Reference Services Review:
Archives and Records at Oxford University

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In 1999–2000, I attended Lincoln College, Oxford, graduating with a Master of Science in Economic and Social History. When I applied in 2022 to the Rutgers Master of Information program, I found that for my Oxford degree to count toward the program's waiver of the GRE requirement for students with a previous graduate degree, I would need to submit a transcript to a third-party foreign-degree verification service, which would confirm the equivalence of the Oxford MSc to an American master's, and convert my Oxford marks to an American GPA. I also discovered that Oxford's online system for transcripts could only process requests for students graduating in 2007 or later, with students graduating earlier referred back to their colleges.

I wrote, then, to the Lincoln College academic administrator, and found that my records were also too old to be in the College offices' working files, while the College archivist was on vacation. When she returned, however, she was able to locate my records quickly and pass them on to the academic administrator, who passed them on to the verification service. She provided me a copy as well—which happened to be the first look I'd had at my marks: two of "β + + +" and one of "β + ? + "—whatever that might mean. The verification service proved to be even more mystified than I was: they confirmed that my degree was equivalent to an American master's, but gave me a flat 2.0 GPA.

I knew UK universities had a reputation for tough grading, but still, this seemed at odds with the generally positive feedback I'd received from my instructors at the time. When I went looking, however, I wasn't able to find any concrete description of the Greek-letter marking system or what standard of work my marks might indicate; at some point after my time at Oxford, the University had switched to a 100-point

numerical system, but I was unable to find any information on how that newer system related to the older one in use during my time there.

I wrote to the History Faculty, requesting any information they might have on the conversion from Greek-letter grades to the numeric scale, or even general information on the standard of work implied by the different Greek letters; but they were unable to find anything in their records, referring me to the University's Degree Conferrals Office. The Degree Conferrals Office, in turn, after checking their own records and also contacting the Examination Schools, referred me back to my college; the Lincoln College archivist could only refer me to the University archives. Even the University archives were unable to find exactly what I was looking for, but eventually located one record among the papers of the Modern History Examiners from 1985, which discussed the Greek-letter marking system as it related to undergraduate examinations for the Final Honours Schools of Modern History with Modern Languages. The archivist further noted that they had no records from the Modern History Examiners after the 1985-1986 academic year—leaving me wondering where those records might be, if not with the History Faculty or the Examination Schools.

Proposed Analysis

In analyzing this series of records requests as archival reference interactions, I will be treating these various information access points—college and departmental offices, college archives, University archives—as aspects of one archival or recordkeeping system, and assessing them against best practices for remote reference drawn from Tibbo (1995) and Oestreicher (2020), as well as best practices for general archival reference from Oestreicher and for library reference from the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association (ALA, 2023). I will also draw on the study by Yakel & Bost (1994) of administrators' use of university

archives, which is perhaps a better model for my own information needs than the use of such records by a traditional researcher.

Yakel & Bost, following Weick (1976), observe that universities are loosely coupled systems, in which "information is created in many different administrative entities and not shared", and "entities may not be aware of exactly what information exists elsewhere" (Yakel & Bost, 1994, p. 599). In Yakel & Bost's vision, the archives are a potential collection point for this information, allowing the archivist a view of the organization that other actors lack, and making the archives a crucial reservoir of institutional memory (Yakel & Bost, 1994, p. 599, p. 612). In a formally decentralized institution like Oxford, where the residential colleges and even individual academic departments have considerably more autonomy than at most American universities, the problem is even more acute, and the presence of multiple separate archives limits the opportunity to collect it and the ability of any one archivist to have a synoptic overview. While parts of the Oxford archival system—particularly, as one might expect, the Lincoln College archives and the University archives—follow many of the best practices I identify, the ability of the system as a whole to do so is limited by the compartmentalized nature of the records and of archivists' access to them.

