

From Users to Co-Creators:

Toward Participatory Collection Development in University Archives

Christine Garaudy, LSU MLIS student, GA at Tulane Special Collections



Abstract

University archives have traditionally centered administrative and faculty records, often excluding students and local communities. User-centered participatory collection development shifts authority to these constituencies, allowing them to help determine what is collected, how it is interpreted, and whose voices are represented. This paper examines initiatives at Cal Poly Pomona, Rutgers SC/UA, and Georgia College & State University, highlighting differences between student- and community-focused approaches. Student engagement builds archival literacy and identity validation, while community collaboration emphasizes cultural preservation, social justice, and trust. Challenges—including access, copyright, limited resources, institutional resistance, and community reluctance—remain underexplored. Participatory collection development offers a framework for inclusive, meaningful archives, and this study calls for research addressing practical and ethical barriers to sustaining user-centered engagement.

Keywords: university archives; participatory archives; participatory collection development; community-based archives; students; archival education and outreach; community involvement in archives

Introduction

University archives have traditionally functioned as repositories of institutional memory, preserving administrative records, faculty scholarship, and other documentation deemed valuable by academic authorities (Barcelona & Dempsey, 2024). Yet this approach often overlooks the experiences and contributions of the people whose daily lives and work give those institutions meaning—students and local community members (Fitzgerald et. al., 2016). Participatory collection development represents a deliberate shift from this top-down model, emphasizing collaboration, shared authority, and user-centered engagement in archival practice. By inviting students and community members to help determine what is collected, how it is contextualized, and whose voices are represented, academic archives can create more inclusive, relevant, and meaningful collections. Drawing on scholarship that employs user-centered methods such as case studies, surveys, and direct observation, this paper examines participatory initiatives at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Rutgers University Special Collections and University Archives; and Georgia College & State University. Through these examples, it explores the strategies used to foster engagement, the differences in approach and impact when working with student versus community participants, and the outcomes and lessons learned regarding trust-building, inclusivity, and institutional relevance. Ultimately, this discussion positions participatory collection development as both a practical and ethical imperative for academic archives seeking to serve their constituencies more effectively, amplify marginalized voices, and foster collaborative stewardship of knowledge.

Participatory approaches also offer a means of addressing gaps left in the historical record when earlier collecting practices excluded minority and underrepresented groups. By prioritizing historically marginalized communities, archivists can foster more inclusive and representative documentation that better serves diverse users and expands the range of experiences reflected in institutional memory. These community-centered collection strategies align with broader institutional commitments to diversity, inclusion, and reparative justice, while also responding to the practical imperative that archives demonstrate their value to the publics they support. As critiques of traditional, institution-centered models of knowledge production continue to grow, institutions of higher education are increasingly recognizing that community-engaged research and scholarship can help them remain responsive to the needs and perspectives of the communities they serve (Fitzgerald et. al., 2016 and Whiteford & Strom, 2013). In this context, participatory collection development brings academic archives more fully into a postmodern era of shared curation and stewardship, challenging conventional notions of authority, erasing rigid boundaries between collector and subject, and dispersing interpretive power beyond the academic ivory tower in order to better meet the needs of both campus and community users.

Significance

Universities often have complex relationships with the communities around them and are sometimes perceived as separate from the social, economic, and cultural realities of their neighbors (Makuka & Turner, 2022). This tension has become increasingly significant as higher education faces growing public and political scrutiny, questions

about its role in society, and threats to funding (Weingarten & Wolfson, 2026). University archives have an opportunity to respond by serving not only as repositories of institutional memory, but also as spaces that foster greater collaboration between universities and the communities they serve.

