Perspectives on the Profession of University Archives

William J. Maher © , University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Introduction/Context Setting

- 1978 SAA meeting in Nashville

- College and University Archives Committee (then about 50 people) with about 34 present.

- Agenda for CUAC: News, *College and University Archives Reader*, report of Sub-Committee on Standards for College and University Archives.

- Product of that day was a document that later was approved by SAA Council as the *College and University Archives Guidelines*.

Tensions and Controversies

"We could never consider having students do the processing."

"Modernist"/public archives approach for hybrid archives/manuscript repositories vs.

"Traditionalist" emphasis on core institutional records and services--archives as an extension of the college administration.

Currents in a Flowing River

- The C&U Archives Committee, soon to be a PAG, was a flowing river of unknown width and velocity.

- Later learned that it was filled with eddies and whirpools that were taking their toll on the consensus and cohesion of the group

- Early 1970s, new group of archivists, especially those coming out of training programs in Midwest, were pursuing a rather expansive vision of the college and university archives calling for archivists to be involved in:
  - records management,
  - outreach/promotion of use of holdings
  - collecting records of faculty
  - alumni papers
  - documentation of student life
  - subject collections beyond institutional history
  - oral history
  - research and publication
  - service on university committees

    Nicholas C. Burckel, "The Expanding Role of a College or University Archives," *Midwestern Archivist* (1976). Reprinted in *College and University Archives Reader* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1979).
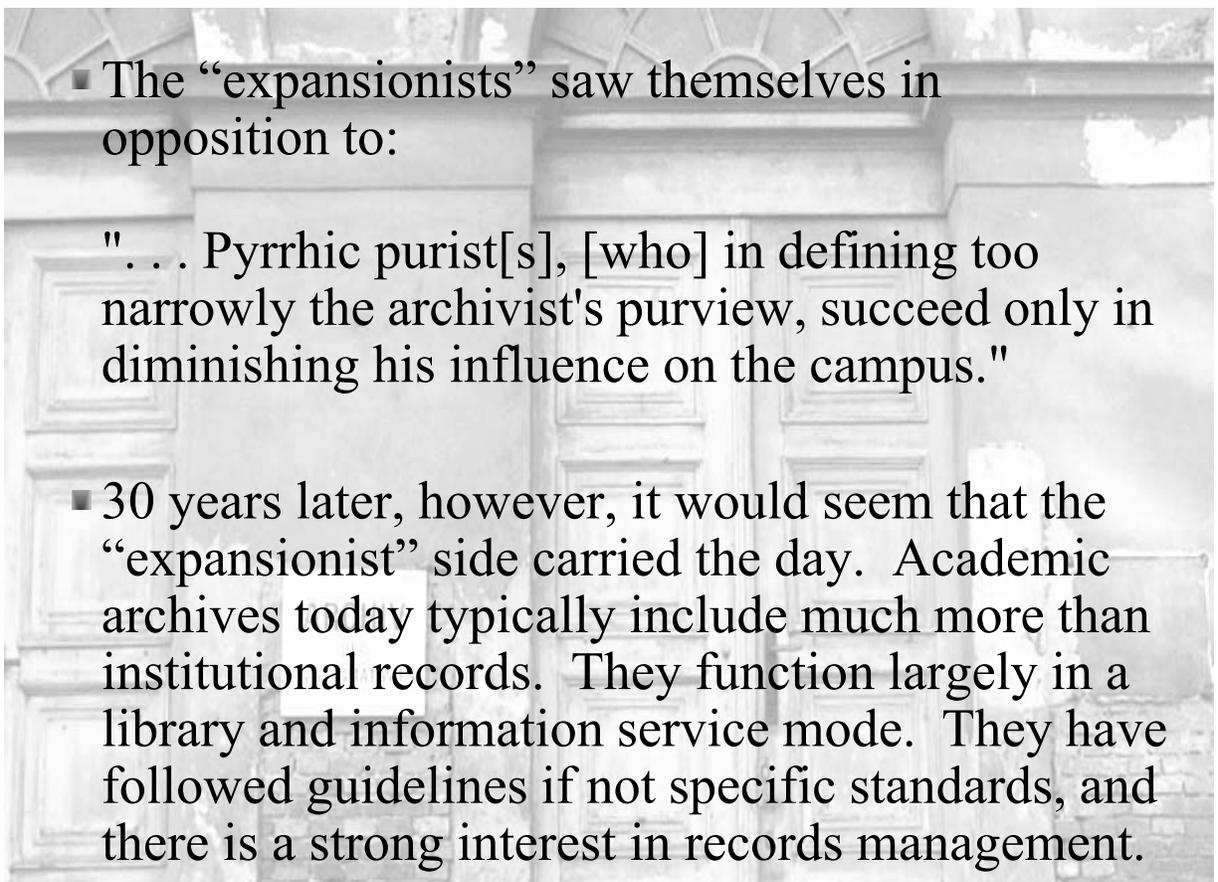
- The "expansionists" saw themselves in opposition to:

