

Activist Archives: Prioritizing Student Group Records at Louisiana State University

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Abstract

Preserving student voices is not a new practice, but a survey of the university history collections at Louisiana State University revealed a significant absence in archival material collected from students and student organizations. If the role of the university archives is to capture history from the materials that are created by, for, about and on behalf of the institution, then LSU was only fulfilling a part of its mission. With an undergraduate population of over 37,000 and records that date to 1860, student voices should play a larger role in the collective memory of the institution. With the appointment of a new University Archivist in 2019, much of the department's effort has centered on elevating the student perspective in the historical narrative. Student activism and engagement has seen a major resurgence at LSU, and the University Archivist responded by prioritizing the collecting of student group records, particularly those groups that were engaged in social justice work including Black Lives Matter, political activism, COVID-19 response, storm & disaster recovery, sexual violence awareness, and more. This article is a case study of the practices employed by the University Archivist to solicit and preserve these records.

Keywords: university archives, student organizations, activism, outreach programs, student experience

Activism at LSU

On June 17, 2020, two workmen strapped into a hydraulic lift and raised themselves over the south entry of the library building on LSU's main campus in Baton Rouge. The sun on their backs, the workers pried the name of a former university president from the brick façade where it had hung since 1974. Minutes earlier, members of LSU Board of Supervisors had read chilling excerpts from the former president's university correspondence that exposed his role in disenfranchising Black students from 1951 to 1962. Many of the students who weeks earlier had petitioned the university to evaluate thirteen problematic building names watched from the main quadrangle as [the name came down](#).

In the Spring of 2020 amid the initial weeks of the COVID-19 shutdown, the University Archivist [launched a program](#) to record the local response to the coronavirus pandemic. The Archivist solicited creative works, journals, photos and videos, class assignments and other items that documented our newfound disconnectedness. The project was not a roaring success and only a handful of digital materials were collected. Shortly thereafter, it began to feel shortsighted that the onset of the pandemic would be the most significant topic to focus the department's collecting efforts. The campus, community, and nation soon witnessed the killing of George Floyd, and many university priorities were reset, such as renaming problematic buildings and spaces at LSU.

The social justice demonstrations in Greater Baton Rouge during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in summer 2020 were, by and large, organized by students from the state's HBCU and PWI flagships, Southern University and LSU. One afternoon in

May 2020, a group of student leaders stood on the steps of the LSU Union at the epicenter of the campus and read a list of building names they wanted removed (a process that could only be procedurally undertaken by a vote of the Board of Supervisors). The Troy H. Middleton Library topped the list for the former president's unrelenting resistance to integration.

If the role of the university archives is to capture history from the materials that are created by, for, about and on behalf of the institution, then LSU was only fulfilling a part of its mission. Administrative units, support services, and academic departments are well-represented in the University Archives. At LSU, these units often have little attrition in crucial administrative and recordkeeping roles. These units can more easily maintain workflows and relationships with the Archives, and they typically have office space to store records before transfer. Student groups, however, do not benefit from the same kind of consistency in documenting their own functions, primarily due to issues of continuity in student participation from year-to-year and the inherent high-turnover of students in leadership roles in these organizations.

To collect records of the student experience with any sense of regularity, it is imperative that university archivists formalize that work as a priority. Staffing constraints always dictate what library projects can be undertaken, and at LSU, the university archives department officially has a staff of one full time person: the University Archivist, which is a curatorial role. All descriptive work for archival collections is done by processing archivists in the technical services department. As curator, the University Archivist services a school population with an undergraduate enrollment that climbed to 37,000 in fall 2023.

Cultivating relationships with student organizations consumed a lot of time that might have otherwise been spent on the active solicitation of departmental records. The University Archivist took a passive approach to collecting the latter and still acquired major collections from the Board of Supervisors, the Office of the President, Academic Affairs, and others. Student organizations remain the focus of outreach efforts while there is still an imbalance in perspectives being represented in the historical record.

