

Access Opportunities We Could Never Have Imagined, Issues That We Can Never Resolve

John Fleckner

The simple word “access” is so familiar a part of the verbal landscape of archives that it is easy to forget its richness and complexities. Access is at once a core value or belief of archivists; a privilege or a right which archivists must administer through institutional policies; and a set of activities by which we make archival records known—that is, intellectual access. This paper looks at the evolving notions of access deeply rooted in our history. It concludes by arguing that archivists should explore another dimension of access—archival literacy, that is the knowledge and skills that enable citizens to understand the archival enterprise sufficiently to meet their information needs.

Thinking About Access for Seventy-Five Years

That archives, as institutions, exist to provide access to archival materials seems true by definition. We would say that a so-called archives with no access of any sort is a reliquary or a mausoleum. What is not at all obvious is who will be the expected (and preferred) beneficiaries of this access? What are the principles by which access will be administered? To what degree should the archivist be a passive custodian or a vigorous advocate for access? What is the place of access (and use of) records in our mental picture of the archival enterprise?

In his 1937 address as SAA’s first president, Albert Ray Newsome, a University of North Carolina historian long active in archival affairs, reflected on that enterprise. “The first third of the twentieth century was an era of archival pioneering in the United States,” he observed, while the second was “a new era of remarkable archival fruition.”⁶⁶ One legacy of the “pioneering” era was the development of some measure of consensus about the nature and purpose

⁶⁶ A. R. Newsome, “Objectives of the Society of American Archivists: 1937 Presidential Address,” *American Archivist* 26 (July 1963): 299, reprinted from mimeographed *Proceedings of the Society of American Archivists* (Urbana, Illinois, 1937).

of American archives. The Public Records Commission of the American Historical Association and its Conference of Archivists—created in 1909 and transformed into the independent Society of American Archivists in 1936—had been key contributors to this development.⁶⁷

President Newsome drew on these shared ideas and values as he identified objectives for the fledgling SAA. “The Society should become the practical, self-help agency of archivists for the solution of their complex problems of internal economy.” These included a litany familiar to us today—appraisal criteria, reproduction techniques, physical preservation, and management of non-textual records. But not all issues centered on the records themselves. “Some of the most puzzling and important problems of archival administration,” Newsome judged, “relate to availability.” For example, what sorts of “research room rules, practices, and implements” are best? And, even more challenging, “should archivists be content with the maximum availability of their records to the small number of visiting and inquiring investigators or should they extend availability by resort to publication, viewed broadly as the entire progress of taking reproductions and guides to the public?” Newsome’s own views seem clear in this striking assertion: The goal of “all competent archivists” is “a more extensive use of archives by scholarly investigators. . . .” Newsome urged SAA “to foster a wider and more intensive interest in archives” among national scholarly organizations. “Public archives,” he argued, “are of the greatest value not only to historians but to scholars in every branch of the social sciences.”

Yet, good relations with archival and scholarly constituencies were not sufficient. “Absolutely vital to the existence and advance of archival work is public support, intellectual and financial.” This support was essential to securing needed archival legislation and financial backing. Newsome offered few particulars, suggesting only that the Society might examine methods for “public exhibition of interesting documents” and “encourage well-directed publicity of an informational nature” about the value of archives to communities. It would be left for many future generations to turn this insight about public support into an action agenda.⁶⁸

Newsome’s second SAA presidential address—in those days presidents served for two years—was a mind-numbing analysis of the archival legislation in each of the forty-eight states, but it provided the ground work for a model state

⁶⁷ James M. O’Toole and Richard J. Cox, *Understanding Archives And Manuscripts* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2006), Chapter 2, “The History of Archives and the Archives Profession,” especially 51–86 and J. Frank Cook, “The Blessings of Providence on an Association of Archivists,” *American Archivist* 46, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 374–399 are brief surveys of the history of the profession.

