

## **Archives and Interdisciplinary Education: A Resource for Educators in the Humanities and Social Sciences<sup>1</sup>**

While archives have clear relevance for graduate students, faculty, and other experienced scholars conducting historical research, archives also offer rich opportunities for interdisciplinary undergraduate learning. When productively integrated into course curricula, archival collections can generate enthusiastic student responses in various disciplinary areas including sociology, psychology, ethnic studies, theater and dance, ethnomusicology, journalism, architecture, government, law, English and Spanish-language literatures and cultures, anthropology, and others. Archival artifacts—whether government documents, maps, video testimonies, or other primary sources—challenge students to draw on secondary sources from a diversity of disciplines in order to contextualize and thus better understand the significance of a given primary source. Further, the inquiry-based nature of archival research encourages students to think strategically about what disciplinary traditions, methodologies, and skill-sets will help them pursue their archives-based research questions.

Generally, if undergraduates are introduced to archival research possibilities at all, it is often not until the junior or senior year. Of course, long-term archival research projects require advanced skills in critical thinking, analysis, and interpretation as well as mastery of pertinent contexts, histories, and languages. However, current research suggests that students can greatly benefit even from a preliminary exposure to archives early in their undergraduate careers, by means of short-term, small-scale archival research tasks.<sup>2</sup> Experts emphasize that such tasks help build students' information literacy, internal authority, recognition of the contingent nature of primary sources, and ability to process multiple diverging perspectives. Building these skills early increases undergraduates' capacities to absorb and critically analyze information, while also increasing the likelihood that they will pursue advanced research projects later in their college careers.

In your role as educator, you might challenge students to look at one archival artifact as a granular representation of a phenomenon in history, or as a dynamic empirical example of a theoretical concept. Alternatively, you might challenge students to look at broad swathes of material in order to benefit from the unparalleled sense of context offered by archives. Even with a small investment of

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<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Rockenbach, pages 284-86 in "Archives, Undergraduates, and Inquiry-Based Learning: Case Studies from Yale University Library" (*American Archivist* 74 [2011]: 275-289), and Marcus Robyns, page 374 in "The Archivist as Educator: Integrating Critical Thinking Skills into Historical Research Methods Instruction" (*American Archivist* 64 [2001]: 363-84).

time and thought, it is possible to integrate a meaningful archive component in your undergraduate teaching. Following are some considerations in order to facilitate effective student engagement with archival materials.

**Start by communicating with an archivist.** Check the website of the archive to see what protocols and policies are in place for classroom sessions and visits. Given plenty of lead-time, many campus archivists are happy to work with faculty to integrate archives in undergraduate curricula. Archival institutions often have an educational mandate; since 2006, for example, education has been a central objective of the Strategic Plan of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). While faculty play a primary role in preparing students to engage with archives, many archivists also see a role for themselves in educating students not only about how to identify and access archival materials, but also about how to analyze and interpret these materials.<sup>3</sup> In addition to seeking the archivist's guidance in identifying pertinent materials for your class, you might ask the archivist whether he or she might be willing to work directly with your students. For example, the archivist might speak to the students about guidelines for conducting research in that archive, contribute to discussions about how to interpret and contextualize the holdings, and/or offer research consultations with individuals or small groups of students in your class.

Given your course objectives and the archival materials that are available on campus, **consider whether a shorter- or longer-term engagement with the archives would be most appropriate for your class.** You may want to anchor an entire semester's class in exploring a particularly relevant campus collection, or you may want to enrich a particular unit or assignment with an archival component. A longer-term engagement can open possibilities for sifting through more materials and constructing a narrative using archival artifacts. (For example, a semester-long class project might be to construct an online exhibit.) A shorter-term engagement might involve analyzing a single artifact or small selection of artifacts. Although a single document or artifact has limited evidentiary value, analyzing and contextualizing an artifact can be a productive first exposure to archival research. Following this initial practice, students are better prepared to take on more substantive, longer-term research tasks.

**Craft undergraduate archival research assignments with the goal of generating inquiry-based rather than argument-based outcomes.** The objective of short-term, small-scale archival research tasks is not to produce original research, nor is it to compress the entire research process into a semester or an assignment. Rather, a preliminary exposure to the archives introduces students to the inquiry-based nature of archival research, builds confidence in the research process, and sparks research interests that students might pursue later in their undergraduate careers. Think of the archival institution as a "laboratory" of the humanities and social sciences where students can

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus C. Robyns writes, "Despite the fact that critical thinking skills are a fundamental component of research in primary sources, many archivists have argued that being a teacher goes beyond the mandate of archival management and that the responsibility for teaching thinking and research skills should be left to properly trained faculty. Moreover, many have expressed a legitimate concern that this approach might jeopardize the archivist's role as a neutral arbiter in the research process. At the same time, recent articles and papers on reference and public outreach suggest that a growing number of archivists are beginning to take a stronger and more proactive role in the promotion of archives as centers of learning and of themselves as educators... Guided use of primary sources in education can have an empowering effect on students and can improve the quality of research in archives reading rooms" (364).

test their hypotheses about currents in intellectual, cultural, social, and political history.<sup>4</sup> Emphasize that rather than seeking evidence in the archives to prove their pre-conceived notions, students should let the evidence guide their learning process. In undergraduate archival research, explains Rockenbach, “learning occurs through inquiry and asking questions, rather than through absorption of static knowledge” (277). Rather than challenging students to make an argument about what the archival materials reveal about a given course theme or topic, ask them to think in terms of what questions the primary source/s raise.

