

# **Archival Research: the UBC Experience**

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This paper will explore the role of research in a professional, graduate, archival education program, and assess the experience of Master of Archival Studies (MAS) program at the University of British Columbia (UBC). The MAS program, which was established in 1981, aims to provide students with a comprehensive professional formation such that they can perform competently in professional positions in the archives and records field. To obtain the Master of Archival Studies degree, a student must complete 48 credits of graduate work. In the current academic year, the program offers 20 three-credit courses in archival studies, exclusive of individualized directed studies and thesis. A student taking four courses of 13 weeks duration in each of four terms, for a total of 16 courses, can complete the program in two years. A thesis (once twelve but now six credits) and an internship (three credits) are optional.

## **The Role of Research in a Professional Program**

From its inception, the MAS program has been devoted to both the development and inculcation of archival science, which Luciana Duranti has succinctly described as "the body of knowledge about the nature and characteristics of archives and archival work systematically organized into theory, methodology, and practice." [1] Obviously, research is intimately connected with the development of archival knowledge. Just as obviously, whether or not they choose to conduct research during their degree, students must understand research "not only as facilitators of research [by] users but also as consumers of research" in their own field. [2]

Ideally, students of archival science do not simply study the results of archival scholarship as received wisdom. Rather they must learn to appreciate when and how archival knowledge developed. To do so, they must critically examine the questions or problems archival scholars have addressed, the methods of investigation they have used, the results they have produced, the areas of the field needing investigation, and the relationship of archival science with other disciplines. To do this, every course must address the scholarship relevant to it, and aim to develop the critical faculties

necessary to accomplish, facilitate, or consume research intelligently. The careful and critical study of research is, then, an integral and vital element of all teaching and learning.

There are some problems associated with the fact that most students have no academic background in the field. It is not possible to enter immediately into the kind of sophisticated critical examination of research that is norm in other graduate programs where students come with a firm foundation in the discipline. This problem can be overcome by concentrating study of the theoretical and methodological foundations of archival science in courses taken early in the program. Although these courses may address research in the terms in which I have spoken of it, they will concentrate on inculcating an understanding of the nature and characteristics of archival material and work. Our experience has been that most students need a full year's study to lay this foundation of knowledge before they can engage research in the critical manner required.

These days in our universities graduate programs are judged in large measure by the quality of the research of faculty and students. Universities and research granting agencies expect to see students involved in projects of faculty research. In this sense, the research effort of archival studies programs plays a vital role in their success and growth. Archival studies or science is both relatively new and small in the university. Working assiduously to develop a high quality of research is a principal means of gaining acceptance for the discipline and strengthening its faculty component. Certainly, the quality of the theses written by students in the first decade of the MAS program was the main means of establishing its intellectual *bona fides* in the University. In the second decade, once the teaching program had matured, the concentration has been increasingly on developing faculty research and involving students in those projects, as is the norm in most disciplines.

The main limitation faced in the tasks of conducting research and instructing students to do it is the relatively undeveloped state of research in the field worldwide. Even though an extensive archival literature exists, stretching back several centuries, particularly in European countries, systematic investigations of archival questions, particularly those of a theoretical nature, employing rigorous methods to develop new knowledge are rare. In my view, this situation can be attributed in part to the lack of a strong academic wing of the profession pursuing research in the manner familiar in other disciplines. Until very recently, university-based archival programs, which are themselves relatively new in most countries, concentrated on professional formation. Teachers in them devoted themselves mainly to instruction, and tended to produce scholarship similar to that in the normal professional discourse. Students were neither trained in nor expected to conduct research to expand archival knowledge. The academic wing has an important role to play in remedying this deficiency, particularly

the lack of theoretical investigations that probe beneath the surface of archival phenomenon. In this endeavour, because archival research is so relatively ill-developed, it is particularly important to learn from other disciplines, particularly about appropriate methodologies of investigation. This learning is not a kind of direct borrowing from other disciplines, for perspectives, concepts, and methods from other disciplines can only fertilize the archival discipline; they cannot plant its seeds and bring them to life.

I am sure that academic colleagues are well aware of this condition of the discipline. Indeed, I am also sure that they are all working to rectify it as much as they can. It is all the more frustrating because we are few in number, and, I would hazard, somewhat insecure and divided as we severally try to bring professional education programs into being or, where they have long existed, to turn them into disciplines with a strong research component. More collaboration, although no doubt difficult to bring off in our busy lives, is definitely needed.

Our experience has also been that not all students are interested in or suited to undertake an extensive research project in the course of their first degree, which after all aims primarily at giving them the intellectual foundation for competent practice. In the early years of the MAS program, students were required to write a twelve-credit thesis. Several years ago, as part of major revision of the curriculum and in the light of that early experience, we made the thesis an elective. A minority of students has subsequently opted to write a thesis. While we are not entirely happy with the results of this change, it is also true that the kind of theses we were demanding, and were often produced, approached the scope and quality of doctoral dissertations. At least, colleagues in other disciplines told us so.

It has become abundantly clear that the next step, which we will take in the coming year, is to institute a doctoral program. Having established a firm foundation in the master's degree, and with three full-time faculty members with strong involvement in research in the field, we feel that we are very well situated to develop doctoral studies. As is now the case in allied disciplines like library science and, often now in Canada, the doctoral degree is the research degree. We will continue to offer numerous opportunities for master's students to conduct research. Currently, in addition to the thesis, students may undertake carefully circumscribed investigations, usually employing social science methods, in a three-credit Directed Research Project course, or conduct a piece of applied research for an archival institution or program in a course called Professional Experience.

More ambitious projects require the time and additional research training that is only possible in a doctoral program. The state of research in the field may seem to be a barrier to the development of doctoral-level studies. I completely disagree with that

viewpoint. The need in society and in the profession for research and deeper exploration of archival concerns demands that we set about, as best we can in the circumstances, to train researchers and our successors. However, the only way to convince university administrators that we are up to the task seems to be to produce research ourselves and cultivate its production by our students that will be recognized as meeting current standards. Usually, this means obtaining grants of recognized granting agencies for academic research. The trouble is, doctoral students and the climate that comes with having them are a vital element in creating a strong research component. I realize that in many universities existing doctoral programs accommodate students interested in archival studies, but the goal is still, as it is at the master's level, to create distinctive archival doctoral programs and develop them vigorously. At the moment, there is nothing like a critical mass of professors and students in one place to create a flourishing doctoral studies environment, at least so far as I know. All the more reason to work collaboratively.

### **Training of Students in Research**

In the early years of the program, when every student was required to write a thesis, the student's supervisor and members of the thesis committee provided the necessary training in research. The committee usually included a faculty member in another discipline relevant to the research. Sometimes that outsider assisted with training in specialized research methods. This was the era when the program had but one full-time faculty member. In time, it became evident that all students would profit from taking a course in research methods, so a required course to meet that need was introduced in the second term of the first year. In fact, this course served students in both the Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) program and the MAS program. Entitled Research Methods in Libraries and Archives, it aimed to give students an understanding of the role of research in their professions, with particular emphasis on research related to evaluation. It instructed students in the basic elements of both quantitative and qualitative social science research methods, taught them to prepare a detailed research plan, and familiarized them with selected descriptive statistical techniques.

Beginning this year, this course becomes an elective course for those students wishing to learn how to employ social science research methods. We have introduced a new course in the first year, called Archival Research and Scholarship. It aims to give students an historical understanding of the relationships among archival research and scholarship, archival practice, the archival profession, archival institutions, and archival education. It will also examine the methods used by archival scholars to observe, describe, and interpret documentary phenomenon and archival situations, the ways in which new ideas originate and the methods for testing and developing them, and the interdisciplinary character of the field. Because the other courses in the first

year aim instilling knowledge of the basic theory and methods of the discipline in students, this course offers the opportunity to consider and assess past and present research in the field in all its dimensions. It also aims to encourage master's students to undertake research in some way as part of their second year, including involvement as research assistants in research projects conducted by faculty members.

We have had limited experience involving students in faculty directed projects. One doctoral student, Heather MacNeil, who was then, enrolled in an interdisciplinary program, took part as a research assistant in the project on "The Preservation of the Integrity of Electronic Records" Luciana Duranti and I conducted from 1994-97. [3] Currently, there is funding for up to six research assistants to take part in the InterPARES project on long term preservation of electronic records. [4] This three-year project just began in January 1999. The full measure of student participation will take place next year, but already we have learned a good deal about what it will take to bring about successful involvement of master's students.

First, student research assistants must prove that they have a superior grasp of the fundamental concepts and principles of archival science. It is impossible to be teaching students these fundamentals during a complicated and time-constrained research project. Second, it is absolutely necessary to spend time ensuring that students understand the objectives, methods, and organization of the project. In the case of InterPARES, which is an international, interdisciplinary project, this means investing a significant amount of time in bringing students abreast of the origins, basis, and progress of the project. Ideally, we would like to have master's students who act as assistants undertake their own project on questions related to the current research of faculty members. As I said, this is the expected practice, but it is also the best way to create mutually supportive interest among faculty and students. Research is a lonely and difficult task that always profits from shared interest and commitment.

### **Barriers to Research?**

Explicitly or implicitly, I have already spoken about barriers to research, although I hardly think any of them need deter us. Indeed, I suspect I have simply identified a few well-known conditions or circumstances every archival teacher/researcher faces. None of the difficulties (limited numbers of scholars, nascent nature of the discipline in the university, limited theoretical studies, etc.) prevent us from making headway. Indeed, in the circumstances, I think that the discipline has fared well. The field is of interest to many bright people. There is ample evidence of societal sanction for investigation of archival questions. Institutions and archivists in the field understand the need for developing new knowledge to keep them abreast of rapidly changing modern conditions, and frequently voice the opinion that academic research has an important role to play in the profession's development. In Canada and everywhere

else with which I am familiar, it is possible to acquire support for research. Granting agencies like the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council recognize archival science as a discipline, and have funded several archival projects. Colleagues in other disciplines have been willing to be part of our research endeavour, whether through assistance of students or by being part of projects we initiate, as, for instance, in the InterPARES project. University authorities, while they have not showered us (or anyone else lately) with resources, have given us a place and seem as willing to reward archival studies as any other discipline, if we can show the right stuff. Therefore, I should like to conclude with a few recommendations on what I think it best to do to cultivate a stronger research in our discipline. They all follow from what I have said.

First, master's-level programs need to be strong, that is, as strong as in other comparable disciplines. Second, we need to make dedicated instruction of research a regular component of study in all relevant master's courses (nearly all of them I would think), pay special attention to training master's students in research methodology, and encourage those interested in pursuing their own investigations to do so. Second, we need to create the condition for flourishing doctoral programs, perhaps through inter-university collaboration where it is feasible. Thirdly, we need to work at creating a more close-knit and mutually supportive community of researchers in our field. This conference is a start, but much more could be done.

<sup>1</sup>*Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, vol. 59, supplement 22, s.v. "Archival Science."

<sup>2</sup>Association of Canadian Archivists, Education Committee, "Guidelines for the Development of a Two-Year Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies Program (December 1988)," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989-90): 139.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the results of the project, see the [www.slais.ubc.ca/users/duranti](http://www.slais.ubc.ca/users/duranti).

<sup>4</sup>The project's web-site is at [www.interpares.org](http://www.interpares.org)