



From Common Practice to Common Goals

Review of John Fleckner, "Myths of the Archives Profession: A Common Practice?"
Presentation at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, 1983.

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In his 1983 article, "Myths of the Archives Profession: A Common Practice?," John Fleckner highlights the role of institutional archivists, while also noting that their contributions to the profession have been misunderstood by their colleagues in the field. He encourages readers to think broadly about why archives exist within organizations. He focuses on corporate culture as "a key determinant of organizational behavior and, ultimately, of the very success or failure of the organization" (p. 2) and by extension the archives¹— directly tying the success of the archives to the success of the parent organization. The value an archives contributes to its institution is more than the records it collects and may include documenting the decision-making processes and the "congerie of shared values, beliefs, and practices which give the firm its unique culture" (p. 5). Fleckner's ideas challenged the state of archival work at the time—i.e., how records were typically collected and appraised and organizational work was usually documented. His underlying challenge for archivists was to think differently about their value to their institutions. Ultimately, Fleckner defends the inclusion of institutional archivists in the archives profession, stating "If the role of an institutional archives is as much to document values and beliefs as to preserve a record of institutional activities and information, then institutional archivists share a very basic common purpose with all of the profession" (p. 6).

¹ Fleckner's use of "corporate" is similar to the current definition of "corporate body" in the Society of American Archivists' *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, which is "an organization or group of individuals with an established name that acts as a single entity." Thus, the corporate culture he discusses applies not only to businesses and corporations, but also to academia, religious organizations, and any number of other archival institutions. Society of American Archivists, *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, "Corporate Body," <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/corporate-body.html> (accessed March 15, 2023).

Fleckner's goal was to encourage archivists to "rise above the small differences which divide us to recognize, articulate, and promote the common ties which bind us and which are the source of the strength we need to meet our responsibilities and fulfill our common mission" (p. 7). For Fleckner, archivists' common creed or mission was "to preserve a record of what has been done and to assure, as best we can, that that record documents why it has been done and what it means" (p. 7). Fleckner identifies all the ways in which archivists have worked to establish themselves as a profession and argues that through these actions archivists have succeeded: "We have made the bold assumption that there is a profession and almost in a leap of faith prepared guidelines, standards, manuals, etc., which both reveal and create a consensus among us on how we do archives" (p. 9). Fleckner argues that archivists then needed to take the next step to use the profession's common mission to "address the supra-institutional goals and needs which are larger than the limits of our individual institutions or types of institutions" (p. 1).

As a corporate archivist, I find Fleckner's defense of institutional archives interesting. From my point of view in 2023, it is difficult to envision a time when the roles of institutional archivists were so limited or when they were overlooked as contributing members of the profession. As Fleckner notes, "Our overly narrow view of the purpose and role of an institutional archives is a major source of our misunderstanding" (p. 2). This implies that at one point institutional archives were not viewed as sharing a common purpose with the larger archival profession.

Fleckner's article was written forty years ago. What was the state of the profession at the time? The Society of American Archivists (SAA) had recently published the first Basic Manual Series, "illustrating the ways in which archivists defined and classified their core concepts"²; there was debate in the archival literature about defining archival theory³; and the Academy of Certified Archivists had not yet been founded.⁴ In fact, SAA had only just convened a study group to define an archivist, or the "qualifications [that] characterize and distinguish an archivist from every other professional," on which Fleckner served, in response to "concerns over the status of the archival profession increasingly . . . brought to Council"; the proposed definition

² Peter Gottlieb and David W. Carmichael, eds., *Leading and Managing Archives and Manuscripts Programs* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019), vii.

³ Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* (Winter 1981): 40–46; Harold T. Pinkett, "American Archival Theory: The State of the Art," *American Archivist* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 217–222; Lester J. Cappon, "What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 19–25; Michael A. Lutzker, "Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organization: Notes Toward a Theory of Appraisal," *American Archivist* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 119–130; and Gregg D. Kimball, "The Burke-Cappon Debate: Some Further Criticisms and Considerations for Archival Theory," *American Archivist* 48, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 369–376.

⁴ The Academy of Certified Archivists was founded in 1989. See Academy of Certified Archivists, "About," <https://www.certifiedarchivists.org/About> (accessed March 15, 2023).

appeared in the January 1984 issue of SAA's newsletter.⁵ The early 1980s was a time when archivists were debating and seeking clarity in defining what exactly an archivist was.

