

Archives Technicians: Their Role in Archives and the Need for Pre-Appointment Training*

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The 1990s as a Decade of Archival Education

The 1990s is shaping up as the decade of archival education in Canada. Since 1990 a number of successful new programmes in archival education have been launched in this country at the post-secondary level. These new initiatives include a two-year full-time Archives Technician Programme at Algonquin College in Ottawa, an undergraduate programme at the Université du Québec à Hull, a week-end certificate programme for working archivists sponsored by a number of provincial archival associations (which takes five years to complete in some cases), and new programmes in archival studies at the University of Manitoba and the University of Toronto. Three universities now offer English-language graduate programmes in archives and the Association of Canadian Archivists has begun to offer what will eventually be a full programme of advanced training for working archival staff. The growth of all the programmes mentioned above has been directly or partly stimulated by the education programmes of the relevant professional archivists associations.¹

The growth of these programmes demonstrates the existence of a hunger for formal training on the part of persons already working in archives as well as a strong interest in full-time preparatory training on the part of those wishing to enter the field. Several hundred persons are already involved as students in these programmes; upon graduation these students are bound to have an effect on the field of archives in Canada.

Wherever one looks in the field of archives in Canada today one finds a new interest and energy in the field of education. It is becoming easier to receive instruction on how better to look after the historical material and records that are so important to us and this is a development which should please us all.

Rationale for a Formal Training Programme for Archives Technicians

Technician - a specialist in the technical details of a subject or occupation; one who has acquired the technique of an art or other area of specialization.

Technology - from the Greek "techne" art, craft and "logos" word or study; the systematic treatment of an art; a scientific method of achieving a practical purpose; the totality of the means employed to provide objects necessary for human sustenance and comfort.

(*Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*, 1991)

In spite of the recent growth of formal training opportunities in our field it is just as well to recall that it has historically suffered from a lack of formal training. Most of the programmes that exist now are of very recent origin. Even the oldest continuing training course—the Archives Course of the National Archives of Canada—dates only from the 1960s. So we are probably better to take up a welcoming attitude to new training opportunities as they develop. This is probably particularly true in the area of the technical aspects of archives, where much that is new is being developed outside our field and imported into it. It seems natural then to go outside for technical training.

Automation has changed two important things in our field already. First, it is now normal for contemporary records created by companies and individuals to contain records that were created on computers and which can be read only with their help. The proliferation of the personal computer has ensured this fact. We can no longer expect to make accessions of new archival records that do not require technical skill to look after. Second, the new capacities that exist in the world for moving information around present our field with great opportunities. Modems, CD-ROM, networks, databases, scanners, and optical character recognition are all terms that we have learned to define and understand; however, they are not yet methods we use much in our field to capture information and to make it available to others. It was impossible to move around in the archives field during 1993 and 1994 without hearing talk of the Internet and the information superhighway.²

A major part of the future of the archives field will depend on whether we can learn to use this new technology. Libraries have learned to use it to their benefit and to that of their patrons, and we should learn to use it as well. The branch of the Ottawa Public Library near my home has a completely automated reference system. There is no card catalogue there any longer; to look anything up, the library patron must use the computer terminal or ask a librarian. The system produces a listing of every book held by the Ottawa Public Library system for the subject or author queried. Among many other things, you are told which branch holds the book, the call number, and whether the book is currently in or out on loan. If the very mixed population of my neighbourhood can use a computer terminal to get the library information they need, surely we and our clients can do so too.

We have talked for years in the archives field in Canada of the need to create a network and an archival system in the country. The new technology provides us with some chances to get closer to those objectives—for ourselves and our clientele. Although some remarkable things have been done in automating some archives in Canada, our progress in automation overall has been slow. One of the hopes of those of us responsible for the Algonquin Programme is that younger

people wanting to enter the field can be trained in the technical expertise we lack and that they can bring this expertise into the field with them as new employees.

