

An Introduction to the Thesis and Thesis Research in the Master of Archival Studies Program at the University of British Columbia

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RÉSUMÉ Dans cette introduction aux résumés des thèses en études archivistiques, l'auteur établit le contexte en évaluant l'expérience de recherche au sein du programme de maîtrise en études archivistiques de la « School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies » de l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique. Il porte une attention particulière au rôle joué par les thèses pour créer une solide base de recherche de même que pour aider le programme à s'établir comme un champ d'étude autonome au sein de l'université.

ABSTRACT In the introduction to the abstracts of archival studies theses, the author sets the context by assessing the experience of research in the Master of Archival Studies Program in the School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. He pays particular attention to the role of the thesis in creating a solid research base as well as helping the program to establish itself as a separate field of study in the university.

Introduction¹

The Master of Archival Studies (MAS) program in the School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC) was established in 1981. It aims to provide students with a comprehensive professional formation such that they can perform competently in professional positions in the archives and records field. At the time, it was the first master's degree of its kind in any university in Canada or the United States. To obtain the degree today, a student must complete forty-eight credits of graduate work. Currently, the program offers eighteen, three-credit courses in archi-

¹ This introduction is an abbreviated version of Terry Eastwood, "Archival Research: The University of British Columbia Experience," *American Archivist* 63 (Fall/Winter 2000), pp. 243–57. The author would like to thank Alan Doyle for compiling the UBC-MAS thesis abstracts.

val studies, all of which are normally taught every year.² Students may also take individualized courses, including Directed Research Project, Directed Study, Internship, Professional Experience, and Thesis. A student taking four, three-credit courses of thirteen weeks duration in each of four terms, for a total of sixteen courses, can complete the program in two academic years.

Students in the classes admitted from 1981–1992 were required to write a thesis. The value of the thesis was one-fifth of the total credits required for the degree (twelve out of sixty credits.) Students were expected to accomplish research to contribute new knowledge to the discipline or field. The standards by which their work was judged were those adopted and practised in other disciplines, of which the two then closest to the program and with a hand in its administration were library science and history. Wherever possible, a faculty member from another discipline sat on the thesis committee to assist the student, but also to insure that the work met the university's standards.

Many students took a job before completing the thesis requirement; some decided to go to work when they had hardly begun their project. On average, students took well over three years to complete the thesis and therefore the requirements for the degree. Despite this less than ideal situation, eighty-two of the ninety-seven students who undertook a required thesis successfully defended their work in an oral examination, a very favourable rate of completion compared with that in the university's departments in the humanities and social sciences requiring a thesis.

The experience of training students to conduct research in the course of writing required theses was a qualified success. It is true that most students completed their thesis, and, as was hoped, several contributed to the published literature as a result. It is also true that a significant number of students, all of whom completed their required and elective course work successfully, often very successfully, failed to complete the thesis and receive a degree.

In the first six years of the program, only one archival specialist in the school was available to supervise theses. At that time, the program aimed to admit about eight students each year. After a second specialist was hired in 1987, the program admitted about twelve students each year. With the addition of a third specialist in 1990, the number admitted grew to about twenty. Shortly thereafter, during the 1992–93 academic year, there was a major revision of the curriculum of the MAS degree. At the time the degree required

2 The courses in archival studies are: Arrangement and Description of Archival Documents; Selection and Acquisition of Archival Documents; Management of Current Records; Archival Diplomatics; Juridical Context of Canadian Archives; Preservation; Archival Systems and the Profession; Archival Public Services; Information Technology and Archives; Management of Electronic Records; Archival Research and Scholarship; History of Record-Keeping; Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Record Trustworthiness; Audio-Visual Records and Non-Textual Archives; Administering Freedom of Information and Privacy Legislation; Database Design; Standards-Based Automation; and Management of Libraries and Archives.

sixty credits, making it longer or fuller than comparable degrees in any similar school in Canada or the United States. It was therefore reduced to forty-eight credits, still making it as long or full as comparable professional master's degrees at the University of British Columbia. In fact, this adjustment aimed not to reduce the amount of study the student did, for it would still normally take two years to complete a degree. Rather, by reducing the normal load from five to four courses per term, it was hoped that students would be able to devote more time to each subject. The new curriculum and requirements took effect in September 1994.