⁶⁸ Newsome, “Objectives of the Society,” 300–303. Newsome was not alone in seeing the need for a broader base for the support of archives. See, for example, Robert C. Binkley, “Strategic Objectives in Archival Policy,” *American Archivist* 2 (July 1939), 168: “Just as librarians promote the use of books, and as teachers defend before the public the value of education, so archivists have as a part of their duty to give stimulus and guidance to the use of archives, and to their use not by the few but by the many.”

public records law drafted by an SAA in 1939.⁶⁹ Section six of the model law, addressing “availability” of public records, articulated standards for access by placing three specific duties on custodians of public records: first: “to keep them in such arrangement and condition as to make them easily accessible for convenient use; second: to “permit all public records...to be inspected, examined, abstracted, or copied by any person,” “except as otherwise expressly provided by law;” and third: “upon the demand of any person, furnish certified copies. . . .”⁷⁰ These standards of access were far from the norm of the day. Although provisions for copying were common, only six states required convenient access; only eight states explicitly made all public records, excepting those restricted by law, available to all persons; while six more states made them available to “citizens;” fifteen states provided “public access to designated classes of records.”⁷¹

SAA undertook several efforts on behalf of the Uniform State Public Records Act. Newsome had communicated with the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws (an American Bar Association affiliate) in preparing the Act and the Society formally submitted it to the Conference in 1940. The Society also printed 175 extra copies of the *American Archivist* issue in which the act appeared for distribution by the Council of State Governments and to a select list of state officials and influential private citizens. In 1941 SAA’s Secretary reported that many public officials had become acquainted with SAA and the proposed law and that eleven states were considering public records legislation.⁷² Over the years SAA’s activities on behalf of archives legislation and other political goals has waxed and waned, but this early example reminds us that from the beginning of the organized profession, archivists have seen advocacy, including advocacy for enhanced public access, as a professional opportunity and obligation.

In 1956, Dr. Theodore R. Schellenberg published *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*, the first of several volumes that became basic textbooks for a generation of archivists. *Modern Archives* crystallized lessons learned in the creation of the National Archives while incorporating archival ideas and values inherited from earlier years. The book’s final chapter on reference service is in Schellenberg’s usual direct and authoritative style, beginning with a bold assertion followed by closely argued propositions that flow from it. “The end of all archival effort is to preserve valuable records and make them available for use,” Schellenberg proclaimed, and all the archival functions—appraisal, accession, description, and physical care—serve these twin goals.

⁶⁹ Albert Ray Newsome, “Uniform State Archival Legislation,” *American Archivist* 2 (January 1939): 1–16.

⁷⁰ “Proposed Uniform State Records Act,” *American Archivist* 3 (April 1940): 110.

⁷¹ Newsome, “Uniform State Archival Legislation,” 12–13.

⁷² Philip C. Brooks, “Report of the Secretary,” *American Archivist* 4 (January 1941): 53–54.

Schellenberg saw twin audiences as well: The archivist “provides access to records under conditions that will satisfy both government officials and the general public. . . .” After all, he wrote, “Since public records are the property of the state, all citizens who collectively constitute the state, have a right to their use.” The undifferentiated “general public,” however, is not Schellenberg’s focus. It is “scholarly needs” (as well as “official” ones) that the archivist serves in managing the arrangement of records. And it is the possibility of “scholarly researches” that is the archivist’s objective in defining “the conditions of access.”

Modern Archives makes another repeated assertion about access: it must be equal. The archivist, Schellenberg insists, must apply “the principle of equal access to all legitimate researchers” and “make no distinction between official and private users.” Priorities in services, if necessary, should be based on the importance of the request, not the requestor, with “special consideration” given to those seeking to establish “legal or civic rights” or whose work “will contribute significantly to the increase or dissemination of knowledge.” Although “an archivist normally favors a policy of free access,” Schellenberg recognized that some restrictions on records were inevitable. *Modern Archives* articulated principles for managing this tension. To begin, an archives must negotiate reasonable access restrictions with agencies when transferring records and refuse to accession records restricted beyond that standard, both practices in place at the National Archives. Reasonable restrictions should be time limited and they should be levied to protect specific public interests, for example military secrets and “certain types of personal information.” An archives program might, as the National Archives found necessary, seek legislation to overcome obsolete legal barriers to access.⁷³

As an archival writer and teacher, Schellenberg’s “main objective,” according to Jane Smith in 1981, “was to systematize and standardize archival principles and techniques.”⁷⁴ Promoting common archival values and perspectives was an inevitable accompaniment. Ironically, by the time of Schellenberg’s death at age sixty-seven in 1970, the archival landscape that he described and shaped was in the midst of a momentous transformation. Hundreds of colleges and universities, expanding to serve the baby boom generation and eager to enhance their research profiles, added new archival programs. Religious and other institutional archives also flourished. By 1970, public records archivists who had once dominated SAA were barely more than one-third of the membership of about 1,000, while archivists from academic institutions were only 5 percent fewer.

