

Eddie Woodward

The case for a university archivist

Preserving institutional memory

In January 2009, I contacted the university librarian at the institution where I earned my undergraduate degree to ask about university archives there. On the university library's Web site I had found a finding aid (circa 2005) for the university archives, but little else. At the time of my writing, the small state-supported liberal arts college, now a university, was preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary as an institution of higher education.

Being a university archivist, and having a natural fondness for my alma mater, I sent an e-mail to the university librarian, asking if she thought there would one day be a need for a proper university archivist. She thanked me for my interest and replied that, "Unfortunately at present there is no immediate need for a university archivist here..." I had to wonder if she was actually correct.

I am currently employed as the Heritage Protocol archivist at Florida State University (FSU). The mission of Heritage Protocol is to identify, acquire, catalog, and preserve items related to the institutional history and cultural heritage of FSU and its predecessor institutions.

The Heritage Protocol effort had its genesis with a small group of concerned alumni, former faculty and staff, and friends of the university. Their well-founded concerns centered around the fact that FSU was not doing, and had not done, a very good job of documenting and preserving its history.

FSU, with a long and proud liberal arts tradition, was more than 150 years old and had very little to show for its interesting, proud, and eclectic heritage. In fact, the first 50 years of FSU's existence, when it

was known as West Florida Seminary, are virtually undocumented in the archives, with only a minute book, a few commencement programs, some photographs, and assorted receipts as evidence to its actual existence as an institution.

It was from this perspective that I read the words of the university librarian at my undergraduate alma mater; 50 years into their history, she felt as though there was no need for a university archivist.

If one considers a university archives as simply a place where the retained remnants of the administrative units, and the academic departments, schools, and college's records retention schedules are stored, then she was probably right that they didn't need a university archivist. If those administrative records are to be arranged and described and made accessible in some fashion, then a university archivist probably is needed.

However, I think it is important that we not consider a university archive as a one-dimensional entity. I do not believe that today's university archive should only hold the materials that document the institutional history of the university. From my perspective, it is important to actively seek to document the student experience at the school. It is only in this way that one can breathe life into the history of the university. University records tell the institutional history. However, it is the student collections that make it live. The university records indicate the curriculum,

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the formation of departments, the coming and going of faculty, when buildings were constructed, etc., but they offer little insight into what it was like to be a student. Student newspapers and publications might go part of the way, but it is through the items that were collected by those who attended the classes that we get a real sense of what it was like to be a student on campus. Documenting the student experience is the other half of the equation in the university archives. And if one simply sits back and waits for the materials to come flowing in, I fear that they will be terribly disappointed.

To my mind, a university archivist actively seeks items and collections from the school's alumni. Because it is through these items—such as photographs, letters, scrapbooks, ephemera, and other memorabilia—that we get a sense of the student experience during a certain era. Each collection, from each alumnus, no matter how large or small, is like a time capsule that documents his or her four years at the college or university. The collections are similar in some ways, and very different in others, often emphasizing the particular interests of each student. It is through the accumulation of these overlapping collection eras that we are able to paint a richly textured image of what it was like to walk the campus at a certain time. The materials are out there, but the alumni need to be made aware of the college's desire for them. This overt interest in documenting the history of the university has numerous unintended benefits to the institution.

First and foremost, it reengages the alumni with the school. My experience is that every alumnus regards his or her college years with great fondness. Just as for me, I look back on those years with great affection and, as can be plainly seen through my actions, I am anxious to reconnect with the school. We have found here at FSU that the Heritage Protocol program has been a great public relations tool for the university. The FSU Alumni Association, University Relations, and University Libraries jointly sponsor the Heritage Protocol program. Each of these

entities sees the friend raising/fundraising potential in reconnecting with this aspect of their alumni base. Alumni might have their favorite departments, schools, colleges, or sports, but they all seem to have a love for the history of the university and a feeling that its history is worth preserving.