Best Practices

Oestreicher (2020) lists five attributes identified by the RUSA in [year] as necessary for good reference service: visibility/approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching, and follow-up. Trott & Schwartz (2014) analyze these attributes and find all of them applicable to remote or virtual reference, though requiring some modification for the virtual reference format. Though Trott & Schwartz proposed the development of specific standards for virtual reference—and the RUSA did issue such guidelines (ALA, 2017)—the latest RUSA general guidelines for reference and information service (ALA, 2023) make a point of collapsing the difference between

in-person and virtual reference, reformulating the desired attributes as inclusion, approachability, engagement, searching, evaluation, and closure.

In the archival space, Tibbo characterizes the archival remote reference interview and information delivery process as having four stages: "setting the tone, clarifying the question, delivering the information, and assessing service" (Tibbo, 1995, p. 298). Though these stages are chronological, it is possible to map them to the RUSA's attributes:

Tibbo	**RUSA**
setting the tone	inclusion,[1] approachability
clarifying the question	engagement, searching
delivering the information	searching, evaluation
assessing service	evaluation, closure

For the purposes of this analysis, I will follow Tibbo, and address best practices for each of Tibbo's four stages in sequence.

Setting the Tone. A common theme in analyses of requirements for providing good reference services, whether archival or library, remote or in person, is to "make people feel welcome" (Tibbo, 1995, p. 303) and establish a "welcoming" (Oestreicher, 2020, p. 40) or "welcoming and inclusive" environment (ALA, 2023, section 1).[2] Best practices for doing so in a remote setting, initially, include publishing contact email addresses (Tibbo, 1995) and encouraging the use of reference services via the institution's website (ALA, 2023). Once a request has been received, Tibbo recommends "a friendly, immediate response" (Tibbo, 1995, p. 303), possibly automated, to help users feel their requests are important, followed by a more personal response, possibly including a researcher registration form and information on institutional policies, including confidentiality. Oestreicher, similarly, noting the higher expectation of quick answers in a virtual environment,[3] suggests either acknowledging the user's inquiry

and giving them an expected timeframe for a more detailed response, or, if feasible, providing a short immediate answer along with an offer of more information later (Oestreicher, 2020, p. 46). Oestreicher also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a professional yet friendly and personal tone in email communications.

Clarifying the Question. As Tibbo notes, arguably the task of either the reference librarian or the reference archivist is to read the user's mind—and to do so, not to discover something the user knows, but to determine just what the user wants to know, but doesn't (Tibbo, 1995, p. 301). Experienced researchers often provide clearly articulated questions, and may also already know what files they wish to consult, while less experienced users may not know what they need at all (Oestreicher, 2020, p. 42). Tibbo and Oestreicher both recommend making finding aids available electronically, which can improve the quality of reference questions (Tibbo, 1995, p. 304), or even allow users to locate the records they need themselves, contacting the archive only for access (Oestreicher, 2020, p. 45). On the other hand, users who ask more specific questions may make those questions *too* specific, or too complex (Tibbo, 1995, p. 304). Regardless, the archivist must attempt to determine the real need behind the question. Tibbo observes that email allows the reference archivist to stop and think, without having to reply immediately, or to move on to the next question, as they would in a face-to-face interview. "The archivist needs to read the initial message, evaluate it, and develop fruitful questions from it" (Tibbo, 1995, p. 305).

Fruitful questions, according to Tibbo, range from open questions, best suited for the beginning of the interview, that encourage the user to provide broad answers, to neutral questions that direct the conversation while still allowing it to flow freely, to closed questions that elicit yes-or-no answers, and can potentially end the conversation, making such questions best suited for the end of the interview as the archivist's understanding of the user's needs is growing clear. Tibbo also recommends that the archivist check their understanding by summarizing it and repeating back to the user;

or as the RUSA guidelines put it, practice active listening by restating the user's question and having the user confirm their interpretation (ALA, 2023, section 3.6). The RUSA's search guidelines (ALA, 2023, section 4) also call for the same open-question, active-listening strategy to be used to elicit the user's input during the search process.

