CASE #32

How Did We Get Here? Using Archives to Study College Selection and Belonging in the First-Year Experience

AUTHORS

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED BY THIS CASE STUDY

1.B. Articulate what might serve as primary sources for a specific research project within the framework of an academic discipline or area of study.

1.C. Draw on primary sources to generate and refine research questions.

2.E. Recognize and understand the policies and procedures that affect access to primary sources, and that these differ across repositories, databases, and collections.

3.B. Identify and communicate information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is.

4.C. Situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created; the author or creator; its format, genre, publication history; or related materials in a collection.

5.A. Examine and synthesize a variety of sources in order to construct, support, or dispute a research argument.

CASE STUDY LOCATION   Mount Holyoke College
South Hadley, MA
mtholyoke.edu

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Introduction and Institutional Context

This case study illuminates a collaboration between two core sites for cultivating self and community understanding at Mount Holyoke College: Archives and Special Collections (ASC) and the First-Year Seminar (FYSEM). The result was a new course, FYSEM-110MT: Measuring Merit: Who Belongs in College and Why?, designed to help first-semester undergraduates build a critical connection with their institutions via early exposure to primary sources related to organizational history. This case study shows how engagement with archival holdings on college admissions and student life can introduce foundational concepts in social science while supporting the retention and success of first-year students.

Mount Holyoke College (MHC) is a private liberal arts college in western Massachusetts with an undergraduate population of approximately 2,200 students. Founded as a women's seminary in 1837, it is the oldest of the Seven Sisters schools and now operates as a gender-diverse women's college. Known for its strong academics and community traditions, MHC pledges that "through an exploration of the arts, sciences, languages and humanities, we create an understanding of ourselves, our peers and the world around us."[1]

ASC serves as the locus of the college's nearly two-hundred-year history. Frequently used collections include extensive files on faculty, staff, alums, and student organizations, as well as the records of buildings and grounds, academic departments, and auxiliary campus offices. ASC is a popular and well-known campus asset: Students frequently visit for class sessions, individual research, and casual stop-ins to collect free zines and postcards on MHC history. ASC's crowded monthly Crafternoons, occasional game nights, and the popular Haunted Mount Holyoke Halloween Tour also anchor the archives and MHC history in student life.

A cornerstone of the MHC experience, FYSEMs are taught on a range of topics by faculty across the disciplines. These small seminars, capped at sixteen students, ensure that all first-year students share a structured introduction to college-level critical thinking, discussion, and writing. Many FYSEMs also introduce the "hidden curriculum" of higher education: the norms and practices required for college success that are not reflected in the formal curriculum, including standards for professional and scholarly communication, project management, and teamwork.[2] FYSEM teachers often partner with campus learning centers, resources, and support staff to introduce opportunities for experiential learning and help establish expectations around scholarly and professional communication.

Mirroring the FYSEM's comprehensive approach to introductory college study, the archival learning objects selected for this pilot strategically span all five categories of archival literacy. This case study provides a valuable model of curricular collaboration between a sociologist and a college archivist that uses institutional self-study to introduce foundational social-science concepts that can empower students as they adjust to college.

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[1] "Mount Holyoke College," Mount Holyoke College, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/.
[2] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice, 2nd ed. (SAGE, 1990), first published in French in 1970.

Narrative

Offered during the Fall 2024 semester, FYSEM-110MT: Measuring Merit: Who Belongs in College and Why? invited new students to explore sociological research by critically reflecting on a recent experience they all shared: applying to college. This was an opportunity to explore the social underpinnings of taken-for-granted bureaucratic processes using primary sources. In collaboration with ASC, Measuring Merit offered students ways to develop their sociological imaginations while finding their place at MHC. Using archival documents representing the school's deliberation, policy, and publicity, participants considered the ways the ideal college student has been socially constructed and how this ideal has changed over time.

