CASE #1

An Online Exhibit:
A Tale of Triumph and Tribulation

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OVERVIEW:

The case study details online exhibit challenges experienced at the Women and Leadership Archives, Loyola University Chicago, and involves two specific aspects of the judgment portion of the [SAA Code of Ethics](#).

- Archivists should carefully document their collections-related decisions and activities to make their role in the selection, retention, or creation of the historical record transparent to their institutions, donors, and users.
- Archivists are encouraged to consult with colleagues, relevant professionals, and communities of interest to ensure that diverse perspectives inform their actions and decisions.

Online exhibits of archival collections are an excellent way to highlight records, in addition to raising visibility and increasing access to the archives. Transparency and collaboration are important for any exhibit, perhaps more so for on-line exhibits given the reach and visibility of the internet. Significant aspects of judgment are required when creating an exhibit to make clear to online visitors the reasons for selection of certain records over others. Consultation with communities of interest helps to include diverse perspectives that in turn, inform actions and decisions regarding the exhibit.

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Advocacy | Authority/Mandate | Exhibitions | Politics | Representation | Student Records | User Relationships

Introduction and Institutional Context

The Women and Leadership Archives (WLA) is part of Loyola University Chicago, a Catholic Jesuit institution located on the Northside of Chicago. Founded in 1993, the WLA grew out of a desire to keep the spirit of Mundelein College alive. Mundelein College began in 1930 by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) and provided education to women until 1991 when it affiliated with nearby Loyola University Chicago. After the affiliation the need arose to preserve the records of Mundelein College. Due to Mundelein's strong tradition of nurturing and producing leaders, it also seemed fitting to carry on that legacy through an archive that collected the papers of women leaders.

Organizationally the WLA is part of the Ann Ida Gannon, BVM, Center for Women and Leadership (hereafter referred to as the Gannon Center) and the Loyola University Libraries. The WLA is staffed by a Director and three graduate students from Loyola University's public history program. Because of a dual funding structure, the WLA Director reports to both the Dean of the Libraries and the Gannon Center Director. At times, the WLA has utilized undergraduate and graduate student workers, interns, and volunteers.

The WLA collects, preserves, and makes available the records of women leaders and organizations founded by or focused on women. Collection areas of strength include social justice, women religious, and women in business, politics, the arts, and education. The WLA primarily focuses on women and organizations in Chicago and the Midwest, particularly the Great Lakes area. While many collections are geographically linked to Chicago and the Midwest, often the organizations and individuals have had a national or international impact. The largest and most used collection is that of Mundelein College.

Mundelein alumnae are an active part of the Gannon Center and the WLA. An alumnae board, in conjunction with the Gannon Center, plans various annual activities, such as a fall reunion, Christmas Vespers, and a spring tea. Alumnae are prime monetary supporters of the Gannon Center and also support the WLA through collection donations. They have a strong connection to the WLA because it preserves Mundelein's history. Many alumnae refer to it as "our archives."

In fall 2013, the WLA launched an online exhibit, *Activist Mundelein*, as part of a grant project. The exhibit examined social activism at Mundelein College from WWII to 1970 using oral histories, documents, and photos. Graduate students from Loyola's public history program planned and executed the exhibit, under the supervision of a newly hired WLA Director. Negative reaction to the exhibit from several Mundelein alumnae resulted in closer examination of documents used and subsequent revision of parts of the exhibit.

Archival collections are more accessible through digital access, in turn becoming open to closer evaluation and criticism. Documentation and presentation of archival exhibit decisions, always important, is even more vital given the reach of the internet. The issues in this case study fall under two specific aspects of the judgment portion of the SAA Code of Ethics:

Archivists should carefully document their collections-related decisions and activities to make their role in the selection, retention, or creation of the historical record transparent to their institutions, donors, and users. Archivists are encouraged to consult with colleagues, relevant professionals, and communities of interest to ensure that diverse perspectives inform their actions and decisions.

Narrative

Exhibit Development

Activist Mundelein grew from two grants, one from the Illinois State Historic Records Advisory Board (ISHRAB) and another from the BVMs. The ISHRAB funds provided for the digitization of a select portion of Mundelein College's audiovisual records of film, VCR tapes, cassette tapes, etc. The BVM grant focused on activities to use the newly transferred records. Funds from the BVMs provided $1,000 each to four graduate students from Loyola's graduate public history program. Under the BVM grant, the digitized files were to be loaded into ContentDm for accessibility, and used to create both an online exhibit and curriculum resources for middle and high school students.

