

Supplement: Public Programming in Archives

“Facing Up, Facing Out: Reference, Access and Public Programming” was the theme of the 1990 Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists. The conference had two objectives: to compel participants to recognize their obligations to the variety of individuals and groups that use archives, and to encourage archivists to pursue strategies that will result in greater responsiveness to user needs and increased public participation in archival activities. Participants at the conference discussed and debated recent developments in information technology, new users of and uses for archival records, increasing sophistication in the delivery of researcher services, and heightened public demand for such services.

A number of papers were presented which provoked a reassessment of the theories and practices that have influenced the way we deal with researchers, sponsors and the general public. This series of articles recapitulates some of the major themes debated during the conference. The articles by Ian Wilson, Gabrielle Blais and David Enns, and Tim Ericson challenge archivists to acknowledge the increasing importance of users in setting priorities in archives. Wilson argues for the development of a National Archival Services Strategy. Blais and Enns propose a model for the integration of public programmes into core archival activities, using the concepts of image, awareness, education and use. Ericson further argues that outreach should be treated as a normal part of our daily work, that it should be ongoing, and that it must be balanced against and integrated into other operational activities. Three key issues are examined: what is required for outreach to be considered a core function; how archivists should think about their public; and how outreach programmes can address image, awareness, education and use. The counterpoint presented by Terry Cook takes issue with some of the arguments presented in the previous articles. While supportive in a general way of public programming, he argues that its advocates claim too much for their cause. In his view, a theoretical approach centred on the user, rather than on archival records, threatens to undermine the richness of the records upon which public programmers themselves rely. Finally, Barbara Craig offers a summary and critique of the four articles.