The Genesis of the Algonquin Programme

Algonquin College is eastern Ontario's largest community college. It runs full-time credit programmes during the day and offers an extensive list of evening courses, both credit and non-credit. It has a teaching faculty of more than eight hundred and a full-time student body of eight thousand. For more than twenty years it has been offering Museum Technician and Library Technician courses as parts of its day-time offerings in the Community Services Studies Section. In the late 1980s faculty in this department, led by Professor Alastair Black, a member of the Ontario Association of Archivists, began discussing the desirability of offering an archives technicians course. In July, 1990 Algonquin invited the members of the Education Committee of the Ottawa Chapter of the OAA to act, individually, as members of an Advisory Committee to the College on the development of an archives technician programme.

The Advisory Committee met with College officials on at least a monthly basis over the next ten months. The Committee began its work with a general review of the concept of such a programme, studied a draft questionnaire that Algonquin sent to all archives in Ontario in September 1990, considered an analysis of the results, and then proposed curricula for the programme. In October 1990 the Committee met with the Chair of the Standing Committee on Education of the Association of Canadian Archivists. The survey results were very positive towards the idea of an archives technician programme. Sixty per cent of the archives surveyed returned questionnaires and ninety-five per cent of the returns said that they thought an archives technician programme was needed in Ontario. Ninety per cent indicated they would consider hiring graduates from the programme and a similar percentage said they would consider accepting field placements from the programme.

Results from a further survey in early 1991 indicated that the ninety-one Ontario institutions replying to the survey intended to create an average of twenty new archival technician positions in their institutions in each of 1993, 1994, and 1995. Specific letters of support for the new programme were received from officials of the National Archives of Canada and from the heads of a number of Ontario archives. In February 1991 the executive of the Ontario Association of Archivists considered the new programme and formally endorsed it.³ In May of 1991 the Ministry of Colleges and Universities in Toronto formally approved the new programme and the College began to accept applications for its first class. Thirty students began their studies in September 1991.

The process by which the Algonquin Programme was developed was complicated and lengthy. In addition to consultation with the professional community in Ontario and elsewhere, the Programme received a careful look from a value-conscious Ministry at the provincial level before it was approved. It operates under the careful scrutiny of an Advisory Committee made up of professionals from employing institutions. The College seeks continued advice from the archival community as the programme is further developed and revised.

Content of the Algonquin Programme

The Algonquin programme is a two-year full-time day programme consisting of thirty-four courses (1,400 class hours) spread over four semesters. In addition, students do field work for one month each in the third and fourth semesters. In addition to four courses each in English and French (as a second language), the students take courses in Canadian history, the history of archives, records management, and all aspects of traditional archives: arrangement and description, appraisal, reference, and public service. Concentrated courses are offered in the basics of computers, RAD, INMAGIC, and automation of archives. The intention is to make the students extremely competent technically and to open up for them in particular the promise and excitement of automation in archives.

The Algonquin Experience So Far

On Saturday, 12 June 1993, Algonquin's first graduating class of twenty archival technicians received their diplomas in a ceremony in the Opera of Ottawa's National Arts Centre. The 1993 graduating class did well in finding jobs in the archives field. A survey conducted by the Placement Services office of Algonquin College in November 1993 showed that eighty-eight per cent of the graduates were working and that the median salary for the group was \$26,390. Nineteen graduates replied to the Algonquin survey: three reported that they had returned to school or for other reasons were not looking for work, two that they were still looking for work, two that they were working outside the archives field, and twelve (or seventy-five per cent of those who sought work) that they were working in the archives field.

College officials regard this as a very encouraging development in a tough economy. This first group of graduates found work in Ottawa, Belleville, Kingston, London, Toronto, and Baffin Island. Employing institutions include the Ameliasburgh Museum, the Ottawa Jewish Historical Society, the National Archives of Canada, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, and the Nunatta Sunaqtangit Museum in Iqaluit. It is hoped that the 1994 graduating class will eventually fare as well as its predecessor. As of June 1994 half of the members of the 1994 class were working in the archives field.

