

## **Emmett Leahy Award Acceptance Speech**

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Thank you very much for this award. The fact that you have chosen to confer it to an academic who has no practical experience in records management, other than as a scholar testing hypotheses, reveals how far the profession and the discipline have gone since the times of Emmett Leahy. The citation accompanying this award is even more meaningful, and I would like to comment briefly on the two motivations that are the most important to me, the introduction of diplomatics into our professional body of knowledge, and the results of the three research projects that I have directed over the past twelve years.

They are important because, by implicitly stating that study and research on their own merit have a significant impact on records management professional practices, these motivations demonstrate that our field has graduated to the rank of a science, with a body of theory and methods that determines and guides the way in which our activities are carried out. As a consequence, now the record field configures itself as a system, which owes its integrity to its logical internal cohesion and to the existence of a clear purpose that governs it from outside (i.e. the control of the documentary by-product of human activities) and that determines the boundaries within which it operates. Inside this system, the theory of the record comprises the ideas we hold about the nature of the object of our care, its characteristics, its components, elements, attributes, genesis, and behaviour; and the methodology comprises the ideas we hold about the way such object should be treated; while the practice is the application of both types of ideas in real situations.

This is a great leap forward from the times of Leahy, when there was hardly a discipline to speak of guiding the then limited number of practitioners. As a matter of fact, if a discipline comprises a body of rules that “disciplines” the research of the scholar and the knowledge resulting from such research, we have not had a records discipline in North America till the 1980s, when the substantial body of practical knowledge developed in the previous decades began to be organized into principles and procedures. I have no shame whatsoever in admitting that I greatly pride myself in having recognized the conceptual link between those principles and procedures and the theory and methods of the old science of diplomacy and to have integrated research aimed at developing it as the core of our professional knowledge, of our record science, into classroom education..

Research is a critical component of a graduate level program for records professionals because it is an expression of the intellectual nature of the record discipline, the scholarly substance of the work that record professionals do, and the status of records studies with respect to other graduate programs. It is vital to provide courses on record and archival research and professional scholarship in order to equip students with the knowledge necessary not only to produce new research but also to understand and interpret existing research. Armed with this knowledge, they may conduct research for their thesis, or on a smaller scale through a directed research project or a directed study, courses that involve in-depth investigation of a specific issue or problem. Most importantly, they would be enabled to work as paid research assistants on faculty research projects. This component of graduate education is strongly recognized by employers, especially in a context that changes so fast, to the point that, these days, employers prefer individuals who have just graduated to individuals with five years experience, which used to be the standard requirement.

Our doctoral program in records studies is increasing opportunities and incentives for more systematic and comprehensive research in our discipline. Whereas the primary aim of our master's level program is to educate future professionals who are also able to conduct research to deal with new challenges and develop better programs in their organization, the primary purpose of the doctoral program is to educate future scholars and educators.

Instituting a doctoral program was a logical step in advancing research agendas in the record discipline and in producing educators for other university programs, thereby fostering the increase in number and quality of such programs. It was also an essential step in strengthening the status of records studies within the university.

Graduate programs are judged to a significant degree by the quality and quantity of the research produced by faculty and students. Faculty members in professional programs are expected to conduct grant-funded research like those in other disciplines, and to use their research projects as a means of training students to be researchers. This is why expanding the opportunities for research in programs like ours is vital to their success and growth. Of course, the decision of our federal granting agency to allocate substantial funding to our research initiatives constitutes an important recognition by the academic community of the scholarly substance of the work of record professionals; thus, the early efforts to build such substance through the development of diplomatics have paid off in several ways. And this is why I consider this one of my most important achievements. The research I have conducted for and with my students has resulted in several publications, in additional research projects, in seminars, workshops and other presentations, and in specific products that have already had a noticeable impact worldwide. But, mostly, it has resulted in a new attitude towards our "science" on the part of records creators and users and of technology providers.

The InterPARES research in my view has done much more than develop new knowledge about digital records, their reliable and accurate creation and their authentic

preservation. It has created a research method and structure built on collaborative work groups, generating in the process a research “community” where none existed. This community of researchers, international in scope and multidisciplinary in focus, comprises for the major part (60%) records creators, records users and technology providers. By demonstrating that it is impossible to preserve digital records if they are not properly made, transmitted through space and time, and maintained, and by involving these three categories of individuals in case studies, surveys, building of prototypes, testing of results, and writing frameworks for policy development and guidelines for strategies and standards, InterPARES has put those individuals right among us record professionals and has put the record discipline right at the core of their activities. To observe music theorists and composers, film producers and makers, geographers, architects, astronomers, biologists, notaries, etc. speaking at their own disciplinary conferences about reliable record creation, preservation of accuracy, identity and integrity metadata, classification, and the like makes me think that, if all I have accomplished has been to make these individuals willing and enthusiastic participants in the management and preservation of their records and in the protection of a democratic accountable society, all my efforts were worth the pain.

My journey through the records management field began with the intuition that our professional responsibility would have progressively moved towards the very beginning of the life-cycle. Twenty years ago, records creation was just a small chapter—mostly about form design and management—in any records management book. Today, it occupies most of the book, and its substance is the theory of the record. If we are not able to identify at the outset what constitutes the record in complex information systems, to stabilize it, and link it to its identity and to the responsibilities for its handling, we will have nothing to manage or at least worth managing. After all, as Chesterton put it, “the beginning is the best place to begin.” And to do it, we must know beforehand what we are looking for, but, how can we

know if technology is constantly changing? We can, because, differently from Emmett Leahy, who had to learn through trial and error, we have a science to rely upon, which is constantly enriched by the research being conducted by scholars and graduate students and tested by those who have the strongest stake in the outcome: the records creators and users. In the 1930s, Pirandello wrote that “outside the network of relationships expressed in the records that makes of us who we are, we do not exist.” Through the experiences of the past decades records creators and users have had a taste of it. Now they know and they are not likely to make the same mistakes. The good part of it is that we are now and will continue to be ready.

Thank you for this important recognition, which sends a very important message to our clients, to our universities, and to society as a whole. I am deeply honored by it.