

Archives Assessment

SOCI 2335

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Based on your readings and experiences from the first half of the semester, what are the pros and cons of archival research in the sociology of higher education? What do the college archives offer us? What considerations do we need to be mindful of? How do you conceive of a framework for understanding the role of archival sociological research?

Archives hold immense power over accountability, shape historical narratives, and reflect society's emphasis on information. Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook described archives as “wield[ing] power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies” (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, p.2). Archives are important to historians and social scientists because they are the primary source and first-hand information that can guide researchers to analyze and understand what was going on in the past from micro and macro perspectives. For the sociology of higher education, archival research is significant for researchers to understand the context of new education policies, uncover different narratives, and amplify voices that may have been marginalized or silenced. With archives, scholars can fact-check the history that has been told and discover untold stories.

Archives are reliable sources for sociological and historical research. The archive is the primary source, and by studying the archives, scholars and researchers can obtain first-hand knowledge of what was going on in the past. In fact, for research, other than archives, the secondary sources we have been using such as textbooks and journal articles are all built on the

archives with extra analysis and interpretation. If researchers hope to reveal important information that has not yet been discovered, there is no other option other than digging into the archive to find out the answer.

Archives have different forms and are created by different people. Such characteristics provide a better context for scholars to understand the topics they are researching. There are many forms of archives including manuscripts, images, and personal items. By putting all available archives together, researchers can have a much more comprehensive and clearer picture of the event. For example, as the Class of 2025 of Bowdoin College just arrived on campus, the whole school was celebrating Fifty Years of Women at Bowdoin. As a member of the class of 2025, I was wondering what Bowdoin would look like with only males, and what has pushed Bowdoin to switch to co-ed when I first got here.

In Barbara J. Kaster's *To Serve The Common Good* Part 4, the video shows the audience the document and perspectives from the faculty committee, Bowdoin's governing board, and Bowdoin's student-run newspaper Bowdoin Orient. The manuscript from the faculty committee and governing board conveys the details and considerations for such a shift. The Orient reflects the students' voice and the discussion on the event of the issue. From the video, there is also evidence of how national events such as the student strike of 1970 in response to the United States' expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia impact and overshadow events at college (Kaster, 1993, 00:13:31). This can be used to explain why the introduction of coeducation was issued in April 1970 but did not get approved until June 1970.

What's more, the images from the archive are powerful tools because they can convey more information than words alone. In the archives, there are pictures of individuals such as Susan Jacobson, the first woman to graduate from Bowdoin College. There are also pictures of

students before and after banning the 3:1 gender ratio policy. Comparing pictures before and after the policy, we can see a clear surge in the presence of the female student population.

Even without any other manuscripts, seeing the picture of Susan Jacobson (Kaster, 1993, 00:16:19) with President Howell, researchers can identify Jacobson's race, age, and even social status. With archival documents, researchers learned that she was an exchange student from Connecticut College who decided to transfer and follow her father's path, a Bowdoin alumnus, to graduate from Bowdoin as the first female graduate. These connections and relationships uncovered from the archives provide some insights into why she was the chosen one to attend Bowdoin and help Bowdoin with the transition.

Moreover, sometimes when combining different archives, researchers can explore some nuances in the historical events. Bowdoin made the transition to co-ed in 1971, and if taking a close look at archives from other two similar prestigious liberal arts colleges Williams College and Amherst College, we will find an interesting pattern. Williams's first woman graduated in 1971 (Women of Williams, n.d.), and Amherst's first woman graduated in 1976 (Coeducation, n.d). All three well-known and most prestigious liberal arts colleges in New England made the same transition within five years, and two of the three made the transition in the same year.

Such "coincidence" can be an example of isomorphism—a "constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p.149). Admitting women is not the only case, the example of isomorphism in higher education can be as small as building a climbing wall to opening a new field of study to actively recruiting under-represented minorities because higher education is a competitive market. To attract consumers who are prospective students, the universities need to refine their products which consist of academics, campus life, and campus

facilities. In the case of Bowdoin, Williams, and Amherst, it is uncertain if this is the direct cause that Amherst switched to co-ed several years ago, but there was certainly indirect pressure on the Amherst governing board after seeing the transition of Williams and Bowdoin.

