

University Archives: A Reason for Existence

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THE DEAN OF UNIVERSITY ARCHIVISTS, the late Clifford Shipton of Harvard, wrote: "Any college archive is, in proportion to its size, as rich a source for history as a State archive; and there, in truth, is half its justification of being. . . . Surely the institution that denies the use of its archives to scholars seeking to further human knowledge misunderstands its own purpose in life. College archives are mines of historical treasure that can be exploited without interfering with the bread-and-butter functions of records management."¹

While in all the literature written during the past twenty-five years relating to university archives authors recognize that the facilitation of academic research is a primary reason for the existence of the archives, only one or two articles have been directed toward an understanding of the place in scholarly research of university archives. And yet, university archivists should be giving some consideration to academic research activities in their archives since serious scholarly use of university archives does not appear to be commensurate with the potential opportunities for significant research.

Researchers, after travelling great distances to use the National Archives or other well-known historical records collections, and often using documents that numerous predecessors have picked over, may discover in their own backyards rich resources for the documentation of American history. The typical professor of American history ignores the archives of his own institution, and is not likely to recommend the university archives as suitable resources for studies by his students. There are several reasons for this hesitancy. The condition of the sources is frequently a barrier. In 1966 and again in 1972, the survey of college and university archives indicated that for most institutions the management of archives is a side function of another office and that the officer in charge spends only a small portion of his or her time on the accession, organization, and preservation of archival records.² All too often, the college archives has been cramped into some

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¹ Clifford K. Shipton, "College Archives and Academic Research," *American Archivist* 27 (July 1964): 396-97.

² Robert M. Warner, "The Status of University Archives," *American Archivist* 31 (July

remote corner of the library or an auxiliary storage area and allowed to deteriorate. If the custodial agency has neglected its responsibilities, the sources may indeed be unusable. But even in institutions where the archives is adequately maintained and easily accessible, scholars rarely make the fullest possible use of it.

Another reason for the insufficient exploitation of university archival sources is that many historians have shunned university material because they view the archives as a place of retreat for sentimental alumni and its resources as "memorabilia" suitable only for antiquarian or genealogical studies. Scholars, often unfamiliar with the nature of the sources, frequently have not understood how they can be used.

University archivists must not, however, simply complain that there is not sufficient cognizance of the rewards of research among their holdings. Their greatest challenge is to convey to the academic researcher the vast potential for profitable research in university archives, and university archivists are uniquely equipped to perform this task.

When deciding whether or not to accession a group of records, the archivist must remain sensitive to the many possible uses of the documents and to their broadest implications. While the archivist works to arrange and describe the records, he or she must ponder their order, content, and relationship to other records. Because of the archivist's exposure to the records prior to and after structuring them, it is the archivist, and not the historian, who understands most about the documents. It is the archivist's obligation to relate that knowledge to the researcher.

First, archivists can stimulate awareness of research possibilities by providing excellent reference service. Besides procuring the records specifically called for, the archivist should recommend the use of pertinent manuscripts of which the researcher is not aware, suggest a look at collateral evidence, and provide other clues and hints which may be useful.³ Also, the archivist might attempt to publicize the archives' holdings by arranging documentary exhibitions, by publishing notices of recent acquisitions in scholarly journals, and by writing brief articles based on the records. Finally, the archivist must attempt to coordinate archival activity with the educational program of the institution. She or he may volunteer as an adviser for senior theses or graduate dissertations or offer to teach historical methodology courses, and thus turn the archives into a special workshop in the use of original sources. If the archivist works in these directions, the archives will begin to assume its rightful place as a vehicle for significant research.

When university archival sources have been used, they have excited considerable enthusiasm. The exploitation of university archival resources appears to be most profitable in five areas: (1) institutional

1968): 235-37; College and University Archives Committee of the Society of American Archivists, *College and University Archives in the U.S. and Canada* (Ann Arbor: Society of American Archivists, 1972), p. iv.

