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Action! Cooperation! Independence! Sustaining Citizen-led Archives in the Midwest

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Up-and-Comers: News for Student Archivists—Justin Seidler, Assistant Editor

Please submit Up-and-Comers items to Justin Seidler at justinseidler@gmail.com.

This edition of the *MAC Newsletter* Up-and-Comers column spotlights the work of Adrienne Evans, the first-place winner of the Student Poster Competition at the 2014 Annual Meeting.

Action! Cooperation! Independence! Sustaining Citizen-led Archives in the Midwest

By Adrienne Evans, School of Library and Information Science, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Purpose

Citizen-led archives exist in many forms—some are small historical societies tasked with documenting a locality; others are community archives that seek to preserve the history of a specific social or ethnic group. These efforts vary in size, sophistication, and prerogative, but they are often managed and staffed by nonprofessionals. This should not detract from the value of these organizations. Citizen-led archives help diversify the historic record; they may preserve aspects of history that institutional archives have neither the space nor the collection scope to save. Furthermore, they are evidence that individuals outside of the cultural heritage profession are not only interested in history, but are eager to actively preserve and facilitate access to it.

These organizations may face many challenges. They often lack financial resources. Volunteers usually do not possess archival skill sets. Plus, without a paid professional at the helm, citizen-led archives are vulnerable to organizational instability in the event of leadership or staff turnover. However, there are ways to mitigate these challenges. One option is the intervention of professional archivists, who could contribute to citizen-led archives as educators, mentors, and advocates. To be the most effective, however, we must understand the nature of the challenges such organizations face, how their practices compare to professional standards, and the ethical and practical implications of professional intervention. To explore these issues as well as promote productive relationships between professional archivists and citizen-led archives, I sought to assess the sustainability of citizen-led archives in the Midwest.

Methodology

First, I developed broad criteria for selecting projects and organizations to participate in the study: they had to self-identify as an archives, be based in the Midwest, and lack a paid professional archivist on staff. In drafting selection criteria, I felt particularly compelled to focus on the Midwest for a number of reasons. Much of the professional literature related to citizen-led archives focuses on organizations in large cities on the East and West Coasts. I

thought that a study may address the gap in the literature on midwestern organizations, which are typically located in less populated areas and have fewer resources than their coastal counterparts. Furthermore, I was curious to see how these types of archival organizations fare in less metropolitan areas.

To identify potential survey participants, I searched online and asked professional archivists as well as fellow students for suggestions. I eventually made contact with the Midwest Punk Archive (an online project); the Queer Zine Archive Project (located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin); the Deforest Area Historical Society (located in Deforest, Wisconsin); the Hmong Archives (located in St. Paul, Minnesota), and the Center for Railroad Photography and Art (located in Madison, Wisconsin). Due to the small sample size, I did not anticipate that the study would provide an overall picture of the state of citizen-led archives in the Midwest, but I did hope to gain some insight into common issues among these groups.

I interviewed a representative from each archives. When possible, I tried to meet with participants face-to-face, but due to distance and scheduling conflicts, some interactions took place online. A set of questions designed to assess both the sustainability of the organization itself as well as materials under its care guided our conversations. I based many of my questions on the Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board's (WHRAB) "Self-Assessment Survey for Wisconsin Historical Records Repositories." This document was once used as part of WHRAB's Wisconsin Archives Mentoring Service, which sought to provide professional assistance to local historical societies throughout the state. My interview questions covered topics such as arrangement and description practices, outreach and community engagement, appraisal and acquisition, the preservation of both physical and digital collections, and professional relationships with like institutions.

Once I had interviewed each archives, I sought a way to compare participants' responses with the profession's best practices. I developed sustainability criteria in nine areas:

governance, skills/experience, human resources, collaboration/networking, dynamism, preservation, archival practices, funding, and outreach. These criteria were largely based upon the Society of American Archivists' *Guidelines for Evaluation of Archival Programs*¹ and Bruce Dearstyne's *Managing Historical Records Programs*.² Finally, I quantified the criteria, creating a 9-point scale to rate archives from least to most sustainable. Study participants could receive one point in each of the nine evaluation areas if they met all of the criteria in that particular area. Half-points were assigned if archives met some but not all of the criteria in a particular area.

Findings

With scores ranging from 4.5 to 8.5, none of the study's participants met all of the criteria on the 9-point sustainability scale. In many ways, these results were predictable; issues common among cultural heritage institutions compromised the sustainability of the participant archives. Participants' lack of reliable funding, formal education or training, and sufficient human resources were the main areas where they lost points. A few participants also lacked the organizational structure to ensure that the archives would continue if founders or key volunteers could no

longer be involved. Storage conditions varied widely at each of the five citizen-led archives, ranging from boxes stored in garages and basements to shared space within an environmentally controlled institutional repository. Similarly, the five study participants exhibited varying levels of collection accessibility. For instance, few catalog their collections, and none make catalog records or finding aids available online. However, a few of them do digitize and publish collections and accompanying Dublin Core-based metadata on their websites. All five organizations reported having significant backlogs or expressed a feeling of being behind with processing materials. Interestingly, the participants do have strongly developed acquisition criteria; all of the archives save one have a formal collection development policy. Generally, when judged by this study's criteria, archival organizations that are legally recognized nonprofits and that have close working relationships with institutional archives or information professionals are most likely to be sustainable.

One interesting discovery that I made during this study is that, in the absence of institutional resources, participants have developed several strategies to assist

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with sustainability. Many confer and collaborate with institutional archives or information professionals. Some also partner with community groups or educational institutions to reach out to potential users. Most also participate in supportive networks of like organizations that provide each other with knowledge and advice. Finally, most engage the public in myriad ways, utilizing various social media platforms, publications, public talks, and exhibitions.

Considerations

Study participants fell short of the study's sustainability criteria; however, I am unconvinced that all of these shortcomings are necessarily the consequences of participants' lack of professional archivists. Many institutional archives also suffer from similar issues and would struggle to pass this study's sustainability criteria. For instance, like citizen-led archives, many institutional archives struggle with funding and human resources.

Furthermore, since initially conducting this study, I've come to question the suitability of existing criteria to adequately evaluate citizen-led organizations. Many citizen archivists have goals and value structures that differ from traditional archival programs. For instance, a few study participants reported that they value access over preservation and dispense with preservation practices that make it more difficult for users to engage collections. Also, some do not plan for the long-term sustainability of their organizations because they intend to eventually donate their materials to traditional archives. I think if I were to continue the study, I would create stricter selection criteria, pursuing participants whose long-term goals are closer to those of traditional archives.

Despite these considerations, I do think that this study broadly indicates several issues with which citizen-led archives could use some assistance. Many professional archivists are already involved in this type of work. State historical societies as well as State Historical Records Advisory Boards (SHRABs) often provide citizen-led archival organizations with educational resources as well as supportive networks. In addition, programs like the Wisconsin's Archives Mentoring Service or Montana's Traveling Student Archivist Program are great models for facilitating more intensive archival instruction for organizations staffed by nonprofessionals. In addition, blogs run by professional archives, such as *Start an Archives!*, which features interviews with activist archivists and grassroots projects, have the potential to both educate and inspire citizen-led efforts. So many resources that could potentially benefit citizen-led archivists already exist; perhaps the next step is simply to make sure that they find them.

Notes

1. Society of American Archivists, *Guidelines for Evaluation of Archival Programs*, accessed August 29, 2014, www2.archivists.org/groups/standards-committee/guidelines-for-evaluation-of-archival-institutions.
2. Bruce W. Dearstyne, *Managing Historical Records Programs: A Guide for Historical Agencies* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 2000).

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