THE ARCHIVIST AS PUBLIC ADMINISTRATOR
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ABSTRACT: The vast majority of archivists are employed by public sector organizations, defined as all organizations dependent on public funding. Yet previous discussions of management training for archivists have made little mention of the applicability of the field of public administration to that training. Unlike business administration, public administration teaches management skills for the public and nonprofit sectors, with an emphasis on its political context. This article introduces archivists to the field of public administration, demonstrates how this course of study is appropriate for archivists wanting to improve their management skills, and finally makes the case for archivists becoming more effective public administrators in order to thrive in this era of shrinking public dollars.

The importance of management skills to archivists has been accepted in the profession for several years. In 1986 the Society of American Archivists’ Task Force on Goals and Priorities reported that few archivists receive training in administration, planning, fundraising, or public relations. Building upon this premise, Susan E. Davis, in her article “Development of Managerial Training for Archivists” wrote: “the question, therefore, is not whether management training is good and necessary, but rather what that training should cover.” Davis explains how management is taught in the fields of business and library science. However, she does not discuss the applicability of the study of public administration to the management of archives. Since approximately 80 percent of Midwest Archives Conference members are employed by public or nonprofit organizations, management training for archivists is most appropriately taught from a public administration perspective.

What is Public Administration?

There is no single definition of public administration. It draws upon many disciplines, including political science, sociology, economics, and business administration. But public administration differs from other management fields because it recognizes the impact of the political environment on the administration of a “public” entity. This differentiation of management in the public sector from management in the private sector is the essence of modern public administration. Prior to the 1950s, public administration scholars refused to admit that politics played any
role in the administration of public programs. These early scholars envisioned a politics/administration dichotomy. Politicians made the policies, and administrators merely carried them out. Beginning in the 1950s, however, systems theory began to be applied to many fields outside the pure sciences, including public administration. When systems theory was applied to public administration, scholars discovered how the political environment acts upon administrative decisions.\(^5\)

Scholars realized that the influence of politics is the essential difference between the public and private world. Paul Appleby expressed this idea when he said government is different because government is politics.\(^6\) Wallace Sayre, among others, agreed, stating that government and the private sector are alike only in general management functions, which he characterized as “all the unimportant respects.” This “publicness” became the focus of the study of public administration. A public institution is different from a private one in its environmental constraints, its legal constraints, its functioning, and its form. Therefore, management in the public sector must reflect these differences and requires a new type of training for managers who administer programs in public settings.

Most archives fit squarely in the public arena. Public archival agencies are not limited to the obvious repositories of our government: the National Archives, state archives, and local government archives. They also include archives of state universities; archives of nonprofit organizations like state historical societies and hospitals; and the archives of quasi-governmental organizations like social service agencies and research institutes. These organizations are all funded in one way or another by the public, and public funding means public accountability.\(^7\) It is often the public aspect of these organizations that is the basis for creating their archives.

Government is never far away from most archivists’ everyday tasks. Federal paperwork reduction acts, the Freedom of Information Act, tax laws, and funding levels for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission have direct impact on our work. The influence of government on archivists at the state and local level is even greater. If we work for state universities, we rely upon state lawmakers for funding. State government regulations have forced many of us to become records managers. Our patrons’ access to certain types of records is governed by state laws. And even more profoundly, the political environment of our own institution exercises an impact on us. Whether our archives is sanctioned by official institutional policy, whether our board of directors consists of political appointees, whether our employees are civil servants—all relate to our jobs. Few archivists can escape the political environment, and we are constrained by its resources, regulations, and influence.

**Public Administration Training Programs**

Postgraduate education appears to be the best means of promoting management training for archivists. Such education programs would best address the needs of a vast majority of archivists if they focused on management for public sector institutions. In addition to continuing education workshops and seminars available at nearly every institution of higher learning, full-scale graduate programs in public administration leading to an M.P.A. degree are available at almost 200 U.S. colleges and universities, nearly 50 of them in the Midwest.\(^9\)
Guidelines for these M.P.A. programs from the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), the professional accrediting association, suggest a mixture of classroom study and field experience (usually in the form of internships, or for midcareer professionals, an application of classroom training to their current job situations). NASPAA further suggests a conceptual framework of M.P.A. programs covering five broad areas: 1) the political-social-economic context of the field, 2) quantitative and nonquantitative analytical skills, 3) individual/group/organizational dynamics, 4) policy analysis, and 5) administrative and management processes.\(^{10}\)

Courses pertaining to the political-economic-social context of public administration involve study of the political system, the economic system, and cultural and social mores. Emphasis is on the purposes and limitations of government in fostering social and economic development, and the role of the administrator in this process. Applied statistics and decision-making methods are taught as problem solving tools. For understanding of individual/group/organizational dynamics, public administration draws upon the insights of psychology. Public organizations are dissected to explain behavior and ways that behavior can be modified for the public good. Policy analysis classes investigate how public policy is formulated, implemented, and evaluated. Lastly, classes in administrative and management processes examine the nuts and bolts of public sector management: personnel, budgeting, and organizational design.