Shortly after the grants were awarded, the WLA experienced a leadership change. A long-time director left in July, 2012. From then until early March, 2013, a graduate assistant served as interim director. Nancy Freeman became director in March, 2013, and over-saw the grants from that time forward.

Records were sent to the vendor in November, 2012 and the originals and newly created digital files returned to the WLA in April, 2013. The ISHRAB grant completion deadline was the end of the 2013 fiscal year, June 30, while the BVM grant ran until September, 2013. When the digitized files returned in April, work began in earnest to carry out both grants. Four graduate students were interviewed and hired in May, 2012. Given their funding, they could work roughly four to six weeks at 24 to 32 hours per week. Time was of the essence given the salary constraints and the deadline that all tasks needed to be completed by September, with enough done by July 1 to fulfill the ISHRAB grant portion of the project.

Over-all supervision of the project resided with the new WLA Director. The former interim director, by May a recently graduated Loyola alumni, continued on at the WLA, in part to provide continuity on the grant project as the new Director navigated relocating from Colorado to Illinois. Training for the students took place in late May and work began in earnest in early June.

Two of the four students entered the records into ContentDM, which involved briefly listening to or watching the files. Once a topic for the exhibit solidified, they also flagged files of interest. One student, with online exhibit creation experience, worked mainly on content and layout in

Omeka, an online exhibit program used by the public history department and Loyola's University Libraries. Another student assisted with the exhibit and used the new content to create curriculum for middle and high school students.

For the first four weeks of the project, weekly meetings took place with the six members of the team: the four graduate students, the former Interim Director, and the new Director. Team members updated each other on progress of their tasks. In addition, the meetings became the venue to discuss and work out the topic for the online exhibit. Choosing a topic proved complicated due to copyright issues with many of the digitized files. Loyola's legal department was consulted regarding the records. It quickly became apparent that to complete the online exhibit by the grant's deadlines meant only using audio from a series of oral histories conducted in the late 1990s of Mundelein College alumnae and former faculty and staff. The oral histories had clear deeds of gifts, and upon closer examination, provided a treasure trove of material.

The team chose to focus on the topic of social activism at Mundelein College from WWII to 1970, a pivotal year in the US and Mundelein's history. Organized by decade, the online exhibit detailed activism at Mundelein beginning in the 1940s to support WWII; membership in political groups in the 1950s; demanding more student involvement in the College and working for civil rights by marching in Selma, Alabama in the 1960s; and culminated in 1970 with the nation-wide student strike at many universities and colleges, including Mundelein, to protest US involvement in the Vietnam War and mark the tragedy at Kent State. On May 4, 1970 the National Guard opened fire during a demonstration at Kent State University, Ohio, killing four students and wounding nine others. Several weeks after the shootings at Kent State, hundreds of universities, colleges, and high schools closed due to student strikes. Mundelein students participated in the strike, although there was significant disagreement among students and faculty regarding the strike.

All team members worked diligently and the ISHRAB grant terms were sufficiently met by the July 1 deadline. By late August, both the digital files were entered into ContentDM and the curriculum component completed, and thus three team members left the WLA. The creation of the online exhibit took longer than expected and University Libraries provided funding for the exhibit team member to finish. By this time, she had a full-time job, and agreed to finish the online exhibit working offsite. Because the work would not be completed exactly in September, the BVMs granted an extension.

Community Response

In early October, the on-exhibit went live. Triumphantly, the grants were fulfilled: one by deadline and one with a slight extension. This felt like a major accomplishment given a new WLA director and the fact that team members were hired, trained, and completed almost all work within three months. An announcement went out on Thursday, October 10, on the WLA's Facebook page regarding the exhibit. Other publicity was slated for the next week.

On Wednesday, October 16, less than a week after the Facebook posting and with no other publicity, the Director of the Gannon Center called the WLA Director into her office. The Gannon Center Director received three calls, all involving criticism of the content of the online exhibit. Two were from Mundelein alumnae and one a significant potential donor. A third call came from a BVM. The main complaint involved the portion of the online exhibit called "Party Politicking" that highlighted Mundelein student involvement in the Young Republicans. Mundelein had a Young Democrats club but that was not included in the exhibit and two of the callers wanted to know the reasoning for that omission. Another criticism involved the section on the Conference on Curriculum and that another voice/opinion needed to be heard in the oral history section, specifically that of a BVM Mundelein Dean in the 1960s.

