A Class of Its Own

By Sitron Carlson, Director, University Archives and Regional History Collections

Every spring semester 28 to 30 students embark on an educational adventure when they begin History 4060, Archival Administration. The class is an undergraduate, three credit hour, semester length course taught out of the Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections. Most of the students take the course as one of several options within the public history curriculum at WMU. Students from allied disciplines such as anthropology or English enroll in the course, and it has also attracted a few business, journalism, and theatre students. Each one is looking for the following:

"Theory, techniques, and practice in the development and administration of archives and archival materials." Undergraduate Catalog, WMU

The opportunity to introduce undergraduate students to archival documents, theory, and aspects of administration is especially appealing to the professional personnel of the University Libraries since those involved can approach this as a full-fledged three credit hour course of study for the advanced undergraduate or even graduate student. The faculty of the Libraries does not often have a chance to provide more than a brief introduction (an hour or two) to researching the myriad resources that are available for students in every department and college. But, in this "regular" class, the instructors have the time to teach and the students have the time to learn and apply techniques and practices related to organizing and retrieving information.

The course begins with basic principles of provenance and original order that provide the foundation for how archives personnel arrange and present collections. The primary concept of archival provenance essentially mandates that collections from an individual, organization, or business will not be interfiled or mixed in with other materials from other sources. By maintaining the integrity of each collection, archivists provide researchers with context. A second related archival rule is the principle of original order that seeks to maintain the order imposed by the original creator of the body of records. Original order is sometimes a more difficult task because collections may lose order (and therefore context) over the course of time even if stored in one general location. In addition, "old" records are often physically moved or "repackaged," and the original order is lost. As a result, it is not uncommon for collections to arrive at an archival home in boxes and bags with no apparent order, i.e., no dates, topics, or source are noted on the box or on an inventory sheet. When this occurs, the archivist must attempt to determine the original order or create an arrangement scheme that makes sense or facilitates research.

One of the basic objectives of the archives administration course is to introduce students to the variety of archival documents and artifacts that may be uncovered. Most public history students bring to this course previous experiences with a number of primary sources. Almost always, however, as the "new" collection is reviewed, students discover an even wider array of potential research resources. This "happening" has proven to be one of the more enjoyable aspects of the course as document show and tell sessions lead to discussions of historical research value and preservation. Students routinely have an opportunity to examine numerous types of visual materials, including glass plate negatives, ferrotypes (tintype photos), Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps, and architectural drawings. In addition, typical archival documents such as diaries, letters, and business records in multiple written/recorded formats are reviewed.

The major class project consists of physically arranging an archival collection and creating a finding aid. Generally, teams of four to five students work on a collection that is about two cartons or four cubic feet in size. Students who have completed this course in the past have processed a number of interesting collections, including the papers of the Westwood Garden Club, the Kalamazoo Federation of Labor Stagehand's Union, and the Kalamazoo County Arts Council. Some students have also processed collections of personal papers that include correspondence, diaries, and ephemeral materials. As part of the processing, items in the collections are transferred into archival folders and boxes. Preservation issues, such as removing rusty paper clips or rotting rubber bands, are addressed. An inventory listing of the collection is augmented by information on the creator of the records, the chronological scope, and relevant information about the subject matter. Each organizational effort requires significant "hands-on" and intensive personal involvement with the history (people, places, objects) of the archival deposit. The end result, or summary, of this archival project is a tangible product that students can identify and include in a portfolio or use for job interviews or graduate school applications.

One of the unique aspects of the archival administration class is its location. Since 2000, the course has been taught almost exclusively in East Hall, the location of the Archives and Regional History Collections. The East Hall location allows students to see documents that could not be transported to the West campus because of size, fragility, or inclement weather. Similarly, the location also makes the major class project feasible. As a special bonus, some students indicate they enjoy the opportunity to take a course in Western's first classroom building that was opened for use in 1904.

An additional positive outcome of the course is the fact that a number of the "graduates" go on to complete internships in the Archives and Regional History Collections or at other archival facilities. Internships typically require 120 to 240 hours of time. Student interns may process larger collections or delve into specific research projects or reference requests—all part of an archivist's work. Needless to say, these ongoing "advanced" projects strengthen each student's future chances for positions in many different types of archival

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been replaced by newer technologies that students expect to see and use. This is a never-ending scenario, of course, and ResearchPath or its successor will be updated regularly in the coming years.

Our research also showed that students prefer to learn concepts in short bursts, one concept at a time. Our goal was to reduce the number of concepts covered in each module to the bare essentials—this insured that students were not overwhelmed with too much information at once. Ultimately, this will also allow students to identify the areas in which they feel they need further instruction, and they will be able to get more help on those advanced concepts.

The ResearchPath tutorial remains a work-in-progress. We are currently conducting research to determine the aspects of the tutorial that are most effective and those that need to be reconsidered. As research strategies, the underlying technologies, and the educational needs of our students evolve, we will continue to evaluate and update ResearchPath: A Tutorial for Today. Check it out at: https://www.wmich.edu/library/researchpath/.

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organizations.
A few graduates have made libraries and archives a career. Several have attended and graduated from library science programs in Michigan and out of state. Some are employed in allied fields, such as records management (e.g., state government, corporate, medical, etc.). One of the goals of the course is that all students gain a greater understanding of the “behind the scenes” activities at an archive and how that impacts the research experience. Although the majority of the students completing History 4060 do not plan or expect to focus on archives after graduation, all historians as well as public historians—those working in museums and historic preservation—will need to consult archival collections at some point. Those students who have had the opportunity to see the foundation of archival organization and preservation have been given a “heads-up” that is invaluable to their future research efforts. And, in a very special way, the University Libraries and its librarians have once more become a force in educating our students, our faculty, and our community researchers.