Such coursework bears some resemblance to business school curricula and many M.P.A. programs allow students to register for some courses in the business school. But public administration schools recognize that the public sector requires essential differences in management philosophy from the profit-driven private sector because of the public sector’s political nature.

**Archival Administration as Public Administration**

Whether they recognize it or not, most archivists employed in the public sector are applying public administration skills and theories in their work. The following are several examples of how public administration theory is, and should be, utilized by archivists.

**Organizational Theory.** Organizational theory in public administration examines the legitimization of power in government. While this sounds remote from archival work, it is not. Appraisal, for example, is directly affected by organizational theory. A legitimate government is one recognized to have the authority and power to make decisions. Authority in the United States comes from a constitution—a written document.\(^1\) All public sector archivists see this written legitimization of the authority of the agencies they document as one of the most important items in their custody. A government legitimized by a constitution creates agencies to administer for the public good. These agencies set procedures, develop internal structures, and perform activities to carry out their function. Archivists responsible for documenting these agencies must understand the procedures, structures, and activities. Students of T.R. Schellenberg might recognize this as collecting records of “evidential value.”\(^1\)\(^2\)

Others have seconded Schellenberg’s desire to apply organizational theory to appraisal. Frank Burke cites the lack of research in this area: “Another area completely ignored in archival writing is a study of the decision-making process
in the management and operations of a corporate body." Among the few articles on the subject is "Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organizations: Notes Toward a Theory of Appraisal" by Michael A. Lutzker. Lutzker illustrates how the structure of a bureaucracy affects appraisal decisions.

Another example of how public administration organizational theory has been applied to archival appraisal theory is the black box of Boles and Young. The black box is an application of systems theory, an aspect of organizational theory. Open systems theorists, which Boles and Young appear to be, view organizations as organic. A system—in this case a university archives—receives inputs of records. The retention decision, whether to accession or dispose is, in the parlance of organizational theory, the "throughput" (the action the system takes on the input). This throughput is influenced by the outside political environment. Boles and Young noted political considerations such as donor and researcher relations, resource limitations involving cost of retention, and procedural precedents such as collecting policies, as factors affecting the throughput. From the throughput comes the output, or the consequence of deciding whether to keep or dispose of records. Feedback from those affected by the output will in turn affect future inputs, throughputs, and outputs.

Although archivists might see the relevance of organizational theory to appraisal, they might well wonder how such organizational theory analysis could affect the archives' daily operations. Organizational theory is useful because it places archival theory in a larger context. Archivists need to realize that not only are the agencies they document part of a political system, but so too are the archives that document the agencies. Public sector archivists must identify how their own procedures, structures, and activities relate to the larger political entity they are documenting and how the political environment of that entity affects the archives. By conducting such analysis, archivists can understand how they operate as part of this system, which may help them improve their place within that system.

Resource Management. The budget process is a direct example of how understanding the system can work to the advantage of the public sector archivist. Because public resources are getting scarcer and archival repositories must compete with other programs often deemed more necessary for the public good, archivists must become adept at managing the budget process within their own political environment.

In the budget process, archivists often seem doomed. Not only do we do most of our work out of the public's eye, when given the spotlight our work seems so esoteric that few members of the public grasp its significance. Because the public budgeting process begins with perceptions of public needs, if we as archivists cannot make our work appear useful to the public—or more important, to the representatives of the public—we have no ammunition in the fight for increased resources.

Some in our profession have criticized the recent emphasis on archival outreach programs. But if outreach is defined as a way to communicate to resource allocators the importance of our work, outreach is an obvious and growing necessity. Outreach programs are essential activities for gaining adequate funding.
After public perception of need is gauged by the resource allocators, the budget goes through the same familiar phases of agency submittal, executive review, legislative or committee review and approval, execution, and audit no matter what the size of the public agency. Up to the point of approval, it is important for the archivist to keep an eye on the political process, lobbying and maneuvering wherever possible to influence the outcome. At the state level, this may require attending committee hearings and speaking personally to legislators. At lower levels of government, it may be more akin to networking through the organization. And throughout this phase of the budget process, outreach efforts should not wane. Service, public programming, exhibits, and publicity are the archivist’s best ways to get their message across.

Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating. Once the budget battle has been fought, archivists must learn effective planning to make the best use of their limited funds. In the past, archivists gave little thought to planning, undertaking it only when embarking on new projects such as building facilities, writing grants, or automating. Often, we did not see beyond the current range of boxes.

The state assessment reports funded by NHPRC serve as example of how and why planning should be applied to public sector archives. The best of the reports, such as New York State’s Toward A Useable Past, followed common public administration planning models. The first page of Toward A Useable Past summarizes clearly the three basic premises of a public sector planning model: the fundamental public service mission of the agency, the values of the agency’s administrators, and the opportunities and problems the plan hopes to solve. From these basic premises, the report provides policy and medium-range planning recommendations. And more recently, the New York report has been implemented through programming based upon the recommendations. One hopes that the state will evaluate its successes and failures in implementing the report’s recommendations at some point in the future, providing feedback for further planning.

The New York report is an encouraging example of how archivists can plan within a political environment. States with less successful assessment reports might do well to apply public sector planning models to determine where improvements might be made.

