

**Politely lauded and discreetly ignored:  
University Archives 1960-2001**

Presented to the Association of Canadian Archivists Conference  
Vancouver, B.C.  
May 23, 2002

**Garron Wells**  
©2002

## **“Politely lauded and discreetly ignored”: University archives 1960-2001**

Universities in Canada have been and continue to be predominantly publicly funded institutions. As such they have traditionally viewed their responsibilities for accountability to be focussed on reporting performance indicators, expenditures of public funds, student assessment and accreditation to their government masters. In 1993, the Ontario Task Force on University Accountability acknowledged that in addition to these traditional areas of accountability, the public, the provincial government as well as members of the university community were demanding a greater level of responsiveness from universities including social and cultural leadership and evidence of sound management.<sup>1</sup> The Task Force, composed of 12 representatives from Ontario universities found that even though it felt universities already made a great deal of information on their activities publicly available, society still viewed them as "very mysterious places". Even their own faculty, staff and students felt that too much business was being conducted in secrecy. However, they agreed that academic freedom and institutional autonomy, those two pillars of higher education, were not incompatible with greater accountability. Improved transparency of their operations could be achieved through an understandable framework and processes that were readily open and accessible to stakeholders. They concluded "universities must place a higher priority on explaining what they do and how they go about doing it."<sup>2</sup> For universities explaining what they do and how they go about doing it can be accomplished through the adoption of best practices for the management of their institutional records. As Jane Parkinson states in her 1993 MAS thesis "Records are an important instrument of the account that fulfills accountability and on which knowledge and evaluation of the performance...can be made."<sup>3</sup>

This presentation will provide an historical overview of the management of university records in 55 public universities across Canada. In an attempt to compare 'apples' with

---

<sup>1</sup> *University accountability: a strengthened framework. Report of the task force on university accountability.* Ontario: Task force on university accountability. May 1993, p. 11-12

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33

<sup>3</sup> Jane Parkinson, *Accountability in archival science.* MAS thesis, 1993. University of British Columbia.

'apples' I eliminated institutions of applied arts and sciences, private institutions (of which there are few in Canada) and affiliated colleges.

Studies of Canadian university archives programs date back to the mid 1960's when the Society of American Archivists compiled its first directory of college and university archives in Canada and the United States. Later on, the University and Colleges Special Interest section of the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) conducted four statistical surveys from the 1970's to the 1990's, and again more recently in 2001. Unfortunately the data gathered varied from survey to survey making it difficult to track changes. And none of these surveys explored the reasons why programs were or were not developed. Over the past year I have attempted to gather quantitative as well as qualitative data on the degree to which universities in Canada have devoted resources to the management and preservation of their institutional records. In an attempt to analyze the wide variety of different archives in universities that have emerged over the past forty years, I have categorized university archives into four broad groupings:

Group A: universities which have a definable administrative unit designated as the official repository of the host's institutional records staffed by at least one full time professional archivist with the title University Archivist who carries out the day to day operations. It may also acquire the private records of individuals and organizations relating to the history of the institution.

Group B: universities with an official repository for the preservation of the host's institutional records that is part of a larger administrative unit that also has responsibility for non-host archives, such as an "Archives and Special Collections" department. Professional archivists have responsibilities divided between the host's records and external collections.

Group C: universities with no designated official repository for the host's institutional records; but there may be an administrative area usually in the Library with informal or ad hoc activities related to the collection and preservation of the host's records. Usually staffed by non-archivists (librarian or clerical staff).