Increasing access, use, and meaningful engagement are longstanding priorities for archival repositories, yet university archives often remain underused by students. Daniels and Yakel (2013) found that 92% of 452 students across two universities had never used archives before receiving formal instruction in primary source research, while Scoulas and De Groote (2019) found that 82.7% of 2,277 student respondents at a large Midwestern public research university reported never using special collections or university archives. These findings suggest a need to consider approaches that foster meaningful, ongoing engagement between students and archives. Involving students and community members in archival practices, including collection development, offers one potential approach. Such participation can broaden engagement with archival spaces while giving communities a greater role in shaping what is documented and preserved. Participatory collection development can diversify the historical record, amplify underrepresented perspectives, and strengthen connections between people and institutional memory.

The intersection of university and community archives presents a particular opportunity to expand this kind of engagement. Community-based archival initiatives play an important role in preserving local histories, but may face challenges related to funding, staffing, infrastructure, and long-term preservation. Community members interested in preserving local history may already be collecting materials and seeking

institutional resources and partnerships to support their long-term preservation and accessibility (Hackbart-Dean & Ray, 2021). Universities often have the resources and infrastructure to support the stewardship and accessibility of these records, creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration. For such partnerships to be successful, they must be reciprocal rather than extractive (Hackbart-Dean & Ray, 2021). Participatory approaches can help universities share authority with community members, build trust, and support community-defined priorities while drawing on institutional resources.

The form participation takes may also depend on the constituency involved. For students, participation may center on relevance, representation, and archival literacy, while community engagement may require greater emphasis on reciprocity, trust, and shared authority. Bringing students and community members into the collecting process offers university archives an opportunity to expand both participation and representation. Participatory collection development can strengthen relationships with surrounding communities, create a more inclusive historical record, and help students see archives as spaces in which they can actively participate rather than simply access materials. It also invites a broader understanding of university archives as places where institutional memory is not simply preserved but co-created with the people and communities whose histories they document.

Case Studies

University Students

Student Life Collecting Initiatives at California State Polytechnic University,

Pomona

Historically, university archives have prioritized institutional, departmental, scholarly, and faculty records while neglecting those that document student life on campus (Barcelona & Dempsey, 2024 and Richardson et al., 2018). This collecting imbalance has profound implications for how students encounter and interpret the archive, as the preserved record often foregrounds administrative authority and faculty achievement while rendering student experiences peripheral or invisible. Administrative and operational records alone cannot tell the full story of a university (Richardson et al., 2018), particularly when students constitute the largest and most dynamic population within the institution. When the archival record omits or minimizes student organizations, activism, cultural traditions, and everyday campus life, it not only narrows the historical narrative but also limits students' ability to see themselves reflected in the institutional memory of their university.

Compounding this representational gap is the reality that many students arrive on campus with little familiarity with archives and special collections as spaces, services, or professional practices. Low levels of student use may reflect not only limited exposure to archival collections but also unfamiliarity with archival spaces and practices. Baines (2023) found that 73% of special collections professionals surveyed identified students' lack of awareness as a barrier to undergraduate use, while 45% identified students' lack of confidence as a barrier. Note (2017) similarly observed that graduate students viewed archives as intimidating and emphasized the importance of making archival spaces more welcoming to first-time users. Archives can appear opaque, governed by unfamiliar rules and terminology, and staffed by professionals whose roles are not clearly understood.

Without intentional outreach and instruction, they risk remaining peripheral to students' academic and social lives, surfacing primarily in the context of required class visits, if at all. These challenges suggest the value of approaches that address not only access to collections, but also students' familiarity with and understanding of archival spaces. Students benefit from transparent communication about collecting priorities, clear invitations to participate, and sustained opportunities to engage with primary sources in ways that feel relevant to their coursework and lived experience. Meeting these needs requires a shift from passive custodianship toward active, relational engagement.

