

**SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS
MANAGEMENT ROUNDTABLE**

August, 1996

Staffing the Understaffed Archives

This edition of the Management Roundtable newsletter presents condensed versions of two papers presented at the session "Staffing the Understaffed Archives: Creative Enhancements" held at the annual meeting of the Society of Southwest Archivists at Albuquerque, New Mexico, May 17, 1996. The session was chaired by Dianne Stalker, Head, Preservation & Special Collections Departments, State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Sara Clark, Head of Archives and Manuscripts at the Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, spoke on "Beyond the Budget: New Staff without New Money:"

At the Center for American History, our main secret to adding new staff without having new money is to make use of the surplus money or time available through other people, such as donors, researchers, students in search of class credit or resume experience, and retired or underemployed volunteers.

A donor, after learning of the time-consuming nature of archival processing and cataloging, will sometimes offer to help with either time or money. An organization which donates records is sometimes able to offer assistance in organizing, arranging, providing a box-contents listing on disk in compatible software, housing, labeling, and transporting records. Organizations have hired part-time processors or have provided a member who served as volunteer processor for the group's records, under our supervision.

We have been successful sometimes in working with researchers who have provided money for preparing checklists, rehousing, or preparation and microfilming of certain collections.

Volunteers APPLY for the privilege of working with us and must supply references. We engage volunteers for PROJECTS, not POSITIONS. On occasion, we have told volunteers that we are unable to find suitable projects for them. We start unknown volunteers on very small, finite, and simple projects. Graduate students working on class projects form the largest group. Other students volunteer in order to gain experience they can list on their resumes. Besides students and donors, most of our volunteers are retired persons, some of whom have been coming weekly for years, and underemployed persons who work part-time or who are homemakers.

Some of the problems with volunteers include coping with garrulousness and preventing volunteer burnout. Both can be handled with empathy and tact. We have rewarded our volunteers with sincerest thanks; with personal invitations to all events at the Center; and, for long-term volunteers, with gifts of the Center's publications at the end of the calendar year and with inexpensive (for us) framed 19th-century-inspired certificates at milestones in their service.

When long-time volunteers have retired, we have taken them to lunch individually.

A little institutional money can sometimes go a long way: Every spring students from two Austin high schools compete for two very modestly paid summer internships to process a one-foot collection each, under our close supervision. As the end of the fiscal year approaches, we ask for any money available in an endowment or other account to hire temporary employees for a few months or weeks. Staff-sharing within the institution and emergency temporary help from colleagues in other units can also temporarily increase personnel.

While our preferred solution to staffing needs would be to add a number of archivists to the staff, we have devised alternate strategies which allow us to accomplish a great deal toward our ultimate goal of preserving and making accessible the quantities of manuscript materials which are entrusted to us at the Center for American History.

Cecilia Aros Hunter of the South Texas Archives, Texas A & M University-Kingsville, addressed "Creative Funding in the Understaffed Archives:"

Archives may hold memories of the past that give meaning to the present and future, but they do not generally hold the keys to the institution's purse. As the demands for proper storage and care of documents increase, it is therefore necessary for the archivist to carefully study and plan for alternative ways to find help at minimal cost.

At the South Texas Archives, Jernigan Library, Texas A & M University-Kingsville, we have created several projects that have served us well in not only getting the work done, but also in outreach and public relations. We defined our goals: (1) increase visibility; (2) gain much needed assistance; (3) maximize use of the facility; (4) minimize expense; and (5) efficiently use my time as the only professional archivist in this facility.

The help of the history department was obtained by offering to allow the Archives to be used as a laboratory for students of history. As other disciplines had lab sections for hands-on training, the history department could now have a laboratory to teach its students how to do historical research and handle documents while assisting their preservation. Projects were devised that students could do in limited and exact time periods with little supervision. To accomplish success in these projects, it is necessary to (1) create assigned tasks that are within the student's abilities; (2) explain the assignment carefully and thoroughly, orally and in writing; (3) define expectations and rewards for accomplishment carefully, orally, and in writing; and (4) devise a check on the work that is thorough but does not take up so much time that the help is more of a burden than an assistance.

Some of the projects that have resulted in valuable student help, given for a grade, include the processing of documents for the University Archives. The state and the University system have created a Records Retention Schedule which includes an archival component. This is reviewed with the students during a regular class lecture period delivered by the Archivist. Further, simple

instructions on proper storage and handling of the documents are explained and written handouts are distributed for each student. The check on this assignment is the written inventory prepared by the student and typed by the Archivist in preparing the finders guide.

Another project includes the collection of oral histories. Exact rules as to how to conduct the interview and what types of tapes and documentation are expected for the Archives to receive the tapes are given by the Archivist to the instructor and to the class. The instructor is then responsible for ensuring that the tapes are of acceptable value. The instructor works with the students to complete the task. Some instructors have also worked with their students in helping them learn how to be field historians, and with careful guidelines from the Archivist, have sent their students out into the vast, rural South Texas area, to survey document collections that can be found in unusual places. For this assignment, students are asked only to find documents and then report on why the Archivist should attempt to acquire them.

Other surveys, of buildings in local communities, of graveyards and cemeteries have also been conducted and databases of information have been created with the data entered by volunteers. To assist in data entry, generally, an older volunteer will be asked to check the student's work.

The Archivist has often been asked to speak before local groups and conduct short document and photo preservation sessions where volunteers are enlisted. These older volunteers are also an invaluable source of a great deal of work. They can be relied on to check work and assist with such projects as preservation microfilming, reorganization of some files as they become disorganized, and the general work of dusting boxes and books.

In all that is done by any volunteer, however, it is important that the instructions be given orally and in writing. Volunteer handbooks on how to accomplish tasks are of vital importance. While written instructions take time to create, they save time and constant instruction. Individualized written and oral instructions must be given for each project. Most importantly the reward for the effort expended must be something that is real even if it cannot be monetary.

Annual Roundtable Meeting

This year's meeting of the Archives Management Roundtable will feature a presentation on self-directed work teams, which are developing as an alternate method designed to cope with declining staff resources, improve work products, and enhance employee involvement in improving work processes and coping with growing work loads. Roger Myers will discuss the use of self-directed work teams at the University of Arizona library and Michael Kurtz will discuss two NARA team experiments.

All members of the Roundtable are encouraged to attend the annual meeting, which will be held on Thursday, August 29, from 4:00-6:00 p.m.

As usual, we will conduct our annual business and develop proposals for the 1997 program.