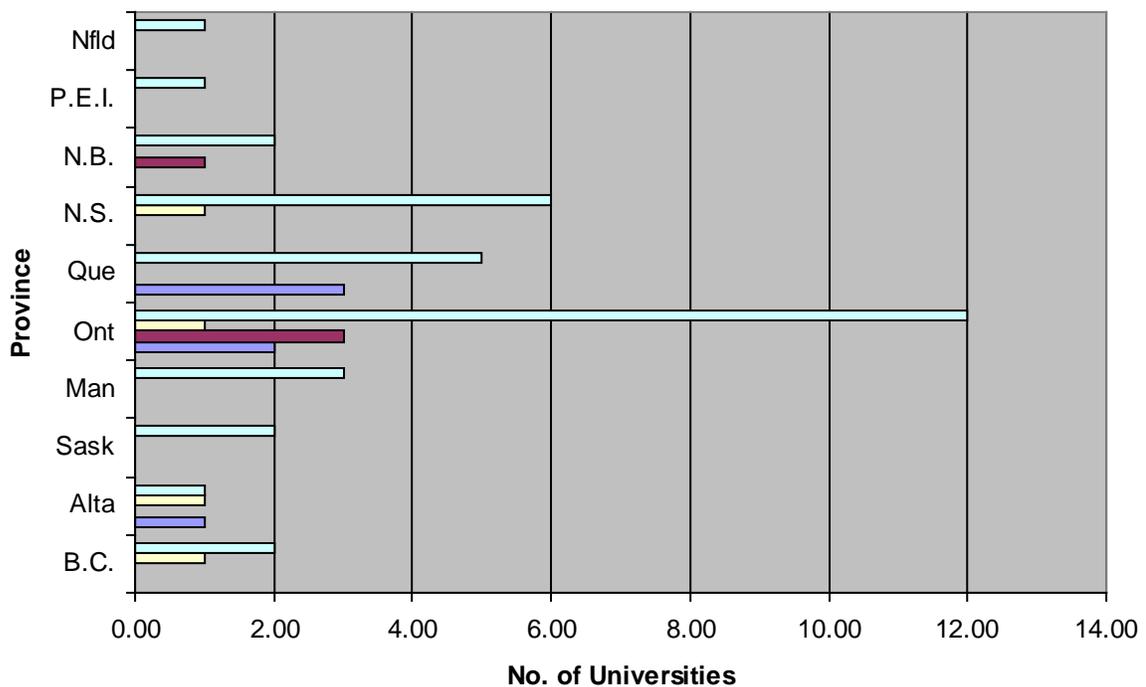
Group D: universities with no activities related to the preservation of the host's institutional records. In such institutions any permanently valuable records may still be in the offices of origin.

These groups are essentially a ranking of programs. A university which devotes resources exclusively to the management of its permanent value records as indicated by Group A is taking greater responsibility for its institutional memory, and has a higher level of accountability to its stakeholders and taxpayers. Those institutions in Groups B and C still feel that their administrative records are less important than external archival collections because they do not directly support academic programs. Group B institutions have acknowledged some responsibility for their institutional records by designating an existing facility as the repository. However, in truth the distraction of resources to the often-higher profile non-institutional “special collections” frequently undermines any success in university records preservation and relegates them to the status of ‘collection’ usually within the Library. Group C universities are really only slightly better than universities with no official repository in Group D since the holdings are so sparse and poorly serviced as to render them of little use for accountability purposes.

#### Up to 1969

Through out the 1960’s universities across Canada experienced an unprecedented period of growth. Major changes both in the number and size of institutions had resulted from an infusion of funds from all levels of government to accommodate enrolment demands from the post war generation of baby boomers. In addition Canada had celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of confederation in 1967 which saw an increased national conscientiousness and pride in our country’s heritage. It was in this environment that a few universities saw value in their own documentary heritage. Of the 49 universities at the end of 1969, only six fell into Group A: one in Alberta, two in Ontario, and three in Quebec.

## Categories as of 1969



The first was McGill where Alan Ridge was appointed University Archivist in 1962. With the establishment of the McGill University Archives whose mandate was exclusively university records and included activities in records management, it is apparent that it was possible to establish 40 years ago, what is today still considered an 'ideal' program. The enlightened approach of Principal James in hiring Alan Ridge, a British trained archivist recruited directly from England to manage the university's records from creation to final disposition owes some debt to John Archer, former provincial archivist of Saskatchewan and at that time Chief Librarian for McGill. Archer does attribute the separation of the Archives from the Library as resulting from his influence and it seems likely that Principal James consulted him about the qualifications of a professional archivist. Laval and University of Montréal both established university archives which paralleled the McGill model with the University Archivist reporting to the Secretary General, an indication that the primary function of the Archives was considered to be administrative rather than academic. In Ontario, only two of 18 universities took the plunge. The University of Ottawa followed the McGill model in 1967 and created the position of university archivist within the Office

of Secretary General, rather than the Library. Like McGill, the position had responsibility for advising senior administrators on a records management program. At the end of the decade, Trent University President T.H.B. Symons spearheaded the establishment of a university archives as a first step towards developing a regional archives. The placement of the university archives administratively within the University Library echoed a practice that would come to dominate such programs in English speaking Canada.