**Recognize that building student confidence is as important as building research skills when it comes to facilitating successful student engagement with archival materials.** Especially in preliminary undergraduate exposures to archival research, it is best to narrow a selection of materials the students can work with, since the vast holdings can be daunting to undergraduates unsure how to initiate the research process. Guidance at this early stage is crucial for building student confidence in working with archives.<sup>5</sup> Make sure that your students understand what a primary source is before they undertake archival research, and clarify that primary sources can take a variety of forms: texts, visual and material objects, oral testimony, digital records, etc.

**If possible, set the conditions for students to work collaboratively.** Working in small groups to analyze archival materials, students share observations and questions, which can lead to richer insights about the artifact/s under review. Marcus C. Robyns advocates the “think-pair-share” model of artifact analysis. Educators and archivists pre-select materials that are “provocative, controversial, and also visually stimulating” (384). Students first review the materials independently, then pair up to share questions and issues raised by the materials, and finally present their observations to the class.

**Contextualize the artifacts or collections you’re working with.** For example, if you were to direct your students to work with the Joyce Horman and Edmund Horman Papers at the Benson Latin American Collection Horman collection at UT, you might provide a brief historical context of the Pinochet regime in Chile, offer background information on the Freedom of Information Act, screen the movie *Missing* (which tells the story of Edmund Horman’s disappearance), and/or screen the interview with Peter Kornbluh of the National Security Archive available in the *Missing* DVD supplementary materials. Such context can pique students’ interest and draw them into the archival research task.

**Encourage reflection in order to maximize the learning benefits of archival research.** Consider assigning students to keep research journals, and earmark time in class to debrief on the challenges and rewards of archival research. Often students have useful insights into both the research process and course themes when they are challenged to critically reflect on their experiences in the archives.

**For students who are interested in pursuing longer-term, larger-scale archival research projects, assist them if possible in seeking mentorship.** If you have a student who would like to pursue an archive-based Connecting Experience or senior thesis project, help the student think

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<sup>4</sup> See Barbara Rockenbach, page 279 in “Archives, Undergraduates, and Inquiry-Based Learning: Case Studies from Yale University Library” (*American Archivist* 74 [2011]: 275-289).

<sup>5</sup> See Barbara Rockenbach, page 285.

strategically about where he/she might seek training opportunities and mentorship. Can you think of other undergrads he/she might communicate with who have similar interests so they can share research strategies and resources? Do you know of a graduate student working in his/her area of interest who may be willing to informally mentor the student?

**Provide models of effectively integrated archival research.** The following links provide examples of how scholars have analyzed archival items and integrated textual, visual, and material artifacts in their research.

The National Security Archive blog, "Unredacted": <http://nsarchive.wordpress.com/>

Slate.com's "The Vault" blog: [http://www.slate.com/content/slate/blogs/the\\_vault.html](http://www.slate.com/content/slate/blogs/the_vault.html)

The Harry Ransom Center "Cultural Compass" blog:  
<http://www.utexas.edu/opa/blogs/culturalcompass/>

The National Archives Blogs: <http://www.archives.gov/social-media/blogs.html>

### **Further reading:**

Cook, Sharon Anne. "Connecting Archives and the Classroom." *Archivaria* 44 (1997): 102-17.

Duff, Wendy M. and Joan M. Cherry. "Archival Orientation for Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Study of Impact." *American Archivist* 71 (2008): 499-529.

Falbo, Bianca. "Teaching from the Archives." *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage* 1.1 (2000): 33-35.

Gardner, Julia and David Pavelich. "Teaching with Ephemera." *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage* 9.1 (2008): 86-92.

Justice, Christopher, James Rice, Dale Roy, Bob Hudspith and Herb Jenkins. "Inquiry-Based Learning in Higher Education: Administrators' Perspectives on Integrating Inquiry Pedagogy into the Curriculum." *Higher Education* 58.6 (2009): 841-55.

Matyn, Marian. "Getting Undergraduates to Seek Primary Sources in Archives." *The History Teacher* 33.3 (2000): 349-55.

Osborne, Ken. "Archives in the Classroom." *Archivaria* 23 (1986-87): 16-40.

O'Toole, James. "Curriculum Development in Archival Education: A Proposal." *American Archivist* 53 (1990): 460-66.

Robyns, Marcus C. "The Archivist as Educator: Integrating Critical Thinking Skills into Historical Research Methods Instruction." *American Archivist* 64 (2001): 363-84.

Rockenbach, Barbara. "Archives, Undergraduates, and Inquiry-Based Learning: Case Studies from Yale University Library." *American Archivist* 74 (2011): 275-89.

Schmiesing, Ann and Deborah Hollis. "The Role of Special Collections Departments in Humanities Undergraduate and Graduate Teaching: A Case Study." *Libraries and the Academy* 2.3 (2002): 465-80.

The UT-Austin Center for Women's and Gender Studies Archival Research Tutorial:  
<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/cwgs/womens-rights/Archival-Research-Tutorial/Archival-Research-Tutorial.php>