The work undertaken by university archivists at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (Cal Poly Pomona) illustrates how such a shift can be operationalized. Recognizing that the absence of student voices represented a significant gap in their holdings, the archivists made a deliberate effort to document student life more comprehensively. Rather than relying solely on records transferred through administrative channels, they collaborated with faculty to integrate archival materials into lesson plans and assignments, thereby embedding primary source literacy within the curriculum. This pedagogical partnership not only increased student exposure to archival materials but also reframed the archives as an intellectually generative space rather than a static repository. In parallel, archivists reached out directly to students and student organizations to inquire about their records and to learn which materials they considered meaningful. By engaging this user group in conversation about value and significance, the archivists were able to build relationships of trust and begin incorporating organizational records that more fully reflected the diversity of campus life (Richardson et al., 2018).

The initiative's impact was further deepened through a for-credit internship developed in partnership with the history department. Student workers were empowered to participate in collecting and processing decisions and to create a LibGuide on documenting student life for future use (Richardson et al., 2018). This approach represents a particularly robust model of user engagement because it moves beyond consultation and toward shared authority. Student organization members became narrators and stewards of their own histories, while student interns assumed roles as historians and custodians of their peers' records. In this model, students are not merely consumers of archival knowledge but active contributors to its creation and organization. Such reciprocity aligns closely with broader calls in archival theory for participatory practice and distributed authority.

Importantly, students "enjoy learning about prior student experiences (Richardson et al., 2018, p. 20)," suggesting that archives can play a meaningful role in fostering continuity and belonging. Student-focused collecting can connect current studies to the longer history of their institution. Although Richardson et al. (2018) do not provide extensive quantitative measures of impact, it is reasonable to infer that initiatives centered on participatory collecting and curricular integration have the potential to increase student engagement and use. When students are invited to help determine what is preserved, when they see their organizations and concerns documented, and when they are taught how to interpret and create primary sources, the archives become more relevant and accessible. In this way, participatory collection development not only enriches the historical record but also strengthens the relationship between university

archives and their student constituencies, positioning the archives as spaces of belonging, collaboration, and shared memory rather than distant repositories of administrative history.

Engaging Student Users Through Pop Culture Collections at Rutgers University

Special Collections and University Archives

Students also want to see the cultural touchstones that matter to them reflected in archival collections, rather than only those materials traditionally sanctioned by academic authorities (Lutz et al., 2020, p. 255). When collecting priorities are determined exclusively by established institutional frameworks, the result can be a record that feels distant from students' lived experiences and contemporary interests. In response to this dynamic, archivists at Rutgers University Special Collections and University Archives (Rutgers SC/UA) have developed collecting policies that explicitly center student users and empower them to shape archival priorities. Their approach invites students to help determine “what is considered ‘important’ or historically significant; and who gets to take up space or speak” (Lutz et al., 2020, p. 255), particularly through the curation of popular culture collections that embrace multiplicity, diverse perspectives, and forms of expression often overlooked in traditional academic archives.

Rutgers SC/UA describe this model as “student-driven collecting,” a framework designed to connect students with materials that resonate personally and culturally. As they explain:

At a state university with a large and highly diverse student body, we value the opportunity to work with students who might feel underrepresented or overlooked.

We view our popular culture collections as social, cultural, and political tools and resources for the ever-diversifying student body. Our engagement with students allows us to be attuned to the materials that hold meaning for students. Students can then see themselves and the pop cultural artefacts that are meaningful to them in the space of an archive (Lutz et al., 2020, p. 256).

By shifting collecting priorities toward what student users genuinely care about, Rutgers increases the visibility and relevance of the archives while fostering deeper engagement. When students encounter their own interests, identities, and communities represented in archival holdings, the result is often a strong emotional connection that reframes the archive as a space of belonging rather than exclusion (Barcelona & Dempsey, 2024).