In Western Canada, the University of Alberta Archives was established in 1968 largely as the result of plans for a commemorative history. On the recommendation of a University Archives Committee in 1963 President Johns agreed with the Chairman, Prof. L.G. Thomas, that a University Archives be established, but that its mandate not conflict with the collection policies of the new provincial archives. Over the next five years, this Committee assumed responsibility for the program, and confined itself to collecting "official and unofficial papers relating to the university and of the private papers of members of the university staff and of individuals with a close connection with the university."<sup>4</sup> By 1968, the need for a full time archivist had become a priority and James Parker was appointed U. of Alberta's first university archivist. At that time, the University Archives was established as a separate department reporting to the Chief Librarian. Within a year, the University's Board of Governors approved a policy statement on the University Archives that also included responsibilities for records management and which confined its mandate to the host's institutional records.<sup>5</sup> As well, the University Archives Committee was replaced by the Archives and Documents Committee, chaired by Dr. Lewis H. Thomas, a former Provincial Archivist of Saskatchewan and member of U. of A's faculty.<sup>6</sup>

### Groups B to D

Of the remaining 43 universities, 71% had no program what so ever, although, I'm quite sure many of them had inactive and potential archival records stored around their campus.

---

<sup>4</sup> UAA 69-123-230. Prof. L.G. Thomas to Hon. A. Holowach, Provincial Secretary, March 15, 1963

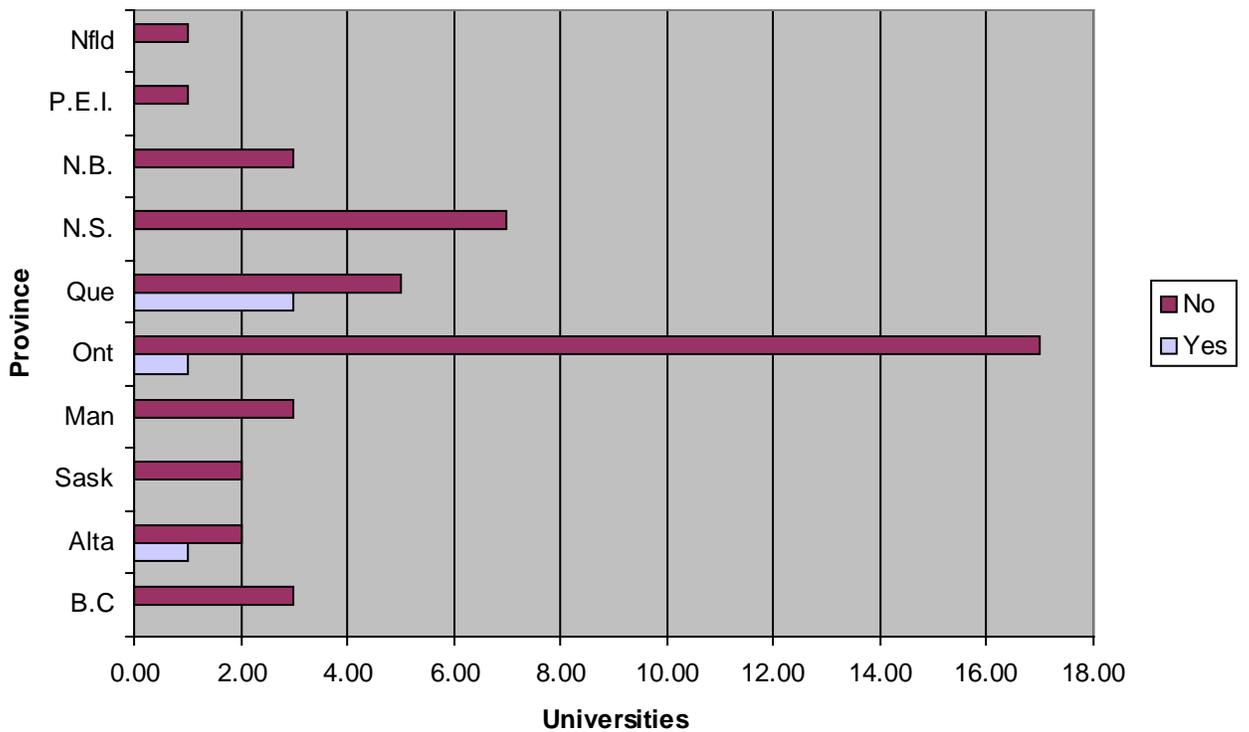
<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 85-91-321, Letter of Sept. 7, 1971 John Nicol, Secy of BOG to Prof. D. D. Campbell, Director of Extension.

<sup>6</sup> Kirk N. Lambrecht, "Records Management at Athabasca University and the University of Alberta". *ARMA Quarterly*, October 1980. P22

This is somewhat understandable since 19 (or 56%) institutions were established after World War II.

A small percentage, 16% can be grouped as B and C types of programs. These types of programs were established at both new universities and older institutions. At Simon Fraser, for example, the Chief Librarian held the title of university archivist and assigned whatever staff was available to manage the archives. Queen's University appointed a former journalist as archivist in 1960 to manage the growing collection of private political and literary papers, and it wasn't until 1967 that John Archer was appointed to the part-time post of University Archivist. At the University of Toronto, both the corporation as well as one federated university established archives programs. The University of Toronto Archives had one existing staff member, usually a librarian, appointed to the position of University Archivist within the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Trinity College appointed retired provincial archivist, George Spragge, on a part-time basis reporting to the Provost.