However, even though archives offer a lot of benefits for scholars, it is important to learn how to use archives properly due to the complexity of archival sedimentation, “the heavy layers of intervention and meaning coded into the records by their creators and by archivists long before any box is opened” (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, p.3). Initially, the creator or owner of the materials holds the power to determine what to preserve or discard during their lifetime. Upon their passing, the fate of preservation often falls into the hands of “the accumulation habits of our scholar’s friends, students, and colleagues” (Hill, 1993, p.15), adding another layer of influence. Later, archivists play a crucial role in determining the trajectory of the documents. The whole process mentioned above can take a long time, and various incidents such as erosion, loss, or physical rearrangement may occur, potentially resulting in the incompleteness of the archival record. As Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook pointed out, “whether over ideas or feelings, actions or transactions, the choice of what to record and the decision over what to preserve, and thereby privilege, occur within socially constructed, but now naturalized frameworks that determine the significance of what becomes archives (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, p.3). Therefore, before reaching any conclusion based on the current archives, it is important to ask big questions. Who was the owner of this archive? What is the purpose of this archive? What was the social environment and background? Who has touched the archives? Is this a complete archive or just a part of it is saved? If it is a partial archive, what happened to the other parts of the archive? How will the complete archives change our current hypothesis?

Thus, while archives are great sources of knowledge, scholars must approach them with awareness of the complexities due to their creation, curation, and preservation. By understanding the nuances of archival sedimentation and the factors shaping it, researchers can engage with archival materials more effectively and responsibly. If skipping this evaluation step, scholars will only see a fraction of the truth which will mislead them to interpret history inaccurately.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, archives come in different forms, and this can include some personal and sensitive materials such as personal journals that can raise some privacy concerns. First, it is possible that a piece of archive such as a journal somehow makes its way to the archive room without the consent of the author. Especially with the development of technology, companies such as “Facebook keeps copies of everything posted, even when items are taken down from public view, along with the awareness of how much personal information is stored” (Lawrence, 2016, p.70). It is the responsibility of the archivist and scholars working on the archives to research how the pieces are made to the archive and assess the ethics of using certain archives. Second, it is also significant to be aware that “it may be very difficult to separate the deceased, whose details technically might not be protected, from those of the living, which may be” (Lawrence, 2016, p.66). Even if the author has passed away for years, it may still raise some privacy concerns for the author, their friends, their families, and the people who are mentioned in the journal. It is crucial to be aware of this dynamic and the impact on the second and third parties when working with archives.

Once scholars ensure that it is ethical to use the archive, it is time to analyze and make sense of the documents. It is recommended to follow Lee Bolman and Terry Deal’s four complementary frames—the structural frame, the human resources frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame to build up a framework to study, analyze, and understand social change

and organizational culture (Buller, 2015, p.39). For example, under the structural framework, scholars should concentrate on Bowdoin's policy changes such as admission policy and facility renovation. Under the human resources frame, researchers should focus on adjusting faculty and staff including creating gender violence prevention and health education. Under the political frame, attention should be given to the interactions among campus groups. This includes the rationales and interactions of the supporting and opposing groups. Under the symbolic frame, it is essential to analyze how switching to a coed college will impact the branding, culture, and reputation of the college.

In conclusion, the use of archival research in the sociology of higher education offers both advantages and challenges. The use of archival research can be a powerful tool as archives can serve as an invaluable source of primary information. However, to navigate archives correctly, researchers must recognize the complex nature of the archive during its curation and creation, and they should combine factors such as the purpose, environment, and period of the archives when working with the materials. With this, scholars can dive into historical narratives, analyze archival data, and uncover nuanced insights into social change and organizational culture.

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