The university archivists at Rutgers SC/UA strategically use these nontraditional collections to engage students who might otherwise feel indifferent toward materials that do not resonate with their experiences. Popular culture collections become entry points for broader conversations about archival power and practice, including what is collected and why, who makes those decisions, and whose histories are typically preserved or marginalized. In facilitating these discussions, archivists not only increase access but also cultivate critical awareness among students about the constructed nature of the historical record. They further observe that young people “crave exposure to tangible media” (Lutz et al., 2020, p. 269) in an era often characterized by rapid, impersonal digital exchange. The analog nature of many popular culture artifacts offers students a tactile and affective experience that feels both novel and grounding. By connecting students to physical, do-it-yourself, and community-centered modes of cultural production, these collections expose

them to expansive archival possibilities and multiple ways of creating and preserving meaning. Ultimately, student-driven popular culture archives demonstrate that participatory collecting can be both intellectually substantive and approachable, inviting students into archival spaces through materials that feel relevant, engaging, and even joyful, while still advancing critical conversations about authority, representation, and historical significance.

Community Members

Engaged scholarship and intentional relationship-building between universities and local community groups create opportunities for co-creating knowledge, sharing stewardship, and fostering a culture of collaboration and reciprocity. As Makula and Turner (2022) note, “As new definitions of knowledge and commitments to engaged scholarship revolutionize academia, academic libraries and archives have the opportunity to join and shape these conversations, particularly through their collections and collection development practices” (p. 248). Academic archives are uniquely positioned to partner with the communities they serve, documenting local knowledge and cultural heritage in ways that enhance both community reciprocity and research scholarship. By embracing community-driven approaches, archives help shape “new definitions of knowledge that challenge the authority of established institutions of higher education and put some of the power back in the hands of the people, legitimizing different cultural ways of knowing and forms of intelligence and creating space for a multiplicity of perspectives within the historical record” (Makula & Turner, 2022, p. 248).

Georgia College & State University provides a compelling example of this approach

in practice. The institution established a Community Engagement Archivist position to strengthen its relationship with the surrounding community by documenting regional history and ensuring that the experiences of diverse local communities are represented in the historical record. This approach reflects an emphasis on allyship as a framework for community engagement (Makula & Turner, 2022). The archivists prioritized documenting and preserving central Georgia's local history while addressing gaps in their collections that had previously excluded marginalized voices. Their efforts extended beyond internal collecting to broader community engagement: they led initiatives to support other institutions in preserving local memories, hosted workshops teaching preservation techniques, and organized "harvest days" in which community members contributed personally meaningful artifacts that were digitized and added to online collections, ensuring the holdings reflected the diversity and richness of the communities they serve (Makula & Turner, 2022).

Central to these initiatives was a commitment to reciprocity and cooperation rather than extraction. The archivists emphasized that community priorities should be explicitly articulated in collection development policies in order to integrate a social justice mindset effectively (Makula & Turner, 2022). As Makula and Turner (2022) observe, community-driven collection development and reciprocal engagement between academic archives and non-academic publics are not only feasible but increasingly recognized as best practice. Participatory approaches of this kind respect the multiplicity of voices within a community, support community-engaged scholarship, and cultivate trust, preserving local knowledge, cultural heritage, and alternative ways of knowing for

students and the wider public alike. By providing access to diverse perspectives and material culture, these practices expand the types of knowledge students encounter, advance reparative archival justice, and foster mutually beneficial academic-community partnerships that enhance both student learning and the broader historical record.

Participatory Collection Development

The examples of participatory collection development at Cal Poly Pomona, Rutgers SC/UA, and Georgia College & State University illustrate how archives can shift from passive custodianship to active, user-centered engagement, and they highlight the different ways in which students and community members contribute to shaping archival holdings. Across these cases, participatory approaches share a central principle: the people whose experiences are documented are empowered to influence what is preserved, how it is contextualized, and who determines significance. Yet the goals, methods, and outcomes differ depending on whether the participants are students or members of the broader community.