By studying their own college, students were empowered to consider how seemingly individual feelings such as "belonging," which impacts college retention and success, have a social dimension.[3] By identifying appropriate primary archival sources to address this topic from a disciplinary perspective (1.B.) and guiding students to generate and refine research questions using these sources (1.C.), the authors created opportunities to discover that belonging is not fixed or neutral but rather constantly being made and remade.

Selecting Sources and Building the Assignment

Exploring college admissions quickly introduced students to the challenges of recognizing that not all primary sources can be accessed as a matter of policy (2.E.). What archivists know well but students had to confront was that the most obvious sources—individual applications and admissions files—are completely inaccessible due to privacy limitations. Moreover, individual repositories, especially private ones, can shape and determine their own access embargos, keeping records closed for varying periods. Learning what we could not access (and why) necessarily prompted students to creatively reapproach college admissions by asking: What *is* accessible, and how do we interpret that material?

To cultivate understanding of primary sources in cultural and historical contexts (4.C.), the authors curated four- to five-item kits containing diverse sources grouped by decade for students to explore in small teams. Studying and synthesizing a letter, a recruitment pamphlet, and a committee report from the same decade challenged students to consider how new ideas about meritocracy reshaped college in the United States after World War II, a central theme in their assigned course reading.[4] Students were invited to observe that while MHC publicizes many programs designed to enhance diversity, like many selective schools, it remains a predominantly white institution. Source kits were designed to foster analysis of how MHC envisioned its ideal student body during four time periods, with some decade overlap: the 1940s–1950s (the introduction of meritocratic selection), the 1960s–1970s (a period of advocacy for change and diversification of college populations and college curricula), the 1970s–1980s (the formalization of minority recruitment efforts), and the 1980s–1990s (the conflict over affirmative action).

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[3] Melissa Mangino, "Students' Sense of Belonging Matters: Evidence from Three Studies" (blog report on lecture by Maithreyi Gopalan), MIT Teaching + Learning Lab, February 16, 2023, https://tll.mit.edu/sense-of-belonging-matters.
[4] Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

The archival component of the course began in late October, exactly midway through the semester. Students had sufficient time to acclimate to one another and to course concepts, goals, and expectations. Students were assigned to teams of three to four and received a copy of the project assignment several days before their class visit to ASC (Appendix 1). The assignment included questions designed to orient students to archival research and the role their source kits would play in understanding the history of admissions in their assigned time period. These questions included:

- What admissions-related sources are available?
- What context do admissions-related records emerge from?
- What are the main objectives of these documents?
- What issues are important in these documents, and what topics are absent?
- How do these documents relate to the themes of the course (history of meritocracy, selective college admissions, quantification/measurement, racial inclusion/exclusion)?

Structure of Time in the Archives

The initial ASC visit was scheduled for a full seventy-five-minute class period and structured to orient students to archival research (Figure 1). The archivist provided an introduction to the archives and the overall scope of collections. To provide a model of archival research skills growth, an MHC junior gave a short presentation on a recently completed research project that had required traveling to local college archives to review admissions collections. This presentation included firsthand stories of frustrations related to access limits articulated in objective 2.E. (in particular, not being able to find blank college applications). It also emphasized the importance of working with available and accessible sources, including organizational statistics, language in committee reports, and publicity materials. This pivot helped students identify and communicate

Figure 1: The initial class visit to Archives and Special Collections

information in the primary sources and the contexts in which they were produced (3.B.) and set up the core activity: exploring the items in their group's source kit (see Appendix 2).

The session goal was for students to gain comfort and fluency with primary sources—skills they would develop further in their group presentations and papers. Following a brief overview of safe archival handling, students were introduced to the same types of sources the MHC junior had been working with: a mix of internal documents (such as admissions committee reports and communications, which are closed for twenty-five years from the date of creation) and public-facing materials (such as recruitment pamphlets and other promotional materials). To aid in objective 3.B., the archivist prepared a worksheet for the session (Appendix 3). Each student spent ten minutes individually studying one source and answering questions on the front of their worksheet, including:

- Describe your source. What is it? When is it from? Who is the intended audience?
- What is the most interesting aspect of this source? Identify one meaningful change or difference you see between the time your source was created and the present moment.