Literature Review

Working to preserve student experiences is not a new practice. Historians and archivists began collecting student-driven material in earnest in the late 1960s and, according to Ellen D. Swain (2004); they did so because documenting the student experience “beyond the confines of the classroom is paramount to our understanding of the American educational system, formation of societal phenomena, reform movements, social trends, and political events” (p. 40). This practice, however, has been underutilized at LSU. In the absence of a University Archivist for the two decades prior to 2019, there was no program devoted to the active solicitation and outreach to student groups. Swain (2004) acknowledges the challenges in recording student voices due to the “expansive and sometimes elusive nature of student life and culture” that makes “documenting the subject daunting” (p. 40).

Daunting as it may, the shared memory of LSU was missing a critical piece and the necessary counterbalance to the official record. Swain (2004) posits that understanding history through these voices stands in critical “opposition to traditional historical analysis based on the experiences and viewpoints of prominent leaders, presidents, and other

officials” and that the benefit of doing so unlocks the “most creative forces shaping the university” (p. 42). While much of the research interest in university history collections may concentrate on the operations of the institution, considerable effort must be made in preserving the lived experiences of students, especially those who affect the institution’s relationship with the broader community, local government, and industry. This history has become particularly valuable in LSU Special Collections instruction where examining campus history from the student perspective has unveiled what Swain described in 2004 as a “potent educational force affecting students’ development” (p. 43). Records of student activism have been used in two graduate level courses, History of Social Welfare and Policy and Foundations of Higher Education, and a handful of undergraduate one-shots in the LSU Special Collections instruction program.

Jessica Wagner and Debbi Smith, in their 2012 article “Students as Donors to University Archives,” emphasize the importance of developing a collection policy “for student life materials as a permanent part” of the official library collection development documents, which can “be modified based on student feedback of materials that would be of future use to them” (p. 554). To encourage the active participation of student donors, the collecting policy at LSU centers the student voices, not only in the collected record but in the administrative functions of the library. Jessica Ballard and Cara Bertram champion the idea of working with the student-donors to form appraisal decisions which, in turn, “enables archivists to develop an understanding of the context of the records [. . .] and how students view the ownership of the records they produce” (p. 29). They caution that inattention to this type of collaboration has the possibility of “damaging relationships with

student groups” (Ballard and Bertram, 2003, p. 30). Wagner and Smith further stress that keeping students involved at this level may lead to more academic faculty involvement in the study and use of the archives (p. 554). Academic faculty studying trends in higher education may find especially valuable the methods by which archivists collaborate with students to preserve their voices. Other works, like Jenifer Becker’s 2017 case study, address the historic “erasure of student narrative” and the need for “increased advocacy, outreach, and donor solicitation” as student activism has increased nationwide (para. 1). She indicates that the archivist cannot prognosticate which groups “may be as enduring as the Black student organizations which came to be in the late 1960s” and which may “exit the campus scene as quickly as they arrived: (Becker, 2017, para. 1). We must treat each instance with “urgency and uncertainty” due to the “ephemeral nature of a student’s brief tenure” (Becker, 2017, para. 1).

While preserving the materials of the organizations that were affecting policy on an administrative level was the primary focus, the University Archivist also collected small amounts of ephemera from as many student organizations as were willing to donate, all in the interest of building community and transforming the perception of the University Archives. Because of movements like Black Lives Matter and community-based archiving, there is a growing appreciation for how archives are working to build more diverse and inclusive histories. With a growing body of student organization records in the University Archives at LSU, students are becoming more receptive to donating.

Surveying the Collections

Kayla Siddel acknowledges in her 2018 article “Documenting Student Life” that

while “students make up much of the university’s population, [...] they are underrepresented in archival records and archival use” (p. 50). An initial survey of the university archives for materials collected directly from LSU’s student organizations yielded a scant eighteen linear feet of textual records (there are a handful of oral histories from former students, which are collected through the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History). Thirteen linear feet of the student group collections are from the records of the student government association. Much of the remaining footprint of student group records are scrapbooks and charters from various Greek organizations and are in no way a comprehensive representation of even those groups (there are more than thirty Greek organizations at LSU). Political groups such as the Young Americans for Freedom, Young Republicans, Young Democratic Club, and the Black Action Movement all combine for a mere one-half linear foot. All of those records come from a considerably narrow period (from the late 1960s and early 1970s) when taking into account the age of the institution, which was established in 1860.