Delivering the Information. Tibbo does not address the process by which the reference archivist locates materials in which the user may be interested, moving directly from clarification to delivery. The RUSA's guidelines for effective search (ALA, 2023, section 4) are helpful here, with best practices focused on involving the user in the search process, beginning with determining what search strategies the user has already employed, continuing with inviting the user to contribute their own ideas (as noted above), and allowing the user the option of performing the search themselves with the library worker's help, or of observing and giving input while the library worker does the search. Tibbo's information delivery best practices are focused on ways the archive can make files available to the remote user, most of which are somewhat dated in detail (Tibbo, 1995, p. 306). The principle, however, of trying to save the user's time by delivering the files to them when possible, rather than requiring a visit to the archive, is still a good one. The RUSA guidelines additionally note the library worker's role as an information mediator, applying and helping the user apply information literacy skills to evaluate the identified information for accuracy, credibility, relevance, and so on (ALA, 2023, section 5).

Assessing Service. The archivist's responsibility, according to Tibbo, does not end with delivering information; the archivist's responsibility is to make sure the user's needs have been met (Tibbo, 1995, p. 306). An unsatisfied user may nonetheless feel that they have taken enough of the archivist's time; or a user may realize only after leaving the archives that they have other questions to ask. As a best practice, therefore, Tibbo recommends making an extra effort to confirm that the user is in fact satisfied, to reassure them that their questions are worth the archivist's and the institution's time,

and to ensure that they feel welcome to return—as well as to make clear that it would only be natural for them to have further questions later. The RUSA guidelines make similar points, and suggest additionally referring the user to other resources, both inside and outside the library (ALA, 2006, section 6). At the same time, the RUSA guidelines note the importance of managing user expectations—a less open-ended commitment than Tibbo's.

Analysis

Setting the Tone. While the Lincoln College archives had relatively little online presence, I was able to identify the college archivist and locate her email address via the college website without difficulty. I wrote during a break between terms, and so was not expecting an immediate response, but I did receive an out-of-office autoreply, and a personal response came almost as soon as possible after the archivist returned from vacation. The response was friendly and professional, and let me know that the archivist had been able to locate my file and pass it on to the college's academic administrator. I had mentioned in my request that I was applying to a library science and/or archival studies program, and as well as letting me know she had fulfilled my request, the archivist gave me her best wishes for my studies and offered a tour of the Lincoln College archives any time I found myself in Oxford. The response from University archives was equally quick, friendly and professional—even if it did lack the personal wishes and the offer of a tour. In short, I felt very much welcomed, and would not hesitate to consult either the college or University archives in the future; it's hard to imagine how the tone could have been better set.

Clarifying the Question. Yakel & Bost (1994) note that administrative users who regularly transfer files to the archives are among the archives' heaviest users, and that those users often have specific requests for documents they already know to have been deposited. My request to the Lincoln College archives for my transcript had very

much the character of this kind of administrative use, and required no clarification. My request to the University archives for information on the Greek-letter grading system, however, was less precise, requiring more of the mind-reading described by Tibbo. Nonetheless, the archivist who handled my request seems to have understood correctly what I was looking for, and was able to reply quickly without further discussion. It's hard to judge from this interaction what would have happened if I had been less clear or had made a more open-ended request, but I can't find any fault with the University archives' performance here.

I do note, though, even though I made no use of them myself, that the University archives' online finding aids (OU Archives, n.d.) are quite minimal. The archives appear to be still primarily using paper finding aids, only some of which have been digitized, and even though the archives are organizationally part of the Bodleian Library, the archives' collections do not seem to be included in the Bodleian's Primo online discovery system (Bodleian Libraries, n.d.). It is unclear whether the archivists themselves have access to anything more modern, but in any case, the lack of a contemporary online finding aid search system certainly hampers remote users.