Even more powerful, perhaps, than these structural changes in the profession were the winds of social and cultural change. Movements for civil

⁷³ T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1956): 224–232.

⁷⁴ Jane F. Smith, “Theodore R. Schellenberg: Americanizer and Popularizer,” *American Archivist* 44 (Fall 1981): 325

rights, peace in Viet Nam, and women's rights also inspired demands for greater democracy, equality, participation, and activism within the archives profession.⁷⁵ SAA responded by appointing a Committee on the Seventies, with funding from the Council on Library Resources, that was charged "to find ways to make the Society more democratic, more responsive, and more relevant to its members." Remarkably, SAA adopted the bulk of the Committee's recommendations, some of them controversial and most focused on the internal operations of the Society.⁷⁶

But the Committee on the Seventies also looked at a wider context, most notably in a section on "social relevance" that called for SAA to be "actively committed" to three social goals: "racial justice, equal employment, and reasonable access to research materials." In the access area, the Committee identified concerns about "overclassification of Federal records in the name of security; over-restriction of manuscripts and archival material; [and] unwarranted violations of the confidentiality of records for political or other unworthy purposes. . . ." To the Committee, true commitment to these goals produced "a moral obligation to take official positions on those contemporary public issues, however controversial, which affect the archival profession."⁷⁷

A decade after the Committee on the Seventies, an even more audacious look at the American archival scene commenced. From 1983 to 1986, F. Gerald Ham, State Archivist at the Wisconsin Historical Society, past president of SAA, and co-author of the "social relevance" statement, chaired the Goals and Priorities (GAP) Task Force, an effort largely inspired by Larry Hackman, New York State Archivist and former director of the NHPRC historical records grants program (which, in part, funded the effort). Ham, the energetic iconoclast and Jeremiah of the profession, described GAP's work as the creation of a "strategic vision of where we as archivists should be heading. . . ." It was an agreement, he noted, that the "introspective and isolationist proclivities of our custodial past" had previously doomed.⁷⁸

The six-member GAP Task force, supplemented by a working group of fifteen, met at least six times and its draft documents received wide circulation and critique. By 1986, SAA's fiftieth anniversary, the Task Force had achieved its two primary goals: a handsomely designed, forty-two page report (mailed to every SAA member) and the appointment of an SAA standing Committee on Goals and Priorities that would, in the words of SAA President Shonnie Finnegan,

⁷⁵ Patrick M. Quinn, "Archivists and Historians: The Times They Are A-Changin'," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 5-13.

⁷⁶ Cook, "Blessings," 397-398.

⁷⁷ Philip P. Mason, "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 1970s," *American Archivist* 35 (April 1972): 205

⁷⁸ F. Gerald Ham, "Planning for the Archival Profession," *American Archivist* 48 (Winter 1985): 26.

continue planning activities and “identify and promote action in particularly critical areas.”⁷⁹

Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities was not a plan for the profession (or even for SAA) but, rather, “an intellectual structure, a framework for planning.” Its form was familiar: a statement of mission for the profession “to ensure the identification, preservation, and use of records of enduring value,” followed by brief statements of these three goals and their relevant objectives and suggested specific activities. The discussion of Goal III, “the availability and use of records of enduring value,” reiterated familiar archival ideas: “The use of archival records is the ultimate purpose” of all archival activities and “promoting use . . . is a fundamental goal of the archival community.” Three assumptions supported this assertion: access to information sustains a democratic society; knowledge of the past contributes to a better future; and use of records increases public awareness essential to the archival enterprise. What made the work of GAP unique was the further analysis that parsed this timeless goal into five broad objectives, nineteen narrower ones, and fifty-eight possible activities. Some of that analysis now seems curiously quaint—for example, inter-institutional loans of archival records and national and regional collections of archival finding aids. Other portions were prescient—reducing barriers to use (such as attitudes and practices), studies of archives users’ needs, and using new information technologies for greater access to finding aids.⁸⁰