The Gannon Center Director needed to know the rational for highlighting only the Young Republicans so she could explain that to the people who called her. Plus, she asked for an investigation into changes to highlight both the Young Republicans and Young Democrats, and look into including the opinion of the BVM Dean.

Of interest, on October 10, the day the WLA posted on Facebook, a Mundelein alumnae commented that she was flattered to see her Young Republican's picture from 1962. She noted that Young Democrats were also very active: "we each received the "College Club of the Year" award from our respective political organizations." While this posting included a compliment, the alumnae noticed the omission of the Young Democrats.

In looking over notes and talking to several team members, the WLA Director discovered the reason for highlighting only the Young Republicans involved a major assumption on the part of the exhibit team. Because Mundelein was a liberal, Catholic college in predominantly Democratic Chicago, it seemed a given there were Young Democrats on campus in the late 1950s. Young Republicans on campus pointed out that Mundelein let all voices be heard. The assumption was that viewers of the online exhibit would intuitively realize Mundelein was a liberal college and would thus be supportive to Young Democrats. Young Republicans, on the other hand, perhaps would have been unusual on campus.

The WLA Director next e-mailed and talked extensively with the team member who did the majority of the exhibit content and design. She expressed concern that adding photos and information to placate viewers would change the narrative and tone of the exhibit. Rather, putting in additional information needed to be done in such a way as to add to the story, not detract as an afterthought or add on. In essence, that changes not occur made just to make people happy.

Conclusion

Institutional Response

To begin navigating a solution, the WLA Director delved into Mundelein's school newspapers and discovered that both the Young Republicans and Young Democrats organized in 1957 on

Mundelein's campus. In fact, by 1958, both groups met on 4:10 on Tuesdays. Photographs and newspaper articles abounded that told of each group's activities.

In addition, the WLA Director found there was no oral history of the BVM Dean from the 1960s. To add her story or opinion in some way would have changed the consistency and narrative of the exhibit, which primarily used oral histories, fleshed out with photos and newspaper articles. It just was not feasible to include the BVM Dean without major changes to the storyline.

Another aspect of the institutional response involved discussions between the WLA Director, WLA staff, and archival colleagues regarding an appropriate response to the situation. Clearly there were records to give equal time to Young Democrats, lack of material was not the issue. Rather, must all sides receive equal attention? Is it ethical, or desirable, to change something just because a few complain? Would adding Young Democrats be totally a political decision, one that ethically was not offensive?

Outcome

The WLA Director worked with the former online exhibit team member who, on her own time, made changes to the exhibit that included Young Democrats on the page. She felt satisfied that the additions worked contextually for the exhibit and were not just added on to make folks happy. In the end, the online exhibit highlights both groups, showing all voices on Mundelein's campus.

During the research and changes, the WLA Director talked to the Gannon Center Director frequently about what was workable and what wasn't. The changes did not happen in the original time frame of one week, first proposed by the Gannon Center Director. Rather, all revisions were made to the site in early November, a relatively quick turn-around given the research involved and the fact the majority of work on the Omeka site needed to be completed by a volunteer.

Discussion

Introduction

In hindsight, several missteps come to the foreground. Assumptions are not helpful in general and in this case, major assumptions occurred about what viewers know about Chicago politics. The exhibit team immersed themselves in Mundelein history and to everyone on the team, the assumption made sense. No one questioned focusing solely on the Young Republicans. No debate occurred regarding including both political sides.

Contextual Knowledge

It is important to consider how one contains and displays archival context within digital spaces. The manner in which archival materials are contextualized is a crucial aspect of information ethics issue. Contextualization provides intelligibility and clarity, and developing collections that maintain these characteristics assists in providing access to materials that can be interpreted in a responsible and reliable matter. For the archivist, the challenge is in determine what categories, and what depth, of contextual information is required to endow an exhibit with intelligibility.[1]

Of additional significance is the consideration of how archivists arrive at these decisions. What evidence should the archivist rely upon? What communities should be consulted? And in doing so, how does the archivist formulate a strategy for assembling a coherent structure that contains both contextual information, and the records themselves. These are challenging, but required, questions with which archivists developing online exhibits will be confronted. What matters most is remaining conscious of how the intention behind an exhibit could possibly be misunderstood or misinterpreted. In considering any fissures of possible misinterpretation, the archivist can identify any contextual gaps, flaws, or absences, and address them through the use of contextual data.

Archival Transparency

An exhibit is an assemblage of choices. Decisions are made to include and exclude specific objects, narratives, themes, and perspectives. Behind any archival action, there is a body of evidence that informs these choices. How much of this evidence should be made available to the viewer of an exhibit? How can this be accomplished in an unobtrusive manner? The events of this case illustrate how matters of archival transparency are of particular importance in the formulation and implementation of online exhibits.