Delivering the Information. Given that the University archives did not even hold records from the time I was interested in—the transition from Greek-letter to numeric marks, probably in the first decade of the twenty-first century—it is hard for me to fault the University archivist's search strategy; and the actual delivery of digitized documents was quick and flawless, evidence of the advancement in technology since Tibbo's time. Yakel & Bost (1994) observe that administrative users prioritize high precision over high recall—that is, they prefer a narrow selection of documents likely to be highly relevant, over a broader selection of documents that might be more complete; but that this also leaves the users with the nagging feeling that if they were to examine the records themselves, they might find something the archivist had missed (Yakel & Bost, 1994, p. 612). On the one hand, the University

archives' search seems to me to have been as comprehensive as I could hope for, the archivist having searched multiple fonds, including some it likely would not have occurred to me to search. On the other hand, I can't help but wonder what happened to the Modern History Examiners' records from 1987 to the present, and why neither the History department, nor the Student Records office, nor, apparently, the Examination Schools, were able to locate anything relevant; and I can't help but believe that if I were allowed to rummage through their document management systems and backup files myself, I might find something.

Still, even if I were somehow allowed access to all those internal records, I can easily imagine that the research required to write a proper, well-supported history of the transition from Greek letters to numeric grades, even in preliminary form might take months, and as Yakel & Bost note, administrative users are also pressed for time.

Assessing Service. While neither the Lincoln College archivist nor the University archivist explicitly asked whether my needs had been met, my transcript request was simple enough that it was clear they had been; while on the Greek-letter marking question, the University archivist made it clear that she knew that she had not been able to find exactly what I was asking for. I did feel, as Tibbo (1995) suggests I might, that I might have taken enough of their time already; but I also felt that, at least as regards the archives available to them, they had likely done the best they could, and told them as much. On balance—and noting the RUSA advice to manage user expectations, something that I think the University archivist did well in informing me of the limits of the period covered by their holdings—I think both did well here, as well. The non-archivists, I think, those who responded to me from the History Faculty and the Degree Conferrals Office, fare less well; both left me feeling that to question them further would also be to question their competence or the sincerity of their answers in the negative—an impression which I did not receive from either archivist.

Recommendations

Most of the one record the University archivist was able to find consisted of admonitions to examiners to "avoid treble +s and –s" and "'fancy' marks such as βββα or β?γ", but it did include a section relating the Greek letter scale to the Oxford degree classes of "1st Class", "2nd Class", "3rd Class", and "Pass", which at least seemed to confirm my intuition that my work was, if not absolutely outstanding, at least of high 2nd-Class degree quality, perhaps roughly at the level of an American B+ to A–. I sent this to the verification service, which replied with one snippy message leaving me with the impression that they hadn't been able to tell β from γ, and then stopped returning my correspondence. I doubt very much that it made a difference to my Rutgers application; the transcript itself accomplished the main task of confirming that I already had a graduate degree, saving me the trouble of re-taking the GRE. Still, it was good to know my own assessment of my work at Oxford hadn't been far off, and in that sense, my information needs were met—in fact, the University Archives met a need I hadn't really known I had.

Where "soft skills" are concerned, I found both the Lincoln College archives and the University archives to provide excellent service, and it is not clear that there is any need for improvement. That said, my interactions were sufficiently brief and transactional that I did not have an opportunity to really evaluate the reference interview skills of either of the archivists that worked on my requests. It is also worth observing that I came to them as a relatively well-informed user, having prepared my requests as diligently as I could—and also as one presenting little difficulty from an inclusion or accessibility perspective, being white, middle-class, well-educated, and an academic library employee, applying to a library and archives program, about as narrow a cultural gap as I could ask them to bridge.