Graduates generally landed in places where they are using their training. They are getting a good start in their chosen field. Our first year students have also had success finding work in the field during the summer between their first and second years.

In each year, College officials have received more applications from qualified persons for places in the programme than can be accommodated. A waiting list is maintained for the programme.

Issues

While the archivists who served on the Algonquin Advisory Committee unanimously supported the proposal to create an archives technician programme at the College, they did not do so without having some other considerations in mind. The

Committee indicated to the Algonquin officials that they wished the objectives of the programme to be clear, that is, that it should be aimed at training technicians and not professional archivists. The Committee also indicated to Algonquin from the start that the priority for the profession in Ontario was to increase the number of opportunities for post-appointment training for professional archivists and asked the College's help and advice in meeting this objective.

Algonquin officials responded to both these concerns in a frank, helpful manner. They were very clear in their own minds that their proposed programme will not be training professional archives and will not aim to do so. They have been running two other technician programmes successfully for years in close consultation with the responsible professional organizations in each case. Algonquin regards continued good, consultative relations with the professional associations to have been crucial to the success of the other programmes they run; they seek the same type of relationship with the Archives Association of Ontario and the Association of Canadian Archivists. The Education Committee of the ACA has agreed to an Algonquin College request to undertake a formal review of the Archives Technician Programme during 1994-1995.

Conclusion

The Archives Technician Programme at Algonquin College can be regarded as a welcome and needed addition to the training presently available in Canada. The proposal was well received by archives in the province and its development can be expected, over the years, to expand the expertise and the knowledge available to archivists and their institutions in Ontario and elsewhere. Algonquin officials responsible for this proposal have shown a commendable and consistent desire to develop their programme in concert with the professional archivists of Ontario. For these reasons, the executive of the Ontario Association of Archivists formally endorsed the development of this programme. The Standing Committee on Education of the Association of Canadian Archivists has indicated its intention eventually to issue guidelines for archives technicians programmes and the staff of the Algonquin programme have offered to help in that process.

The Algonquin programme, unique in North America as far as we have been able to discover, provides formal training in archives technology. It links study and practice in a useful way and has been developed by archives educators in consultation with professional archivists and with employers in the field. It has attracted a significant number of students and the first graduates are beginning to find employment in the field. It would seem to be an example worth supporting and, perhaps, worth imitation in other jurisdictions.

A legitimate question for those of us who have chosen archives for our field is why the field has remained largely underfunded in Canada in most jurisdictions. Part of the answer may lie in the fact that there has historically been a lack of formal training in the field and that most of us entered it having been trained for something else first. The field has often lacked a definition and identity of its own. Much of the effort of the professional associations over the past ten years has been aimed at increasing formal instruction in archives.

It should encourage us, I believe, that a significant number of people are willing to train themselves at their own expense for two years in order to seek employment in our field as technicians. Speaking as someone who has worked with the group at Algonquin, I must say that I admire very much the students who make up that programme and I am excited by the contribution that I believe they are capable of making as they take their places in our field.

Notes

- * An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists on 24 July 1993 in St. John's, Newfoundland. I am grateful to Alastair Black and Jim McLaughlin of Algonquin College for their comments on that earlier paper.
- 1 These new programmes join older initiatives such as the National Archives of Canada's Archives Course, the evening programme in archives at George Brown College in Toronto, and the concentration in archival studies that the History Department of the University of Windsor offers as part of its programme. There may be other programmes and courses of interest not mentioned here.
- 2 Keith Spicer, Chair of the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission, led off the 1994 annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists with an address on the subject of the information superhighway. He stressed the importance of there being an archives lane on that highway.
- 3 See letter of OAA president Lutzen Riedstra to Alastair Black of Algonquin College, 4 February 1991.