Within this context, Fleckner defends institutional archives and their role in supporting institutional culture. As he writes, archives "can have a role not only in symbolizing the corporate culture but in recording and transmitting it as well" (p. 2), and they "can be a symbol, repository, and bearer of the corporate culture" (p. 5). My fellow institutional archivists may feel as I do—that this is obvious; the arguments Fleckner made as to the necessity of institutional archives and the documentation of organizational culture are key to my role and that of most institutional archivists today. In addition to documenting corporate philosophies and practices, I capture the strategic decisions of the company I work for, document the major legal transactions and financial welfare of the institution, preserve images and records, make records and heritage information available to my colleagues, and promote the archives at every opportunity, all of which are the common activities of an archivist. I also act as historian and interpreter of the corporate heritage. I pay attention to the corporation's stated values, and how they have been demonstrated and exhibited throughout the corporation's history. When I give a corporate orientation presentation, I tie it to the corporation's values and strategy and address the key messages that are important to the business today. I make heritage relevant, demonstrating how the past influences the present for new and current employees. Institutional archivists today certainly bridge the traditional work described by Fleckner of collecting administrative, legal, and fiscal records, as well as documenting corporate values, belief, and myths. One cannot support and explain the culture of an institution without records and evidence.

One reason I engage in these activities is to address the age-old question of how corporate archives remain relevant. My perspective and focus are entirely on demonstrating the archives' value within a business-to-business, private, family-owned corporation, with few legacy brands sold directly to consumers. I make this distinction because other business archivists can explore different avenues to remain relevant within their organizations and may have ways to contribute to their institutions' bottom line. My archives exists within the nonrevenue generating portion of the company, so I need to demonstrate the archives' usefulness to the institution in ways other than its contribution to corporate profits. I also need to find ways to align with the corporate strategy because I do not work directly with our customers. It is most beneficial for my archives to focus on engaging employees and enhancing the corporation's purpose, brand, and reputation, all of which contribute to the culture of what makes our organization unique. As Paul Lasewicz wrote, "intangibles such as reputation, identity and brand can positively influence

⁵ "Archivist: A Definition," *The Society of American Archivists Newsletter* (January 1984): 4–5, http://files.archivists.org/periodicals/Archival-Outlook/Back-Issues-1973-2003/saa_newsletter_1984_01.pdf (accessed March 15, 2023).

customer perceptions.”⁶ My work falls into this space of intangible and indirect influence through our employees.

A special 1982 issue of *American Archivist* focused on business archives.⁷ As Elizabeth W. Adkins nicely summarized, this series discussed the “ways in which business archives and archivists could be invaluable assets to their employers.”⁸ The articles are practical explorations of how to demonstrate value to managers, who to partner with in an organization, which areas to document, which assets to promote, and how internal users could benefit from incorporating archival corporate records and heritage information in their work. There is little discussion of brand, reputation, or engagement, yet a key theme is the need for corporate archives to demonstrate their value. This remains an emphasis of corporate archives today, but business archivists use new and different terms to describe it. Documenting and sharing corporate culture are articulations of how corporate archives demonstrate their value.

The recent SAA publication *Managing Business Archives*⁹ reflects this with multiple chapters discussing the value of corporate archives and the multiple roles corporate archivists have:

For a corporate archives, value is created by the rapid provision of credible, relevant, and readily accessible information that improves the work products of these constituents—product design, intellectual property, reputation and branding, storytelling, organizational culture, litigation, and constituent relationships (clients, media, alumni, etc.). In most cases, it will be the archivist’s responsibility not only to find facts or specific documents wherever they may be found but also to package information into an authentic, accurate, and accessible end product. In other words, corporate archivists are expected to holistically weave physically disconnected but thematically related informational elements found throughout the archives into a coherent narrative value.¹⁰

The structure of the book is also very telling. Each chapter follows the domains established in the Academy of Certified Archivists’ Role Delineation Statement for Professional Archivists, which define the “the commonly accepted duties and responsibilities that professional archivists perform in the course of their work,”

⁶ Paul Lasewicz, “The View from the Ivory Tower: The Academic Perspective on the Strategic Value of Corporate History and Heritage,” in *Crisis, Credibility and Corporate History*, ed. Alexander Bieri (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 110.

⁷ *American Archivist* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1982).

⁸ Elizabeth W. Adkins, “The Development of Business Archives in the United States: An Overview and a Personal Perspective,” *American Archivist* 60 (Winter 1997): 16.

⁹ Sarah A. Polirer, ed., *Managing Business Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2022).

¹⁰ Paul Lasewicz, “Arrangement and Description: Balancing Use-Based Arrangement and Description,” in *Managing Business Archives*, ed. Sarah A. Polirer (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2022), 43.

such as selection, appraisal, and acquisition; arrangement and description; and reference services and access.¹¹ “Each chapter [of *Managing Business Archives*] delves into the application of each domain in depth and discusses how the archival principles are applied”¹² in a corporate environment. The role of the corporate archivist is grounded in the “recognized” principles of archival theory. These agreed upon practices are part of our shared professional identity. The work of the corporate or institutional archivist is bound to the tenets of common archival practice while acting within the structures that makes these institutions unique.