  ". . . Pyrrhic purist[s], [who] in defining too narrowly the archivist's purview, succeed only in diminishing his influence on the campus."

- 30 years later, however, it would seem that the "expansionist" side carried the day. Academic archives today typically include much more than institutional records. They function largely in a library and information service mode. They have followed guidelines if not specific standards, and there is a strong interest in records management.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch . . . .
Trends in higher education:

- interdisciplinarity
- diversity of student, faculty, and staff
- de-unionization
- corporatization
- student-centric focus
- information technology that results in more documents of lower quality
- decrease in staff attention to management of files and information resources

Profession not standing still: the "NEA Agenda"

- digital "collecting" and collaborations
- institutional repositories
- electronic records management programs
- digital asset management systems
- integrating primary sources into the curriculum
- documenting the classroom
- portals, e-journals, grey literature, web publishing
- faculty and archivist collaborations to integrate archives into courses
- cross-institutional collaborations
- revenue-generating ventures
- service on campus committees & task forces
- personnel management

Intimidating agenda

- Dwarfs agenda articulated by Burckel and which raised the concerns of the then traditionalists.

- Yet, logically cannot really argue against this new agenda any more than 1970s archivists could have dismissed Burckel's.

Alternatives to just throwing up our hands:

- Pre-eminent issue is involvement in the design and creation of new record systems. Otherwise, there will be no archives to process, preserve, or provide reference service to in the future.

