

## *Review Article*

### *Archival Sallies: Words and Deeds From the Ivory Tower*

by BARBARA L. CRAIG

**The Management of College and University Archives.** WILLIAM J. MAHER. Metuchen N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press and the Society of American Archivists, 1992. xiii, 430 p. ISBN 0-8108-2568-6.

**Varsity Letters Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities.** HELEN WILLA SAMUELS. Metuchen N.J. and London: The Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1992. 281 p. ISBN 0-8108-2596-1.

Both of these books deserve to be widely read. Although the authors develop their arguments within the framework of a North American institution of post-secondary education, the specific issues they raise and those suggested by analogy are germane to the work of all archivists, regardless of the milieu in which they practice. While some of the ideas advanced in these books are novel, others have been current for some time. However, neither their recent birth nor long life alone commend them. We are fortunate, therefore, to have these books, the clarity of presentation of which gives the ideas expressed a cogency independent of their pedigree.

Maher's volume is large, as is fitting for a manual. The text is detailed, and numerous appendices provide illustrations and practical examples that are pointed and useful. Designed as a textbook for the archivist who manages a repository in a college or university, the volume is a compendium of advice and methods for accomplishing professional, technical, and managerial tasks. The book achieves its objectives admirably, covering the variety of work that lies within the purview of the archivist. In part, Maher's book is a response to a need, frequently articulated, for a single-volume manual covering all aspects of archival practice and management within a college. Academic archives in North America number over 3,500. Most were established in the past twenty-five years or so, making archives in the academic setting a veritable growth industry in North America. The book speaks directly to this group, using examples and problems familiar to the university archivist and recommending solutions tailored to the unique features of a collegiate environment.

The arrangement of the book is logical and the material presented is full and complete. Seven chapters, along with a preliminary section and a conclusion, deal with the full range of archival matters. The introduction, which provides advice on navigating through the volume, is followed by chapters on the "Fundamentals of Archives," "Archival Theory, Procedures and Techniques," "Special Records Problems" (in which there is a useful discussion of theses), "Special Challenges and Opportunities in Academic Archives," "Programmatic Activities," and a con-

clusion that directs archivists' attention outward, to their place in the broader academic community and to the archives' special role in it. Among the five appendices are a selective bibliography on management basics for archivists, model archival processing forms, and the Society of American Archivists/College and University Archives Section "guidelines and resolutions on theses and dissertations." The index is economical but extremely useful, providing a precise subject *entrée* into a book with long chapters whose many sub-headings are not given in the table of contents.

The author is to be congratulated for harmonizing the particulars of academic archives with the universals of archival practice. Maher's managerial advice is clear, and many of his experiences provide useful lessons in politics and valuable information on methods. I was particularly struck by his keen grasp of appraisal issues, which Maher rightly identifies as one of the key problems facing modern archivists, regardless of the environment in which they work. He sensibly points out the futility of trying to unite hypothetical future use with the demands of today, arguing that providers of heritage and purveyors of memory are not always one and the same. He has some pithy things to say about the art as opposed to the science of description. Surprisingly, after several hundred pages of cogent argument backed by compelling examples, Maher modestly concludes that neither the findings reported nor his recommendations should be taken as the final answers.

Despite the hard-cover and solid binding—features to be encouraged in works of reference—I was disappointed at the presentation of the volume. The chapters are not numbered, a small point admittedly, but a feature that facilitates dipping into and negotiating a complex volume. The typeface is not particularly pleasing and my eyes quickly grew tired. I was bothered by the failure to underline or italicize non-English terms such as *per se*. Photographic illustrations, graphic devices, and guide numbers tied to headings and sub-headings all would have made the book more pleasing and an example to emulate. It is indeed unfortunate that a book of this calibre was not accorded more attention in design.

A University archivist would use this book often, especially in conjunction with the guidelines for student assistant workers also produced by the energetic SAA College and University Archivists Section. Maher's examples speak directly to the university records environment, to the importance of individual authority in academic bureaucracies, to the problems of placement and conflicting mandates, to the pitfalls of *pro forma* "collection policies," and to the requirements of using students in processing projects. As a teacher of archives, I finished the book with a nagging sense of *ennui*. As much as I like the book, and I shall use it often, I was, in the end, somewhat unsettled by its larger implications. Should archivists overcome the barriers of ignorance or should we encourage isolation by addressing manuals to specific settings? The dictates of a "unique" environment appear overwhelming and may undercut a consensus on a universal theory and common practice. I realize that a pressing need for this book stems from the enormous growth of college archives compared with the few trained practitioners available to staff them. This being the case, a book that deals with theory and practice in one setting has a practical reason and a commercial rationale. It certainly provides an oblique but telling comment on the absence of a consistent curriculum for professionals. A book that aims to set out the basic elements required to meet the documentary needs of a college or university is certainly late in coming—the good ship *Archives* has been launched in colleges without either a complete keel or an engine in place.