I attend Alumni Association luncheons and reunion type events, setting up a display table with “road show” materials from the archive. And don't underestimate the power that conjuring up thoughts of the old days has on a graduate's heartstrings (and purse strings). The Alumni Association has established the category of emeritus alumni for those that have graduated 50 years ago or more, and every year we celebrate the entry of the next class into this category. The fact of the matter is that the alumni, especially the emeritus alumni, are the number one fans of the project and my target constituency. These people want to know what is going on with the program and how they can get involved.

I send out newsletters and have an online photograph database to look for all of the possible ways to engage with them (and continue to raise awareness of the program). Every newsletter or mention in the local newspaper results in a flurry of communications and, ultimately, donations. Alumni participation, either passively or through donations, invests them more heavily in the outcome of the project, and ultimately the university.

As another unintended consequence, the program is helping to raise awareness within the current student body. I work with the History Department's Public History Methods students, teaching them to arrange, describe, and create finding aides for collections within the archive. I also have them digitize photographs and create the metadata for those scanned images so that they can be uploaded into the online photograph database. This gives them hands-on experience at processing collections, while at the same time raising the profile of the program within the student community, hopefully resulting in original research and scholarship originating

from within the collection. It is enjoyable to work with the students and get them excited about the archival aspects of their assignments, however, my ulterior motive is to raise awareness with the students where I think it will be the most productive: the FSU History Department. We have done other things, such as creating a reading room/display area devoted to the resources of the collection. Heritage Protocol is also very involved in the annual Heritage Day celebration, and the current movement to create an FSU History Museum. Again, these all help to engage alumni, and raise awareness within the current student population about the history of their university.

I guess what I want to make clear is that a university archives should be considered more than a warehouse for administrative records, and it offers potential for development in other aspects of engagement for both current students and alumni. If one defines the university archives as simply the repository that holds the administrative records of the institution, then my alma mater's university librarian was correct, and there is probably no need for a university archivist at this time. But, if one believes that there is more to it and that there should be an active/aggressive effort to acquire materials from former students that document their experiences at the school,

then a university archivist is needed. And if, "not now," I would say, "then when?" In 10 years, 20 years, or another 50 years?

For FSU, our first 50 years are essentially the dark ages of our history. We have virtually no records from that era. And we have no idea what it was like to be a student on the "campus" at that time. We have little insight as to what the students did for fun or what the routine of college life was like. And the unfortunate fact of the matter is once records and artifacts from bygone eras are lost, they are gone forever. In our position now, we cannot redouble our efforts and work extra hard to recoup our losses because it is too late.

So, if my undergraduate alma mater chooses to wait another 10, 20, or 50 years to begin an aggressive campaign to document its cultural history, how much of its history will be lost? How many attics in the region have university-related materials sitting in them? How much has already been thrown away? And how much will be thrown away by the time the university archivist position is created?

I can tell you from experience that FSU waited way too long to care about its history. I am now just trying to play catch-up and save what remains. Let us hope that my undergraduate alma mater does not make the same mistake. ♪

("Mobile technologies for libraries" continued from page 225)

the library's social media profiles. *Access:* <http://m.library.ucr.edu>.

• **Virginia Tech University Libraries.**

A simple but effective layout offers important information, such as library hours, contact information, catalog search, and library maps. *Access:* <http://m.lib.vt.edu/>.

Notes

1. International Telecommunications Union, Market Information and Statistics Division Telecommunication Development Bureau, "ITU estimates two billion people

online by end 2010," news release, October 19, 2010, International Telecommunications Union, www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press_releases/2010/39.aspx (accessed March 9, 2011).

2. International Telecommunications Union, Market Information and Statistics Division Telecommunication Development Bureau, "ITU sees 5 billion mobile subscriptions globally in 2010," news release, February 15, 2010, International Telecommunications Union, www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press_releases/2010/06.aspx (accessed March 9, 2011). ♪