To orient the University Archives toward improving the collection of student materials, the University Archivist focused on the notion that “students are the most important products of higher education,” as read in a statement from the March 1978 newsletter of the Society of American Archivists (p. 10). The statement goes on to say that these records are “essential to an understanding of the educational process over time,” and that the evolution of the college experience “can be studied and evaluated only if [student] institutional files are maintained and made available for research use” (Society of American Archivists, 1978, p. 10). Because of the idle collecting practices of the past at

LSU, the Archivist had to make clear the shift in values for preserving diverse voices and the archives' commitment to correcting past exclusions. Moreover, to earn trust with student organizations, the University Archivist and special collections graduate assistant challenged themselves to find other ways to share the history of student engagement at LSU so that the students might understand how their experiences would be situated in the shared memory of the school.

Student Materials at LSU

The major, comprehensive collections from the student perspective at LSU are from student media. The Gumbo yearbooks (which date back to 1900) are completely available online in the [Scholarly Repository](#), and thirty-five years of the Reveille student newspapers are online in the [Louisiana Digital Library](#) (the remainder are being digitized and will be added periodically). The availability of these items doubtless played a role in the ability to acquire new student materials, but always with the caveat that they are records that speak on behalf of the student body and still fail to let the students and student organizations tell their own stories.

In meetings with student organizations, the Archivist and graduate assistant showed the organizations examples of historical instances of activism on our campus. Student newspaper articles about demonstrations by Black LSU students after the Rodney King verdict, stories of walkouts over the prioritization of more stadium renovations instead of upgrades to academic facilities, photographs of Anti-Vietnam protests, and the written demands of women students to be included on the new campus in the 1920s were all used to showcase the engagement of LSU students in the past. But none of these items were

from the student leaders and organizations themselves. We explained to each organization that the history they—and their successors—deserved to see also included sources directly from them.

Finding Student Groups

Throughout the fall 2020 semester and with the addition of a [new graduate assistant](#) to LSU Special Collections, the university archives formalized its collecting priorities and made outreach efforts to student organizations that had been involved in social justice work including [Black Lives Matter](#), political activism, COVID-19 response, [storm & disaster recovery](#), [sexual violence awareness](#) and more.

Following Jenifer Becker’s model at Washington State University Vancouver as outlined in her 2017 case study “Bringing Student Voices into the University Archives,” we used LSU’s student life portal, called TigerLink, to identify student groups, determine which were active, and collect the contact information of officers and advisors. Becker (2017) acknowledges that the university archives is a “traditionally hidden department” from students and therefore must “work harder to show themselves as allies” (para. 1). We had to meet the students where they were, so in addition to campus email, we also scoured social media platforms for each of these groups as an alternate method for outreach efforts. The graduate assistant drafted boilerplate communications for email and social media direct messages. Mirroring Becker’s (2017) ideology, our graduate assistant understood the student inclination to “question administrative policy” and found it critical to emphasize the university archives’ role in collecting this history, its responsibility to student privacy, and its autonomy (para. 1). This was a difficult message to articulate in

initial communications and it dominated the first real-time discussions with almost all of the groups contacted.

By the end of Spring 2021, we made contact with fifty-three student organizations. Some were long-established student groups while others were newly formed or recently revitalized organizations. The first student organization to work with us was Democracy@Work (now Cooperation Rouge), which was one of the main student organizations to spark the evaluation of the thirteen problematic building names in 2020. We held a video chat meeting with members of their executive board where we outlined our values in collecting the student perspective surrounding building names at LSU. We showed them examples of student protest and activism in the past and asked for them to share their records. Our graduate assistant was integral in approaching this group as student-to-student and was able to validate the responsibility of the archives from a perspective that could not be done by the University Archivist as a faculty member.

Because of the trust that was built over the course of our conversations, Democracy@Work members were eager to entrust their historically significant records with the University Archives. We set up digital storage through LSU Libraries' Box account and within a week they organized and uploaded their files, which included open letters to the university administration, research files into the thirteen building names under scrutiny, and other materials that documented their organizing efforts.