Fleckner also states “that archivists have exaggerated the differences among themselves based on the type of institution which employs them” (p. 1). If you look at the plethora of member sections within SAA, archivists may not feel that we have come very far in forty years. SAA Council has been assessing the health and structure of member sections through the work of the SAA Sections Health Assessment working group. As stated in its November 2022 report to SAA Council, “The large number of affinity groups (specifically, [45] sections) in the Society presents a challenge to the SAA Council and staff in terms of responsiveness to elections, assistance with governance, fiscal oversight, and other support. This has been a recurring issue in the Society for many years, exacerbated by ongoing concerns about member involvement in section leadership, as well as active member participation in these sections.”¹³ In its call for annual reports for 2020–2021, SAA Council asked SAA sections to respond to the following questions:

1. SAA is exploring programming and topical affinities between sections. Does your section share issues or scope overlap with other sections? If so, which sections?
2. If your section were to be part of an umbrella of affiliation with other sections, how would you describe the overarching theme of that umbrella?
3. Do you have any concerns or questions about the potential for your section to merge or affiliate?¹⁴

The responses to question three were the most revealing. While some sections could see benefits in affiliating with others, only eight out of forty-five had no concerns, qualms, or questions about merging with another section.

¹¹ Academy of Certified Archivists, “Role Delineation Statement for Professional Archivists,” <https://www.certifiedarchivists.org/role-delineation> (accessed March 15, 2023).

¹² Polirer, *Managing Business Archives*, 1.

¹³ Joyce Gabiola, Jasmine Jones, Dominique Luster, and Lydia Tang, *SAA Sections Health Assessment*, Society of American Archivists, Council Meeting, November 1, 3, 2022, Virtual Meeting, Agenda Item V.B., 1, <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/1122-V-B-SectionHealth.pdf> (accessed March 15, 2023).

¹⁴ *2020–2021 Section Annual Reports (Compiled)*, Society of American Archivists Council Meeting, November 10, 12, 2021 Virtual Meeting, Agenda Item VI.S. https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/1121-VI-S-SectionAnnualReports_1.pdf (accessed March 15, 2023).

Aside from the important issues that SAA Council raised about section structure, archivists do not mind defining themselves by institution or interest and are often happy to do so. Has this impeded our ability to define and identify ourselves as archivists, or to define our profession? Have we simply discovered that archivists are multifaceted and that dividing ourselves by institution type or area of interest helps us address questions of importance to our work? In my experience, archivists do not view this structure as exaggerating the distinctions among ourselves, but rather recognize that different institutions and activities have unique issues and require unique responses. Archivists seem to have reached a point where our differences do not divide us so much as provide communities of support with which to address our concerns together.

I am sure archivists today would agree with Fleckner's conclusion that we have forged a common profession. We have standards; we have educational programs; we have member organizations; we have publications and peer-reviewed journals; and we have advocacy efforts. And yet, how many of us regularly explain what an archives is? How many of us respond to the exclamation, "I didn't know we have an archives!" How many of us are corrected on the pronunciation of archivist after we introduce ourselves: "Oh, an 'arch-EYE-vist,'" rather than the more recognized pronunciation, "AR-kə-vəst."¹⁵ All of these happen to me on a weekly basis. Public awareness of archives and archivists remains low, despite recent news stories of current and former US presidents retaining classified documents in their personal dwellings and the involvement of the National Archives and Records Administration in retrieving the classified material.¹⁶ As Alexandra A. A. Orchard, Kristen Chinery, Alison Stankrauff, and Leslie Van Veen McRoberts concluded in their 2019 *American Archivist* article, "public perception of archivists and the profession is often nonexistent or negative, rooted in stereotypes promoted through books and movies."¹⁷ It appears the public perception of our status as a profession is not as clear as our own.

Orchard et al.'s article also addresses the archival mystique, or "the duality of being a demographically female-dominated profession while women archivists still face traditional gender limitations."¹⁸ In the recent A*CENSUS II survey, seventy-one

¹⁵ Society of American Archivists, *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, "Archivist," <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archivist.html> (accessed March 15, 2023).

¹⁶ Devlin Barrett, Jacqueline Alemany, Perry Stein, Josh Dawsey, Ann E. Marimow, and Carol D. Leonnig, "Skepticism Before a Search: Inside the Trump Mar-a-Lago Documents Investigation," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/12/21/trump-doj-garland-mar-a-lago-january-6/> (accessed March 15, 2023); Jamie Gangel and Jeremy Herb, "Archives Says it Has to Consult Justice Department Before Providing Biden Document Info to Congress," *CNN*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/18/politics/national-archives-biden-documents-comer/index.html> (accessed March 15, 2023).