³ The archivist is cautioned not to encourage the scholar to spend precious time on a topic simply because of an amplitude of records. The archivist must be sure that, regardless of the quantity, the quality of the records merits the recommendation.

history, (2) intellectual history, (3) social history, (4) political history, and (5) documentary editing. Some sense of the variety of in-depth studies using university archival records can be gleaned from a few examples. The most obvious employment of university records has been in institutional histories. Two excellent examples of traditional, administrative, college histories were published last year, *Dickinson College*, by Charles Coleman Sellers, and Richard Warch's *School of the Prophets, Yale College, 1701-1740*. Solidly grounded in the official records, these administrative histories chronicle the growth and development of their specific institutions and make use of the full range of records contained in university archives: charters and deeds; minutes of the meetings of the faculty and of the board of trustees; treasurer's accounts; college catalogs and directories; commencement notices; administrative and departmental records; lecture notebooks; student diaries; personal papers of students, faculty, and administrative officials; records of special societies; and school newspapers.

Sellers's work was written as a bicentennial project that had also as its goal "a systematic development of the College Archives, so that all aspects of Dickinson College history may be available to scholars in a range beyond the scope of any single volume."⁴ Warch's work on Yale adds some social dimensions to traditional institutional history because Warch searched university records for the wider purpose of adding to our knowledge of the beginnings of higher education in the United States and its relationship to both church and state.⁵

A new and important, but untraditional, institutional history is Martin Duberman's *Black Mountain*. His work is based on the collection of more than 100,000 Black Mountain College documents in the North Carolina State Archives and in the Rollins College Archives, in combination with tape recorded oral interviews of participants in the now-defunct experimental community. Duberman challenged the ideal of historical objectivity by allowing himself to enter freely into the dialogue and to interject his own feelings throughout the text, thereby letting the reader see the actual process by which the historian interacts with data.⁶

The value of university archival records for research in intellectual, as distinct from institutional, history is also apparent. Three new studies exemplifying the use of university records for intellectual history are "The Choice of Hercules: American Student Societies in the Early Nineteenth Century" and "American Colleges and the Transmission of Culture: The Case of the Mugwumps," both by James McLachlan, and *College Literary Societies: Their Contribution to Higher*

⁴ Charles Coleman Sellers, *Dickinson College, A History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), Foreword.

⁵ Richard Warch, *School of the Prophets, Yale College, 1701-1740* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

⁶ Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain, An Exploration in Community* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972). I might add parenthetically that Duberman's work makes a good case for the value of a university archives oral history program.

Education in the United States, 1815-76, by Thomas S. Harding.⁷ All three studies attempt a close look into the mind of the early college student in America.

In the 1800s nearly every college in the nation had at least one literary society organized by students for training in public speaking and creative writing. Students read and wrote about, and discussed and debated issues of real concern to them. Attempting to search the mind of the Princeton student of about 1815, McLachlan in his "Choice of Hercules" searched the minute books, library loan registers, membership lists, and related records of the American Whig Society and of the Cliosophic Society. Harding analyzed the records of forty-four societies in colleges in northeastern, southern, and western United States and presented a picture of what intellectual life was like in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In his "Case of the Mugwumps," McLachlan innovatively used alumni biographical files, matriculation records, and curriculum-related documents to examine one group's college intellectual experience and to demonstrate the influence of that intellectual experience on political expression later in life.