While the beginning of the project came out of the COVID-19 collecting efforts and the initial meetings were conducted via Zoom, the greatest success, in both time spent and quality of material, came once campus operations returned to mostly in-person. By

spring 2022, we had increased our outreach efforts by attending campus events with a large presence of student organizations. Because undergraduates have little familiarity with LSU's Special Collections research library—only a small portion of undergraduates have visited for classes—there were many barriers to acquainting them with the physical building, its functions, and their role in crafting the memory of the institution. We invited student leaders on building tours to see our workspaces and materials storage. We introduced them to the processors and instructors who would be working directly with their collections. We emphasized their entitlement to the library as a space on campus and encouraged them to use it for research, study, group meetings, or just a general space for reprieve when between classes. [Recent efforts](#) to open more spaces in Hill Memorial Library, home of LSU Special Collections, by public services and outreach staff, administrators, and building managers has contributed to a greater appreciation for the library as a venue for preserving student organization records.

Outreach Efforts

The University Archivist employed a variety of outreach efforts to connect with student groups such as email campaigns, engagement with social media accounts, attendance at group meetings and events, and more. The Archives' relationship with Democracy@Work, which was cultivated by the graduate assistant, laid a foundation of trust and understanding that we were able to leverage when contacting other student groups. This article will discuss two: Tigers Against Sexual Assault (TASA) and LSU Feminists In Action (FIA).

Tigers Against Sexual Assault, the student group at LSU that organized protests

surrounding the release of a report that disclosed details of LSU's mishandling of sexual misconduct cases, invited the University Archives representatives to a meeting of their executive board and they made archiving their organizing work an agenda item. We pitched our project, discussed the university's troubling history of sexual violence response (with sources from the University Archives), and fielded questions from members of the board about the procedures for ensuring that their voices would be made part of the historical record. With permission from Democracy@Work, we showed the TASA officers how their files could be organized and how they would be maintained digitally. They then offered to share physical materials as well. We accepted email correspondence with the LSU administration, state legislature and community partners, working documents of organizing efforts, and posters and materials saved from their protests.

The University Archivist connected with another student organization, LSU Feminists in Action, while tabling at an undergraduate research fair in the LSU Student Union. LSU Special Collections had plans to fund an undergraduate summer research project, and we wanted to connect with students who were interested in creating a project based on some historical aspect of student life at LSU. The University Archivist met an executive officer with LSU Feminists In Action who had heard of our work with TASA. They agreed to meet with us for a tour of the Special Collections library where we held a meeting with their executive board to discuss their archive. FIA's initial digital transfer included email correspondence, organizing activities, multimedia from protests and demonstrations, pamphlets, flyers, and more. They have also donated physical materials including copies of speeches and protest posters. FIA were instrumental in the success of

the university's [campus lighting efforts](#).

Technology Used

The first instance of working with a student group, Democracy@Work, led us, naively, to believe that other groups would be as receptive to using Box to transfer their files, but what we learned was that we needed to meet each organization where it was creating and keeping its records. For TASA and FIA, Google Drive was the preferred platform, so we created a Google account for the University Archives that could be added to TASA's historical files. We have also accepted removable storage media for transfer to preservation drives.

At the writing of this article, the student organization records from groups with activist missions have not been made public via online mechanisms as a courtesy to the brave students who entrusted the Archives with their materials. We will open the digital records only in the Hill Memorial Reading Room's computer terminals after the appropriate time has passed. Files have been transferred from temporary media, drives, and cloud storage to preservation storage.

Next Steps

As more organizational records are collected, it seems evident the need to consolidate student group archives into a platform that can showcase their work, for the organizations that wish to do so. While we have been encouraging the use of the institutional repository for meeting materials, the digital library or a dedicated site may be more appropriate venues. Already in the works is a training module for student groups to designate their own organizational historian to learn best practices for preparing materials

for transfer and for executives to formalize the transfer relationship to the University Archives within their group's bylaws.

Conclusion

The main interest in collecting the records of student organizations in the University Archives is to correct the silenced voices from the student perspective. While there may be little that we can do to fill the gaps from the student voices of the past, especially the very distant past, we can mark this project as an intentional effort of elevating the student experience in the official institutional narrative. Historical erasures, especially those at previously segregated universities like LSU, seem to be an inevitability in university history and are a fact about which we must be transparent if we are to reshape our values and confront the exclusionary policies of the past. The University Archives at LSU may not have been able to connect with the student groups if not for the renaming of the library building, and the University Archives at LSU takes seriously its commitment to maintaining relationships with the student organizations whose work makes an indelible mark on the culture of our campus.

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