

**College and University Archives: Readings in Theory and Practice.** CHRISTOPHER J. PROM and ELLEN D. SWAIN. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2008. 357 p. ISBN 1-931666-27-X.

The passage of thirty years can translate into a lot of changes in any profession, but the changes experienced in college and university archives, as evidenced by this recent publication, are truly astounding. The first reader – *College and University Archives: Selected Readings* – published by the Society of American Archivists in 1979, covered a range of topics of interest; President Hugh A. Taylor said the volume belonged “on the desk of every college or university archivist in the United States and Canada.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as a fledgling university archivist in 1983, I remember picking up this seminal volume to help me understand my place in the academic hierarchy and being won over by the Wayne State University Filing System.

Articles such as “Establishing a College Archives: Possibilities and Priorities” and “The Reference User of Archives,” however, have, in the current volume, been replaced by “The Impact of Information Technology on Academic Archives in the Twenty-first Century” and “Documenting Diverse Populations in College and University Archives.” Indeed, the 1979 publication was more a “how to” primer: how to acquire archival materials, how to set up a records management program, how to explain archives to a librarian. Only an article and an appendix on privacy hinted at the complexities of what was to come for almost all archivists. These are now covered in the new edition: identity theft, copyright, encoded finding aids, electronic publishing, documentation strategies, and so on.

The editors of this new volume, Christopher J. Prom and Ellen D. Swain, warn that the challenges presented by the twenty-first century are of such magnitude that they threaten our very existence: “... if we are not careful, many of us may find ourselves to be the marginalized keepers of idle curiosities” (p. vi). They identify three themes that run through the readings: technological change; co-operation and collaboration beyond the archives; and proactive approaches in promoting the archival agenda. These themes, which add new twists to traditional practices and raise completely new challenges for university and college archives, make the readings provocative and interesting.

A number of articles provide very specific findings. For example, a 1981 survey of college and university archives in the United States found that archivists were most concerned with increasing their space and reducing backlogs; in 1991 – a mere ten years later – archivists wanted to encourage greater use of collections and provide better trained staff. A survey of a sampling of academic archives in 2006 found that 43 percent of all holdings of these institutions were

1 *College and University Archives: Selected Readings* (Chicago, 1979).

unprocessed. In their article, contributors Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner state that processing rates in academic archives are a mere fifty to one hundred and fifty cubic feet per full-time processor per year. Other articles paint the academic picture in broad strokes. The chapter on privacy discusses issues for academic archives that hold “faculty and alumni papers, oral history interviews lacking release forms, and materials of unclear provenance” (p. 222). Certainly many of us can appreciate the privacy issues that arise from these uncertain sources. The final chapter on extending services to researchers provides “fictional composites” to bring the broad clientele of an academic archives to life. These examples of researchers are based on the author’s own research experience and represent undergraduates, professional scholars, administrators and staff, and the local community.

A number of the chapters point out deficiencies in university and college archives – even more things that academic archivists should be doing but currently are not. The chapter on encoded finding aids points out a major weakness in our systems: the lack of professional standards governing the construction of these finding aids. We have been delinquent in documenting student learning. Evaluations of use and user services are sorely lacking. Still, other readings pose impossible challenges. After noting that authors of various surveys all felt that “as long as records management remains a part-time responsibility of the university archivist, RIM programs will likely not achieve their full potential,” the author of chapter nine states that archivists and records managers need to provide expertise in the creation of campus information systems (p. 187). Perhaps the reason that university archivists do not provide this expertise is because they do not have it. Many archivists are responsible for a variety of functions beyond records management for which they are ill-equipped. They have had to start digitizing collections without having dedicated, trained professionals to investigate how to do this. They have been compelled to create electronic finding aid systems on the strength of one- and two-day workshops. They have had to deal with an increase in legal and privacy concerns the likes of which would make a university lawyer blanch.

As might be expected, however, some things never change. Academic archivists are still struggling with the acquisition of faculty papers. Graduate (and for that matter, undergraduate) students are still processing much of our backlog. We still grapple with volumes of records that have grown monstrously larger than when our archives began, and are accruing faster than we can handle them. Significant backlogs of unprocessed records thus continue to plague us, even with all the streamlining that institutions have adopted. Instead of publishing our documents in hard-copy volumes, we now publish them online, but we are still making selections of them publicly available to a broader clientele. Likewise in the past we created physical exhibits, but now we also are creating them in the virtual environment; nevertheless, we still are using exhibits, albeit physical or virtual, to attract external users.

Although some of the readings in *College and University Archives* are reprinted from various publications, most of the articles, each of which constitutes a chapter, are new. The inclusion of reprinted articles places them in a single, convenient publication for easy reference. Not all readings will be equally useful to the Canadian reader: Chapter 11 on copyright law and fair use in the United States for example, might be read for sheer interest. And like any compilation, the writing talents of authors vary somewhat, making a few chapters more soporific than their subject matter would suggest. The chapter on outreach oddly presents like a laundry list of traditional and new activities. But on the whole this is a stimulating set of readings that archivists in the academic setting, be they fresh out of graduate school or seasoned professionals, would find of value.

**Shelley Sweeney**  
**University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections**