Like the practitioners of other professions, archivists bring a particular perspective to their work. Just as doctors think like doctors and lawyers think like lawyers, so archivists think like archivists: they analyze and understand archives and records in their own particular way. Those who create and use recorded information have their perspectives, too, but archivists develop a way of looking at records that is peculiarly their own, different from that of others. Creators, for example, usually take a practical view of records: records help them accomplish a particular task and are viewed in that light. To their creators, records are a means to a specific end. Once that immediate use is past, records have little further significance in themselves and can be ignored or destroyed. Records users, by contrast, often look on records purely as research materials, carriers of information that are valuable or not to the extent that they answer the question of the moment. For users, too, records are simply a means to some immediate end.

Archivists have a perspective on records that is broader than either of these. They see a bigger picture. From the history of their profession and their own place in it, archivists develop habits of thinking and analyzing, together with characteristic attitudes that govern and guide their work. For the archivist, records perform not merely one service but a whole range of them, some of which cannot be anticipated in advance. Making that variety of use possible—indeed, encouraging it and making it easy—is the archivist’s goal. To
achieve it, archivists rely on a perspective that derives from a base of knowledge and a set of shared values, acquired and refined over the course of their careers and nurtured by the traditions and experiences of the archival community. Before considering the various activities that make up archival practice, therefore, it is necessary to understand the perspective from which those activities flow.

Knowledge

Archivists build up a store of knowledge, which they apply to their work through introductory archival education at the graduate level, on-the-job experience, and continuing professional education. This building implies change, of course, meaning that archival knowledge is elastic and its acquisition is an ongoing process. While in the past archivists often favored extensive apprenticeship approaches to learning their craft, it is now the case that the ideal basis for acquiring archival knowledge comes from all three sources. Comprehensive graduate education provides a systematic orientation to the theories and methods of archival work. While most graduate programs continue to include a practicum component, it is probably the case that the real orientation to practice comes in the archivist’s first position. Continuing professional education, once nearly exclusively directed at an introductory or rudimentary level, is now increasingly meeting the needs of those in middle or even advanced careers. This is a sign of how the rapidly changing technologies, legal issues, and the social contexts of records systems are affecting the knowledge of archivists and other records professionals. In general, however, archival knowledge focuses on four broad categories: knowledge about the individuals, organizations, and institutions that produce records; knowledge about the records produced by those people and entities; knowledge of the uses to which records can be put; and knowledge about the principles best suited to the management of those records. This knowledge encompasses both the historical aspects of these categories and their contemporary manifestations.

Knowledge of Individuals, Organizations, and Institutions. Because they live with the paper and electronic remains of human
activity, archivists acquire a broad knowledge of the varieties and possibilities of that activity. Through the records over which they exercise control, archivists vicariously experience otherwise unfamiliar places and events, learning things they would not otherwise have known and expanding their sense of the possible. A pioneer’s diary now preserved in a historical society describes in stark human terms the emotions of migration and settlement. The letters of a young woman in a collection of family papers describe the experiences of motherhood, child-rearing, and career choices. The founding documents of a charitable organization kept in the group’s archives convey the original fervor that brought it into being. The financial records of a corporation provide glimpses into the decisions, wise or misguided, that have led it to success or failure. The archivist does not actually need to have any of these experiences personally to understand them through the records that are left behind. Even when working in a repository that has a relatively narrow collecting scope or in an institutional archives serving only the parent organization’s needs, the archivist will be exposed through records to a wide range of people and groups, not all of them likable but each with a story to tell.

This exposure gives the archivist a sense of the complexity of life and the variety of its expressions. Through the records, the archivist is ideally situated to see how complex any activity is. Individual responsibility and action may lie at the heart of it, but individuals seldom operate entirely on their own. The delivery of social services, for example, whether by public or private agencies, is no longer a matter (if it ever was) of a few good-hearted people single-mindedly pursuing their goals. Rather, it results from the coordination of a great many individual and collective actions. Large bureaucracies emerge to make the effort possible, peopled in some measure by individuals who never come close to direct contact with those actually being served. The accountant who manages the financial resources and the personnel director who hires the staff have as much of a role to play as the social worker who visits clients. Even in the personal realm, the demands of modern life are multifarious: individuals undertake a great many tasks, join a number of voluntary associations, and expand their range of involvements. Archivists have long been aware that it is not only the great political leaders or the engaging ideas that
cause new events or create great movements; with their orientation to the records of a wide array of people and organizations, archivists have long been open to a “microhistory” perspective, even before it became a scholarly fashion.4

Because archivists encounter the extensive, interconnected, and overlapping records of all these phenomena, they come to appreciate complexity and to look for collective activity and significance. In doing so, they recognize that context is all important: similar actions in different contexts have significantly different meanings. Archivists also develop a structural understanding of these phenomena, looking on them not as random productions of human interest but rather as the result of deliberate, often complicated processes that must be reconstructed and understood. These processes change with time, and the archivist is ideally suited to see their development through changes in the records. The records of an organization or the papers of an individual have as much to do with external regulations, policies, and traditions as with the immediate, peculiar circumstances of the single agency or person.

The nineteenth-century records of an orphanage, for example, may have been kept in large ledger books, with all the pertinent information about each child written on a single line divided into columns running across a double page. By the twentieth century, these volumes have been replaced by case files: fat, expandable folders in which all manner of documents concerning each child are kept. Today, these files are probably in digital form. In all instances, the records creator was concerned primarily with accounting for the children, keeping the records (whatever their format) to accomplish that fundamental, though increasingly complicated, purpose. The records’ forms change with government regulations and social work practices, and the analysis of these regulations and practices enables the archivist to comprehend why and how the recordkeeping systems have changed. The records user of today is concerned principally with the content of the information recorded, consulting it to answer questions that are either particular (was a specific child ever in this orphanage?) or general (what were the broad demographic characteristics of orphans in certain periods?). Many others—lawyers, court-appointed investigators, the media—may also seek to use these records for their own purposes.5
The archivist asks very different questions. How were the records kept originally, and how can that original system be reconstructed so as to enhance rather than obscure meaning? How can the earlier recordkeeping practices be explained to present-day users so they can draw information from them, perhaps in answer to entirely new, unforeseen questions? Are the records worth keeping at all for the long term? Do the potential uses outweigh the financial costs involved in maintaining the records in an archival repository? There are other practical considerations as well. Since a row of bound volumes will be more compact than a stack of boxes containing hundreds of case files, how much space will have to be set aside to store the records? What physical condition are the records in, and what steps will have to be taken to stabilize or restore it? Do the records contain sensitive information that might have to be withheld from use for a certain time? How have changing laws and regulations affected the records? The archivist lives with the evolving nature of the records themselves and must therefore be prepared to understand them as a whole in a way that is not so critical for either creator or user. That wider view is the measure of the differing perspectives of archivists, creators, and users of records.

The archivist can thus see not merely that the record becomes more complex with time, but also that the structures, systems, and activities from which the record derives become more complex. In the orphanage case files, careful testing and detailed psychological analysis have replaced the quick, seemingly off-hand remarks of the earlier ledger books. The record left behind is thus more detailed, but it is also more clearly the result of formal, articulated procedures in which larger goals are achieved through a succession of smaller steps. This pattern of development will not be quite so noticeable to one who lacks the archivist’s singular perspective. On the one hand, the records creator focuses mostly on the immediate tasks to be accomplished, with the records almost an afterthought. On the other hand, the records user may miss the larger organizational context from a desire to answer only one or two of the thousands of questions that might possibly be asked. The archivist learns to see through the records to larger insights that ultimately help explain the records, the actions that produced them, and the information they contain. The
archivist can see how individuals and organizations reveal themselves, knowingly or not, through their records.

The archivist seeks the fundamental connections between the producers of records and the records themselves. What are the characteristics of the records produced by different activities? How did those processes change over time? What evidence can we find of those changes in the documents that will lead to a better understanding of the phenomena? How clear, in other words, are the windows to other experiences that the records offer? How do these particular records relate to other sources of information and evidence? A knowledge of how and why individuals and institutions produce records leads the archivist to recognize all these as crucial questions.

Knowledge of Records. If archivists know something about the structures and processes that produce records, they also come to know a great deal about the records themselves, both in general and in particular. Fundamentally, archivists become scholars of records and recordkeeping systems—not merely their content, but also their cultural and symbolic meanings. Two specialized branches of archives work devote scholarly attention to records as ends in themselves. Paleography studies the changing nature of writing, while diplomatics studies the forms that documents take and the impact their style has on their content. More generally, archivists inevitably learn something about the subject content of their collections. Archivists do not, of course, spend their working hours simply reading historical documents for their own amusement or edification, any more than librarians spend their days reading books. Still, in the course of acquiring, organizing, and helping others use records, archivists learn a great deal, even if they enter a position with little previous subject knowledge. A state archivist, for instance, develops a detailed knowledge of the state, even if not a native. The archivist in a repository devoted to the records of a particular religious or ethnic group learns a great deal about that group, even if from another background. Constantly surrounded by the subject matter, archivists develop a detailed knowledge of the historical and other issues raised in their collections. While such subject knowledge enhances the archivist’s ability to work with the records, it is expertise about the records and the systems creating and supporting records that is the special contribution of the archivist.
More important than any specific subject knowledge, however, is a broader understanding of how records function and what they do, whether in an organizational setting or in personal life. Archivists frequently express this understanding by speaking of a **life cycle of records**. Developed first and most fully by records managers, this notion expresses the idea that, like the people who produce them, records pass through a life cycle of different phases. The records life cycle is often thought of as having four stages—creation, use, storage, and disposition—and archivists believe that they can best manage the records they encounter by understanding them at each stage of their life cycle and the effects each stage has on the others. More recently, some archivists have also spoken of a **records continuum**, arguing that archival records are never really “disposed” of, and that a continuum metaphor thus takes better account of records in time and space. The distinction between current and noncurrent records is artificial, in this view, since “records are ‘fixed’ in time and space from the moment of their creation, but recordkeeping regimes carry them forward and enable their use for multiple purposes by delivering them to people living in different times and spaces.” The concept suggests that the value of records has little to do with any element of time and everything to do with their function, characteristics, and compliance attributes. The records continuum concept may also enhance the connection between archival and records management responsibilities, and this strengthens the focus on the importance of records in any organization. Both concepts support the notion that records are integral to the lives of organizations, individuals, and societies.

When records are created, they are made by a given technology in a particular form in order to carry out certain functions. While archivists may have become preoccupied with the implications of recent digital technologies—probably because they change so rapidly, are so fragile, and are the creation of software engineers who have a culture and mission of their own—records have always been the products of sophisticated technologies. The creator, however, usually does not stop to reflect on either the form or the function: the record is merely a tool, and the job that the tool does is more important than the tool itself. The archivist, however, sees the necessary connection and knows that decisions, conscious and unconscious, made at the
time of creation will affect the future meaning and usefulness of any record. The information in a document may be laid out in an unusual manner, for example, making its use or even its intelligibility problematic. The record may be in such a form that it cannot be read by the unaided eye, requiring a microfilm enlarger, a projector, or varying kinds of computer hardware and software. Some records may be created in very large formats, making their handling and storage difficult. Some may be created with long-term or permanent retention in mind, but constructed out of very impermanent materials that work against that goal. Since many of these records are eventually included in the archives, archivists live with the results of the decisions made during the creation of records. It is thus important for them to know the circumstances of that creation. Some archivists even contend that they are as much in the business of tracking and implementing policy as in shepherding records, since records are the expression of laws, regulations, best practices, conventions, and traditions. This is a valuable insight, since it reemphasizes the archivist’s responsibility to become expert in all dimensions of recordkeeping systems.

Records are necessarily created with a particular use in mind, and that period of use represents the second stage of the life cycle. A record’s usefulness may be immediate or long term, and it may also change with time. Archivists are predisposed to value the usefulness of records (or rather the usefulness of the information in them), but they also understand some of the problems that use entails. Who, for example, has the right—legal, moral, or other—to see certain records, and which records must, for whatever reasons, be restricted from use? In this era of ever-shifting privacy and security concerns, how does the archivist administer access to records fairly? What once was perceived to be a mundane record of uncertain value but worth maintaining because of its connection to an important event or project may now be seen as presenting security problems. The archivist may find the old building blueprint or weekly statistical report needs to be maintained with extra care. What should be done with documents that are so heavily used that they begin to wear out physically? How might usefulness change? This is not as simple as it may seem. In some instances, the value of the records may remain constant for a very long time: the blueprints of an old building remain, in some senses, cur-
rent and active as long as the structure stands. In other cases, the useful life of records may be very brief; the weekly report becomes outdated as soon as its statistical information is superseded by next week’s report or by the monthly report.

Whether records are in constant or less frequent use, they need to be filed and stored somewhere, and a necessary part of the archivist’s perspective is a concern over the problems of storage even before records actually get to the archives. In particular, the archivist must be concerned with the questions of how to store records efficiently and how to find them when they are needed. What kinds of storage equipment (filing cabinets, boxes, shelves) are the most cost effective, and how can records be stored so as to take maximum advantage of the available floor space? How high off the ground can records be stored and still permit ready retrieval? What weight of records will the floor safely support? How do environmental conditions in the storage areas affect the long-term physical survival of the material? Should the format of the records be altered (through microfilming, for example) in order to store a greater volume in a smaller space or for other reasons? How complicated is the arrangement of the records, and how easily can one locate information when required? While these kinds of issues remain relevant concerns even with digital records, additional considerations are involved in their maintenance. Should archivists take physical custody of records, and what kinds of decisions will have to be made about emulation or migration, thereby transforming archival appraisal from a one-time decision into a continuous process? Neither the records creator nor the records user worries much about such considerations; for them, having the information stored close at hand for convenience when needed is likely to be the principal concern. They need not, as the archivist and the records manager must, see storage as a problem of its own, one that must be addressed in a planned and systematic way.

When records have fulfilled their immediate purposes, they arrive at the disposition stage of their life cycle. For the records creator, disposition usually means precisely that: throwing the records away to make room for new ones. This has always been problematic for archivists, since modern organizations have tended to see paper records as bureaucratic (in the pejorative sense of the word) barriers to efficient
operation. The archivist applies a broader meaning to the term *disposition*, viewing both temporary transfer to interim, bulk storage (often called a records center) and long-term storage in the archives as forms of disposition. The original meaning and usefulness of the records may have passed, but in disposing of them the archivist knows that other uses are possible and that those potential uses must affect any decision to retain or destroy them. The archivist thus sees a wider range of disposition options and can select the most appropriate one in any particular case. Understanding all the previous stages of the life cycle of records provides the archivist with information necessary to make proper judgments at the disposition stage, offering a knowledgeable basis for deciding which records will survive and which will not.

Beyond this broad knowledge of what records go through before they ever find their way into archival custody, archivists also develop a detailed knowledge of certain technical matters. Foremost among these is a knowledge of what records are made of physically and how they are put together. Archivists learn how to recognize the different types of record material. They are familiar with the various kinds of systems that have been used for recording and filing information. They understand, for example, the circumstances that produced press-book copies of letters, file drawers filled with carbon copies, or systems of electronic mail. They also know the forms and types of documents that are characteristic of different periods, and this allows them to fix approximate dates for records with reasonable accuracy. By looking at a document—the kind of paper and ink, the size and format of the information, the style of handwriting, in some cases even the feel or the smell—the archivist knows something about it, readily distinguishing an eighteenth-century letter from a twentieth-century letter, for example. The archivist is also now becoming an expert in understanding the digital means for producing records, from word processing to electronic mail to Web-based records systems. Given the complexities of modern records, archivists not only have had to expand the scope of their own knowledge, but they have had to work with other professionals responsible for records and information systems.

With the same knowledge, the archivist is able to judge the authenticity of records, distinguishing those that are genuine from
fakes or forgeries. Something is obviously amiss when a document with eighteenth-century physical characteristics speaks of twentieth-century subjects, and the archivist recognizes anomalies in a way that someone else might not. The distortion and deliberate faking of records is all the more difficult to detect in digital systems, of course, but archivists certainly have the opportunity in these circumstances to demonstrate their knowledge of records and recordkeeping systems. Their technical knowledge is also sufficiently detailed so that archivists can understand what causes records to deteriorate; this allows them to make plans to retard or reverse that deterioration. Naturally, well-trained and experienced archivists can make these judgments more readily and with greater assurance than novices. Still, all archivists learn to examine records in this way, adding to their knowledge and reinforcing a perspective that is uniquely their own.

**Knowledge of the Uses of Records.** If archivists know something about where records come from and how they are produced, they also know from daily experience that records can and will be used for a wide range of purposes. Indeed, it is the expectation of enduring and continuing usefulness that explains all the effort and energy archivists expend on the materials in their care. In the archivist’s view, saving and organizing the unique, original recorded information from past and present are not ends in themselves. Rather, they are warranted only to the extent that someone—indeed, a large number of someones—will use that information. What the archivist does makes that use possible.

The archivist differs from others who use records, however, in that the archivist’s perspective takes in a wider range of possibilities. Where the creator or user of records usually sees only the current value of recorded information—the task or the inquiry of the moment—the archivist sees a more open-ended potential. One person may ask one set of questions of archival holdings this morning, but the archivist knows that someone else will ask an entirely different set of questions of those same materials tomorrow—or maybe even this afternoon. The certainty that this process will go on indefinitely drives the archivist’s desire to facilitate the work of all the questioners, not organizing the collection in a way that will satisfy one while making usability or understanding difficult for the others. The diversity of
potential uses also challenges archivists in conducting appraisal for known current uses and unpredictable future uses and in creating finding aids for a wide array of researchers.

The reasons why users call on the information in archival records are thus constantly shifting, and the archivist's perspective entails a predisposition to appreciate these shifts. Government census data or the records of births, marriages, and deaths maintained by counties and towns offer good examples of the unpredictable multiplicity of uses that archives may receive. The information they contain is recorded in the first place to serve wholly practical, instrumental purposes. These records offer legal proof of age and personal status (of existence, even), and many benefits depend on them. The rights to vote, to drive an automobile, or to purchase certain products, for instance, all depend on proving that one has achieved a certain age. Representation in local and national legislatures depends on the aggregate information of the census. Passports offer proof of citizenship, but they also adapt to broader uses in an era of civil unrest, war, and terrorism. The changing technology of passports—including biometric information, for example, in addition to physical description and photographs—expands their possible uses even further.¹⁴

As important as they are, these immediate uses of records are transitory. The archivist knows that most records will lose their original usefulness but that they will take on a secondary usefulness, one that will make them important for different reasons. A genealogist will ask new questions of the records, trying to find information about particular individuals at particular times. A lawyer will seek to reconstruct families in the settlement of estates. Government and private-sector planners will look for population trends and movements that will affect the shape of cities and the landscape. Historians will connect the rise or decline of population to other factors in assembling a complete picture of what happened in the past. Even quite ordinary records—cancelled checks and insurance policies—have been placed in archives because of their association with horrific events, such as the Holocaust, and have taken on importance as instruments of accountability.¹⁵ No one of these eventual uses was in the mind of the creator of the records, but the archivist is prepared for all of them.
The changing utility of records is no less evident in the case of private manuscripts and papers. Diaries and personal letters may not have the same practical purposes as census records, but they nonetheless fix and hold information reliably for their creators and recipients. The originators of personal papers count on them to communicate with others at a distance or simply to remember things they might otherwise forget. Subsequent readers of those same items, however, will find different uses for them and will be able to answer previously unimagined questions. By “reading between the lines,” these later users will be able to reconstruct and understand the interpersonal dynamics between correspondents. They will be able to watch an intellect or a personality develop over time, seeing a change so gradual that it would not have been apparent to a contemporary. They will be able to see conscious literary productions take shape and grow from draft to masterpiece. The classic example of this type of records use may be seen in a prize-winning study of a woman’s diary. Martha Ballard, a midwife in frontier Maine in the era of the American Revolution, maintained a diary that subsequent generations ignored as little more than an account of routine chores, weather, and other insignificant matters. A later historian used the diary to create a rich tapestry of social life and women’s roles in early America, seeing it as a kind of unofficial town archives. Such users may be exploring any of these potential topics for scholarly, academic purposes, or they may pursue them simply in the interests of understanding their family or themselves. In either case, the recorded information is being put to uses quite different from those originally intended.

The archivist is in a better position than anyone else who comes into contact with the records to see this kind of broad and constantly changing usefulness. The wider perspective demands that all sorts of uses, including many that are not obvious, be accommodated. Not all possible uses of records are created equal, of course, and archivists generally try to avoid the trap of thinking that “somebody, somewhere, someday” might be interested in a given topic, no matter how trivial or obscure. Still, when archivists look at records, they see a greater number of possibilities, and they go about their work in a way that encourages diversity and adaptability. By committing themselves to assisting all possible users of the information in their custody,
archivists assume the ongoing responsibility to gather systematic information about their holdings and to pass that information on to those who have a need or a desire to use it.

**Knowledge of Archival Principles.** These three areas of the archivist's knowledge—of the organizations and individuals that produce records; of the nature of records themselves; and of the possible uses of records—become most relevant when they are combined with a knowledge of the principles best suited to organizing and managing those records. Most important are those that focus on making all records, produced for various and often unpredictable reasons, comprehensible and therefore useful. Materials that have a logical order at the time of their creation may lose that order as time goes on. Restoring the original coherence thus becomes a critical task, one that will be especially difficult if the original orderliness has been replaced by chaos and disorder. Archivists thus share with librarians and museum curators the mission of organizing the materials in their care in some systematic manner and then codifying and communicating that order to users who want to retrieve information.

Archivists designate this as the process of establishing *intellectual and physical control* over their holdings. Intellectual control means knowing what the pieces of an archival collection are, where they come from, and how they fit together. To achieve intellectual control is to be able to answer, with reasonable specificity, the questions, "What is this?" and "How did this come to be?" Such an understanding can operate on its own, without immediate reference to the actual physical location of the material: it is possible to know what an archival collection or group contains without necessarily being able to state the precise order or place of it. Just as one can tell that a jigsaw puzzle is a lovely pastoral scene before actually putting it together, so the archivist can know, in the aggregate or even in some detail, what an archival collection is before fully understanding how all its pieces relate to one another. Thus, establishing intellectual control is mentally prior, the necessary first step. The process is, as one archivist has said, a case of "mind over matter," an understanding of the records, the systems supporting them, and the regulations and conventions shaping them.

It is always necessary, of course, to take the next step. Basic intellectual control may come first, but archivists must always establish
physical control as well. It is not sufficient merely to know intellectually what the pieces of the archival jigsaw are; it is also necessary to know where they are so they may be retrieved when needed. Knowing what parts make up an archival whole is useless unless it is possible to find and retrieve those pieces, and only those pieces, rather than all of them. Establishing intellectual and physical control lies at the heart of the organizing function, whether in museums, libraries, or archives. Archivists know that they must be able to achieve this control over their holdings, even those portions that are difficult to understand. Archivists hope that when the records arrive at their repositories they will be in the original order of their creation and use by the records creator, thereby preserving important evidence. In organizational or institutional archives, this is why archivists often have records management responsibilities or work closely with records managers, focusing on external requirements, auditors’ practices, legal considerations, and administrative use—usually identified in records retention or disposition schedules. Personal papers may present more challenges in establishing control, but there has been a growing recognition that such papers have evident structures critical to understanding them. Intellectual and physical control are not always accomplished sitting in a room full of recently acquired records; they are done through ongoing research about the functions and activities, people and organizations, generating the records.

For librarians, intellectual and physical control are always intimately connected. For any library system to work properly, the books will have to be on the shelves (physical control) in the order of the numbers assigned them in the catalog (intellectual control). The same can be said for museum collections, in which registration or accession numbers substitute for classification or call numbers. Because of the differences in the nature of the materials in their care, however, archivists approach these organizational tasks in a different way. Library materials usually exist in multiple copies that are all more or less the same. The way that one library catalogs a book, therefore, can be adopted, perhaps with minor modifications, by other libraries. This is true whether the classification schema is based on an expendable a priori outline of all conceivable subject fields (like the Dewey Decimal System) or simply on the organizational plan of the largest,
most comprehensive library available (like the Library of Congress System). At the same time, most published materials address one topic or a limited range of topics, and they do so deliberately, following an author’s conscious intention. Librarians can therefore rely on subject categories as the basis for their organizational effort. A book may be about Impressionist painting or about nuclear engineering, but it is unlikely to be about both. Individual library materials may thus be organized and kept with items that pertain to the same subject. In fact, there is a positive advantage to doing so because it enables library users to browse, finding items that interest them in physical proximity to one another.

Archivists cannot profit from either of these advantages. In the first place, each archival collection is, in the strictest meaning of the term, unique: the materials held by the National Archives are and always will be distinct from the collections in a local historical society. Attempting to devise a single classification framework that will work equally well for both is thus futile. Furthermore, since manuscript and archival materials are often produced as an unconscious byproduct of human activity, they may pertain to a myriad of subjects. A single letter may speak of family matters, business affairs, avocational interests, and random thoughts of no apparent significance. When archivists deal not with a single letter but with thousands of them in large files, this problem becomes even more difficult. Determining just exactly what topic a file is “about” may be no easy task. Which of the many subjects should be used for classification purposes? If the archivist chooses one, what happens to the other subjects discussed in the records? How many hundreds of cross-references will be required to provide equally easy access to information by very different users asking very different questions?

Because these characteristics are inherent in the nature of archival materials, archivists need a more reliable principle for organizing their collections (similar to principles held by other professionals, such as museum curators and archaeologists). This principle, which archivists call provenance, is based on the deceptively obvious insight that the person or organization producing the records determines their content. A nuclear engineer will produce files and documents that are essentially different from those produced by an Impressionist
painter, even if both of them talk about a whole range of subjects in their letters. Thus, the archivist can adopt the individual or corporate entity that created the records as the central organizing standard, keeping all the records produced by a particular origin or source—that is, a single provenance—together. By knowing something about the point of origin of the records—who the person was and what that person did or was interested in; what the corporate body was and how it was structured and operated—the archivist lets the records fall into the natural groupings they had when they were created. This approach eliminates the necessity of imposing on them predetermined subject categories that may not be entirely fitting. The archivist is still intent on gaining intellectual and physical control but chooses means for accomplishing this that are best suited to the material at hand, extending from analysis and understanding of the records and recordkeeping systems.

To this reliance on provenance, the archivist adds a closely related principle that is flexible and well suited to maintaining control over records. This is the principle of original order. When the records of any given provenance are created, they come into existence with a certain order already imposed on them, identified more than a century ago as the "organic" nature of records. The records creator divides them into logical groupings, often based on different functions or activities: the personal correspondence is kept together in one place, the financial records somewhere else, and so on. In organizations, this practice is even more apparent and beneficial: the president's office records are all kept together, separate from those of the heads of the various departments. What is more, within the files themselves, there is another level of order, again established at the time the records are created. In a set of letters, the documents are filed chronologically; in a series of personnel files, they are alphabetical by the employee's name; in a collection of medical records, they may follow some sequential numbering system. Whatever arrangement is there has been chosen by the creator of the records because the very order itself is an effective means for keeping the records straight. The physical arrangement of the records gives fundamental clues as to why they have been created and how and why they may have continuing use.

Archivists know that maintaining this original order is as impor-
tant as maintaining provenance in understanding and controlling the records after they pass into archival custody. Relying on the natural order allows the records to stand on their own as much as possible, without introducing any other variables from the archivist. No matter how logical outside, subject-based schemes may appear, they always have a limited usefulness. What is more, they are unnecessary, since an original order of some kind is always present, even if it has been partly obscured through misfiling or other carelessness. This is equally true for electronic records, even if they are never printed out into a physical form. Like provenance, the principle of original order provides an objective rather than subjective way of treating the records: the archivist accepts the order and arrangement the records already have, rather than trying to make one up after the fact. Not only is time saved when archivists are involved with descriptive work, but essential aspects of the evidence in records are preserved as well.

Thinking of records in terms of their provenance and original order and then applying those principles to a particular body of records are critical components of the archivist’s way of looking at things. Others have a different perspective. When creators and users look at records, they “see” other things, either the task to be accomplished or the subject matter being investigated. When archivists look at records, what they see first and foremost are provenance and original order. This perception permits the establishment of a context that will serve as the basis for everything else the archivist does. It establishes the point of origin and the natural, original arrangement of the records as the fixed reference points for archival organization, eliminating the necessity for the archivist to concoct such schemes from scratch. Archivists thus know how to identify provenance and to discern original order in particular collections, no matter how ostensibly disorganized those collections may at first appear.

All archival knowledge is acquired by archivists through a combination of means. Foremost of these is formal academic study at the graduate level. Through lectures by instructors, extensive readings in the professional literature, classroom discussions, student research and projects, case study exercises, and other means of introductory and advanced professional education, students acquire the foundations of their knowledge. The graduate classroom is the place where future
archivists have the opportunity to study and to question archival knowledge and practice, apart from the pressures of organizational assignments and responsibilities. As such, it is a crucible for thinking about archival administration and its application in any organizational or cultural setting. Upon this base, all archivists next build a growing body of professional experience by actually working with records. This experience adds to each individual archivist’s storehouse of applications and examples, instances of problem solving that offer numerous demonstrations of how the general principles apply in particular cases. Some of these experiences come in the form of internships or work-study opportunities, often while beginning archivists are still receiving their introductory education. Similar insights continue to build over the course of a career. Finally, the archivist’s knowledge is refined and developed through continuing professional education, which is necessary for all archivists, no matter how experienced. Continuing education expands the connections between theory and practice beyond the necessarily limited range of one’s own experiences, drawing useful examples and lessons from the experience of others. This “life-long learning” also permits archivists to keep abreast of important changes and developments in their work, particularly in areas (such as automation and preservation technology) that are changing constantly.

Participating in the activities of professional associations and attending continuing education workshops and academic programs are valued means for keeping abreast of the growing body of archival knowledge. All these forms of education are important; to have one without the others is to have a limited grounding.

There is also another critical area, and that is building a foundation for lifelong reading across a variety of disciplines for insights into records and recordkeeping systems. Although archivists have many textbooks, the substance of archival knowledge is far more complex than can be covered in a single volume. The idea that all archival knowledge can be summarized neatly in two or three hundred pages is false. There are many books far removed from the production of practice-oriented basic textbooks. Some are, of course, intended to be studies about records or archives (they all have very different purposes), but taken together they provide insight and inspiration about how archivists can approach the documents of the past. We can add to these
kinds of books layer after layer of works from anthropology, sociology, political science, and other fields providing both a deeper and broader scholarship on archival matters. Enriching this is the work of a new generation of scholars studying archives from inside the field, perhaps best represented by the growing number of dissertations on archival subjects. All of this makes reliance on the single-volume archival textbook more problematic. Textbooks provide an introduction to the field, but archival knowledge is broader and deeper.

Values

Drawing on their base of knowledge and building on their practical experiences, archivists also develop a characteristic set of values about what they do, why they do it, and why it is important to do. This professional value system includes a commitment to ethical behavior as an archival professional, but it also goes well beyond ethics to include a broader set of beliefs. These values embody what archivists think is good and bad, proper and improper, and they provide the foundation for making decisions in countless professional situations. The values archivists share may be summarized in a number of propositions.

1. Archival records exist to be used and not merely saved for their own sake. Archivists are charged with the responsibility to preserve records, indeed to preserve them for the indefinite future. This responsibility requires that archivists employ certain safeguards to ensure that the records in their care will survive, including establishing and enforcing procedures that will guarantee the physical survival and integrity of the records. Connected to this is the responsibility to organize the records in a coherent and understandable way. All those activities are not carried out for their own sake, however; rather, they are necessary only because they serve the larger purpose of making the records usable. Archivists are not hoarders or packrats. They are preservers of evidence and information and, just as important, they are sharers of that evidence and information. The reasons for which records will be used are practically unlimited, from "pure" historical research to government and corporate accountability. Archivists see in the uses that their collections receive the real reason for keeping them
in the first place and for lavishing their time and professional attention on them. The public at large may equate archival work merely with preserving records; for archivists, however, preservation is always done for a purpose, and that purpose is use.

