

# HBCU Student Records: Understanding Experiences and Perspectives

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**Abstract:** Have you ever dreamed of being a part of a legacy? Some students attend a school for educational purposes, while others want to be accepted into a community of like-minded individuals who will help launch their careers. Yet, when a student attends a historically black college and university (HBCU), they achieve both paths while pursuing their academic degree. Consequently, not all history is being preserved. In my analysis, I have noticed that since the decline of University Publications, including the student newspaper and yearbooks, Prairie View A&M University has lacked the ability to gather modern-day information for future preservation. Hence, the purpose of my research is to combine community engagement and being aware of the importance of preservation. The study of contemporary archival collection development is stagnant in ways of improving based on the availability of archivists, especially in HBCUs. Through a quantitative survey analysis, I have reached out to various institutions to gather information on archival collection development practices and the availability of policies and procedures. My study revealed that due to the availability of archivists in these settings, some collections are in a huge backlog and not a concise analysis of campus student life records in one institution. Overall, I conclude that active community engagement with various organizations, faculty advisors, and outreach initiatives can gather the importance of cultural preservation to be in the Archives department rather than in the silo departments across the school campus.

## Introduction

During my first time working at an HBCU, I quickly learned about the importance of student research. Most of the students who came by the archives asked about two main topics: the university's history dating back to the late 1800s and the history of Divine Nine Greek Organizations. As a brand-new archivist and alumni of PWI (a predominately-white institution), I only knew about certain aspects of research requests but not Campus Student Life including student clubs and Greek organizations. The importance of student research was heavily into the lens of their everyday life on campus and the impact of student leadership, especially looking into the past students and their influence. With that being said, I was a new learner in this field of research and HBCU culture and eager to learn more and develop myself to be a better archivist and librarian.

## Historical Background

### *The Creation of HBCUs*

By the Federal Land Grant Act of July 2nd, 1862, each state received a land grant to endow at least one College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts (Greenleaf, 1928, v). The creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) traces back to the period following the Civil War, during the Reconstruction era (1865–1877). After the abolition of slavery, there was a significant push to provide African Americans with educational opportunities that were previously denied to them. Many HBCUs were founded in the 19th century, often by religious groups, philanthropists, and African American leaders, who recognized the importance of education for Black freedom, advancement, and social mobility.

Most importantly, Archivists who work on African American collections are increasingly more aware that traditional sites of African American agency and autonomy are becoming more unstable. The need to capture the perspectives and histories of these institutions is urgent (Powell, 2018, p.1). Despite challenges such as limited funding, segregation, and systemic racism, HBCUs have become an enduring

symbol of African American resilience and intellectual achievement, continuing to provide higher education to generations of Black students

*Responsibilities of being an HBCU Librarian or Archivist in the archives*

When I was first hired to be a processing archivist at HBCU, I did not know much about the culture of HBCUs so I had to realize that this is a different type of college and experience from any other institution. Most importantly, working in the archives is about collecting and preserving stories rather than just the University's history and manuscript papers. The importance of preserving African-American stories and those stories being told correctly is important nowadays and in the times that we are living in DEI and valuing representation in all platforms of all Races, religions, and cultures. In this perspective, I will be speaking on strictly the land can HBCUs in particular because we are historic as being the first HBCUs before there were privately owned HBCUs and similar institutions. It has been brought to my attention that historically HBCUs have lacked the support of the archives department and so most people who are hired into these positions or transfer into these positions often struggle to understand what is important and what is a priority to focus on for preservation. This is important to keep in mind when considering HBCUs and their archives because not everyone on staff went through a graduate archival education program or certification as the rules have changed throughout the years about becoming certified. Also, there has been a lack of training for HBCU archives staff to know how to process collections and create finding aids.

The challenges become more acute when communities recognize the need to preserve their legacies but do not have the resources or support to make it happen" (Powell, 2018, p.1). I noticed a large gap between knowing what to do and being able to have the time to preserve collections. Systemically, there has been a large backlog of collections at most institutions, but at HBCUs, the number grows even larger due to the smaller staff and changing staff. The responsibilities of a librarian or archivist in an HBCU have not changed but there is a challenge to keep up with statistics of research inquiries and the assessment of their storage areas. Hence, the importance of archival accessioning when it comes to the acquisition of active collections like campus student life has to be taken into account to keep a relationship with the student population.

**Problem Statement**

*Importance of HBCU Student Leadership & Contributions*

The issue I had come across as a Processing Archivist at an academic school for student researchers is the lack of representation of Campus Student Life Records being collected for long-term preservation. There is a lack of literature available on understanding the Black Student experience at HBCUs and lesser knowledge on Archival Collection Development from public HBCU librarians & archivists in the United States. I gathered various articles from a Student Government Association (SGA) president (Smith 2020), a Black Greek Letter Organization member (Gunn 2015), and the historical significance of HBCUs (Greenleaf 1928) to compile an understanding of the importance of Black Student Leadership. The testimony of one HBCU student states, "Being an SGA president helped me identify my purpose on earth which is to help educate and uplift the Black community" (Smith, 2020, p.14). One of the main goals of Historically Black Colleges and Universities is to uplift and bring opportunities to inspiring students like Travis Smith. His theses about his experiences in the SGA at an HBCU transformed how I want this conversation of preserving Campus Student Life records to be even more important for all archivists.

*Lack of Representation in the University Archives Collection*

When I realized student researchers at my institution wanted records on student-related clubs and organizations, I wondered if other institutions collect Campus Student Life records rather than yearbooks. I sent an anonymous survey on LinkedIn and SAA listservs asking about archival collection development and collections on student clubs and organizations. The responses I received from all institutions were that they do not actively collect Campus Student Life records. If I were to speak in data terms, all institutions collected less than 10% of student clubs and organizational records. The most common form of donations or pictures and artifacts, which is surprising since most archives are document-based but this race is the question of should HBCU archives be also considered a museum. This discovery questions the

acquisition of items at HBCUs in particular from any other archival institution because we collect more artifacts than documents at times depending on the subject like an academic program, faculty or staff research, and sporting programs.

Yet, some archivists do not have the time to do outreach initiatives to collect Student Life records, and/or there is a lack of staff in these departments to actively do outreach. Historically, public HBCUs have had a lack of support when it comes to the archives of preserving and collecting materials, keeping retention of staff, and training of staff to preserve collections. So, as we are in 2024 the importance of preserving African American collections is vital to the community and telling our own stories, especially the stories of students while they are in school. The inquiry of student researchers at Prairie View A&M University is strictly about sororities, fraternities and student clubs in the past. This issue can be resolved by coming up with several solutions to encourage engagement within the community to work with the archives department on campus to preserve their contributions and stories and recognize the importance of their club and organization.

### **Results**

Since I presented at the SAA Research Forum, this research, unfortunately, came to a halt when no one responded to my inquiries on collection development in archival institutions. I am not submitting a research article due to the lack of results. Hence, I want to offer a solution to hopefully open the door of conversation to preserve Campus Student Life Records at HBCUs.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout my assessment of archival accessioning at my institution, I have come up with a possible solution to help with the acquisition of Campus Student Life records at my HBCU. This solution can help multiple HBCUs who may be in the same position as a smaller staff. The implementation of HBCU student ambassadors in archives through volunteers or work-study students can be the first start to getting into the spaces of student events and outreach. This kind of program can help encourage students to help with digital archiving and storytelling through social media content and posts. For this program to work, Librarians and Archivists have to be intentional with reaching out to student clubs and organizations and letting them know that they are open to preserving their history and collecting any pictures/programs of some events from that organization.

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