Other Aspects of Public Administration. There are other aspects of public administration theory that apply to archivists. In human resources management, understanding civil service regulations and unionization in the public sector are critical to those in supervisory positions. For example, terminating an employee in the public sector is much different from terminating one in the private sector, and knowing the difference is crucial for both parties. Intergovernmental relations study might provide archivists responsible to different levels of government valuable insight into these complicated arrangements. Local government records archivists, for example, should have a thorough understanding of the relationships between counties, cities, and townships if they are to make informed appraisal decisions about records of these entities. And yet another example would be utilizing a policy analysis approach to discover why some regulations, such as those governing records management programs, have been effectively or ineffectively implemented.
The Need to Become Better Public Administrators

The history of the U.S. political system is the history of the growth in size and influence of government. From the time the founders established public domains like the mail service, roads, and defense, through the industrial revolution to the Depression, more wars, the civil rights movement, and the environmental movement, our government has continued to grow. Phenomenal growth occurred at the federal level, with an equal or greater growth occurring at the state and local levels.

Archivists can look at their organizations’ files today and see a mirror image of governmental growth. The growth in administrative functions of government has been accompanied by an increase in paperwork because public administration requires information gathering. Information gathering, of course, means more paper.

It seemed for a while that governmental growth would never end. But the 1980s brought a new term to the public administration field—cutback management. Cutback management is defined as “managing organizational change toward lower levels of resource consumption and organizational activity.”20 For most institutions dependent on public funding this has meant less money to operate programs. Because archivists lag several years behind in acquiring records, they are managing the paperwork growth of the 1960s and the 1970s with the declining resources of the 1980s and 1990s. Balancing declining resources against increasing job pressures demands that archivists develop new methods and hone administrative skills in the near future.

Unlike their private sector counterparts, public sector employees cannot expect larger profits each year to fund bigger and better programs. Nor can they expect larger governmental appropriations because cutback management is not a passing whim, but a long-term reality. If we as archivists are going to compete for our share of the shrinking pie, we must become more politically attuned. Hence our management training must be aimed at survival in the political environment, not the corporate world. For those of us in the public sector, reading the latest text on corporate management techniques by Peter Drucker, or searching for the “excellence” described by Peters and Waterman will not make us more effective managers.21 Nor will pursuing M.B.A. degrees, because business school training ignores the uniqueness inherent in the public sector.

The recently revised “SAA Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs” have at least made mention of public administration as a field applicable to archival training. But even here it is last on the list of “related fields.”22 If we hope to contend for resources in an era when competition for those resources is becoming more difficult, we must recognize how our organizations fit into the larger political environment. We need to develop political savvy and administrative skills as they relate to this political environment. In many ways public administration is not a remotely “related field,” but rather what we do every day, and what we need to learn to do better.
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NOTES

3. Statistics based upon the Midwest Archives Conference 1988 Membership Directory. For the purposes of compiling this statistic, public sector archivists are defined as those employed by government; private, nonprofit organizations; historical societies; colleges; universities; and religious organizations. Not counted as public sector archivists were those unaffiliated, those employed by for-profit corporations, and those working for hospitals, since it was not known if these were nonprofit or for-profit hospitals.
5. Dwight Waldo is credited as being the first to apply systems theory to public administration. As with other social scientists of the period, he was influenced by the work of the pure scientists who produced the atomic bomb. For Waldo, the workings of public sector organizations were similar to the workings of atomic bombs—complex series of actions dependent upon environmental factors to produce desired results. Waldo postulated that the environment in public organizations was the irrational world of politics, thus affecting the outcomes in an irrational manner. See Dwight Waldo, The Study of Public Administration (New York: Random House, 1955).
7. Sayre felt that similarities between public and private management were inconsequential. Differences such as legislative and judicial impact, measurements of performance, exposure to public scrutiny, influence of the media, and the vagueness of the bottom line were far more important. For a recent examination of Sayre’s thesis, see Graham T. Allison’s “Public and Private Management: Are They Fundamentally Alike in All the Unimportant Respects?” in Setting Public Management Research Agendas: Integrating the Sponsor, Producer, and User, Proceedings of the Public Management Research Conference, 19-20 November 1979 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 1980), 27-38.
8. Public funding underlies all differences between the public and private sector. This is because “profit-seeking organizations are considerably less constrained in considering the public interest in their decision-making structures and the behavior of their administrators.” This definition is quoted in David H. Rosenbloom’s Public Administration: Understanding Management, Politics, and Law in the Public Sector (New York: Random House, 1986), 5.
12. T.R. Schellenberg, Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 133-160. Schellenberg emphasizes a public administration approach, suggesting archivists analyze agencies in terms of position in administrative hierarchy, functions performed by each office, and activities carried out in each office.

16. Fesler, 30-34, includes an introduction to systems theory as it applies to public administration.


19. Ibid., 1.


22. Revised guidelines as proposed by the SAA Committee on Education and Professional Development are printed in American Archivist 51 (Summer 1988): 380-389. On page 387, public administration is cited as a related field in which students should be encouraged to take courses.