The recommendation I would most like to make is for a change beyond the control of any of the individuals or organizations I worked with—that the University of

Oxford centralize its archives, or at least introduce a centralized records management system. This would limit the number of referrals to different organizations faced by any one user, and also potentially improve both management of and access to records such as those of the History faculty post-1987 that currently seem not to be under the purview of professional records managers or archivists. Doing so would undoubtedly be an expensive and difficult proposition—and most likely a politically impossible one, at least to the extent that it would take away the academic departments' and residential colleges' control over their own records; and to simply transfer the various college archives' holdings to the University archives might well mean a worse standard of service for those collections. It seems possible, though, that a post-custodial approach to centralizing the description and discovery of University-wide records, if not their physical management, might be both possible and fruitful—though still expensive and difficult, and as Tough (2004) observes, potentially bringing with it its own political problems, where the interests of archivists differ from those of records managers or records creators.

Failing that, the next most obvious improvement would be to modernize and put online the finding aids of both the University archives and the individual college archives. This would still save the experienced researcher effort, while making the finding aids available to administrative users might go some way toward minimizing the sense that there must be more in the archive than the archivists themselves are able to find in the time allocated to an administrative search—although it would still not answer the question of what happened to the digital-era records of the Modern History Examiners.

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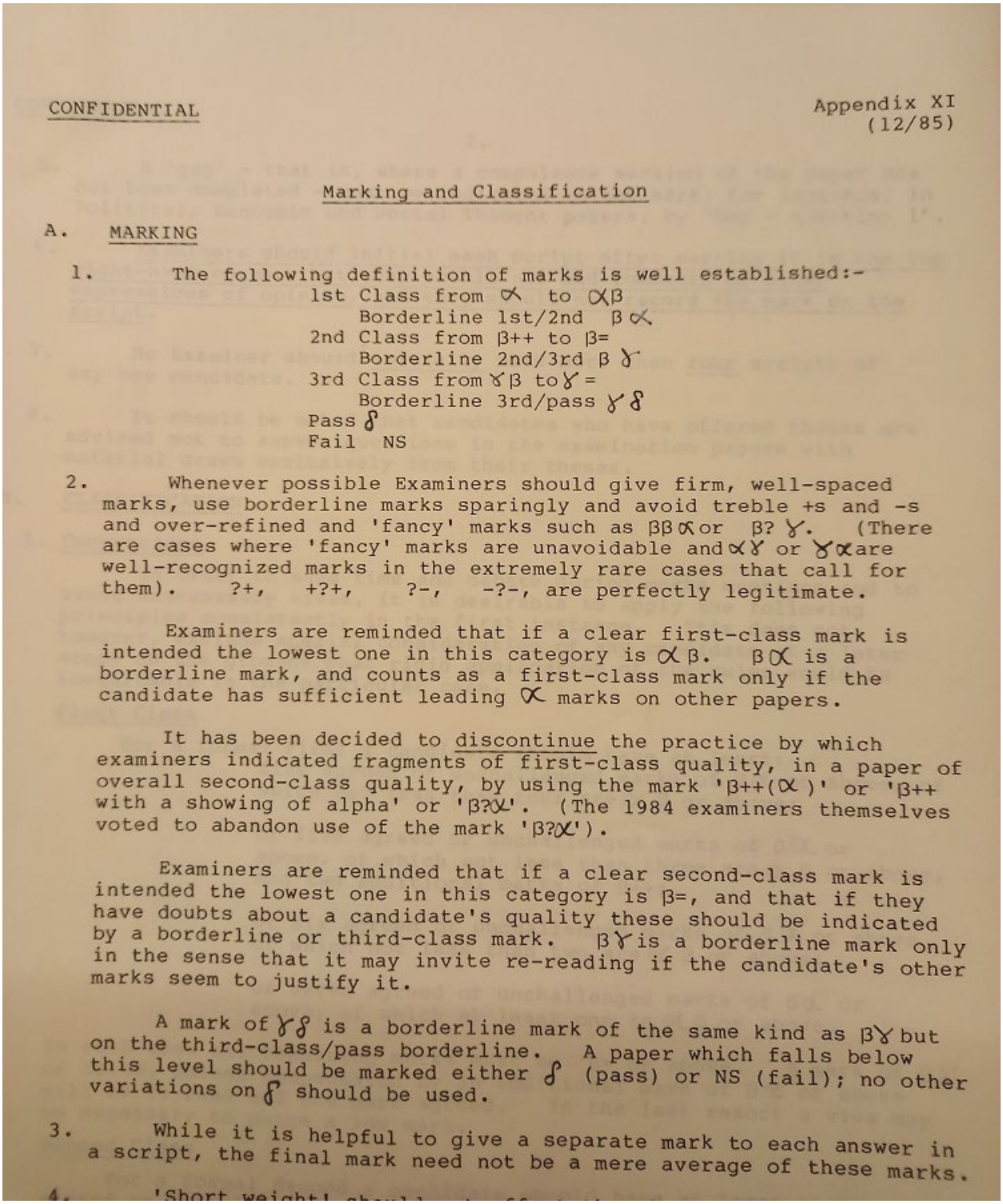
Appendix: Marking and Classification, Dec. 1985