College and university archivists will welcome Maher's advice and examples, which are so apt: the need for assiduous, long-term effort to see that a mission statement is approved within the institution; the importance of resisting pressures to undertake other duties if the result is neglect of the basic archives programme; the focus on organizational behaviour; and the necessity of winning support within the academy as a buffer against bad times. On one hand, I welcomed with relief Maher's counsel to develop the skill of accepting frustration as a needed

asset along the road to success. On the other hand and from a more detached view, all such good advice is also a sign of the tenuous place of the archivist and role of the archives programme in these institutions.

Helen Samuels tells us that she has found the key to establishing an important role for the archives and an unassailable place for the archivist. In *Varsity Letters* she shifts archivists' attention from the duties of a keeper of records to the more dynamic role of a shaper of documentation. Her bold plan is to convert appraisal, or "collection building" from its near-sighted focus on the details of records to a macro analysis of the broad sweep of institutional life. Her aim is to present a universally valid method for building the relevant documentation of an organization, which, for the sake of clarity and example in this book, she has chosen to apply to an institution of higher learning. However, the method is not exclusive to the academic setting and could be applied equally to other organizations. Appropriate documentation would flow into the archives as the result of a rational plan developed systematically through a process of functional analysis. Here is the strategic plan for a university archivist, one that addresses many of Maher's concerns: a mission statement in order to establish unique archive credentials as the documenter of the university; a clear focus on service to the university community through documenting higher education; the identification of "appraisal" as the engine of the work of the archives, but a special kind of appraisal that is integrated into the organization and its aims rather than its records.

*Varsity Letters* is a self-confident book. It is written well; it is pleasingly designed; it is easy to negotiate and to use; and it addresses fundamental issues that are relevant to all archivists. The book is divided into nine sections. A useful introduction contains a rationale for the functional approach to documenting the institution, and a model scheme for institutions of higher learning based on the seven broad functions characteristic of colleges. Seven chapters then examine each of these broad functional areas in turn: "Confer Credentials," "Convey Knowledge," "Foster Socialization," "Conduct Research," "Sustain the Institution," "Provide Public Service," and "Promote Culture." Within each chapter the author has followed a parallel plan of arrangement in which the sub-functions are identified, their documentary problems reviewed, and recommendations given to assist the archivist in documenting the function. A final chapter defines the purpose of an Institutional Documentation Plan (IDP) and outlines the steps to be taken in developing one as well as preparing its sister plan, that of the process to be followed in implementing the IDP. A useful index and well-placed photographs complete the volume.

This book is impressive and will no doubt receive the glowing reviews that it mostly deserves. It should also foster debate, which is needed, and a clear response to its broad challenge to archives as they have developed over time. Samuels is convinced that modern organizations and their documentary practices have overturned the basis of traditional archival theory, and outstripped the capacity of its methods and practices to cope with creating usable documentation of the institution. This new situation brings with it some unavoidable imperatives. Where they are wanting, the theory and its methods must be adjusted accordingly and quickly. The archivist's role must also be recast, dramatically, from that of minion to master. Archivists must proclaim their independence by becoming the creators of documentation profiles of their institutions. Older methods and devices, such as the records inventory and survey, previously used to support acquisition and geared to the custodial function of the archivist, must be either abandoned or retooled. New methods and techniques will empower the new pro-active archivist whose first duty is to prepare, plan, and execute an IDP.

Both the archives—its contents and its purpose—and the function of the archivists—their professional goal and its underlying philosophy—are changed in this book. It is a testament to the skill and persuasiveness of the author, moreover, that the whole enterprise is laid before us with clarity, economy of words, and uncomplicated prose. I hope that I do not do an injustice to the subtleties of Samuels's arguments by suggesting that her model archivist resembles a librarian. The archivist of the future, in preparing an Institutional Documentation Plan in order

to document either an institution or a phenomenon, will be preparing the archival equivalent of a comprehensive collections plan. The archivist will then implement the IDP by building the documentation and information about the institution or phenomenon in such a way that it meets the plan's objectives. The IDP will have bench-marks of quality and comprehensiveness akin to the levels of collecting bench-marks for libraries.

The only absolute prerequisite to this new way of archive-building is the functional analysis and its resultant plan. The author acknowledges that resources and staff are important, but in the big picture they are variables affecting detail. The number of staff will certainly determine the length of time it will take to implement the plan and keep it operational. The level of resources also may dictate the degree of detail considered necessary for identifying documentary problems, and may restrict the ways in which the archivist redresses the gaps in documentation. The IDP itself, however, is not dependent on the staff available to implement it. It is not just the big, well-funded archives that can transform themselves into documentation centres: "lone arrangers," too, can and must become documentalists. The IDP is a universal faith and its plan of implementation a process and a tool that can be used by all archivists.

