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The Changing Face of Archives: Will You Recognize Us? Part II

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Progressively since the 1980's the main training and hiring route for archivists is through the various titled Masters in Archival Studies programs, in English at U of T, Manitoba, and UBC. The entrants to these programs have a far more diverse background than the vast majority of entrants to the archival field prior to 1985, and now constitute a significant portion of the archival profession. Remember in part this is because few archives have hired and those that have, are nearer the locations of these schools. Prior to the archives schools, the majority of people working in archives had some sort of academic history background, often at the Masters level or higher. To show the extent of this transition, a few years ago the theme of the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists was "What does history have to do with it?" I was expecting to hear a rousing debate over the merits of the two routes to working in archives, archival studies vs history. To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. Such a debate never materialized. It was a foregone conclusion that history was, if not irrelevant, at least far down the list of skills necessary to pursue a career in archives. I am not suggesting archivists in the past were any better prepared to work in archives than candidates today but they clearly had a greater interest and affinity to the records because of their interest in history and research background. If you are working in archives and do not first and foremost care about the records and their content you are less likely to battle the many or often constant challenges affecting preservation and access to records or be concerned with the plight of the academic historian. Much like archivists hired in the 1970's, the shortcomings in the background of entry-level staff could be ameliorated by mentoring. The problem will be, due to retirements, there will be no one to do the mentoring.

This downward spiral is further exacerbated by two additional complications: the trend that management can be done without any field specific knowledge and the increasing demand by all sectors of archives users for far more specific and detailed arrangement and description of archival holdings. The theory that management training alone is sufficient to run any organization is reinforced through programs by governments designed to recruit interns for entry-level positions who are selected and placed without regard to educational background or position qualifications. This has the employer benefit of making employees fairly interchangeable, which meets the need of growing flux within the federal and provincial governments, and complements the predictions of multiple careers in one's lifetime, but does nothing to encourage the type of commitment, longevity, and advocacy demanded by the challenges in archives and other heritage fields. Such a climate also doesn't foster the essential incremental knowledge fundamental to strengthening the capacity of archives to pursue their mandates and deliver services to a diverse clientele. This is similar to the approach in the public school

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system where anyone can teach history but a specialist is more likely to be recruited for the sciences, math, music, and many other areas.

Let me remind you that this is all unfolding in an environment where nearly 40% of institutions have more than 40% of their holdings completely inaccessible and most of the rest of the holdings have no effective subject access. This situation, where the only thing keeping things afloat is the corporate memory and historical knowledge of the staff, and they are about to walk out the door through retirement, is desperate. The final nail in the coffin is accountability or what I like to call the Auditor General chill. The measurement of success for most public institutions is becoming not what you have accomplished but what you have accomplished against your work plan. Recently the federal Auditor General chided the Canadian Coast Guard for trying to do too much. There is no doubt that trying to do too much can undermine any institution's primary function. But when it comes to archives you rarely get a second chance to acquire or preserve something and those opportunities do not announce themselves conveniently sufficiently ahead of time to be included in work plans. Again the group most harmed by rule by work plan is academic historians. What can you do? Funding for archival activities by the federal government is a fraction of what goes to other heritage sectors, including academic historians. The CHA has a strong voice and needs to be more aware of what is

happening in Canada's archival community. Greater interaction with archives groups at the national level such as the Canadian Council of Archives would be an important first step. More involvement at the provincial and local level would also go a long way to establishing a greater rapport with the community that serves you and on which you depend. If you are lucky enough to have an archives in your community, ask them what issues they are facing and if there is anything you can do to help. Alerting your students to possible careers in archives would be a constructive step not only broadening career options for your students but possibly increasing the attractiveness of taking your courses. You and your students use archives and increasingly archives' web sites and products. Providing feedback on what you find in collections and on the sites you use would not only be of help to archives but it would offer you an opportunity to see what challenges archives face doing such activities. But at a minimum, before you send off that grant application to SSHRC, CFI, Canadian Heritage, or other foundations, check with the archives you intend to utilize to see if there are any impediments to using the records and what costs the archives may have to pass on to you based on your plan. The archives may even be able to supply you with information that will enhance your application. Archives today do not serve historians as well as we would like, but without your active participation archives soon won't care.