CONFIDENTIAL

Appendix XI
(12/85)

Marking and Classification

A. MARKING

1. The following definition of marks is well established:-

1st Class from α to αβ
Borderline 1st/2nd β α
2nd Class from β++ to β=
Borderline 2nd/3rd β γ
3rd Class from γβ to γ=
Borderline 3rd/pass γδ
Pass δ
Fail NS

2. Whenever possible Examiners should give firm, well-spaced marks, use borderline marks sparingly and avoid treble +s and -s and over-refined and 'fancy' marks such as ββα or β?γ. (There are cases where 'fancy' marks are unavoidable and αγ or γα are well-recognized marks in the extremely rare cases that call for them). ?+, +?+, ?-, -?-, are perfectly legitimate.

Examiners are reminded that if a clear first-class mark is intended the lowest one in this category is αβ. βα is a borderline mark, and counts as a first-class mark only if the candidate has sufficient leading α marks on other papers.

It has been decided to discontinue the practice by which examiners indicated fragments of first-class quality, in a paper of overall second-class quality, by using the mark 'β++(α)' or 'β++ with a showing of alpha' or 'β?α'. (The 1984 examiners themselves voted to abandon use of the mark 'β?α').

Examiners are reminded that if a clear second-class mark is intended the lowest one in this category is β=, and that if they have doubts about a candidate's quality these should be indicated by a borderline or third-class mark. βγ is a borderline mark only in the sense that it may invite re-reading if the candidate's other marks seem to justify it.

A mark of γδ is a borderline mark of the same kind as βγ but on the third-class/pass borderline. A paper which falls below this level should be marked either δ (pass) or NS (fail); no other variations on δ should be used.

3. While it is helpful to give a separate mark to each answer in a script, the final mark need not be a mere average of these marks.

4. 'Short weight'

Notes

[1] "Inclusion" as defined by the RUSA guidelines includes aspects such as equity, accessibility, and cultural humility (ALA, 2023). Strictly speaking, inclusion should be considered throughout the reference process, from the design of reference services, to their promotion, to the mediums of communication through which reference is offered and the reference archivist's communication style during the reference interaction. In Tibbo's terms, however, it makes sense to consider it as part of the tone that is to be set.

[2] Interestingly—oddly, even—Duff et al. (2013) do not appear to consider this aspect of reference service at all in their model of "Archival Reference Knowledge", except perhaps insofar as some of the skills it requires would also be those required for good communication in a reference interview setting, which they address from both the user's (p. 82) and archivist's (p. 84) points of view. Possibly this is a limitation of their survey population, at least on the users' side (the sampling methodology does not seem likely to reach many potential archival users who felt unwelcome and so became non-users), but it is less clear why it does not appear in the archival education materials they examined or in the SAA survey responses they analyzed.

[3] As Tibbo says: "If clients do not hear from the archivist for days, they might as well have used the postal service to mail their letters" (Tibbo, 1995, p. 303).