### Records Management as of 1969



By the end of the 1960's records management was a function in five of the six universities in Group A. As we have seen, this element of what today we realize is essential to the success of any corporate archives, was still a relatively new feature of information management in post world war Canada. It was also a feature of provincial and national governments, a characteristic that would not have gone unnoticed by many universities (especially in Ontario) who were struggling to attain autonomy after decades of political interference. Thus by the end of the 1960's interest in managing university corporate records was still very much in the formative stage. The majority of the six institutions that did establish programs to manage the host's records laid sound foundations for both archives and records management, developed policies for official administrative approval, appointed professional archivists, and sought to separate the Archives, if not physically, then administratively from the Library.

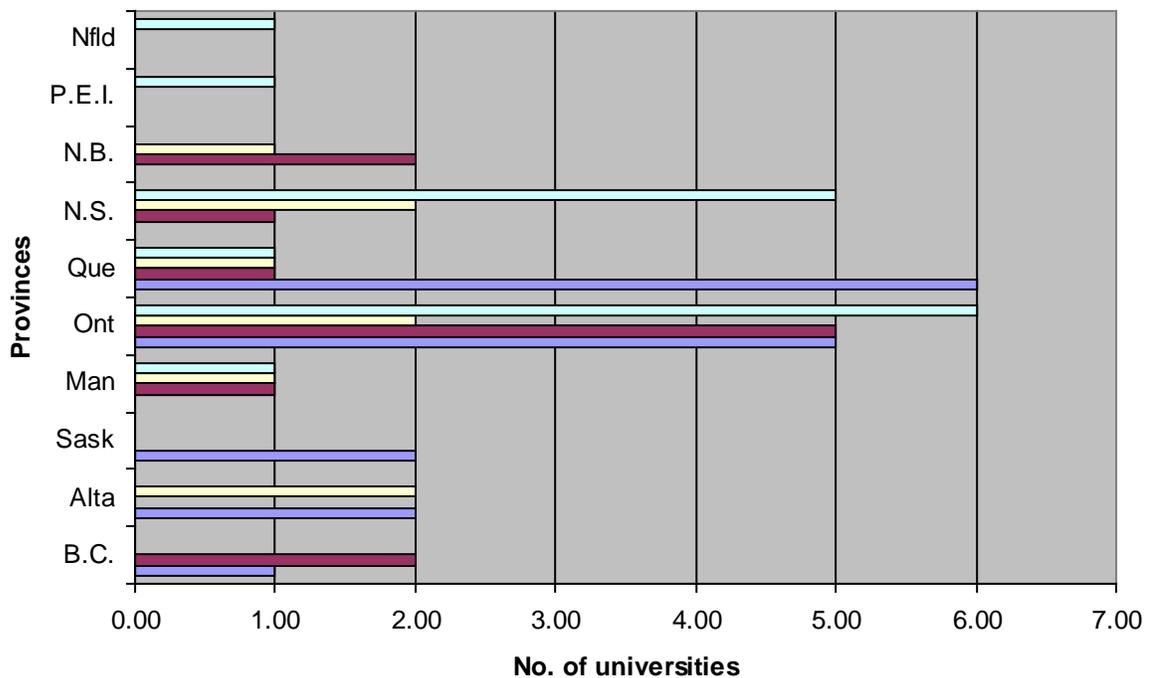
#### To the end of 1989

The next two decades were a period of expansion and maturing among Canadian university archives, as it was with Canadian archives in general. Canadian archives were brought to the forefront with the release of the Symons report in 1976 and the Wilson report in 1980. Both reports saw a leadership role for universities in both archives management and training of professionals. With the establishment of more archival programs staffed by professional archivists, universities became the second largest employers next to provincial and federal governments.<sup>7</sup> By the mid 1970's university archivists were co-operating in the conducting of institutional surveys, developing standards, researching and writing articles on the Canadian university archives experience.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Canadian Archives. Report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada by the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives* (1980) p. 32. Table 1 Categories of Canadian archives, 1978 lists at total of 59 "paid archivist" at 43 educational institutions.

