The Academic Archives of the Future

About fifteen years ago, while attending a conference focused on research on archival appraisal, I witnessed a debate about academic archives and what they represented—a debate that, I suspect, would not happen today. After a presentation about appraising college/university records, some audience members argued that the real problem was that higher education institutions were overdocumented: nearly every college and university, no matter its age or significance, had established archives and had hired archivists on a scale not seen in any other sector of society. Today, academic archivists continue to be prominent. They participate in numerous archival professional associations, contribute a large proportion of the articles (and research) to the professional and scholarly archival literature, constitute a sizable portion of the professional leadership, and serve as instructors teaching many archives courses.

Through the decades, academic archives have experimented with different approaches in documenting their institutions, from writing appraisal policies to establishing records management programs to experimenting with functional analysis and other appraisal models.¹ Fifteen years ago, the main challenge seemed to be how to capture those aspects of campus and student life that are not always well-documented in official files, such as students’ social life or teaching in the classroom or the careers of prominent and representative faculty.² Now, we recognize that students, faculty, and administrators alike are utilizing a much larger array of technologies that are transforming the nature of documentation in higher education, resulting in both threats and promises for archiving the essential evidence of what transpires in the ivory towers. A decade ago, the author of a case study about the role of digital communications (e-mail and listservs) at the University of Michigan asserted: “Digital communications are the glue that holds together many of the core functions of the University of Michigan, especially the conduct of research, conveying of knowledge, and fostering of socialization.”³ More recently, college and university administrators are being warned that U.S. courts expect them to be able to produce their electronic data, and they are being advised to establish policies and procedures enabling the preservation of electronic files.⁴

A relatively modest number of academic archives programs have addressed the issue of electronic records. This may have something to do with the origins of these programs, which often emerged to support other academic units, such as history departments, rather than to fulfill administrative, legal, fiscal, or other needs of the institution and its administration.⁵ Even the acquisition of faculty papers, long a topic of discussion among college/university archivists, has led to considerable reflection on just how such documentation should be selected (although with too little recognition of the changing formats supporting such documentation).⁶ Today, we may thus begin to wonder just what will be in these academic archives of the future, other than the legacy of the generations of traditional paper-based records now filling academic archives and records centers.

Increasingly, faculty are creating and maintaining personal papers and research data in digital rather than paper format. Faculty offices ought to be less cluttered than they were a generation ago, although there is no hard evidence to suggest that this is the case. Colleges and universities are themselves generating less paper-based documents, reports, and policies and procedures. Although large amounts of paper are still being produced, some of the most critical functions have shifted to digital format. For example, at many institutions, printed campus bulletins have been replaced with websites, although less care has been devoted to documenting changes in these sites and the information they provide than occurred with their paper predecessors. Electronic messaging, digital photography, cell phones and portable digital assistants, web-based delivery of classroom instruction, and a host of other digital communication and decision-making systems have transformed higher education, just as they have changed other institutions and how individuals function.
The seismic shift from paper to digital information and evidence systems ought to cause some reflection on the archival mission in higher education. In the past, archives in colleges and universities functioned mostly as the symbolic heart of these institutions, as their corporate memory, rather than as mechanisms for legal and fiscal accountability to faculty, staff, trustees, and alumni. The existence of an academic archive provided some assurance that the activities, past and present, of the academy were documented and could be understood by subsequent generations. Now, however, much of what used to go into these academic archives may not be going there; indeed, the new digital records may not be going anywhere.

Today, many academic archives not only lack formal policies for appraising the full range of documentary sources created by their institutions, from the president’s office to informal student groups, but also seem concerned mostly with having methods to deal with traditional documentary sources: utilizing commercial records centers and often reacting to (rather than planning for) crises by removing bulky file cabinets of records. Although there have been many individual academic projects focused on electronic records, these have not led to widely accepted approaches for electronic records management in higher education, at least not in archival programs.

This portends trouble for the future of academic archives, an issue that I can speak to personally. About a decade ago, I sent over to my university’s archives a fairly large number of boxes of personal records concerning teaching, advising, research and publication, and so forth. I fully expected to send additional boxes every year or two; however, I am now to the point where I create only a modest amount of paper records. If I were asked to deliver personal files to the archives today, the delivery might occur on a single flash drive. I am sure that other faculty, staff, and administrators can testify to similar experiences. The question is: are academic archives prepared to accept such files and records?

As institutions have charged ahead to utilize every kind of new digital technology, most college and university archives have tended to overlook the implications of these technologies for academic documentation, practically ignoring the material being created in digital form even as great gaps in archival records open up. For example, many academic archives diligently acquired printed bulletins of programs and courses, and these publications often formed the backbone of the institutional archives. But as these publications were discontinued and their content was moved to the web, many academic archives neglected to collect the web surrogates.

We seem to have arrived at the proverbial fork in the road. Archivists and other records professionals tend to view this fork as leading ahead, down one path, to documentary oblivion or back, down the other path, to the good old days when college and university records were inherently stable. But this may be the wrong view. Perhaps the road ahead will not lead to oblivion. The real issue that academic archivists need to face is how to adjust their practices to accommodate these new digital information systems. They need to think about how they can redefine their mission.

It is possible that this redefinition will require a different kind of academic archive. Rather than a physical space, consolidating mostly paper records, perhaps the institutional archive needs to assume more of a policy role, identifying records throughout the campus and working to ensure that digital records are both maintained by their creators and kept ready for research use. Such an approach can extend to faculty and their personal papers: the archives can assist faculty in learning how to maintain their own papers and can step in to make a final decision about acquiring these documents when a faculty member retires or dies. Rather than a program, usually within the library system, the academic archive needs to think of itself as a social and organizational work space focused on building partnerships across the institution and among all academic records creators. These partnerships ought to assist in increasing the depth of expertise that can be directed toward working on the technological issues faced by college and university archives. Academic archives also need to shift some of their focus from a corporate memory or cultural role to one that includes accountability and compliance processes—a role that is needed in colleges and universities today and also one that is likely to help institutional administrators rethink both the function of academic archives and the web of complex concerns about digital information and recordkeeping systems.

Without a redefinition of mission, the academic archives of the future may be nothing more than museums of old documentation forms. The existing digital information will be held by other units on campus—units where there is a lack of appreciation for the importance of archives as sources for memory, history, and essential evidence.

Notes
1. Academic archivists were among the first to adopt careful descriptions of the appraisal decision-making process. See Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, “Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Administrative Records,” American Archivist, vol. 48 (Spring 1985), pp. 121–40.
5. This has resulted in underdeveloped records management programs, as documented in Don C. Skemer and Geoffrey P. Williams, “Managing the Records of Higher Education: The State of Records Management in American Colleges and Universities,” American Archivist, vol. 53 (Fall 1990), pp. 332–47.
6. For a recent example of such reflection about faculty papers, see Tom Hyry, Diane Kaplan, and Christine Weideman, “Though This Be Madness, Yet There Is Method in ’t’: Assessing the Value of Faculty Papers and Defining a Collecting Policy,” American Archivist, vol. 65 (Summer 2002), pp. 56–69.