Today, the GAP report as a whole stands as a record of the experiences and expectations of a generation of archivists a quarter century ago. It also stands as a forerunner, perhaps even inspiration, for the strategic planning that has become an integral part of SAA and of most archival organizations. Alas, as Larry Hackman has recently written, GAP did not produce a “continuing, settled, and participatory process for nationwide assessment, for adopting priorities and strategies, and for reporting to and encouraging the profession and the American people.” Nor did the NHPRC take up this role, a missed opportunity for its aspirations for a National Records Program.⁸¹

How do we articulate the place of access and use in the intellectual framework of archives in 2011? This year SAA grappled with two major statements of professional identity. “Access and Use” is one of the eleven “Core Values of Archivists” adopted by the SAA Council in May and promoting access and use is an imperative infused throughout the Core Values statement: access to records

⁷⁹ Shonnie Finnegan, “Dear Colleagues,” March 1986, cover letter accompanying the GAP Report.

⁸⁰ *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 1986): especially 22–30. Available online: <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015024110663>.

⁸¹ Larry J. Hackman, “The Origins of Documentation Strategies in Context: Recollections and Reflections,” *American Archivist* 72 (Fall/Winter 2009): 448.

is essential to the value of accountability; promoting use and understanding of the historical record is primary to advocacy; community use of archives fosters the value of diversity; and meeting the needs of record users contributes to both service and social responsibility.⁸²

The SAA Council will soon revisit the 2005 Code of Ethics. The proposed revision of Section VI, Access, begins by asserting that “use is the fundamental purpose of keeping archives” and then reiterates the duty to promote open and equitable access. In line with the overall intention to make the code more aspirational, the revised statement adds several elements not in the earlier version: archivists minimize restrictions and obstacles, maximize access tools, minimize psychological barriers, and develop policies that maximize responsible use. Any restrictions on records must be appropriate, well documented, equitably enforced, and carry an end date.⁸³

Intellectual Access

Just as the ideas of access and use are inherent in the definition of archives, the dissemination of information about the archives (and its holdings) is inherent in the idea of access. The practice of providing intellectual access to archives by the publication of guides to individual collections and to the holdings of entire repositories and by transcription and publication of documents began in the nineteenth century. The American Historical Association’s (AHA) Public Records Commission and, in the 1930s, the Historical Records Survey of the Works Progress Administration, gathered and published information about public and private records in thousands of repositories across the country. In 1954, the *Harvard Guide to American History* noted: “Every library or institution that collects manuscripts, every governmental unit that maintains an archivist, should put out a printed guide to what is has,” though the *Guide* lamented, “but few have done so.” Nonetheless the *Guide*’s list ran to more than three small print pages despite having “no room to be comprehensive.”⁸⁴ A renewed interest in records surveys and guides occurred in the 1960s and 1970s as archivists began to speak of a “universe of documentation” and to espouse a more active role in identifying and selecting records for preservation. Federal and foundation grants supported many survey efforts, most notably the Women’s History Sources Survey.

⁸² “Core Values of Archivists,” <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/core-values-of-archivists>.

⁸³ “SAA Seeks Member Comments on ‘Draft Code of Ethics for Archivists,’” <http://web.archive.org/web/20130919080830/http://www2.archivists.org/news/2011/saa-seeks-member-comment-on-draft-code-of-ethics-for-archivists>. The current Code of Ethics for Archivists is at <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

⁸⁴ Oscar Handlin [and others], *Harvard Guide to American History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1954): 26.

Beginning in the 1980s, as new information technologies became available, strategies for enhancing intellectual access to archives shifted dramatically. New technical and descriptive standards, new local, regional, and national information systems, and (in the 1990s) the Internet and the web enabled institutions to disseminate collections information and digitized images of archival materials to a vast audience at a cost inconceivably less than print publication.