I have three specific comments to make about the arguments in *Varsity Letters*. In reading this book I noted a growing divergence between my own restricted sense of the term "function" and the broad way in which "function" is used by Samuels. I am still not convinced that either "socialization" or "promoting culture" is a "function" of a university. I do not dispute that these are aims—they may even be broad institutional goals; they certainly are institutional purposes—but I do not think that they are functions. A function is a clearly articulated activity composed of distinct and specific procedures that would, as a matter of course, have specific documentary manifestations. This is not merely a semantic consideration. Many distinct functions contribute both meaning and documents to any one of the broad areas identified by the author, areas she calls "functions" but which what might be more fruitfully classified as "purposes." Although Samuels does discuss the records created by modern universities, she confesses to be interested more in the institution itself, its history, its purpose, and its "functions." This prime, almost exclusive interest is dictated by the requirements of the documentation plan and leads to a conclusion about what is needed to adequately document the institution or human phenomenon. The question that the archivist must ask is not "what documents does the institution create?" but rather "what does it take to document adequately the institution?" To be entirely fair, the author does discuss the documents that the institution creates, but the analysis of records as opposed to "functions" is downplayed.

The functional analysis and IDP are true declarations of independence from the tyranny of documents as they are created, accumulated, and used. In this new archives scenario, documents now are considered only in relationship to their contribution to a picture of the institution as described in the functional analysis. Documents, either as they are created by the institution or as they are simulated by the archivists, provide the palette of colours that the archivist/artist uses to paint a picture. The archivist unites the sphere of history with the sphere of documents by determining the value of records in documenting the institution or phenomenon. In this new archives ecology, information is a democratic commodity because all information of the same type is of equal value regardless of its documentary manifestation. Rejected applications for admission do not warrant a recommendation for preservation, partly because the information on rejection is to be documented in other ways that are more direct, economical, and purposeful. Function, as defined, analyzed, and documented according to this method is in direct opposition to methods that focus on contemporary values, on records, or on events.

The functional analysis and its method may be very useful tools. By concentrating the argument on functions, however, the author has neglected explicitly to tie the descriptive analysis to a parallel and equally full analysis of each function's documentary expression—or typical documentary expression, if you will. The author recommends that archivists create what is in effect a "Higher Education in the '90s Collection." As a parallel she counsels us by implication

to abandon the role of midwife, assisting a natural archives to emerge from records created organically as the result of functions. Only one of these "archives," however, will have independent documentary values far beyond its pertinence to the single subject of higher education.

By choosing to document an institution, a function, or a phenomenon that we define today, such as "higher education in the '90s," archivists erect a conceptual tyranny in which documents are considered only in their relationship to the aims of documentation strategy. Because the functional analysis and documentation plan are oriented to a phenomenon in time and place, they cut a wide swath through the levels of records and the nuances of documents: in fact, the strength is in their single-minded concentration. The focus of the IDP is on the actors and their roles within a play, and the "play" is one that the archivist has specifically defined. The functional analysis and the IDP are presented as clear advances over the usefulness of older methods that are oriented to records—to their roles in relationship to the persons and functions that created them and to the facts that they represent. It seems to me that the strength of this traditional concept (though not necessarily of its processes) is its documentary clarity, which is based on the history of documents and their purposes as well as on the history of documentation and its uses in the institution.

Finally, the book unites theory and practice in a way that is infinitely adaptable because it argues that correct appraisal decisions and efficient archive-building are the result of an ongoing process. From the process of functional analysis and IDP emerges archival "truth" in the form of the documentation of an institution or a multi-institutional phenomenon. *Varsity Letters* demonstrates that method is the theory and that process is the principle.

In this new economy of documentation the changed role of the archivist—from keeper to creator—and the fixed purpose of archival records, as the evidence of archivists' ideas (whether the documents are derived from natural activities or are conscious products the creation of which archivists have stimulated), are the two fundamental conclusions of this book that have profound implications for us. These should not be down-played, dismissed, and above all they should not be ignored. If the effect of this book is to generate debate and further thinking, then it will have achieved something of even greater importance than the substance of any specific recommendation. Perhaps the wisest valedictory on Samuels's ground-breaking book is provided by Maher: the arguments presented in the volume should be considered when taking archival decisions, but the specific recommendations should never be implemented exactly as presented.

These books are important contributions to the archival discipline. For college and university archivists, the arguments need to be studied and discussed in light of the actual practices and problems in their institutions. For all archivists, the wider implications of the assumptions and recommendations of these authors deserve to be studied and discussed in the light of a more comprehensive practice. Like every menu of ideas, and the rhetorical cuisine in which they are presented, the dishes served by Maher and Samuels need to be savoured and digested, not swallowed whole.