

Reflective Essay

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I've had the opportunity and the pleasure to work with UNCG's Special Collections and University Archives for the past 10 months. During my time as a Special Collections Student Assistant, I've been able to learn a lot about the archives that I otherwise wouldn't have known. The experience has shifted my understanding of what the archives are all about and has also helped me understand the issues that occur to this day when it comes to archival collections. In this reflective essay, I will explore the different definitions and roles that the archives play when it comes to the preservation of history, as well as the role that archivists on a daily basis. While reflecting on these ideas, I will also reflect on my time at SCUA to see how my experience has shaped the way that I view the archives.

So, what are the archives? From my understanding, the archives are a repository of different historical records, as well as materials that document the activities of people, organizations, or institutions over a given period. From what I've seen and read, the archives can be incredibly useful for research, cultural preservation, and the understanding of our society. That brings me to what are records? Records, from what I've experienced at SCUA, are documents/materials that are specific and capture information that could be created by an organization or the individual as a part of their daily activities. An example of records that I've encountered at SCUA are photographs and personal papers. I'm bringing this up because I'd love to talk more about it, right now I'm working on the Women Veterans Historical Project (WVHP) and I'm currently working on processing a veteran's collection and I've encountered a lot of her letters and photographs that were sent back and forth between loved ones during WWII--these items would be records that were created by her and her loved ones.

When it comes to the function of archives and records, I would say that their main purpose is to preserve and ensure access to historical materials. They're almost like the keepers of memory for communities and individuals, which makes it easier for future generations to have access to the past. Something interesting that I've learned at SCUA is that how archival materials are appraised ends up determining their long-term value, which is something I would've never thought about before. For the most part, I had an idea that all materials had pretty much the same value. An example of what I've mentioned above is with collections that I've helped archivists for the WVHP, where there have been materials from some collections that were not able to serve any research function and had to be essentially taken away from the collection.

Moving on to the life cycle of a record, I've had the absolute pleasure of working with both digital and physical records, and it has honestly shown me how complex and dynamic the life cycle of the records is. At SCUA I've seen how we are focusing on not only preserving and collecting records but also ensuring that they are accessible. With the work I've done, I've helped digitize part of the WVHP collection to make researching easier for the public. I've also, as I mentioned above, been helping process a collection and I've been ensuring that all information is included in the finding aid in order to make it extra accessible for those who are curious/researching that specific collection. I've learned that with the life cycle of a record, it can be a part of daily life activities, and then become a historical artifact, which allows us to gain insight into the past. Working with SCUA has taught me to see the importance of not just storing materials for the "heck" of it, but also to understand the importance as a piece of history.

My favorite part has been learning the role of an archivist. I used to view their role as someone who only stored and collected people's personal information, but it's so much more than that. Through my experience working alongside archivists and with the podcast episode that I listened to, I am confident in saying that their role is incredibly important in society. Especially because they are in charge of preserving history respectfully, while also making it accessible for current and future individuals. Krista McCracken in season 8, episode 4 of *Archives in Context* talks about community-driven archives, which is something that I had encountered before and was excited to continue learning about. The reason I bring this up particularly is because this episode made me realize that archivists can be very involved with the community which is very important when taking different perspectives and voices into account. I also liked learning about decentering the power of the archivist to be inclusive. So when we think about it, archivists can take on many roles, including roles within the community. It's also important to include that the role of archivists can be very different, not all archivists focus on the same thing. This also is important to take into account when thinking about the different skills that they hold. Another thing that I've learned from working at SCUA is that not all archivists have the same skills and they all have their specialized areas of expertise--this was definitely something I had to learn quickly.

When it comes to challenges I've noticed how archivists deal with digital materials. At times there can be a large volume of records, which with digital records I've been taught by archivists at SCUA can deteriorate in a sense because of changing technology or even a lack of proper storage. Prior to working at SCUA, I had not noticed or thought about how archivists had to keep up with emerging technologies because I always had an idea that digital materials were easier to

preserve than physical ones. There is also the challenge of having to advocate for the value of the archives. I used to think that it was a given that they are important for historical preservation but from the many conversations that I've had with archivists, they have explained that many people view the archives as outdated or just simply not important.

Reflecting on all of my experiences and conversations with archivists, as well as what I've learned in class, I can say that I have a completely different perspective on what the archives mean. I've been able to gain a deeper appreciation and understanding for this profession, and by furthering my knowledge it has solidified my desire to become an archivist. The archives aren't just old documents that are collecting dust; they are the stories of societies, people, and communities. As I continue learning, I hope to be able to contribute to the field in a meaningful way.

References

Archives in context. Archives In Context. (2025, January 16).

<https://archivesincontext.archivists.org/>