This extraordinary availability of information about and images of, historical records seemed to promise both enhanced scholarship on historical topics and greater use of primary sources by far broader audiences, especially students and teachers. Trends in education to introduce students at all levels to primary sources bolstered those hopes. Students would acquire critical thinking skills and learn basic research techniques. Today we are less sanguine about these outcomes. As we have learned from a flurry of user studies, becoming fluent in using archives and archival materials—in digital or original form—requires a basic level of archival literacy rarely achieved by K–12 or undergraduate students and only infrequently by others in the research public.⁸⁵ So, it seems, our task as archivists to increase use of archives (and win supporters for the archival enterprise) is not accomplished simply by our massive efforts to populate the internet with archival information.

What then might we do? Archivists and teachers typically begin their instruction in using primary sources with copies of sample documents. Using a tool like the National Archives' Document Analysis Worksheet, students identify basic records characteristics—date, author, audience, and the like. Working from these observations, students are encouraged to consider why a document was created, to place it in historical context, and to evaluate it as historical evidence. This instruction no doubt contributes to building critical thinking skills and to preparation for standardized tests with document-based questions. When coupled with specifics about a repository's policies and procedures, it should ease user anxieties and facilitate research assignments.

But most document-based instruction falls far short of preparing archives users to recognize the complexities of archival materials and to locate and

⁸⁵ My thinking about archival literacy has been greatly aided by a 2007 research paper by Katrina Righter, then a student in my research seminar at the University of Maryland. Righter found something fewer than thirty Google hits on the term "archival literacy" four years ago; today the number is around 225; Google Scholar, by contrast, finds only seventeen. Righter pointed me to Keith C. Barton, "Primary Sources in History: Breaking Through the Myths," *Phi Delta Kappan* 86, no. 10 (2005): 745–753. Elizabeth Yakel and her colleagues at the University of Michigan have studied and written extensively about the education of users of archives, for example: Yakel, "Impact of Internet-based Discovery Tools on Use and Users of Archives," *Proceedings of the XXXVI Roundtable on Archives (CITRA) Meeting, November 11–14, 2002, Marseilles, France*, published in *Comma* 2, no. 3 (2003); Yakel, "Information Literacy for Primary Sources: Creating a New Paradigm for Archival Researcher Education," *OCLC Systems and Services: International Digital Library Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (2004): 61–64; Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence," *American Archivist* 66 (Spring/Summer 2003): 51–78, especially 77–78; Magia G. Krause, "Undergraduates in the Archives: Using an Assessment Rubric to Measure Learning," *American Archivist* 73 (Fall/Winter 2010): 507–534.

effectively use them in a wide range of repositories. In pursuit of that sort of archival literacy, we might extend document analysis exercises by thinking about the “original” document from which the sample was copied: Where is it at this moment? How did it come to be in a specific folder, box, series, and collection? This conversation would turn away from the individual item and emphasize the “groupness” of archival materials and it would spur further questions: What is the life of archival materials before they enter a repository? How and why do they end up there? How did the repository choose to make these materials known through finding aids and online systems?

Greater archival literacy will make researchers more productive archives users, and it will have many other benefits as well. Understanding archival concepts and practices builds additional critical thinking skills that are vital in our knowledge economy. Students might apply these skills to class projects, such as building a digital community history website, personal and family documentation, and to coping with all the recorded information they will encounter throughout their lives.

Conclusion

Archivists have always played the roles of gatekeeper and mediator between the record and its users. But we have always been teachers, as well. Ironically, when the Internet connects users directly to the documents the role of educator becomes all the more essential. Of course, this rarely is the archivist on one end of a log and the user/student on the other. Our teaching will consist of online tutorials, pop-up help screens, improved graphic design, and a host of other ways that provide users with the intellectual schema they need to be truly effective users of archives. Our teaching, however it is delivered, will be more productive as we better understand what constitutes archival literacy and as we refine our teaching methods on the basis of that understanding.

Archivists believe in access. It is a value to which we are committed and a goal toward which we strive. Over the history of our profession, we have enlarged our vision of potential audiences for archives. We have placed the use of records at the center of who we are and what we do. Our understanding of access and our efforts to enhance it have become far more complex. Lastly, we have learned that beyond disseminating information about archives we must redouble our efforts as educators to promote archival literacy as a basic right of all citizens.



