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Aaron D. Purcell. Academic Archives (2012)

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This title first attracted my attention when mentioned in the April issue of *American Libraries*. The mention was only a sentence, but I read it, in the context of the title, to herald a gutsy author willing to profile the emerging academy, predict the records it will produce, and outline a scheme (or schemes) to manage them. I was disabused when the review copy arrived. Mr. Purcell acknowledges that colleges and universities face challenges today but offers no particular insight as to where the sector is headed – up, down, or out. Economics and digitization, it seems, may force cosmetic change at the institutional level, but tomorrow will look pretty much like today on the sector level.

It is essential to understand “Academic Archives” here in Mr. Purcell’s sense, in which – quoting his Preface – “In addition to college and university archives, academic archives encompass records management programs, special collections departments, and other campus archival repositories.” 2 Observing that many once separate units/functions/programs (e.g., rare book, manuscript, recorded sound, oral history, photographic, map, ephemera, and other collections, as well as fund- and friend-raising, outreach, digital, and other activities) have, over time, become associated with the institutional library and often administratively merged into the mix that is “Special Collections,” Mr. Purcell believes this pattern will continue and lead to über units, which, rather like black holes, will feed on thus far nonassociated “historical” materials and activities.2 What takes the place of gravity in the metaphor isn’t entirely clear, but it seems to be efficiencies and economies as perceived by central administrations.

If this is correct, then surely archivists3 have an opportunity, perhaps even a responsibility, 4 to reach for the brass ring and manage the über units. Mr. Purcell is not shy in putting forward his program. The first paragraph of his first chapter reads, “…academic archivists are defined as: professionally trained archivists, curators, records managers, special collections librarians, and digitization specialists who work within or are affiliated with an academic library. Their ranks are not limited to university archivists who work mostly with official records. Instead, academic archivists are part of a larger umbrella of professionals, [sic] who work in special collections departments, records management units, rare book libraries, audiovisual archives, and other repositories found within the academic environment. ... They are the budding leaders of academic libraries and the larger archival profession.”5 There are probably some unexplored complications in this definition but little doubt about the aspiration: Mr. Purcell intends to be
the Horatio Alger who outlines the pluck and luck required by those under the umbrella who yearn to wrap themselves in the Golden Fleece.6

The book consists of three parts. The first, “three overview chapters [that define] the academic archives” (how to get to one; how technological developments have changed them; and the inner mysteries of Special Collections7 occupies pages 3 to 86. The second, pages 89 to 276, is “more prescriptive,” “explains how to build an archives program in an academic library;” distinguishes programs, missions, and visions;8 discusses record management programs;9 with additional chapters on collection development; acquisition and processing; reference services; and “digital frontiers.” This long section is firmly grounded in the present, with considerable redundancies between chapters and only the occasional nudge as to how the present may anticipate the future.

The final section, just 24 pages (279-303) titled “The Future of Academic Archives,” is certainly required by Purcell’s title and theme and might logically have been placed first, but it adds little, repeating Algeristic optimisms expressed in earlier chapters. It begins with sentences of startling exhaustion: “Predicting an accurate future depends on understanding the past, the present, and emerging trends…. Technology is the greatest variable in understanding how research and archival work will be conducted in the coming decades.” Predicting events accurately might more correctly be said to rely on the state of our knowledge – which in some circumstances we have in abundance, in others not so much. Purcell here, perhaps not alone, may be, quite simply, deficient.10 [This paragraph corrects an erroneous RBML edit to my text which moved the quote mark here placed after “decades” to follow “not so much.”]

Although none is forthcoming, some argument seems warranted: is it actually likely that colleges and universities will continue to expand an already quite large (and much criticized) administrative infrastructure of staff and facilities “non-essential” to the core educational mission? Is the library likely to embrace and authorize additional staff for a complex and comprehensive record collecting programs on the hope that some small group of future scholars will find them useful?11 Doesn’t Purcell’s sense that academic institutions are contracting conflict fundamentally with his sense of expanding opportunities for academic archives? Will competence-tested training delivered via the internet prove to have no effect on the academy?

*Academic Archives* is one of the first titles issued by Neal-Schuman since it was taken under ALA’s publications wing, a few words on production values may be in order. Editing and proof-reading is no stronger than one expects these days, but no weaker.12 Design is simple and effective enough, with someone realizing that unrelieved, and not very lively, text would quickly become indigestible and hence adding bullet lists every few pages and inserting 21 “figures,” a
few of which are charts or graphic representations, the rest murky black and white photographs. The graphs don’t add much, except to break up the text, and the photographs are frequently enigmatic. Figure 2.1, for example, captioned “Collaborative Library Space,” depicts a large decorative window at the end of or on one side a room. Four club chairs are arranged on a rug beside the window, while a student at a table in the left corner and another on the right, separated by the expanse of rug and club chairs, bend over their books. The explanation in the text is, “Today’s students demand more usable and appealing library spaces for quiet study, group interactions, and examining library collections.” Hmm, well….

