

Understanding (Mis)perceptions of Archives and Archivists

Abstract

Recent scholarship on archival users has generally focused on current users of archives and has assumed a general knowledge of archives and archivists among both users and potential users. However, while the archival literature has largely ignored potential users and non-users, the library literature has shown the importance of better understanding these groups and offers a useful lens through which to view our own field.

"I don't know if you would call it a museum, but it felt like a museum, the archives, it feels like a museum" – U8

Research Objective

To understand how people think of archives and therefore be able to better communicate with and serve different populations on campus

"I don't even know what the archives are" – U5

Literature Review

- Archival Literature: there are scores of user studies (and a continued call to do more), but very few touch upon the potential users of archives ; they instead often focus on users' interactions with archival holdings and tools
- Library Literature: studies often consider non-users; many unaware of electronic resources; want convenience;

Methods

- Conducted 10 in-depth interviews with faculty members from the colleges (SKMC, JCN, JCP, JCPH, JCHP, JCGS)
- Half of interviewees had some knowledge/experience with archives and half had no experience
- Interviews were recorded, transcribed, analyzed for word frequency, coded using Nvivo
- Thirty-five codes were identified and expanded into a codebook. Those codes were then distilled to 3 primary themes

"Jefferson has such an old history, I think it's wonderful to save it. There's a good history and a bad history, and I think it's important to save both of that and have some good photos of that and materials. I just think history is important to save and I think it's appreciated down the road." – U4

Major Findings

- Collections + Functions Misunderstood: *the collections and functions of archives are not fully understood and are often conflated with libraries and museums*
- Education and Outreach Needed: *based on barriers to access and lack of knowledge of archives there is a pressing need for basic outreach and education about the purpose and functions of the archives*
- Archives Have Value : *archives are considered extremely valuable even when individuals are not sure what archives are or what they offer.*

"I think of file drawers, either vertical or the old fashioned ones. I think of letters, I think of discovery, hidden gems that are in there that you didn't know. I also think of physical objects, so I think of cases with physical objects in them." – U10

Conclusions

There is a surfeit of misconceptions about what archives preserve and what their purpose is. To combat this we need:

- educational campaigns and greater outreach initiatives
- to be more flexible to meet our constituents' expectations, even if that means re-defining what archives are and what they offer

"I did not realize that we had a specific archive, and I've always wanted to know about the history of the university." – U6

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