## Categories as of 1989



By the end of the decade, 16 institutions had archives programs in Group A, nearly triple the number in 1969. Of these institutions, seven had established new programs and four had improved existing programs. Interestingly, no evidence was traced that the report of the Commission on Canadian Studies chaired by Prof. T.H. B Symons entitled *To Know Ourselves* had any influence on this development. This conclusion is further reinforced in the federal Secretary of State report commissioned in 1980 entitled *Reflections on the Symons Report. The state of Canadian studies in 1980*. Of the 46 universities reviewed in this report, only McGill and Guelph reported on any activity in preserving their own university records. The University of Toronto ignored its own university archives, preferring instead to mention the sad state of the Vincent Massey personal papers at Massey College, a reference no doubt prompted by former president, Claude Bissell who was at that time writing his two volume biography of Massey. Even the author, James Page, ignores any discussion of the Symons recommendation regarding the role of the universities in preserving their own institutional records, instead focussing on developments in archives on the provincial and national scene.

In English speaking Canada improvements in program responsibilities may be more the result of the professionalization of archivists coupled with a perceived status of having a "university archives". In institutions where existing programs moved up from Group B and C categories, some credit must be given to the archivists who were able to influence administrators by providing solutions to record keeping challenges. At the University of Toronto Archives, some measure of independence from the Library had been achieved when it was designated a separate department reporting, not only to the new Director of the Fisher Rare Book Library but also to the Chair of the new Presidential Advisory Committee on Archives and Records Management. This development was largely the result of challenges facing registrars in the management of student records and the ability of the university archivist to recommend and implement concrete solutions. In Saskatchewan, both the University of Saskatchewan, and its former Regina campus, the newly designated University of Regina established archives programs modeled on the University of Alberta Archives. The provincial archives played a major role in encouraging and advising on the development of their archives programs. As a result these programs included both archives and records management components.

In the 1980's changes in legislation proved to be a major factor in the development of Quebec university archives programs. In 1982 the province was the first to pass its Access to Information and Protection of Personal Privacy act, followed in 1983 by the Archives Act. Both these laws included universities as public bodies and as such had a major impact on the development of university archives and records programs in the province. Universities were required to improve their record keeping systems through formal records management programs and reaffirmed the role of the university archives as an administrative function rather than an academic function. By the end of the 1980's only a small portion of institutions placed their university archives administratively within the Library. The majority instead reported to a senior administrator, usually the Secretary General. University archivists in Quebec, like their English speaking counterparts, became more active professionally. In 1977 they formed a Working Group within CREPUQ, <sup>8</sup>, the provincial council of heads of universities. Over the years they have studied the impact of legislation and regulations on management of university archives, preparation of standard retention

schedules, the development of policy frameworks for active, semi-active and inactive records and the impact of computerization.

#### Group B to D

While we can see measurable improvement in universities' commitments to preserving their corporate records through the 1980's, the fact remains that a full two thirds of institutions in Canada still considered these records to be a low priority. 19 of 52 institutions or 36% operated programs in which university records were only one of several areas of responsibility for the staff. The growth of institutions in categories B and C demonstrates that universities were not prepared to devote exclusive resources to the host's institutional records, preferring to establish programs where responsibilities included regional or subject based archives in support of academic programs. Indeed, one Ontario university in planning their archives policy stated that their large holdings of university archival material was "less significant for today's research than a collection emphasizing regional and local history".<sup>9</sup> Atlantic Canada was still a region where universities continued to ignore institutional archives. More than half of the universities in Nova Scotia had taken no action to preserve their university records even though many of these institutions were more than one hundred years old. And not one institution had a program that could be categorized as falling within Group A since all were either part of another library department or were informal programs with no full time staffing.