¹⁷ Alexandra A. A. Orchard, Kristen Chinery, Alison Stankrauff, and Leslie Van Veen McRoberts, "The Archival Mystique: Women Archivists Are Professional Archivists," *American Archivist* 82, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2019): 73.

¹⁸ Orchard et al., "The Archival Mystique," 54.

percent of survey respondents were women,¹⁹ an increase from the first A*CENSUS where sixty-five percent of survey respondents identified as women.²⁰ The feminization of the profession is not slowing. The public appears to have little recognition of our profession, but should they look it is obviously women-dominated. Do archivists give the impression that our jobs are “women’s work” and all the negative connotations that come with that phrase? What’s more, we must also contend with vocational awe, “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.”²¹ While vocational awe was originally used to describe librarianship, it easily translates to archives. Fleckner himself hints at this awe when he writes that there is “an assumption that being an archivist is more [emphasis added] than having a job with the title and that there exists within the profession sufficient consensus about what that ‘more’ is” (p. 8). The idea that archivists are privileged to hold the role of keeper of unique original records and the lack of public recognition adds to the air of mystery. The idea that we should do this work because of passion, or out of a sacred duty, has ramifications when it comes to salaries, diversity, and professional development.

Fleckner states that as a profession we will be able to address the supra-institutional issues that archivists face. Archivists do not let our institutional divisions affect our ability to collaborate or form communities, and institutional archives and archivists have solidified their place in and contributions to the profession. We have built upon our predecessors’ work since the 1980s and succeeded in creating a professional identity. Yet, we have new supra-institutional goals and needs to address. Public advocacy is one. As Orchard et al. concluded, “Archivists must educate and advocate about archives as ‘people’s work,’ just as archives is, and they should expand to become more so, about ‘people’s history.’”²² Being a profession of women also has ramifications. The annual McKinsey report, *Women in the Workplace*, notes several headwinds that women continue to face in their places of work: slower advancement to leadership, increased workload but lack of recognition, and lack of flexibility, all of which increase for women of color.²³ Additionally, we are all recovering from a global pandemic and the ramifications it has had on our health, mental stability, and personal and working relationships, not to mention our relationships to work itself, our offices, and our institutions. As

¹⁹ Makala Skinner and Ioana G. Hulbert, *A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey Report*, ITHAKA S+R, August 22, 2022, 6, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/acensus-ii-all-archivists-survey-report/> (accessed March 15, 2023).

²⁰ Victoria Irons Walch, “Part 3. A*CENSUS: A Closer Look,” *American Archivist* 69, no. 2, (Fall/Winter 2006): 329, 331.

²¹ Fobazi Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/> (accessed March 15, 2023).

²² Orchard et al., “The Archival Mystique,” 81.

²³ *Women in the Workplace, 2022*, McKinsey & Company, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace> (accessed March 15, 2023).

noted by Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith in 2021, the workplace needs rethinking, and not everyone has positive experiences in their daily work lives: “As practitioners in this field, we have inherited a professional and institutional culture of toxic ambition that . . . does not provide enough person-drive care—paltry benefits, stagnant wages, policies that attempt to place the institution above all else in our lives.”²⁴

The benefit of having a professional identity, as well as the established structure, theory, and support that go along with this identity, gives archivists the backing to face these issues as a group. We have the ability individually and as a profession to improve public awareness, transform paths to leadership, establish fair salaries, increase diversity, and create flexible workplaces. In 2016, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor introduced a new ethic of care to the archival field, discussing “four interrelated shifts in archival relationships based on radical empathy.”²⁵ Holly Smith built on this idea, outlining in her 2018 article the “idea of a fifth affective relationship—that of archivists to each other. Archivists must consider how we empathize and communicate with each other. Our multi-layered and intersectional identities can be just as complex as the records we steward and we must be cognizant of how we support, challenge, and advocate for each other professionally and personally.”²⁶ Fleckner grounded his view of archival professional identity in our work and our common mission, “to preserve a record of what has been done and to assure, as best we can, that that record documents why it has been done and what it means” (p. 7). The next step is to ground our professional identity in the person to assure, as best we can, that every archivist has what they need to be successful, supported, and sustained wherever they may work.

²⁴ Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith, “An Introduction to Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” in “Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021). DOI: [10.24242/jclis.v3i2.171](https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.171).

²⁵ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 82 (2016): 24.

²⁶ Holly A. Smith, “Radical Love: Documenting Underrepresented Communities Using Principles of Radical Empathy,” *Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists* 15 (2018): 5–6.