Figure 3.5, “Examples of Rare Books,” illustrates the sentence, “Because rare books are still a central resource for scholars and are found in nearly every special collections department, academic archivists must familiarize themselves with the printed pieces in their repositories.” It shows a copy of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, perhaps one of the wrappered issues of the 1920s, bleeding off upper left; a 16th or 17th century tome with main text in an inner column surrounded by commentary in an outer column; and, lower right, the cover of Dreiser’s *My City* (Liveright 1929). Illustrated with eight etchings by Max Pollak, this book was issued in 275 signed copies, and was thus probably never “common.” Still, WorldCat locates a goodly number of institutionalized copies, and one can (or recently could) acquire the author’s copy, with an additional inscription and the original box from Charles Agvent for $1500, so it is apparently not excessively rare, or perhaps not highly sought, another mark of Genuine Rare. Is there a reason these three items were selected for the illustration? “New Acquisitions for Academic Archives,” “Processing University Records,” “A Processed Collection,” “Reading Room Exhibit,” and “Cadet Corps Visit to Special Collections” are similarly curious images.13

With a $95 cover price, many readers may question whether they’ve gotten good value; critical readers will probably feel ripped off. ----Sidney F. Huttner, Emeritus Special Collections & University Archives Librarian, The University of Iowa.

1. Mr. Purcell fails to maintain consistently his distinction between “academic archive” and “college or university archive,” (or indeed, plain old vanilla “archive”) -- and does seem sometimes to trade on ambiguity. In this review I use “archive” in today’s conventional sense (institutionally-generated records thought to merit or require permanent preservation) and “Special Collections” to refer to the library administrative unit within which archives (university and otherwise) are frequently placed. In the past few years it has become popular to expand “Special Collections” to a variant of “Special Collections Research Center.” While there is precedent for using “academic archivist” to identify a great assortment of workers who toil in colleges and universities -- e.g., the Society of American Archivists 2004 A*CENSUS -- Mr. Purcell is, so far as I have been able to determine, the first to suggest “Academic Archive(s)” as the name of the (as yet non-existent?) unit in which they (may) collectively work.
2. Though, oddly enough, he doesn’t seem to sense these will include campus museums or that the same forces may stimulate affiliations with nearby historical societies, historic homes, and the many other kinds of cultural institutions, often at least loosely associated with colleges and universities, which also face extreme economic challenges.

3. This seems to be either the plain-vanilla archivist or the current college or university archivist rather than the soon-to-be-defined “academic archivist,” though Mr. Purcell later suggests it may also include selected local, state, and federal archivists whose political experience may make them attractive leaders for emerging über units. See, e.g., page 299: “The combination of activist archivists and well-connected government archivists will form an effective group to lobby for more support on behalf of statewide archival programs that benefit all state residents.”

4. For instance, note the waffle(s?) in: “While many professional archivists detest administrative duties and prefer their daily processing and reference duties, the closer integration of academic archives into the mission of the academic library opens up leadership opportunities for academic archivists.” (292).

5. But Mr. Purcell seems himself uncertain about terminology: “To reflect these broader trends, the presence of these skills, and their location within the academic library, a majority of academic archivists will be designated with the new and more appropriate title of special collections archivist.” (287).

6. It seems obvious that academic archives (as Mr. Purcell defines them) will inevitably be lead by academic archivists (as Mr. Purcell defines them), but in fact Mr. Purcell’s book only makes some sense if his primary audience is actually those “professionally trained archivists” (of the college or university archives type) who crave leadership positions in the emerging (existing?) academic archives. There’s no argument here, merely the perception of an opportunity to be exploited and two definitions which, taken together, are circular. The book is issued in Neal-Schuman’s The Archivist’s and Records Manager’s Bookshelf series, which tends to reinforce the sense it has a narrower intended audience than the title implies.

7. Where we learn, among other things, that “Reviewing rare book dealer catalogs is another way for academic archivists to familiarize themselves with not only what is available for purchase, but also with the process of researching and describing a rare book.” Presumably those academic archivists who are specialists in printed books read these catalogs for other purposes.

8. Of the programmatic sort, not those related to illusions, mirages, mushrooms, etc. Although, of course, there might be overlap here.

9. University archivists, it seems, are not always a good “fit” as record managers: shredding backlogs may build while they fiddle with content assessments: see pages 122-123; 129.

10. Mr. Purcell is fond of this locution, putting forth two or three sentences said to mean the same thing and ending with “Quite simply,” followed by a koan-like statement. E.g., “Quite simply, a vision creates a sense of purpose, while the mission is the purpose only.” (102). “Quite simply, research services are the public face of archives.” (216).

12. The space allowed for this review doesn’t permit thorough exploration but there is a fair amount of a sloppy proofreading throughout. Within two pages, for example, we learn that, “… paper based collections in academic archives will attain even more unique qualities [than they now have],” (284) and “Advancing technology [and a list of similar things] will create much more unique archives programs…..” (285). Unique today, more unique tomorrow, ever more unique in the future, means “unique” has lost its meaning.

13. Something, though it is uncertain just what, may be explained in that Mr. Purcell holds an MLS from Maryland (College Park) and PhD (History) from the University of Louisville and is currently head of Special Collections at Virginia Tech. Marc Brodsky, credited for all of the Figures not provided by the author, is Public Services and Reference Archivist there. The other members of the staff have titles of University Archivist, Processing and Acquisitions Archivist, Project Archivist, Digital Collections Archivist, and two Archives Assistants. The department is said to manage 1600 manuscript collections, 60,000 books, and an institutional archive of unstated size. See http://http://spec.lib.vt.edu/.