

2 February 2019

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LIS 658-02 – Archival Management

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Assignment #1 – Archives Visit

For this assignment, I decided to visit a university archives for the reason being that I am currently working towards a career in academic archives. The university archives that I have chosen to visit were the East Carolina University Archives, which was an amazing experience for me. The archivist that I chosen to interview is the university archivist, who throughout this paper, I shall refer to as “Sage.” I am doing this for the purpose of maintaining her confidentially. She was a wonderful guide as she gave me my first direct look into the realm of archival management. I conducted the interview in parallel to her giving me a tour of the university’s archives.

I began the interview by asking the archivist to tell me a little bit about herself. Hailing from the city of Raleigh, North Carolina, Sage received her master’s degree in library science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After receiving her degree, she began work as a Digital Scholarship Librarian at Washington and Lee University. She then moved to Corpus-Christi, Texas, where she was the Processing and Digital Assets Archivist at Texas A&M University. After spending some time developing her experience, she then moved back to North Carolina. She began her position at ECU a little over a year ago, which is where she continues her exciting and fruitful story as the institution’s University Archivist.

According to the Joyner Library website, the mission that the University Archives strives to accomplish is to collect and preserve materials that pertain to ECU's history.¹ This includes student life, athletics, and other areas that make up the university. This is pretty much what Sage said in our interview. She also concurred that the mission that she always strives to fulfill on a daily basis is to collect, preserve, and make available information about ECU, as well as the environment its in, to not just the academic community, but also the general community as well. She said that this is the overall mission of the Special Collections department, which is the department that University Archives is a part of. To me, she is essentially in charge of creating records and collections that are deemed to be of personal value to the university. As stated by the *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* article, "Most common are the *personal* reasons for creating records."² This applies to the university as well, because they want to make records of the events and individuals that have played a major role in the university. It is the job of the University Archivist to make the collections of the university's history as strong as possible.

When I asked her what the collection strength of the University Archives is, she said that while its collections has some pretty good strength, which includes the size of the collection and relevant topics to its mission, there are some areas that she believes need to be worked on. According to Sage, they are currently trying to get a lot AV (Audio Visual) material into inventory. They are also getting the majority of their materials from the campus' music department, which is called School of Music. Despite

¹ Joyner Library Special Collections, *East Carolina University*, <https://library.ecu.edu/specialcollections/archives/> (accessed February 7, 2019).

² James M. Toole and Richard J. Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: SAA, 2006), 45-86; 87-112 (accessed February 7, 2019).

all of that though, the one area that she feels is not getting enough attention is student life. She explains that the university collection only contains pockets of materials that touch on student life. This is one of the issues that she would like to address, which I also agree with as well. The students are a major part of the campus that has an impact on how it operates. I believe that most of the decisions that a university makes takes the students into consideration. Therefore, it is important that a university's archival or special collections department dedicated a good portion of their collection to how students go about their daily lives. They should be collecting materials on the student body's journey towards their respective degrees. I personally hope that, whenever she can get around to it, that Sage can address this.

Despite that though, the University Archives still have a vast ocean of materials for the audience to look at. When Sage was giving a tour of the archives, I saw endless rows of shelves, which had boxes that were stacked on top of one another. It was an amazing site, because all of those shelves contain ECU's entire history, which were just waiting for its contents to be seen by the community. When I asked Sage about how her department goes about acquiring these materials, she explained that the other parts of the university donate some of their materials. She also went on to explain that they also get donations from ECU's alumni as well. Since the University Archives are suppose to be collecting and preserving materials that pertain to the university itself, it would make sense that they would acquire these materials from within the university. She also said that the rest of their collections were purchased from vendors as well.

When I put forth the question as to how these materials get processed, she explained it depends on the current situation, as well as the material in question. There

are certain materials that she has to prioritize over the others, which depends on both the value of the material and the current event that are going on. One of the current issues that she is dealing with is the fair amount of backlog that the archives has. They have a lot of materials in inventory that haven't been processed and made available to the public yet. While some materials have been processed, they have yet been arranged and organized in a way that they can be viewed. She then goes on to explain that while they do have some of these materials, they don't know where they are. It's of the current problems that she has inherited from the last archivist.

No matter what though, Sage did emphasize that the first thing that they always do is create an accession record, which is a list of records that are added to an archival collection. One of the main benefits of having an accession record is that it contains the chronological order of the material that is added. Considering the fact that ECU's archives still have fair amount of materials that still haven't been added into their collections yet, the accession record would be useful in making sure that they could exactly locate the material in question. My interpretation is that while she really wants to get the rest of the materials processed and added to the collection, there are other tasks that she immediately has to prioritize.

To assist her in tackling these tasks, Sage utilizes a good set amount of archival tools that she uses to get the job done. When I put forth the question about these tools, one of the first things that she tells me is that she uses a neat tool called Aeon. Aeon is software that was specifically designed for archives and special collections. They help the archivist keep track of patron transactions, like keeping track of which materials get checked out. It is one of the best ways to make sure these materials are still protected for

the purposing of maintaining access for patrons. The other tools that she uses to maintain the university archives are the physical archival toolkit that most archivists use, as well as asset-free boxes to store materials. Based on her response to this question, I am assuming that these are part of the basic repertoire of tools that all archivists, no matter what type of library or museum they work at, have.

Archivists make use of these tools for the purpose of making sure that the community they serve has access to the materials that they have collected. In saying that though, they have to make sure the materials in the collection are protected so that future generations can still have access to them. Before I even began my interview, one of my personal concerns was figuring out how to find the balance between access and protection. To me, this was one of the important questions that I have to make sure gets asked. When I asked this question, Sage gave me a couple of strategies that can find that balance. She explained that they digitize materials that very sensitive, as well as make facsimiles of those materials. She also said that the special collections department could education people on how to properly handle these materials. The latter of the two is what jumped out at me the most. I agree with educating the community on how to properly handle materials, because I believe this is the best way to balance out access with protection. Passing along these skills to the current generation will allow them to pass along to the next generation, which will ensure that materials will be able to survive for a very long time.

In order to for the University Archives to accomplish this though, they need to market their collections to the community that they are serving. According to Sage, they are currently making progress towards giving the archives a strong marketing presence.

Not only are they trying to hire an outreach specialist, they are also teaching students about their archives as well. It tells me that Sage and the rest of her staff are really trying their best to make the academic community aware of their collections. Even so though, I got the feeling throughout the interview that they fighting a bit of an uphill battle. I did a quick search on social media, and it seems that the University Archives itself doesn't have a strong presence. I only found a few posts on Facebook that come from the University Archives. However, I do believe that the department will accomplish all the goals that they are working diligently towards.

Overall, the entire experience at ECU was wonderful, and Sage is a fantastic individual. Based on observation, as well the information I gathered from the interview, she has a lot on her plate. She is doing the best she can with the cards that have been dealt to her. Since I would like to be an archivist for a university one day, one thing that I have learned from this interview is that the academic institution that they answer to influences part of how they operate and make decisions. That means that the university itself can influence which materials you processed first. It was an exciting visit, and I wish Sage the best of luck in the next chapter of her professional career.

Works Cited Page

Joyner Library Special Collections. *East Carolina University*.

<https://library.ecu.edu/specialcollections/archives/> (accessed February 7, 2019).

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