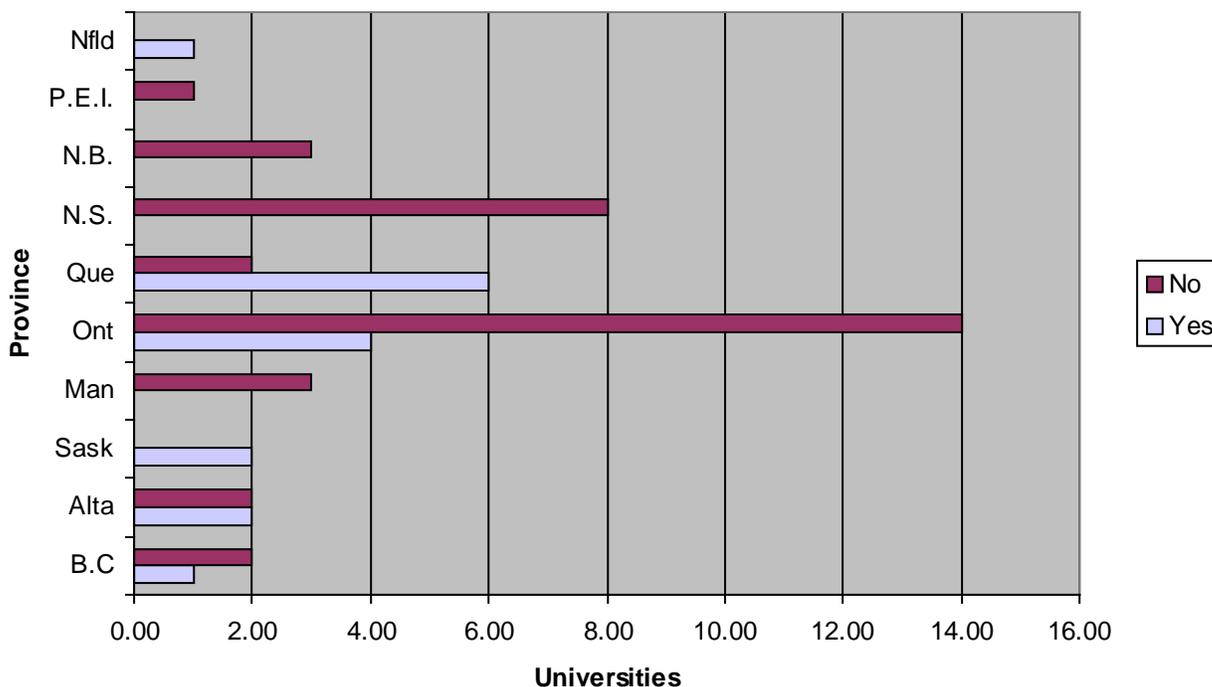
---

<sup>8</sup> Conférence des recteurs et des principaux des universités du Québec.

<sup>9</sup> University of Guelph, Archival and Special Collections, McLaughlin Library. RE1 UOG A07948 Box 6.

"Report of the subcommittee appointed by the Senate Library Committee to investigate Archives policy for the University of Guelph". P. 1

### Records Management as of 1989



The incidence of records management as an activity in university archives programs grew at a similar rate. With the exception of Ontario and Newfoundland, all of the university archives programs in Group A had some responsibilities relating to records management defined in their mandate or policies and procedures. Memorial University produced policies and procedures on records management, but had no official repository for its institutional archival records. In Ontario only four of the six university archives programs had taken additional steps to promote records management within their institution. This contrasts sharply with Quebec and three Western provinces where all Group A institutions had records management as a responsibility. A few Ontario universities did however make an attempt in the early 1980's to promote the advantages of records management. On the recommendation of Graham Hill, Librarian at McMaster University, the Council of Ontario Universities funded a study on the feasibility of an Ontario University Records Centre. The Committee, chaired by Hill and consisting of representatives from University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier and University of Toronto met in 1982 to

1. consider the desirability of establishing an Ontario Universities Records Centre for low cost centralized storage of university records.

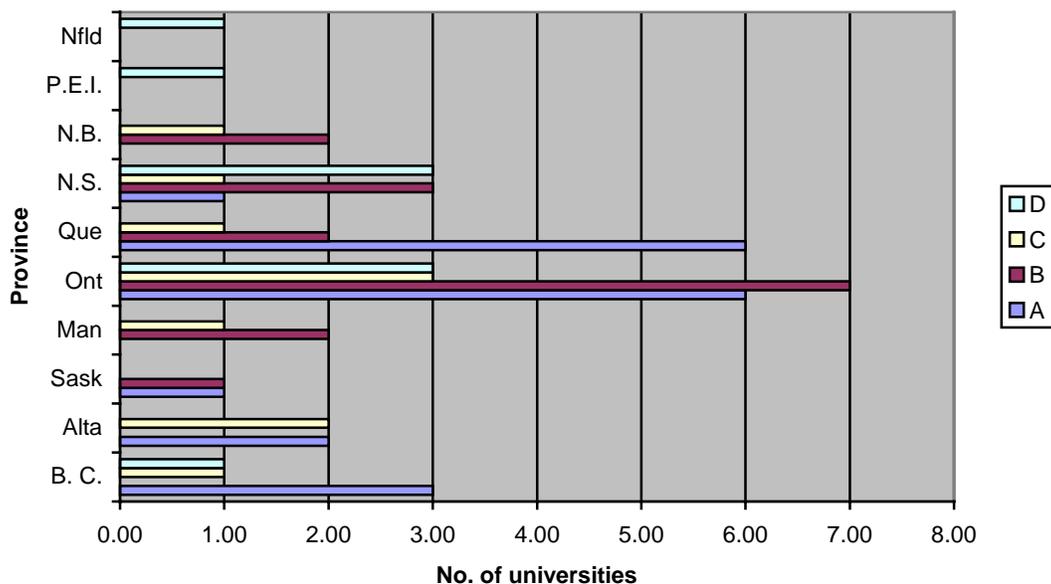
2. provide a feasibility assessment, including estimating of capital and operating costs of such a centre
3. consider the relationship of this idea to the notion of centralized depository library facilities.<sup>10</sup>