To begin the work of constructing an argument using analysis of individual documents (5.A.), groups then spent twenty minutes sharing and discussing their sources, guided by additional questions on the reverse side of the worksheet, including:

- How do your sources relate to one another? What can we learn from considering them both individually and as a group?
- Based on your sources, who do you think would be an ideal MHC student at this time? What qualifications and attributes might they possess?
- What stories does MHC seem to be telling about the makeup of its student body during this time?
- What questions does this set of sources spark for you?

Students quickly noticed dialogue between their sources and raised questions about the landscape of college admissions during their assigned time period. For instance, the group working with the 1960s–1970s materials understood that this was a time of increasing concern for diversity in MHC admissions, specifically around recruiting African American and Jewish students. Studying a flagged page in the director of admissions' annual report from 1973, they noted statistics and demographics on the incoming class. Comparing a general recruitment pamphlet from the mid-1960s, which featured very little diversity, with one from the early 1970s, which spoke specifically about Black experience at MHC, they evaluated outreach efforts to recruit from a historically marginalized demographic. A pair of letters between the director of admissions and a high-school student angry about limitations to financial aid at the college also piqued questions about economics in college access.

The session ended with ten minutes of discussion wherein each group shared one key insight or interesting aspect of a primary source from their table. The archivist delivered instructions for scheduling their group follow-up visits to access the source kits for further analysis.

Results

Students in this FYSEM spent significantly more time in ASC than students in most other classes. Following the initial class visit to ASC, students returned with their groups at least once; some groups visited several times. At least once, two groups met in ASC at the same time, resulting in organic cross-group conversation and resource sharing. Structuring this assignment around groups encouraged a paradigm of discovery that invited reflective, collaborative, and inquiry-oriented treatment of sources in context, supporting learning objectives 3.B. and 4.C. With student consent, this led to a social-media moment wherein a member of the group responsible for the 1940s–1950s clearly articulated some of the course's learning goals: "I like uncovering rare documents and previously unknown information but the challenge is in interpreting sometimes ambiguous information" (Figure 2).

Figure 2: MHC ASC Instagram post (with student names redacted), Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections (@mhcarchives), "Tuesday was a busy day of student research in the archives! . . .," Instagram, November 21, 2024

To meet the goals of this writing intensive FYSEM, the six weeks of archival work culminated in a four- to six-page group paper creatively synthesizing primary sources to make original interpretive arguments. The provided source kits allowed the authors to target their project scaffolding and provide guidance on the sociological relevance of the archival materials (1.B.). This encouraged each group to state and revise clear research questions (1.C.) and to engage in argumentation that used primary sources to verify or amend scholarly themes related to the rise of meritocratic selection in US higher education (5.A.). In order to build these written arguments, the course required students to deliver group presentations in the weeks leading up to the paper submission. These presentations provided particularly rich opportunities for students to engage with and communicate the contents of primary sources (3.B.) and situate them in the historical context in which they were produced (4.C.).[5]

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[5] For more illustration of the power of student presentations in this series, see also Rhia Rae, Molly Castro, and Annia Gonzalez, "Teaching the History of Higher Ed through Primary Sources and Digital Exhibits," *Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources*, Case 26, April 2024, https://www2.archivists.org/publications/epubs/Case-Studies-Teaching-With-Primary-Sources.