- Not a radical position--55 years ago, Ernst Posner wrote
  "Unless the archivist undertakes the delicate job of volunteering advice in matters of current record administration . . .the future user will find altogether too many gaps in the records, while on the other hand he will be overwhelmed by the plethora of valueless material."
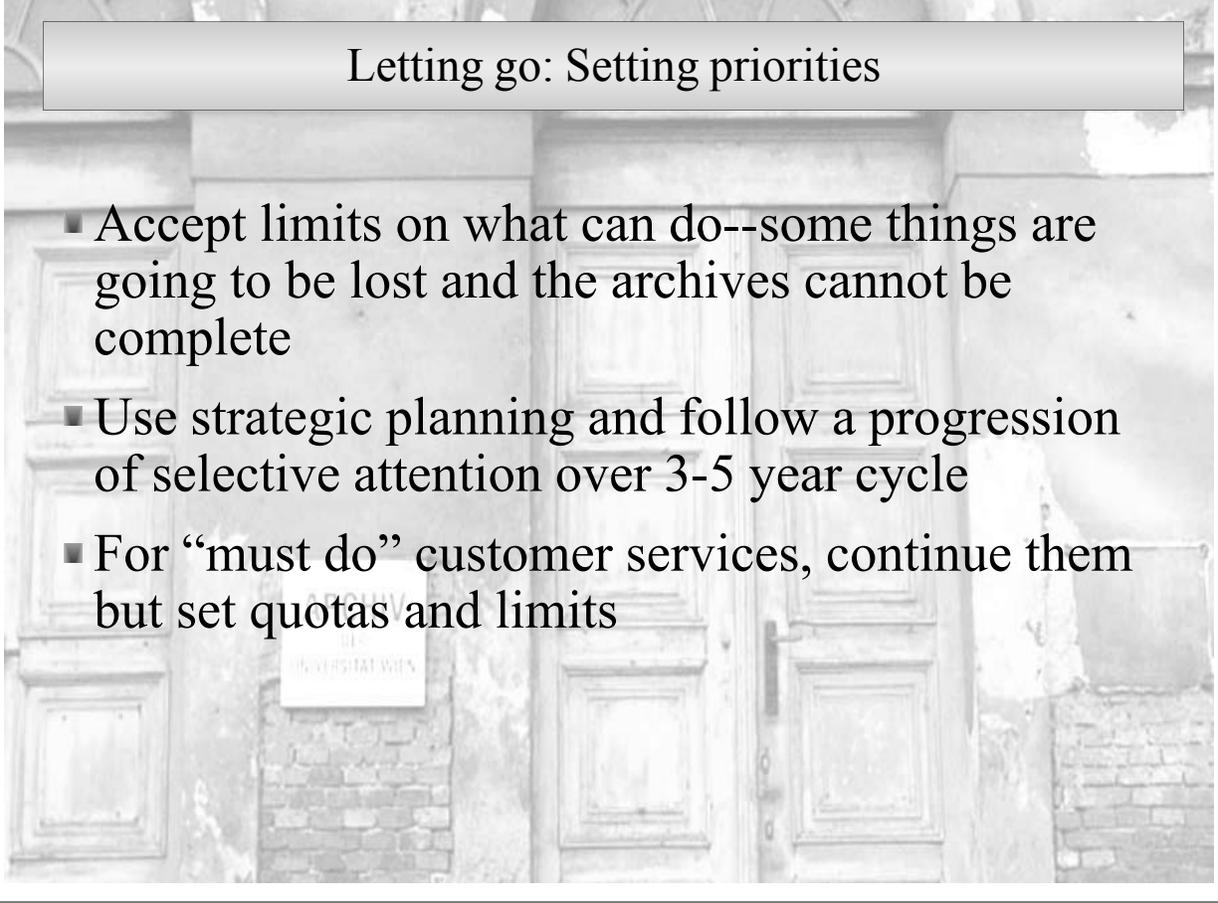
Letting go: Setting priorities

- Accept limits on what can do--some things are going to be lost and the archives cannot be complete

- Use strategic planning and follow a progression of selective attention over 3-5 year cycle

