Undergraduates in the Archives: The UM Experience. “Let’s Break Some Rules”

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Introduction:

I’m here to suggest we should deliberately break the rules and ignore many of the principles we were taught as archivists. Over the past 10 years, special collections at the UM have undergone a dramatic transformation. While it is not our purpose today to discuss organization charts and philosophies of change management, we do want to share some of the outcomes that fundamentally changed our capacity to engage students while at the same time helping us explore new ways to introduce archives and special collection to undergraduates.

I will be speaking from my perspective as the director of a moderately large special collections department. At UM we have a staff of around 20 professionals spread over six major collection areas and functional operations. I will speak first, since most of you are not really too keen on my thoughts as an administrator. Next we will be hearing from our staff person who is responsible for leading our instructional efforts, Laura Cleary. Laura will be focusing on the ways we have moved beyond the traditional curriculum to position the archives at the center of conversations about social justice that are occurring on many campuses today. Finally, our star student Kendall will describe her evolution from an undergraduate who was introduced to special collections in a class, to someone who started working for us as an undergraduate, to her current status as a graduate student pursuing dual masters degrees and aiming to join the archives profession soon.

Administrative Perspective.

1. As a special collections director in a large academic institution I am often reminded that our archives and special collections do not exist in a vacuum. We operate in a rapidly changing education context, where many of the old assumptions about the role and purpose of our collections no longer are valid.
2. Although all of us in this room may think it is patently obvious why archives are worth keeping, many academic administrators, faculty members, students, and resource allocators (in our case state government budget officials and legislators) are not so aware of the benefits our collections provide. We operate in an environment where the vague concept that what we do is “for the greater good” is no longer a compelling argument for why resources should be expended on archival programs in an academic library.
3. Yes, we can always pull out the traditional argument that there are legal and procedural obligations to maintain the university’s records, but this narrow definition of why we exist really marginalizes us to merely supporting the legal, financial and business services functions within the institution, while ignoring much better reasons.
4. I’m also finding it less easy to explain that our collections support advanced scholarship, since the modest number of doctoral dissertations and citations in scholarly articles and monographs generated from use of our collections really cannot justify the huge cost we expend in staff, storage and services. Keeping track of these numbers is important, but they are not likely to impress someone looking at us through a green eye shade. We will never abandon our commitment to history, literary studies and other disciplines for whom the archives is the place to do research. But let’s be brutally honest, the humanities are not a growth industry - on our campus the numbers of majors in those disciplines are declining - we cannot survive if our sole justification is in support of those studies.
5. There was a time when institutional prestige was one of the reasons why colleges and universities sought to acquire high-profile collections. This aspect of one upmanship survives to some extent - I’m thinking of a certain research center in the Lone Star State that once flaunted its prowess in beating other institutions in snagging the papers of major authors - but few educational institutions have had the means to aggressively build archives and special collections programs the same way they have invested in sports as a way to call attention to themselves. It is a luxury few of us can afford.
6. So if our purpose is not to show off our treasures to impress others, or any of the other justifications I have suggested that are too limiting, what do I tell my bosses when they ask why I’m asking to increase the budget of the archives?
7. For me, the most compelling argument is that special collections are in the mainstream of the teaching and learning mission of the university. In an era when some are calling for institutions to demonstrate measurable outcomes from the substantial investment in a college degree, we archivists must be able to show that we are part of the solution and not yet another reason for spiraling costs in higher education.
8. For us at Maryland, we see this as an opportunity to position the archives in at the heart of a renewed emphasis on enriching the experience and learning outcomes of undergraduates. Many college-level instructors have made the move to experiential learning as a means to better instill key concepts that the traditional lecture and textbook seem increasingly unable to deliver. In encouraging students to delve into the actual stuff of our collections, we are shifting away from seeking to train the next generation of academic historians in the ways of primary research, and more toward helping students, regardless of their disciplinary major, develop skills of critical reasoning and analysis that will serve them well in whatever career they pursue. Rather than being the laboratories of history, I think our future as archives is as the training ground of the mind.
9. Higher education also is about creating informed citizens. As you will hear from Laura Cleary, the role of the archives as the repository of reliable, and verifiable information has become increasingly important in a time of fake news and maliable definitions of what is fact. Today’s student needs to be able to sort through the fog of conflicting data to make informed judgments about the issues that will determine the fate of our country. This is not just about understanding why something happened in the past, it’s also about equipping our students to deal with the present and plan for the future.
10. So I also see special collections to be in moving away from a somewhat unrealistic attitude of neutrality and distance from the conclusions drawn from our collections. Many institutions of higher education are adopting more aggressive stances toward teaching social justice in the face of a national debate about the unresolved issues of racism, sexism, and economic inequality. Many of our colleges and universities are on the forefront of a national conversation about these issues, and our archives are uniquely placed to participate actively rather than reactively.
11. Perhaps it is naive to see our collections as the “arsenal of democracy,” but I think our survival depends on repositioning ourselves as part of the major changes in higher education. Students learn differently today and we archivists cannot expect them to react to our collections the same way that researchers did a generation ago.
12. As you will soon hear, the job of the archivist has moved away from an exclusive focus on describing, preserving and managing collections. Increasingly we are teaching, guiding students to explore the richness of our collections, sometime even in ways that break the rules generally enforced in our reading rooms. We are trying to find ways to not let our rules and regulations get in the way of learning, to use online environments and adopt the ways today’s students communicate to show that our collections are relevant and essential.
13. Sometimes this means reexamining our procedures. One of the changes we made was to create an instructional space that serves as what I call the “messy reading room.” It’s chaos: Students talk loudly in groups, open multiple boxes at a time, take more than one folder out of a box, take pictures without filling out forms, generally ignore archival protocols except where their actions might endanger the collection. We allow this because we do not want the rules to get in the way of the experience of learning. In the past, we emphasized the process of doing research. How to use a finding aid, how to request a box, what you could and could not do in the reading room. For me this is echoed the critique by Greene & Meissner - we let the process get in the way of the product, namely teaching and learning. At the undergraduate level we should be opening minds to the possibilities, not talking about limits. Once they are hooked, they can learn about the process of doing research.
14. For all of these reasons, the UM Libraries Special Collections & University Archives have spent the last few years reorganizing ourselves both structurally and intellectually to change from being mostly about collections to being mostly about access to ideas. I do not minimize how difficult it is to change a professional ethos, but revolutions often start with small steps, and as you will hear, we are finding that our moves to redefine the archives are starting to gain notice.