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June 20, 1988

Dear Colleagues:

How many different uses can you think of for a Hollinger box? When the question was put to a workshop on managing creativity during the recent MAC meeting in Chicago, my workteam could think of only 56, but the winning team suggested over 80 uses. While I may have not contributed greatly to the creativity of my workteam, I still found the session quite stimulating. It emphasized the importance for all professional and managerial workers to break out of the thought processes that limit what we can contribute to ourselves, our institutions, and our profession.

Maintaining creativity can be a challenge to archivists because our work is highly process-oriented. We need to follow uniform formats and standards so that our appraisal, arrangement, description, and preservation work make the most efficient use of scarce resources and promote the access for the broadest group of users. Thus, technique and procedure, rather than personal creative inspiration, control a good portion of our work.

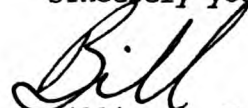
As a result, we may internally suppress creative ideas about our work, even in the many areas that do not required standardization. Nonetheless, creativity is absolutely essential to our individual and collective future health because it represents the means to add life to the profession by fostering new ideas and approaches. For example at the excellent MAC seminar entitled "In Defense of Archives," participants showed how creative thinking could lead to new justifications for archives that move beyond a product-oriented approach (e.g. we preserve and make accessible documents) to value- and purpose-oriented reasons for archives (e.g. we provide society with a heritage, with a past, and thus a way to distinguish the present from the future).

Essentially, creative thinking must be an individual, rather than a group, activity, and it is not amenable to systematization for delivery by institutions or organizations like MAC. The role for MAC is to draw out the creativity of its members for the benefit of the organization and the archival profession. MAC can accomplish this by continuing to provide an open forum for discussion of archival and professional problems.

At the same time, we must avoid the risk of exchanging the limits and narrowness of our institutions for similarly stifling professional controls. Instead, MAC should foster diverse, dissenting, evolving, and serendipitous viewpoints in program sessions, publications, and informal dialogues. Most fundamentally, MAC needs to encourage each archivist to think creatively about his/her work and to share those creative thoughts with the rest of us--even when they may seem a little absurd.

It is precisely its openness to creative thinking that has always made MAC a stimulating organization for me. I would appreciate hearing your thoughts as to how we may make both MAC and archival practice more creative.

Sincerely yours,


William J. Maher
President