- For "must do" customer services, continue them but set quotas and limits
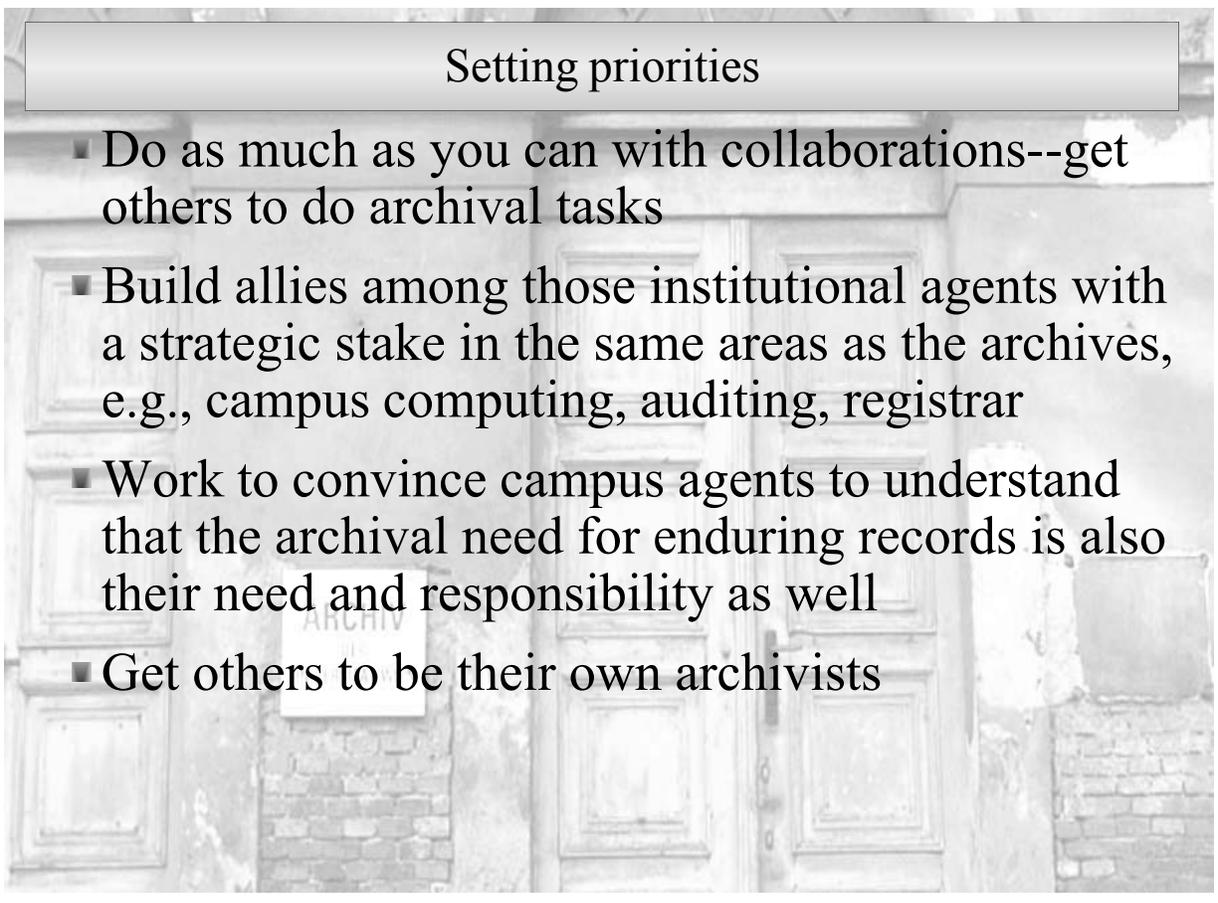
Setting priorities

- Do as much as you can with collaborations--get others to do archival tasks

- Build allies among those institutional agents with a strategic stake in the same areas as the archives, e.g., campus computing, auditing, registrar

- Work to convince campus agents to understand that the archival need for enduring records is also their need and responsibility as well

- Get others to be their own archivists

Setting priorities

- Create a quick and dirty electronic infrastructure to stash away those electronic materials that do come your way even data refreshing, migration, or emulation must wait until later

- Try to make the paper "float"
  - ▸ let incoming paper material, sit unprocessed, or accessioned only
  - ▸ apply Greene-Meissner, "Less Process More Product" model
  - ▸ combine with remote library-depository like storage.
  - ▸ require folder lists with all records transfers
  - ▸ consider doing full processing only "on demand"

Distinctive character of archival mission

- Our job is to be the faithful archivists for society–we should not try to be librarians, historians, or digital information specialists.

- Don't get lost in technology or item-level management

- Keep focus on the seven domains of archives:
  - ▸ authoritative establishment and administration of programs,
  - ▸ authentication of documents,
  - ▸ appraisal,
  - ▸ arrangement,
  - ▸ description,
  - ▸ preservation, and
  - ▸ use

Archival gymnastics

- We are not magicians, but we have to be jugglers or maybe slight-of-hand artists.

- The archivist needs considerable autonomy to the define the archives' mission and goals, as well as the means needed to accomplish them.

- The archivist must take primary responsibility for all decisions affecting the program's direction.

- Must maintain a balance among the many forces bearing down on the program. Over-compliance with any particular interest group will weaken the core of the archival program.

Archival leadership

- At the heart of the best archival programs, will be the archivist's vision and ability to exploit multiple interests and constituencies.

- It is precisely the challenge of selecting of which practices to follow and which influences to accept--that renders archives a professional activity.

- Such balancing requires compromises and local approaches but with one eye clearly fixed on external expertise.