“Answering the Call: Archival Literacy and Teaching with Primary Sources”

Review of John Fleckner, “Access Opportunities We Could Never Have Imagined, Issues That We Can Never Resolve,” *The American Archivist* 74 (2011) (Supplement 1): 24–32.

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John Fleckner’s 2011 piece, “Access Opportunities We Could Never Have Imagined, Issues That We Can Never Resolve,” resets our shared understanding of archival access. In both detailing the history of access and redefining its complication as part of the shifting landscape of the digital age, Fleckner raised many questions that continue to challenge the profession: How does online access translate to equitable use of archival materials? How do archivists ensure the relevance of historical records in a technology-fueled world? How do archivists bridge the gap between content provision and responsible, accurate, and effective use by their patrons?

In his trademark clever and scrupulous manner, Fleckner summarizes the history of the archival profession, describing the Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) split from the American Historical Association in 1936 and the address of SAA’s first president, Albert Ray Newsome, in which he “articulated standards for access by placing three specific duties on custodians of public records” (p. 26). The three responsibilities Newsome listed were: first, organizing and making records accessible; second, permitting access to patrons; and third, providing copies of public records. From this moment in the history of SAA, Fleckner traces continued professionalization of archives through the work of Dr. Theodore R. Schellenberg, whose 1956 multi-volume *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* included a succinct explanation of archivists’ role that Fleckner quotes: “The end of all archival effort is to preserve valuable records and make them available for use” (p. 26).

Early archival scholars like Schellenberg sought to create a universal understanding of the role of archives in society. Their definitions and understanding of archives,

however, would soon be challenged in the coming tumultuous decades, which marked social, cultural, and political upheaval in the United States. The response from professional archivists throughout the 1960s and 1970s continues to define the field today.

As progressive movements for justice, peace, civil rights, and women's rights rose to the forefront of social consciousness, SAA and professional archivists redefined their role in the cultural landscape. Archivists no longer saw themselves as an isolated island of records custodians, but as a powerful force in society ensuring that previously underrepresented voices were now heard. Archivists were not simple gatekeepers or paper jockeys, but distinct professionals whose decisions regarding collecting, preservation, and access had major implications for shared memory.

Inherent in this redefinition, SAA and archivists working throughout the country further prioritized access to archival records. We take many of these developments for granted today, such as the loaning of archival records and the sharing of finding aids. But the profession also began to prioritize access in ways that are still familiar and relevant, including "reducing barriers to use (such as attitudes and practices), [undertaking] studies of archives users' needs, and using new information technologies for greater access to finding aids" (p. 29).

While providing access to archival collections has been part of the profession since its birth, our new, shared understanding of equitable, democratized, and universal access grew from these social movements. Today, our work is heavily influenced by these ideals.

When Fleckner presented this piece at SAA's 75th Annual Meeting in 2011, he focused on the further evolution of the field, mainly the expansion of digitization services and online archival databases that promised to enhance access for patrons. As he wrote, "This extraordinary availability of information about and images of, historical records seemed to promise both enhanced scholarship on historical topics and greater use of primary sources by far broader audiences, especially students and teachers" (p. 31). While this was a positive professional evolution, Fleckner also warned that "our task as archivists to increase use of archives (and win supporters for the archival enterprise) is not accomplished simply by our massive efforts to populate the internet with archival information" (p. 31). Instead, he stressed the importance of moving past his understanding of current trends in teaching with primary sources, which were mostly confined to document analysis and basic information literacy skills. He suggested that "archival literacy" (p. 32) meant teaching students to understand the complexities and nuances of archival materials, from their value as pieces of material culture to the power dynamics inherent in their acquisition and collection.

Just as archivists grew and emerged from their early professional cocoons through the twentieth century, Fleckner stressed the importance of the archival profession recognizing and prioritizing the practice of teaching with primary sources. He

suggested a new understanding of access as moving beyond basic accessibility and toward the practice of critical archival literacy. As he declared, “we have learned that beyond disseminating information about archives we must redouble our efforts as educators to promote archival literacy as a basic right of all citizens” (p. 32).