For students, engagement often emphasizes relevance, representation, and educational outcomes. At Cal Poly Pomona, archivists integrated student records and organizational histories into the collection while embedding archival use into classroom instruction, creating a dual pathway of participation and learning (Richardson et al., 2018). Similarly, at Rutgers, student-driven collecting focused on popular culture materials that resonated with students' identities and lived experiences (Lutz et al., 2020). In both contexts, students were not passive users; they became contributors, co-creators, and even decision-makers in appraisal and processing. The outcomes of student

participation include increased engagement with archival materials, enhanced understanding of archival practices, and strengthened connections to the institution's history. Importantly, participatory collecting allowed students to see themselves reflected in the archival record, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity that traditional collections often fail to provide. A lesson learned from these initiatives is that when archives prioritize student interests and provide structured opportunities for participation, engagement and relevance are maximized, and the archives become spaces where students' cultural and social identities are validated.

Community participation, while sharing some of these goals, emphasizes broader societal impacts, including reciprocity, cultural preservation, and social justice. Georgia College & State University demonstrates that academic archives can partner with local communities to document histories and knowledge that have been historically overlooked or marginalized (Makula & Turner, 2022). Unlike student-focused initiatives, community-driven projects often involve the co-creation of new collections from scratch, direct preservation of personal artifacts, and workshops that teach preservation skills to community members. The outcomes extend beyond the archives themselves: trust between the institution and local communities is strengthened, previously excluded voices are amplified, and the historical record becomes more representative of the broader social landscape. Lessons from these initiatives emphasize the importance of reciprocity and collaboration, ensuring that archival work is mutually beneficial and does not extract value from the community.

Comparing these approaches reveals both overlap and divergence. Student

engagement often centers on pedagogical and identity-driven outcomes, connecting participants to their institution's history and fostering archival literacy. Community engagement, in contrast, prioritizes cultural preservation, social justice, and long-term relationships that expand the archives' relevance beyond campus boundaries. In both cases, participatory collection development challenges traditional archival authority and recognizes the value of diverse perspectives by creating opportunities for users to exercise agency in determining what is collected and preserved rather than merely providing feedback or commentary on existing practices. The examples therefore suggest that participation can serve not only as a means of diversifying collections, but also as a way of building relationships between archives and the people they serve.

The existing literature also varies in how participatory initiatives and their outcomes are assessed. Richardson et al. (2018) and Lutz et al. (2020) primarily present practitioner perspectives grounded in the experiences of archivists who designed and implemented the initiatives they describe. Makula and Turner (2022), by contrast, supplement their case study research with survey and interview data. These approaches provide valuable insight into how participatory initiatives are developed and implemented but offer less evidence about how students and community members themselves experience these efforts. More user-centered assessment could help clarify how participation influences perceptions of belonging, trust, archival use, and institutional relevance.

Conclusion

The examples examined in this paper suggest that participatory collection

development can do more than diversify university archives. It can change the relationship between archives and the people whose histories they preserve. At Cal Poly Pomona and Rutgers, involving students in collecting created opportunities for greater representation, archival literacy, and connection to institutional history. At Georgia College & State University, community-driven initiatives extended this work beyond campus, emphasizing reciprocity, trust, and the preservation of histories that might otherwise remain undocumented. Although the goals and methods differed, all three cases demonstrate the value of giving users meaningful agency in determining what is considered worthy of preservation.

This distinction between student and community participation is important. Student-centered approaches often use relevance, education, and representation as entry points, helping students see archives as spaces connected to their own experiences rather than distant repositories of institutional history. Community-centered approaches require a greater emphasis on reciprocity and shared authority, particularly when universities have historically been perceived as separate from or extractive toward surrounding communities. In both contexts, participation offers one way for archives to deepen their relevance to the constituencies they serve by creating opportunities for users to engage not only with existing collections, but also with the processes that shape what is preserved.

Participatory collection development is not without significant challenges. Copyright and intellectual property concerns, limited staffing and funding, institutional priorities, and the time required to build sustained relationships can all constrain this

work (Makula & Turner, 2022). The literature also offers limited guidance for situations in which communities are reluctant to collaborate with universities or where longstanding institutional tensions make trust difficult to establish. These challenges are not incidental to participatory practice; they are central to it. Sharing authority requires institutions to reconsider established collecting priorities and commit resources to relationships that may not produce immediate or easily quantifiable results.