Archivists, through their selection, arrangement, and design choices, become embedded within the architectures of their exhibits, they are not necessarily immediately present to curate, respond to questions, or offer commentary on how an exhibit was developed. The viewer engages with the archivist, primarily, through the interface, which displays the results of archival decision making. Offering a view of the archival perspective that informs an exhibit, in addition to revealing information regarding the archival institution's/archivist's intention, potentially allowing for the exhibit to be better understood, also offers a path into better understanding the nature of archival work.[2]

In addition to communicating to viewers how archival materials are represented and mediated, archivists themselves, become more transparent, allowing their interventions to be evaluated

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[1] Heather MacNeil, "Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor, " *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 271–274.

[2] Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002): 217.

and critiqued by the community that they serve. This provides for a more transparent archival practice. Again, the challenge for the archivist is in determining what degree of transparency is required, what information is necessary in order to be archivally transparent, and lastly, how this information will be structured within an exhibit.[3]

Issues of Selection

Selection issues and archival transparency are closely related. The reasons the team chose to highlight only the Young Republican and their records, should have been explicitly explained in the online exhibit. A short discussion of Mundelein's liberal, Catholic philosophy, in conjunction with Chicago politics, could have provided the viewer with needed information. Without explanation, the "Party Politicking" section clearly felt incomplete to some viewers.

Exhibits in Digital Spaces

While conceptually, physical and digital exhibits are similar, hosting an exhibit in a networked space presents particular opportunities and challenges. Digital technologies present archivists with opportunities for presenting collections and narratives in unique arrangements. Additionally, removed from a physical space, the capacity for engaging with both local and global communities is enhanced. More importantly, the potential exists for direct interaction with a larger, and more varied, audience, aiding in community building, while also permitting closer evaluation of archival practices.[4]

However, it is also important for archivists to consider the particular challenges involved in developing online exhibits. Because archivists may not be immediately accessible to their viewers, providing mechanisms that can support discourse between archivists and users is critical. Online exhibits necessitate that archivists evaluate the nature of the relationships that they are establishing, and how these relationships differ from those fostered in traditional archival spaces. Conceptualizing exhibits as tools for communication is useful in accomplishing this task, asking, what, and how, the exhibit communicates to an audience.[5] What is the intention of the exhibit? Is this intention communicated clearly? Addressing these questions can assist archivists in maintaining an understanding of what an exhibit communicates, and the extent to which this aligns with its intended function.

Community Engagement

Another mistake in *Activist Mundelein* involved a lack of awareness regarding a community of interest, in this case Mundelein alumna. They are an active, engaged group who follow the WLA's activities. The lack of awareness may have arisen from the fact the online exhibit team

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[3] Light and Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations," 223–225.

[4] Martin Kalfatovic et al., "Smithsonian Team Flickr: a library, archives, and museums collaboration in web 2.0 space," *Archival Science*, vol.8, no.4 (December 2008): 272–273.

[5] Paul Conway, "Modes of Seeing: Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced User," *American Archivist* 73 (Fall/Winter 2010): 427.

consisted of graduate students and a new WLA Director, none of whom knew the extent of the alumnae's passion regarding Mundelein's history. In hindsight, alumnae could have easily been involved throughout the creation of the exhibit. In fact, it may have been a richer, albeit perhaps different, story had they been consulted.

How should archivists' communities inform their archival practices during exhibit development? This is a defining question underpinning these archival decisions, and a critical concern of the archivists involved. In this case, the community dialog generated by the initial permutation of the exhibit came to inform its reformulation.

In evaluating the nature of the relationships that exist between archivists, exhibits, and their works, determining the nature of what, and how, community input should be used are key questions to consider during the initial stages of exhibit development. Secondly, having a strategy for facilitating and responding to public comment is advisable, both for encouraging community dialog, and also for determining if community input will potentially be used to inform reformulation of an exhibit, based on an exhibit's reception.[6]

When engaging with wider communities, one will not be able to necessarily anticipate the conversation that an online exhibit will foster. However, archivists can implement mechanisms to ensure that a healthy conversation is facilitated. More importantly, this engagement can permit archivists to develop stronger relationships with their community members, and learn from their reactions and perspectives.

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[6] Lyndon Ormond-Park and Robyn Sloggett, "Local archives and community collecting in the digital age," *Archival Science,* vol.8, no.2 (2012): 202–203.