As an archivist who focuses on teaching with primary sources, reading Fleckner’s analysis now sounds like common sense. Since he delivered these remarks, teaching with primary sources has quickly expanded to become a vital component of our work as archivists. I hope to offer my perspective on Fleckner’s proclamations and predictions and provide some critiques about the beginning of the teaching with primary sources field and ideas about its future development.

The expansion of archivists tasked with teaching traces back to the mid-1980s, just as Fleckner described the most recent social turn in the profession. In a 1986 article, Ken Osborne suggested that rather than only being seen as historians or records managers, there needed to be a third category applied to professional archivists: educators.¹ In 1997, Sharon Anne Cook demonstrated how seriously archivists were embracing instruction in the K–12 realm, while also acknowledging the need for professional and financial support that prioritized this teaching.² In a 2004 article, Elizabeth Yakel acknowledged the increasing availability of online archival resources, while pointing out the need for a more formal approach to archival information literacy. As she wrote, “Rethinking the paradigm for archival user education toward defining core knowledge and skill sets that would comprise information literacy for primary sources would help all archives to serve an increasingly diverse audience.”³

In 2008, archivist and educator Doris Malkmus compiled research regarding how archivists teach with primary sources to support undergraduate learning and build the archival literacy that Fleckner described three years later. Malkmus concluded that “primary sources are used almost universally in undergraduate instruction to improve class discussion, engage student participation, promote historical empathy, help develop critical thinking skills, and demonstrate how historians create narratives from disparate documents.”⁴ The next year, Peter Carini wrote “Archivists as Educators: Integrating Primary Sources into the Curriculum,” which provides guidance for archivists newly tasked with serving as subject expert instructors. Carini stressed the importance of moving away from traditional library instruction to a new standard built around the principles that Fleckner later called

¹ Ken Osborne, “Archives in the Classroom,” *Archivaria* 23 (Winter 1986/87): 16–40.

² Sharon Anne Cook, “Connecting Archives and the Classroom,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 102–117.

³ Elizabeth Yakel, “Information Literacy for Primary Sources: Creating a New Paradigm for Archival Researcher Education,” *OCLC Systems & Services: International Digital Library Perspectives* 22, no.2 (2004): 63.

⁴ Doris Malkmus, “Teaching History to Undergraduates with Primary Sources: Survey of Current Practices,” *Archival Issues* 31, no. 1 (2007): 39.

for: critical thinking, understanding of historical biases, the power dynamics of collecting, and more.⁵

All this is to say that by the time Fleckner presented these ideas, several other archivists had already been working on them for years. Their foundational work deserves to be recognized. It also made training available for a new generation of archivists whose professional focus was teaching with primary sources.

Three brilliant scholars—Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina—edited *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises*, a volume that gathered real-life examples of teaching with primary sources from across the profession. Published in 2014, it includes the work of dozens of archivists who were quick to answer the call to action Fleckner made three years prior. The activities included in the edited volume exemplify the creativity and intellectual rigor displayed by instruction archivists as the subfield expanded in the twenty-first century. More than that, the authors show how widely the field had grown, even in the few years following Fleckner’s call for an increased focus on archival literacy.

The *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* were approved by the leadership of both SAA and the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2018, fulfilling the need first expressed by Dr. Yakel fourteen years earlier. These guidelines, for the first time, provided an officially and professionally sanctioned guide for how archivists should teach skill building that was relevant in doing primary source research: primary sources “require critical analysis due to their creators’ intents and biases; the variety of contexts in which they have been created, preserved, and made accessible; and the gaps, absences, and silences that may exist in the materials.”⁶ The passage of these guidelines by the profession marked the further development of primary source instruction as a field independent from traditional archival practice. Following the guidelines’ release, the University of Michigan hosted the “Teaching Undergraduates with Archives” symposium in November 2018. The symposium brought together archivists from across the country who focused on teaching with primary sources and allowed them to share their work and cooperate on new initiatives.⁷

One outgrowth from the symposium was a renewed focus by a group of archivists on building a formerly proposed online environment for resource sharing. Originally referred to as a “Teaching with Primary Sources Resource Bank,” the initiative was given a new name and professional energy. Dubbed the Teaching with Primary Sources Collective (TPS Collective), a team of archivists and associated professionals

⁵ Peter Carini, “Archivists as Educators: Integrating Primary Sources into the Curriculum,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, nos. 1–2 (2009): 41–50.

