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Almost, but Not Quite, Entirely Unlike Libraries

Academic law librarians enter the world of archives

By Stacy Etheredge

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, an Englishman who has suddenly found himself aboard a spaceship after the Earth is decimated (don't ask, just read the book) tries to get the ship's computer to make him a nice cuppa. What he gets instead is a cup full of liquid that is "almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea." Although that phrase would fit splendidly at a party with Alice and the Mad Hatter, you get the gist—this is tea, except it isn't. Or, perhaps a little more clearly, this is very similar to tea, but it is also very different.



Academic law librarians are learning that the same can be said about libraries and archives. More and more, law schools are seeking to establish archives to document their history and save their institutional knowledge. However, budgets dictate realities, and schools that cannot hire archivists find themselves with boxes of materials and no idea what to do with them. Casting about for a solution, law school administrators often decide that the logical destination is the library. And why not? In the public's mind, libraries and archives have always been more or less synonymous. From time immemorial, they have been considered the repositories of society's collective information. Thus, to an administrator, it is not really a stretch to conclude that the library can (or even *should*) be responsible for the school's archives. But the truth is, archives are almost, but not quite, entirely unlike libraries.

The Differences Between Us: A Basic Primer

The primary similarity between libraries and archives is that they both revolve around information—collecting it, organizing it, sharing it. The main difference is in the types of materials that each holds. In a nutshell, the mission of an archive is to preserve and provide access to records of enduring

value related to a particular entity or subject. In the case of an academic institution, an archive would collect materials related to the school's history, most likely focused around academic year-by-year operations. Thus, materials found in a law school archive would include yearly reports, administrative correspondence, committee minutes, student handbooks, class schedules—in short, anything that documents the school's history.

This definition is, of course, basic in the extreme. As with librarianship, it takes years of training and experience to become an archivist and to learn how to properly maintain an archive. If you find yourself suddenly inheriting reams of materials from the law school and are asked to transform them into an archive, you certainly will not be able to understand it all overnight. But you can at least start out knowing some fundamental differences.

Sources: Secondary Versus Primary

Libraries are organized around secondary sources, such as books, encyclopedias, and journals. They collect published items, created independently by a variety of authors and for a variety of reasons. These secondary sources are intentionally acquired because they are "about" something that is related to the library's mission. Secondary sources are the end products of research and analysis. In a way, even a book containing primary sources, such as a reporter of case law, becomes a kind of secondary source once it enters a law library's collection because it was specifically compiled and collected to serve as a resource about the law.

The most critical element to understanding archives is that they are

organized around records, which are primary sources. These records were meant to be working documents, not end products of analysis or research. They are original documents that were created by an entity, such as a law school, during the normal course of its business. The authors of the records, termed "creators" in archives language, come only from within that entity. The items collected, almost always unpublished, are tangible records of events that stand as evidence of the institution's history. Although they may now serve as resources for research, they weren't created for that purpose.

Items: Stand-Alone Versus Intertwined

Materials in a library collection are discrete items that have individual significance on their own. Although these resources might connect to one another in a general sense of subject matter, there is no intrinsic or formal relationship among them. Published items in a library, with the exception of rare books, are also generally not unique, as there are thousands of copies of the same items available elsewhere.

Sources in an archive differ from those in a library in that they are usually received in aggregate groupings, such as a year's worth of the dean's correspondence. An individual document in a records group derives a large part of its significance from its relationship to other items in the group. And since materials in an archive are the primary documents of a specific institution, they are almost always unique items. Thus, if only one copy exists of the faculty senate minutes of March 6, 1987, its loss would be irrevocable.



Archival materials are organized not by subject, but by *creator*—the entity originally responsible for production of the records. This process, called “arrangement,” is based on the concepts of provenance and original order. Provenance is the principle of keeping together all the documents generated by a single creator without intermingling them with the documents of a different creator. Original order follows the idea that archivists should, as much as possible, preserve records in the order they were accumulated, used, and stored, as that in its own way provides information of both context and creator. However, the result of this focus on relating archival materials in a records group back to the creator is that these

Collection: Creating Versus Receiving

A law library’s collection is essentially created, i.e., built up, around the information-seeking needs of a specific patron base. It is a forward-looking and constantly evolving body, always responding to new areas of law and scholarship interests. Library materials are acquired one by one, with the specific intention of adding each particular item to one specific collection. If a certain book about a subject cannot be had, others like it can be—it is usually one choice among many. These individual choices and decisions create a library collection that is, in a sense, subjectively chosen.

Collecting for an archive, on the other hand, is more of an objective enterprise. Intellectual control is exercised with prior records-management decisions as to which groups to collect from, what type of materials to collect, and what records will be considered to have enduring value (none of which are easy). After that, an archive is not so much “created” as “received.” In a way, it is more of a past-looking venture; the collection is defined beforehand by the very nature of the organization and its business, with resultant records channeled into the archives accordingly.

Organization: Subject Versus Creator

A fundamental principal of information science is that materials need to be organized before they can be accessed.