The cases examined here do not establish a single model for participatory collection development, nor do they demonstrate that participation will produce the same outcomes across institutions. Rather, they illustrate a range of approaches that can inform how university archives think about relevance, representation, and authority in their collecting practices. Further research that centers participant perspectives and evaluates outcomes over time could help clarify which approaches are most effective and sustainable.

For these reasons, participatory collection development should not be understood simply as another outreach strategy or method for filling gaps in archival holdings. It represents a broader shift in how university archives understand their role and authority. Rather than deciding in isolation what aspects of institutional and community life are worthy of preservation, archivists can create structures through which students and community members help shape that record themselves. Such an approach does not eliminate the archivist's professional expertise, but places that expertise in conversation with the knowledge and priorities of the people whose histories the archives seek to preserve.

The question, then, is not only whose histories university archives preserve, but whose voices have a role in deciding what becomes history. Participatory collection development offers a way for academic archives to move toward a more inclusive model of stewardship, one in which institutional memory is not simply inherited and preserved but continually shaped through relationships with the people who make up the university and the communities around it.

References

- Baines, J. (2023). Establishing special collections literacy for undergraduate students: An investigation into benefits and barriers of access. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2022.2149481>
- Barcelona, L. M. & Dempsey, P. R. (2024). Student Life, Diverse Institutional Histories, and Archival Policy: Inclusion of Student Life Archival Material in University Archives' Collecting Statements. *College & Research Libraries*, 85(6), 930–940. <https://doi-org.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/10.5860/crl.85.6.930>
- Daniels, M., & Yakel, E. (2013). Uncovering Impact: The Influence of Archives on Student Learning. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 39(5), 414–422. <https://doi-org.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/10.1016/j.acalib.2013.03.017>
- Fitzgerald, H. E., Bruns, K., Sonka, S. T., Furco, A., & Swanson, L. (2016). The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education: Reflections and Future Directions. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 20(1), 245–253.
- Hackbart-Dean, P., & Ray, W. (2021). Community engagement: Finding history where it lives. *College & Research Libraries News*, 82(8), 377–380. <https://doi-org.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/10.5860/crln.82.8.377>
- Lutz, C. A., Maharjan, T., & Crawford, S. (2020). Going against the archival grain: case studies of pop culture archives of a music scene, regional zines, and local beer. *Archives & Records*, 41(3), 254–273. <https://doi-org.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/10.1080/23257962.2020.1810005>
- Makula, A. & Turner, L. (2022). Toward Engaged Scholarship: Knowledge Inclusivity and

Collaborative Collection Development between Academic Libraries and Archives and Local Public Communities. *College & Research Libraries*, 83(2), 246.

<https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.2.246>

Note, M. (2017). The “intimidating” archives: Teaching graduate students historical research methods. *Journal of Archival Organization*, 13(3–4).

<https://doi.org/10.1177/155019061701303-403>

Richardson, K., Adkins, A., & Gomez, E. (2018). Learn by Doing: Cal Poly Pomona’s Efforts to Modernize Archival Practices and Increase Student Life Records in Special Collections and Archives Through Collaborative Partnerships. *Collaborative Librarianship*, 10(1), 1–22.

Scoulas, J. M., & De Groote, S. L. (2019). The library’s impact on university students’ academic success and learning. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 14(3), 2–27. <https://doi.org/10.18438/ebliip29547>

Weingarten, R., & Wolfson, T. (2026). New Compact Shows Resistance Works, but Fight for Higher Ed Isn’t Over. American Association of University Professors. <https://www.aaup.org/news/new-compact-shows-resistance-works-fight-higher-ed-isnt-over>

Whiteford, L., & Strom, E. (2013). Building Community Engagement and Public Scholarship into the University. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, 37(1), 72–89. <https://doi-org.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/10.1111/napa.12018>