The Teaching Archives

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

Those who have never visited WMU’s archives and regional history collections, which are located “off the beaten path” in the oldest building on the East Campus, usually have a wrong conception of what occurs in that ancient academic hall. Collections and archives are preserved and organized there, of course, and the staff assists hundreds of users answer a variety of questions about southwest Michigan, genealogy, and the communities of WMU and Kalamazoo. In addition, one unrecognized or largely unknown service is offered by a vibrant staff who interacts with thousands of students and researchers as active teachers of the methods and procedures of historical research. Each year, they, along with librarians and staff located throughout the University Libraries, provide hundreds of instructional sessions for thousands of students, who seek to find information in the numerous collections located in East Hall and the University Libraries as a whole. Although many sessions are one-time presentations, for the last five years students seeking an intensive library oriented course have had the opportunity to opt for an entire semester’s worth of instruction in History 406, Archival Administration.

Every January, during the Spring session, up to 30 students enroll for University credit in Archival Administration, a course where students study the history and theory of the development and management of archival collections, applied techniques, vocabulary particular to archives, and general professional issues. The class is geared primarily for public history majors and minors but it is also an elective class for students enrolled in the business information systems program or anybody interested in learning more about archives.

The class meets twice a week at the Archives and Regional History Collections location on the old campus. A potential drawback from having the class in the more familiar environs of Dunbar Hall, the home of most history classes on the West Campus, is that it requires a trek across campus to Western’s first building, East Hall. Once students learn bus schedules and coordinate car pooling, the situation is not as arduous as it may seem, and has some major advantages. In East Hall, students can examine a variety of original documents. For example, when the class session focused on photographic materials, students examined ferrotypes, daguerreotypes, and other types of nineteenth century cased photos. They alsoreview these records is one that makes the class unique and especially useful to students.

While the “hands-on” experience is especially useful and relevant to the course, other aspects of the class have considerable similarity to any upper level class taught at WMU. There are lectures on procedures and techniques, and the students must learn the “language” of the field, such as “provenance” and “original order,” as well as pass a mid-term and final exam. But, another unique aspect of the course is the use of the case study method. The case study method, while commonly used in business administration or public administration courses, is often a new learning experience for public history students. Each case, consisting of a problem related to archival administration, may have more than one correct answer, depending on how the problem is defined, assumptions are made, and parameters established. To complete the study, students must determine and assess the variables, and those analyses will produce different solutions. As a result, students learn to work toward consensus while tolerating legitimate differences of opinion.

During the semester there are two case studies. At the beginning of the semester, students explore a case involving the acquisition of controversial materials. In this instance, the case is drawn from the real life situation of another archival institution in Michigan that pursued the records of a county chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. After some preliminary discomfort with the process and the subject matter, students soon get into lively debates about the possible alternatives that could be taken. The case highlights issues of collection development, cultural sensitivity, and inter-institutional cooperation. Students receive grades for their participation in the class discussion and for completing a paper outlining their assumptions and preferred

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course of action with rationale.

The second case study requires the students to apply knowledge and skills learned in the processing and creating of a finding aid for an archival collection. Most public history students are accustomed to this type of endeavor, as they may have previous experiences in collecting oral histories or studying historic sites. In this case, the processing/finding aid project is the equivalent of the term paper. Because of the work needed to complete such a project, it is also a group project. Students work in groups of four or five students. This has the added benefit of giving them a real world experience in teamwork—a method often used in actual public history decision making.

The “reality” projects in 2005 used a variety of collections including the American Association of University Women Records, the Park Township Records, the Michigan Society of Gerontology Records, and a couple of collections of personal papers and miscellaneous accumulated collections. Selecting actual collections for the students to work on is probably one of the most challenging aspects of preparing for the class. The records represent quite differing issues, and identifying existing collections of two to three cubic feet that are comparable in complexity is difficult. All projects will involve a degree of refoldering and almost all collections will be shifted from cartons into archival document boxes. A final collection inventory is also part of the project.

Completing an actual case study project inevitably creates its own unique learning experiences:

• Some records, particularly those assembled by organizations, are in good order. In these instances, students work with larger volumes of material and identify contaminants such as newspaper clippings or rusty paper clips.
• Students also learn how to handle the random photograph.
• Other students have collections with organizational problems. Students have to determine if the records had an original order. If unable to determine the order, students may opt to create series and work with a chronological scheme. Imposing an order makes the records usable for future researchers.

• An additional challenge occurs when a collection has deteriorated or has preservation issues. A collection of personal papers may have been stored in a damp environment, perhaps a garage or basement. As a result, individuals sensitive to mold or other contaminants may have allergic reactions.

For many students, this class is an essential component of the public history curriculum. Not only do they learn archival principles and gain hands-on experience, but also their primary source research skills are improved. Those most interested go on to complete internships in the Archives that require commitments of 120 to 240 hours over the course of the semester. All together, the Archival Administration class, the onsite opportunities, the case studies, and the internships provide a special “training and testing” ground for many future archivists and librarians. And, even if not a chosen profession, each student leaves with a new sense of the meaning behind the old saying that “The past is history, the future is a mystery, the present is a gift; therefore it is called a present....” What a “present” is found in the learning experience called “the teaching archives!”