In their final report, the Committee concluded that "records management among institutions is at different stages of disorganization and that it appears to have a relatively low priority".<sup>11</sup> The co-operation required for the success of a records centre would only work if all the universities felt that they had a similar problem. And without that common concern, universities were not prepared to share the costs equally. As a result the idea of an Ontario Records Centre died.

To end of 2001

In the intervening twelve years, universities have had to cope with recession, government debt and restructuring, and corporate downsizing. But along with these challenges there was a shift in society's view towards how organizations manage information, especially personal information, with the rapid development of the Internet and computer technology. In many regions of the nation universities found themselves drawn into the legislative debate

**Categories as of 2001**

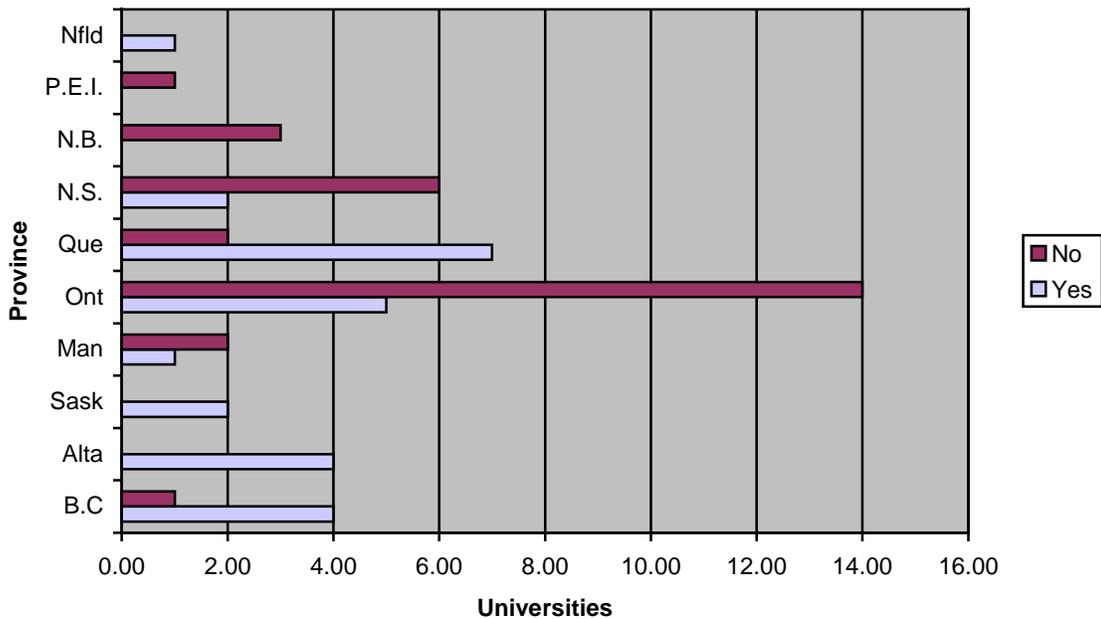


<sup>10</sup> University of Guelph Archives. RE1 UOG A1698. "Report of the Special Committee on the feasibility of an Ontario Universities' record centre to the Council of Ontario Universities. P. 1

on access to information and protection of privacy.

Since 1989 there has been only a small change in the number of universities devoting exclusive resources to their corporate archives. Of the four universities added to Group A, three upgraded existing programs, and one university, University of Western Ontario created a new program. Western had studied and debated the establishment of a university archives for over twenty years. The appointment of a new University president proved to be the necessary impetus and a university archivist was appointed in the spring of 2000. But the majority of universities in Canada, and these are mainly in English-speaking Canada, still promote multi-purpose programs sharing limited resources between the management of the host's records and external archival collections. The one optimistic sign is that universities with no university records activity have declined by nearly 50% over the past eleven years.