3.1: "1940s–1950s Mount Holyoke College Admissions"

3.2: "Diversity in Practice at Mount Holyoke College in the 1960s and 1970s"

3.3: "MHC Admissions and Recruitment Strategies of the 1970–1980s"

3.4: "A Comprehension of the Mount Holyoke Archives: Admissions Policies during the 1980s–1990s"

Figure 3: Titles and example slides from student presentations

The four presentations were the products of each group's collective synthesis of their archival sources and the application of course readings and class discussions to the study of their own college (Figure 3). Group 1, tasked with the 1940s–1950s, sought connection with the more distant past through comparisons between MHC now and then. Engaging with the impacts of the civil rights and liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Group 2 emphasized the ways MHC had to diversify its recruitment materials to appeal to more than one type of ideal student. Group 3 pursued these ideals into the crisis that coeducation precipitated for women's colleges in the 1980s, and Group 4 situated their study of the 1990s in a social context of a reemerging wave of student activism on campuses. Highlights from the presentations showed the students' investment in the material. Group 2 went so far as to locate and contact the aforementioned teenage critic of the college's financial-aid policies in the 1970s, eager for her added perspective on the source (which she couldn't recall writing, but she thanked the students for reminding her).

Class discussion around the presentations was honest, lively, humorous, and deeply engaged. At one point, a student directly asked her classmates if they had all desired to go to a historically women's college, prompting candid sharing and reflection of their individual stories of making their way to MHC. This positive engagement elicited by the archival project was evident in course evaluations. More than half of the students who completed evaluations mentioned the archival

assignment as having a positive impact on their overall experience. Selected feedback on this portion of the course included:

> The assignments also forced us to practice important skills for a successful college experience such as . . . doing archival research.

> The group [archival] project consisted of a group essay and presentation . . . [that was] a learning experience for sure. We also had three "field trips" during the course, including trips to . . . the archives. These trips were very engaging and were nice "breaks" from regular class time without wasting valuable time.

Measuring Merit was a new course, and the instructor had not previously used the college archives to create a significant group project. In spite of this, the positive feedback and high levels of engagement evidenced in students' responses helped reinforce many of the course design decisions. Those that worked particularly well included beginning the archival experience with a presentation from an advanced student with archival research experience, a commitment to group work, and the prioritization of public presentations as methods of evaluation. This experience also helped identify the opportunities for growth discussed below.

Lessons Learned

This collaboration grew out of a shared interest in leveraging college archives to study and cultivate belonging. As with any new multidimensional course, future iterations will require refinement and consolidation of class components and core ideas, particularly those related to the archival project. Next time, the archival research can be introduced and grounded sooner in the semester with more support from readings on archival topics. Future offerings of this course could also build in more evaluation and feedback, specifically around the archival learning goals articulated here. This might involve pre- and post-course surveys to measure student learning and identify questions, curiosities, and concerns to address in future iterations of this course. Because students seemed inclined to reflect on their experiences in the archives, the next iteration of the course will likely include a short written-reflection exercise.

This case study presents a successful collaborative model that draws on the richness of college archives to accomplish core objectives of many introductory social-science courses. Having been admitted and recruited with the message that they belong at their new school, students quickly learn that belonging is more easily accomplished for some students than for others. Using archival collections and sociological tools, this class introduces students to the work of understanding how a particular institution has defined belonging and revised these understandings in response to pressure over time, as well as how feelings such as belonging are shaped by collective processes. This model can be recreated at other institutions through collaborations between archival staff and faculty and/or engaged professionals in offices of student life. Not only will these efforts open up new avenues for cross-disciplinary learning, they can empower students to think differently about their early college experience and, ultimately, may even foster belonging, retention, and college success.

Appendix 1: Assignment

Prof. Ben Gebre-Medhin
Dept. of Sociology & Anthropology
Mount Holyoke College, Fall 2024

Measuring Merit (FYSEM-110MT)
Tue & Thur, 10:30-11:45a, Porter 108
Office hours accessible via Pathways

Group Project: MHC Archives (20 pts)

Due dates available on Moodle

Archives are among the most important sources of information about the organizational, cultural, and social dynamics of the past. As repositories of primary documents, collected and curated over hundreds of years, archives serve as important sources of knowledge for groups and individuals that have had the resources to maintain these collections. In this assignment you will work in small teams to inspect the history of Mount Holyoke via collections found in the College archives. Once in teams, you'll focus on one of four time periods (1940s–1950s, 1960s–1970s, 1970s–1980s, 1980s–1990s) to analyze how selective college admission has evolved at Mount Holyoke over time.