As part of the revision, the thesis in the MAS degree was made optional. The change in the thesis came about for several reasons. A survey of graduates revealed that many of them did not favour continuing a required thesis. With the degree being reduced from sixty to forty-eight credits, maintaining a twelve-credit thesis would mean that precisely one-quarter of the credits for the degree would be tied up in the thesis. With half of the program composed of required courses, there would be one-quarter of the program or four courses devoted to elective courses in the second year, at a time when the number of such courses was expanding. For instance in 2002–2003, there are twelve elective courses, exclusive of individualized courses, which many students take. To meet the needs of the field, students must be able to build on the core, required studies of the first year by taking second-year electives to suit their career goal. Perhaps the most telling reason for making the change relates to supervision. At the time of the change, the two longest-standing faculty members had between ten and twenty students actively pursuing a thesis under their supervision. With three members of the faculty sharing the load, with each new class numbering about twenty, and with many students taking two, or three, or more years to complete their work, that number would likely continue to rise. Were a required thesis to remain in place, and assuming an even division of labour, each faculty member would take on six or more new thesis students on average each year. Sabbatical leaves of faculty members would exacerbate what was clearly becoming an issue of quality in the ability of faculty members to supervise so many theses at one time. Thus, making the thesis optional would put the choice in students' hands, and would very likely reduce the numbers of students to supervise to manageable proportions for faculty members.

In the first class to experience the optional thesis, a class reduced in size because of a temporary faculty vacancy, five of eleven students opted for the thesis. All five completed the thesis, four of them within three years, the fifth in five years, which is the maximum time allowed. The number of students in this class who opted for a thesis was encouraging. Such a division promised to keep the thesis alive and well for those who wanted to try their hand at research. Unfortunately, the number opting for the thesis declined thereafter. It is fairly clear from anecdotal evidence that students quickly learned that opting for a thesis reduced the number of elective courses they could take and

was likely to lengthen the time to complete the degree by a year or more. As a result, fewer of them opted for a thesis. The declining number of new thesis students allowed faculty members to concentrate on the backlog of uncompleted work of students with the required thesis. In 1994, sixteen of them successfully defended their work, the most in any year of the program, and the next year eleven more followed suit.

A brief summary of the methods and topics of the theses provides a glimpse into the kinds of research students have undertaken over the past twenty-one years.³ From the perspective of research methods, a small number have employed empirical or inductive methods to gather and analyze data, whether quantitative through survey questionnaires, qualitative through interviews, or content analysis. The remainder have employed methods less easy to characterize. However, all of them work from an understanding of the basic concepts of archival theory as to the nature of records and the principles of their treatment. Many use a method that might, broadly speaking, be called heuristic, in which the student sets out to discover what he or she can about a subject and characterize it cogently, in archival terms and according to the norms of scholarly writing. More narrowly, it is possible to identify five variations on the heuristic theme.

The first variation, and a common one, is essentially historical. Depending on the subject and the author's approach, the theses with an historical exposition vary widely. Some of them are studies in the history of archives; others are in the history of archival ideas to arrive at a synthesis of the state of thinking in a particular realm. A second variation is provenance-oriented. A number of theses rely on a traditional method of archival analysis to come to a characterization of the functions, activities, procedures, and records of a creator. Some examine a class of creator (e.g., artists, architects, universities, churches, voluntary associations), often in order to characterize aspects of the treatment of records of that class. Using the same archival method, other students have conducted studies of a particular creator, often to probe aspects of the treatment, value, or juridical circumstance of its records.