### Records Management as of 2001



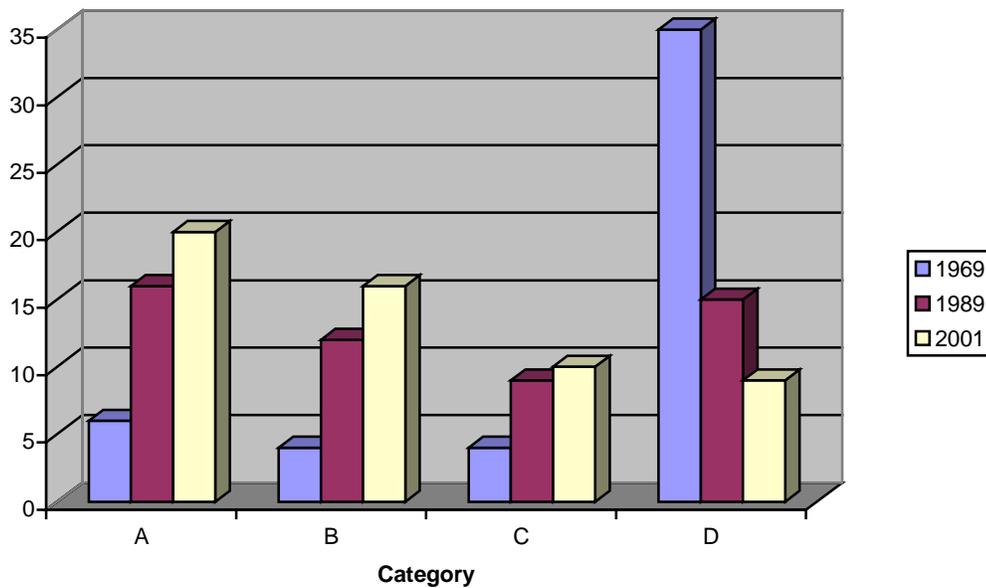
<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 3

Two factors I believe have contributed to the improvement in the scope of university archives programs: the greater awareness of the role of records management in the development of a comprehensive university archives and the inclusion of universities under provincial access to information and protection of privacy legislation. Since the late 1980's 9 of 10 provinces have passed this type of legislation and all but one province (Ontario) has included universities. As a result, universities have been forced to evaluate the way they manage their corporate information. In Western Canada this is most evident. With few exceptions, all of the major universities from Manitoba to British Columbia have either added or enhanced their programs with records management initiatives since the mid 1990s. Atlantic provinces have only recently brought universities under this new legislation and the full impact has yet to be determined. However at least one university has developed records management policies and still others have established new, albeit, limited archival programs. Ontario remains an anomaly in this picture. Fewer than one third of universities devote resources exclusively to the preservation of the hosts' institutional records. The reason for this is, I believe, a traditional belief that as autonomous bodies, they should be exempt from the same level of accountability as governments. Throughout the last two decades, universities in Ontario have deflected pressure from government and the public to bring their information management practices in line with the rest of the broader public sector. In the 1980's they were excluded from the Ontario FOI Act because they were deemed not to be a part of "government". In 1993, the government ignored the recommendation of the Ontario Task Force on University Accountability for yet another committee to monitor universities. Two years later, Ontario universities successfully fended off suggestions that they be brought under provincial FOI legislation by voluntarily agreeing to abide by their own "Guidelines for access to information and protection of privacy". Over the past eleven years, only one additional university has allocated resources to archives and records management. The majority of universities still operate multi-purpose programs with an emphasis on the acquisition of non-university archives. Almost all of these programs are a part of the Library where the acquisition of archival material is undertaken in support of academic programs rather than administrative accountability. As a result, Ontario universities lag far behind their Quebec and Western Canadian counterparts in the development of archives and records programs devoted to the host's institutional records.

Conclusion

Over the past forty years, universities have been slow to recognize the importance of their institutional records to their communities and to society. After World War II, increased awareness of the cultural value of their institutional records prompted a few universities to establish official repositories. However, since 1970, the majority of universities have chosen to establish multi-purpose archival programmes in which the preservation of university records frequently plays second fiddle to higher profile collections of private, non-institutional records. Quebec and parts of Western Canada recognized early on that records management would play a key role towards ensuring the success of an institutional archives programme. In other parts of Canada, especially Ontario, the traditional view that archives are only worth preserving if they support academic programmes has retarded the development of institutional repositories and as a result, the ability of these institutions to meet society's changing attitudes towards information management. Provincial legislation relating to access to information and personal privacy may prove to be catalyst that changes the landscape of long term information management at Canadian universities.

Canadian University Archives



Bibliography

Parkinson, Jane. *Accountability in archival science*. University of British Columbia. MAS Thesis, 1993

Consultative Group on Canadian Archives. *Canadian Archives: report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada*. 1980

Lambrecht, Kirk N. "Records management at Athabasca University and the University of Alberta". *ARMA Quarterly*, October 1980.

Ontario. Task force on university accountability. *University accountability: a strengthened framework. Report of the task force on university accountability*. May, 1993