Questions

- What admissions related sources are available? What context do they emerge from?
- What are the main objectives of these documents?
- What issues are important in these documents, and what topics are absent?
- How do these documents relate to the themes of the course (history of meritocracy, selective college admissions, quantification/measurement, race inclusion/exclusion)?

Requirements

- Submissions must be made through Moodle in PDF format.
- Papers should be 4–6 double spaced pages with roughly 12pt font and 1 inch margins.
- In-text citations should be used, and a list of works cited should be attached.
- Presentations should be 10–15 minutes and present your main results in context.

Evaluation

Successful group projects will accomplish the following objectives, which are weighted to demonstrate the priority of each component:

4 pts - Overall effectiveness in communicating ideas which address assignment questions.
3 pts - Engagement with the assigned material and themes of the course.
2 pts - Ability to effectively contextualize the individual documents that you analyzed.
2 pts - Clear and effective thesis statement.
1 pts - Clear and effective introduction.
1 pts - Clear and effective conclusion.
1 pt   - Correct use of in-text citations and a works cited section.
4 pt   - Presentation of final results.
2 pts - Peer evaluations.

1 of 1

Appendix 2: Pull List

FYSEM: Measuring Merit – Fall 2024
Archives and Special Collections Visit 10/31/25

Pull List

Table One: 1940s–1950s

Mount Holyoke: Everybody's College, 1948	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 5 (Publications); Box 10; Folder 2
The Liberal Education at Mount Holyoke College	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 5 (Publications); Box 10; Folder 3
Report from the Board of Admissions 1946–47	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 3 (Reports); Box 4; Folder 5
Report from the Board of Admissions, June 30, 1960	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 3 (Reports); Box 4; Folder 6

Table Two: 1960s–1970s

Report of the Director of Admissions, 1973	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 3 (Reports); Box 5; Folder 2
MHC: New Directions "View Book," ca. 1964	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 5 (Publications); Box 10; Folder 5
Black Experience at MHC pamphlet (1971?)	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 5 (Publications); Box 10; Folder 6
Letters Between N. Pellaton and Clara Ludwig, November–December 1973	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 2 (Correspondence); Box 4; Folder 1

Table Three: 1970s–1980s

"Dear Alumna" Minority Recruitment Effort Letter, December 1979	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 4 (Subject Files); Box 9; Folder 11, "Minority Students"
Report of the Director of Admissions 1983–84	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 3 (Reports); Box 5; Folder 11
Social Sciences at MHC Pamphlet, 1970s	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 5 (publications); Box 10; Folder 6
"Keeping up with Youth" Column Correspondence, 1973	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 4 (Subject Files); Box 9; Folder 20, "public relations"

Table Four: 1980s–1990s

Report of the Director of Admissions, 1996	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 3 (Reports); Box 6; Folder 11
Now It's Your Turn to Make History Recruitment Pamphlet, 1990s	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 5 (Publications); Box 10; Folder 8
Using the Class Profile as a Tool for Conversation, 1993	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 1 (General Info); Box 3; Folder 3
Admissions Shortfalls and Budget Deficits: Report to Faculty, October 22, 1991	Mount Holyoke Admissions Office Records; Series 1 (General Info); Box 3; Folder 4

Appendix 3: Learning Object

A Source Is an Information Container
Consider Your Source

1. Describe your source. What is it? When is it from? Who is the intended audience?

2. Identify one meaningful change or difference you see between the time your source was created and the present moment:

3. Identify one meaningful constant or similarity between then and now:

4. What is the most interesting aspect of this source?

1

Questions for your Table:

1. How do your sources relate to one another? What can we learn from considering them both individually and as a group?

2. Based on your sources, who do you think would be an ideal MHC student at this time? What qualifications and attributes might they possess?

3. What stories does MHC seem to be telling about the makeup of its student body during this time?

4. What questions does this group of sources spark for you?

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