Resources for the Beginner

Associations: The Society of American Archivists (SAA), www.archivists.org, is the premier professional association for archivists, though it encourages membership from individuals at all levels. Two subgroups of interest are the College and University Archives Section and the Lone Arrangers Roundtable. The Council of State Archivists (CoSA), www.statearchivists.org, is another active organization.

Introductory Texts: The SAA website has an online bookstore that features a number of helpful books, including its own Archival Fundamentals series. Some “bibles” for the beginner are: *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (James M. O’Toole and Richard J. Cox), *Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives* (Gregory S. Hunter), and *Archives: Principles and Practices* (Laura Millar). There are also texts that focus on university and small-shop archives.

Guidelines: SAA has prepared and made available the detailed and comprehensive *Guidelines for College and University Archives* at www.archivists.org/governance/guidelines/cu_guidelines.asp. Topics covered include administrative relationships, records management, and facilities and equipment. There is also a helpful appendix on types of academic records.

Tutorials: The American Association for State and Local History administers a self-paced, online course, *The Basics of Archives*, designed for people with “little to no experience with archival materials,” at www.aaslh.org/basicsofarchives.htm. The course is also provided free on the Connecticut State Library’s website, www.cslib.org/archivesbasics/index.html, though you are not provided with a certification of completion. In addition, CoSA’s website hosts the *Student Workbook and Facilitator’s Manual*, provided for a pared-down on-site training version of the course, that includes screenshots, exercises, and examples from the course, at www.statearchivists.org/arc/bace/index.htm.

Librarians and archivists both agree on this principle; they just differ in their techniques. Subjects drive the organization of materials in libraries. Librarians *classify* materials; that is, they assign predetermined subject areas chosen from a universally recognized system. After that is done, the materials are physically grouped together by the assigned subject classifications. The academic library world primarily uses the Library of Congress Classification, and the public library world generally uses the Dewey Decimal System, but the method and end results are the same.

groups end up containing information about numerous subjects.

Description: Catalog Versus Finding Aid

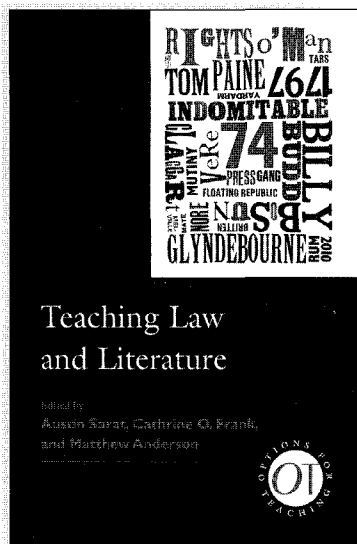
Another important difference between libraries and archives is their methods of description. Titles in a library are individually described and cataloged. This is not actually as burdensome a task as it could be because a cataloger working with published materials has immediate sources of help available to

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Archivists, however, almost always have to create original descriptions because they deal with primary documents. There is no built-in information or shared data available when the document is unique to the world. Time constraints and workload make it impossible to list each individual item, so archives materials are generally described at higher levels, that is, as record groups and subgroups. This, in turn, has a direct impact on access, since a capacity to search for individual documents is not available. Thus, the primary access tool of archivists, the "finding aid," has a different character than the catalog. Its job is not to supply a detailed list of documents but to provide a narrative overview of the collection, summarizing contents and supplying enough history to give context. A finding aid is just that—an *aid* to the collection, not a catalog of it.

Access: Open Versus Closed

Not surprisingly, the issue of access to materials is quite different between libraries and archives, a direct function of the different types of materials that each collects. Libraries, with the exception of special collections and reference materials, want their materials to be accessed freely. In fact, the words we use are "borrow" and "circulate." There are open stacks where patrons are encouraged to browse, select whatever they want, and then either disappear into a corner or take the item out of the library altogether. It isn't that libraries want to spend extra money replacing items that go missing, just that it probably will not be difficult to reacquire published items that are widely available.

Archives want their collections to be used, too, but they most definitely do not want them to be borrowed or circulated. The materials are closed to patrons, kept in rooms that are probably out of sight. A staff member will retrieve the items for the patron, who will then be ushered to a supervised reading room. Under no circumstances will materials be allowed out of the archives area. Strict guidelines for use and even stricter measures for security will be employed. This isn't administrative arrogance; it is just a very real acknowledgment of the value of the unique materials involved. Any items lost are probably irreplaceable, and thus, so is the information they contain.

Let the Journey Begin

The differences I have outlined are basic and just the first step toward understanding and working with archives. Librarians who are suddenly responsible for their law schools' historical records will probably discover that it is like any other life situation that you enter not exactly as prepared as you would like: challenging, scary, fun, tiring, rewarding—all of this and more, wrapped up in one big archival package. There is going to be a lot to learn, and it is going to be a fairly steep learning curve, but it will probably remind you again of why you love having a career working with information.

So if you do find yourself in the delicate situation of inheriting an archive, just remember the same advice our intergalactic Englishman got from the cover of his hitchhiker's guide . . .

DON'T PANIC!

(in large, friendly letters). ■

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