A third variation consists of explorations of the literature in other disciplines or fields to illuminate a topic or concept of relevance to archivists and the various contexts in which they work. Copyright law, freedom of information law, accountability, privacy, and multiculturalism are among the topics and concepts that have been examined. In addition, several students have explored aspects of the technological and managerial context of records. A fourth variation focuses on the application of diplomatics to modern records and record-keeping. Students have explored the historical, juridical, and procedural framework underpinning the creation of specific documentary forms

³ For a more detailed analysis of UBC-MAS student theses see Eastwood, "Archival Research," *American Archivist* 63, (Fall/Winter 2000), pp. 245–49.

such as land deeds, records of litigation, probate, and bankruptcy proceedings, United Church call to ministry records, broadcast archives, and moving image documents.

The fifth and final variation addresses questions of some function, activity, or technical aspect of the work of archivists. The aim of this group is to characterize and resolve some question, problem, or issue of practice. These studies are not strictly historical, nor do they rely solely on any one the other methods or approaches mentioned so far. Rather, they reflect that natural interest of the student to come to some deeper understanding of a particular sphere of practice. In all cases, the students consider the fundamental theoretical concepts at play, analyze the extent to which common methods of practice adopted and utilized these concepts, and make recommendations in light of their analysis. Beyond the archival (and in some cases other) literature on the subject, they often examine real cases in the field to illustrate problems and demonstrate their resolution in principle. Some examine a particular documentary form of archival document and an issue or number of issues in its treatment. Others examine problems in the treatment of a class of archival document. Still others focus their attention on an archival function, activity, technique, or professional issue.

Together the ninety-five completed theses represent a sizeable body of literature that very much reflects the state of the archival discipline, the preoccupations of the field, and at least some of the possibilities and prospects for research. Collectively these works amply demonstrate that students at the master's level can contribute creatively to the intellectual advancement of the profession.

Successive classes of students have themselves provided the most visible evidence of the value of the work of their predecessors as they use it for their own study and research purposes. The fact that several theses have adopted a similar focus and methodology or approach has allowed students to develop and refine a particular genre of study. For instance, that has been true of studies employing traditional analysis of the historical evolution of the juridical context, functions, activities, and structures of records-creating entities. In fact, every student needs to be competent in this form of archival analysis, for it forms the basis of the day-to-day investigations archivists make during appraisal, arrangement, description, and reference service. Work to clarify the concepts of this analysis and illustrate their application serves to characterize a fundamental method of archival research.

Despite the changes in the curriculum and the decline in the number of students at the master's level opting for a thesis, the effort is not coming to an end. The optional thesis allows students to choose the best program of studies to meet their goals. Whether they themselves undertake a component of research or not as part of their professional formation, all students are introduced to the issues and problems of conducting research and learn to

assess its value. Many of the foundation, required courses address the relevant research literature, but we have recently introduced a course called Archival Research and Scholarship. It aims to cultivate in students an understanding of how archival research and scholarship have evolved over time; and to familiarize them with current topics and trends in archival research and scholarship. In addition, another course (Research Methods) offered in the school acquaints students with the theory and practice of the basic social science research methods used in libraries and other information-based organizations.

Students who choose not to write a thesis have an opportunity to conduct scholarly enquiry on a smaller scale through a directed study or a directed research project, both of which require students to undertake an in-depth exploration of a specific archival issue or problem. There are also opportunities to conduct action-oriented research in the course called Professional Experience, which places students in an archival institution or program or in a records management setting to solve a problem requiring some investigation.

Beginning in September 2003, the school will offer a doctoral program to accommodate students who wish to take what is rapidly becoming the main research degree in most professional disciplines. The doctoral program has both an archival studies stream and a library and information science stream and it is expected to increase opportunities and incentives for more systematic and comprehensive research.

Research is critical to the development of archival knowledge and so the institution of a doctoral-level program is a logical next step in advancing archival education. It is also an essential step in strengthening the status of archival studies within the university. Graduate programs, at least those in North America, are judged to a significant degree by the quality and quantity of the research produced by faculty and students. Faculty members in professional programs are expected to conduct grant-funded research like those in other disciplines, and to use their research projects as a means of training students to be researchers. Over the long term it is expected that student participation in faculty research will encourage master's level students to continue their studies at the doctoral level and to write doctoral theses on a related topic. Perhaps the next issue of *Archivaria* devoted to theses abstracts will include the first fruits of this promising new endeavour.