- Academic archives is managerial work that requires decisions and actions based on a thorough professional knowledge combined with a deep understanding of the realities of one's own institution.
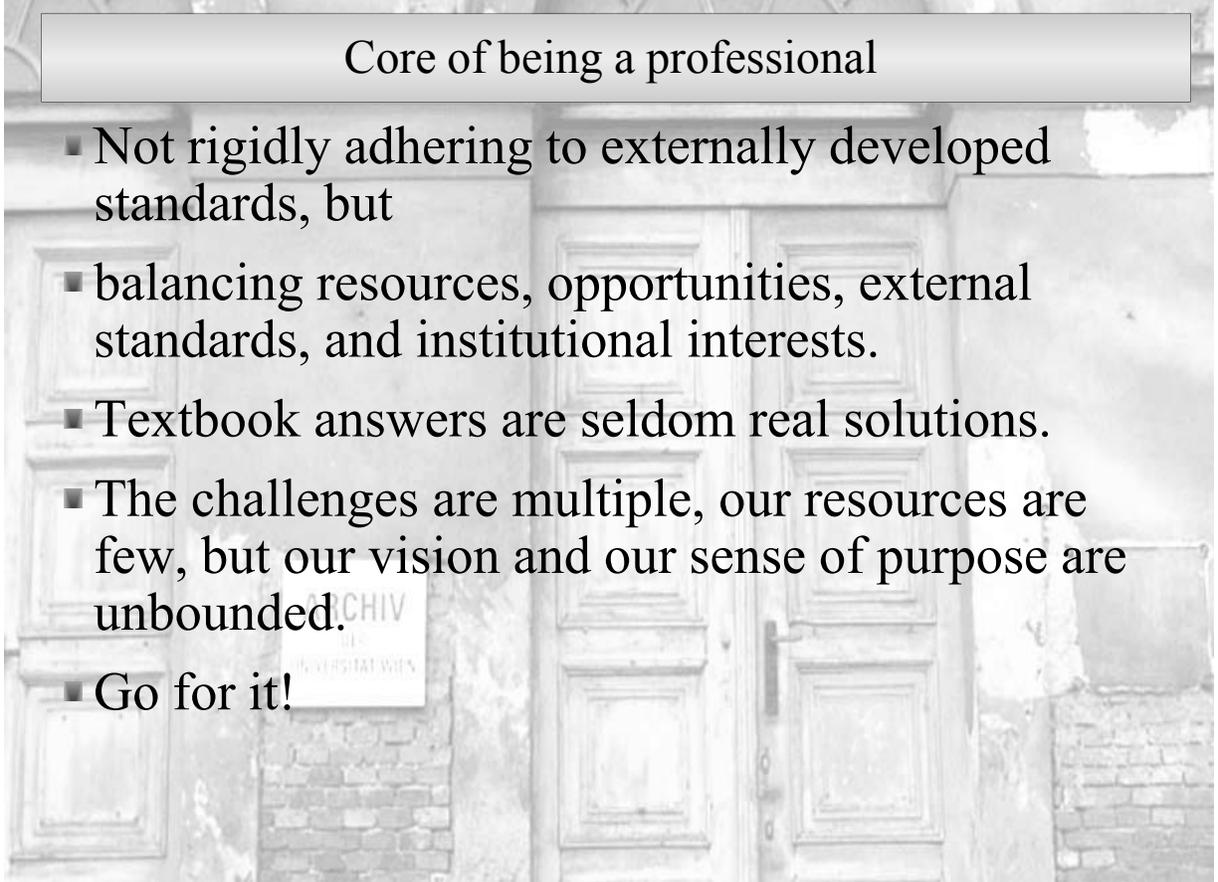
Core of being a professional

- Not rigidly adhering to externally developed standards, but

- balancing resources, opportunities, external standards, and institutional interests.

- Textbook answers are seldom real solutions.

- The challenges are multiple, our resources are few, but our vision and our sense of purpose are unbounded.

- Go for it!

w-maher@uiuc.edu