2. Some records ought to be preserved long term, even after their immediate usefulness has passed. Archivists take a long view of the usefulness of information. This perspective is probably even more important in the contemporary era, with its emphasis on speed, change, and instant gratification, an age in which computer specialists speak of “archiving” records—meaning that they might keep them for as long as six months. Archivists accept the value of preserving records into a longer future, well beyond the limit of their own careers. They commit themselves to that care and maintenance, even though they may not be able to predict, much less control, the use those records will receive in the future. Nevertheless, archivists’ role as preservers of evidence and information is a particularly important responsibility in our modern age of ephemeral media. At the same time, archivists balance preservation with other responsibilities. They approach the universe of documentation with the assumption that everything will not be saved. They are, then, destroyers as well as keepers, although they destroy records in a controlled and careful manner. Expanding digital memory will not change this reality, especially as the fear of being swamped by information continues to grow. One conservative estimate suggests that about “800 MB of recorded information is produced per person [in the entire world] each year. It would take about 30 feet of books to store the equivalent of 800 MB of information on paper.” Obviously, with this growth rate, archivists will continue to balance preservation and destruction and will adopt more competent approaches to selection.

3. Archival records ought to be preserved as completely and coherently as possible, with critical information about context and connections preserved. Archivists work toward this goal actively, helping destroy records that do not have any ongoing significance; in large measure, this is a “forest-and-trees” problem, ensuring that the forest of meaning will become visible through selective clearing of some of the trees. Still, for those records that will be chosen for survival, archivists believe that they ought to be preserved as fully and as
carefully as possible, without gaps or omissions, either deliberate or inadvertent. What is more, archivists understand the value of making their selection choices on the basis of a reasoned, articulated set of criteria rather than on whim or on vague, intuitive feelings about what distinguishes informative records from less valuable ones. With the shift of large portions of the information professions to the idea of "content management," the business of preserving records in a manner that maintains their integrity becomes both more important and more difficult, and archivists have to relate their objectives to the new demands of the digital era.26

4. Archival records ought to be organized properly and in a timely way so they can be used. Every archives has a backlog of work, a portion of its holdings that its staff has not quite gotten around to yet. In any archives that continues to grow—and growth is necessary and healthy in virtually every repository—a backlog is inevitable. That condition notwithstanding, archivists remain committed to the value of organizing their collections, if only at an aggregate level, as quickly as possible so the information in them can be understood and used. The archivist approaches collections in a manner that refines them progressively, organizing all holdings in a summary way before
treating any single collection in detail. What is more, archivists believe implicitly in the value of sharing knowledge about the materials they hold. Some information in records may have to be guarded, but archivists believe that information about records should always be shared. Archivists seldom value secrecy about their holdings, recognizing instead the responsibility to spread the word about what they have and welcoming those who desire to study it. At the same time, archivists must be careful that this principle of timely processing and access does not lessen commitments to other responsibilities.

5. Sensitive information and information given in situations presumed to be private should be protected from use as long as that sensitivity remains. The belief that records exist to be taken advantage of does not imply that archivists should disregard legitimate concerns for the rights of privacy and confidentiality. In fact, archivists are frequently in the forefront of protecting these rights by restricting the use that their collections may receive. Archivists are committed to balancing the maximum use of records with the necessity of safeguarding confidential information. They take this responsibility seriously, and they place a positive value on doing so fairly and consistently. In an age of increasing concerns about personal privacy, especially in matters of national security, it is critical that archivists hold to administering their collections in a way that protects privacy but that ensures that records are not unfairly restricted.

The society in which contemporary archivists live and work may challenge this value. Controversial government legislation, corporate misconduct, and media attention have changed forever the world of archivists, complicating matters related to sensitive information and privacy. The Internet, cable television, and other factors have created both new threats and opportunities for archivists. While they can now make information about their holdings more quickly and more widely available, archivists must also be more sensitive to potential breaches of privacy and to the difficulties of balancing personal privacy and the greater public good. A generation ago, archivists might have been able to approach such matters by posting notices in their reading rooms and distributing policies to their researchers. Today, archivists are working collectively through their professional associations and other venues to change laws and public policy threatening
time merely reflecting on them for their own sake. Rather, archivists constantly apply their knowledge and values to particular situations in particular archival collections. An archivist knows and values certain things, but what does an archivist actually do? One may identify larger intellectual concerns for archivists, but those archivists still live in the real world in which there is work to be done, collections to be acquired and organized, and users to be served. The archivist’s perspective is important because it helps archivists do certain things. A consideration of the archivist’s task, the duties and responsibilities archivists face as professionals, provides additional understanding of what archives and manuscripts are all about.