Besides their evident utility for institutional and intellectual history, university archival records have been used in sophisticated and sensitive manner by social historians interested in the results of quantitative analysis. Student matriculation records, for example, reflect important behavioral patterns and significant aspects of the social structures of communities. Most of these studies have used the student records of European university archives. Preliminary results can be found in a series of articles, written during the past ten years, in the Oxford history journal, *Past and Present*, and are now available in *The University in Society*, edited by Lawrence Stone.⁸

David F. Allmendinger, Jr., recently published a similar study for American colleges, *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England, 1760-1860*.⁹ From matriculation records, biographical directories, and beneficiary account books, he gathered data on student ages, birthplaces, social origins, income and expenditures, living arrangements, and subsequent occupational and geographical dispersal. He suggests that by the early nineteenth century, New England society was producing a class of paupers and scholars, students who had to take charity or support themselves with

⁷ James McLachlan, "The Choice of Hercules: American Student Societies in the Early Nineteenth Century," in Lawrence Stone, ed., *The University in Society*, vol. 2, *Europe, Scotland, and the United States from the Sixteenth Century to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Thomas S. Harding, *College Literary Societies: Their Contribution to Higher Education in the United States, 1815-76* (New York: Pageant Press, 1971); James McLachlan, "American Colleges and the Transmission of Culture: The Case of the Mugwumps" in Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, eds., *The Hofstadter Aegis, A Memorial* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).

⁸ Lawrence Stone, ed., *The University in Society*, see note 7 above.

⁹ David F. Allmendinger, Jr., *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England, 1760-1860* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974).

their own work, and that their presence transformed institutions of higher education and established a different kind of student life in New England.

A fourth profitable use of university records is for political history. Because of their dominantly national viewpoint, many American political historians have disregarded university archives, equating university records with "localism." But university archives can be resourcefully used to illuminate aspects of our national experience. While gathering data for his monograph, *The Emergence of the American University*, Lawrence R. Veysey visited a dozen university archives.¹⁰ In his paper "A Scholar's View of University Archives," he stated the case well: "In summary, any University Archives is an archive of at least national scope, and in two different ways—first, because of its incoming letters, which actually document the history of geographically distant people and institutions; second, because of the broader illustrative significance of material which may seem, at first, to be merely local material. . . . But these 'local' records are the stuff of which national social and institutional history is later constructed."¹¹

An example of the use of university archival records for the reconstruction of national political history can be found in John Whitehead's new book, *The Separation of College and State: Columbia, Dartmouth, Harvard, & Yale, 1776-1876*.¹² Using the corporation minutes of these four institutions as basic sources, Whitehead demonstrates that the separation of college and state may not be as old a tradition as is generally believed. His research revealed that in all four colleges during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there existed the elements of state approval through a corporate charter, state supervision through representation on either the board of trustees or a visitorial body, and some form of state financial support. But, between 1776 and 1876, the universities were transformed from quasi-public to private institutions. His findings give an added dimension to our understanding of American legal, political, and educational history.

Another fruitful avenue for work in university archival sources is in the field of historical editing. A primary function of the university archives is to attempt to preserve a full record of the thinking that has gone on at a particular campus. Consequently, university archives frequently are repositories of personal papers, unpublished essays, diaries, journals, and notebooks of faculty, students, and administrators. Some are worthy of publication. Michael Kammen's new book "*What Is the Good of History?*" *Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker, 1900-1945* may serve to indicate possibilities in this area. The letters

¹⁰ Lawrence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

¹¹ In Rolland E. Stevens, ed., *University Archives: Papers Presented at an Institute Conducted by the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, November 1-4, 1964* (Champaign: Illini Union Bookstore, 1964), pp. 82-93.

¹² John S. Whitehead, *The Separation of College and State: Columbia, Dartmouth, Harvard, & Yale, 1776-1876* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

reveal much of the rich, wide-ranging mind of a great American historian, much about the student-teacher relationship, and much about the nature of the historical profession. Seeking always to answer the question, "What is the good of history?" Becker concludes: "The chief value of history is that it is an extension of the personal memory, and an extension which masses of people can share, so that it becomes, or would ideally become, the memory of a nation, or of humanity."¹³ If the university archives can help the scholar to extend that memory by encouraging the use of its records, university archives will become a vital part of the intellectual enterprise of American society.

¹³ Becker to Henry Johnson, December 1922, in Michael Kammen, "What Is the Good of History?" *Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker, 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

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