⁶ ACRL-RBMS/SAA, *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy>.

⁷ “Teaching Undergraduates with Archives Symposium,” Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181205132559/https://www.teachingwitharchives.com/>.

from across the country began virtual conversations that resulted in a new website and specific programming tailored to TPS. Developed as a grassroots, volunteer organization not officially affiliated with other professional societies, the TPS Collective “is an online hub that brings together resources, professional development and support for those who teach with primary sources, including librarians, archivists, teachers, cultural heritage professionals, and anyone who has an interest in using primary sources in an educational setting.”⁸ The TPS Collective became an even more vital tool during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many TPS professionals online in order to continue serving their patrons. The Collective also provided a supportive professional environment through webinars, conferences, and workshops. Its work continues to expand and evolve today.

How do the developments of the past decade relate to Fleckner’s 2011 call? Although he may have missed some of the work done in the years preceding his conference address, he was prescient in understanding the increased need for archivists dedicated to instruction and critical pedagogy. It is no coincidence that the upsurge in TPS professionals expanded in tandem with making resources available online in an unprecedented manner. Over the past twenty years, the idea of access has shifted monumentally from how it was understood before the digital age. Mass digitization and the availability of online primary source databases has exponentially increased the number of people who can use archival collections. When Newsome and Schellenberg were writing in the first half of the twentieth century, the primary patrons of archival institutions were limited to a small number of faculty members and professional academics. Today, researchers across the world can access archival resources with the click of a button. Just as social media has supercharged the volume of information we process each day, this massive upsurge of online resources has made so much more information available. Without the care and knowledge of archivists who can teach patrons how to properly analyze and use these resources, the online availability of these materials is moot.

The field of TPS scholars is steadily expanding in both number and responsibility. Academic archives and special collections libraries now view archivists dedicated to instruction or education as vital to their operations. Even though ideas about the role of archivists as educators can be traced back to the 1980s, the move toward this role has been dizzying in pace. It signifies the maturation of our field and reflects the wider social turn in academia during this time. It is no longer enough to simply offer materials to patrons or to make sure that our materials withstand the tests of time. Those responsibilities are still important to the profession, but primary source instruction has become a vital pillar in the field, equal in value to these other professional pursuits. In an age rife with disinformation, bias, and outright lies, archivists have answered with a new professional practice that contextualizes, educates, and expands the possibilities of our students and researchers.

⁸ “Teaching with Primary Sources Collective,” <https://tpscollective.org/>.

While the field continues to expand, just as Fleckner hoped, we are still in need of better training and professional infrastructure for teaching with primary sources. Through their respective committees, both ACRL and SAA have increased their support for teaching archivists. The TPS Collective has also worked to provide a variety of resources and support for teaching archivists to be successful. These professional organizations need to advocate for further support and funding behind teaching with primary sources, as well as prioritize scholarship and programming in this area. More importantly, library science and archives graduate programs should provide independent courses dedicated to teaching, pedagogy, and outreach. Too often, these topics are relegated to ancillary parts of larger courses related to a survey of archival practice, collection management, or acquisitions and processing. Many graduates are not aware of primary source instruction as a possible career path and get even fewer opportunities to develop experience in this area before entering the field.

A commitment to the field of primary source instruction not only makes sense with recent developments in archives but is also imperative to fulfilling our professional mission to provide equitable access and promote social justice and historical empathy. Fleckner's urgent call for promoting access through archival literacy has been answered by the field. The promising group of scholars dedicated to teaching with primary sources and increased funding and support for positions dedicated to teaching make this apparent. Fleckner's call has also been answered by the scholarship and professional requirements developed by TPS professionals and the conferences, publications, workshops, and mentoring programs designed to prepare the next generation of archival educators. But there is still work to be done. We must redouble our commitment to promoting and building the foundation for archival literacy; its role in our society, and our democracy, has never been more important.