

# Understanding History, Building Trust, and Sharing Appraisal Authority: Engaging Underrepresented Student Groups through Culture Centers

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**ABSTRACT:** Appraisal of student records is an essential part of building a complete narrative of a university's history. Within this process, it is important to capture the experiences of underrepresented student groups. A rich source of documentation of both student life and campus diversity comes from the records produced by university cultural student clubs, cultural houses, and sororities and fraternities with historically BIPOC membership. The formation, activities, and dissolution of cultural student organizations can help to shape an understanding of a university's demographic, social, and political history. Working with and building relationships with organization advisors and student members is important for forming good appraisal decisions about the records they produce. This article examines two case studies of appraisal projects involving the Ethnic Student Center at Western Washington University and the Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It also includes an analysis of the appraisal of records of cultural student organizations and discusses the importance of working with stakeholders and understanding ownership of records.

## Introduction

Appraisal of student records and building trust with student organizations is an essential part of developing a complete narrative of a university's history. Within this process, it is important to capture the experiences of underrepresented student groups. A rich source of documentation of both student life and campus diversity comes from the records produced by university student clubs, cultural houses, and sororities and fraternities with historically BIPOC membership. The formation, activities, and dissolution of cultural student organizations can help to shape an understanding of a university's demographic, social, and political history. Working with and building relationships with organization advisors and student members is important to forming good appraisal decisions for the records they produce. This process can engage stakeholders in appraisal decisions and enables archivists to develop an understanding of the context of the records, which are important, and which are considered confidential or sensitive. Creating these relationships can also help archivists understand how students view the ownership of the records they produce. While a retention schedule may classify university-affiliated student organization records as university records, many students may interpret them as belonging solely to the organization and its

members. These differing views of ownership can affect the appraisal process and potentially strengthen or damage relationships with these student groups.

This article examines examples from appraisal projects with the Ethnic Student Center at Western Washington University and the Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These projects involved established culture centers on university campuses, along with student clubs and organizations, both official and external. This article also discusses the appraisal of records of cultural student organizations and the importance of working with stakeholders in making appraisal decisions, understanding ownership of records, working with and without retention schedules for student organization records, and, ultimately, building and sustaining relationships with underrepresented communities. Underrepresented or marginalized communities have often been neglected by mainstream archival collections. These case studies will demonstrate how collaborative work between archivists and stakeholders from these communities can foster mutually beneficial relationships that can strengthen archival programs when more cultural communities are included in archival holdings.

## Literature Review

The importance of including student life records in the appraisal and collection of university records is well documented. Helen Willa Samuels's 1992 publication *Varsity Letters* strongly advocates for the collection of student life materials by university archives, and the chapter "Foster Socialization" focuses entirely on the documentation of student social life.<sup>1</sup> In her 2013 article, Jessica Wagner's survey of college and university archivists about student life documentation reflects the prevalent view of the value of student life materials.<sup>2</sup> Student life archival programs, such as those at The Ohio State University, Iowa State University, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, highlight the importance of student records in research, preservation of collective memory, and community building.

There are challenges in trying to document student populations and their activities. Sarah Buchanan and Kathie Richardson's article, "Representation through Documentation: Acquiring Student and Campus Life Records through the Bruin Archives Project," and Ellen Swain's "College Student as Archives' Consultant? A New Approach to Outreach and Programming on Campus" both describe methods of engaging students in archival literacy and performing outreach initiatives for collection development of student records.<sup>3</sup> These articles also highlight the challenges of working with students, noting the limited years students spend on campus, thus limiting networking initiatives. Jessica Wagner and Debbi Smith note that "capturing these materials is like hitting a moving target. Students are only enrolled for an average of four years, and they arrive and leave every semester."<sup>4</sup> Chris Prom and Ellen Swain also acknowledge the difficulties of documenting student groups because of the "transient nature of student populations—student organizations form and dissolve frequently and their leaders hold office only

briefly.”<sup>5</sup> The ebb and flow of the student population emphasizes the need for strong communication between archivists and student groups.

Many studies and conversations have been conducted to find methods to increase the inclusivity of cultural groups, more commonly known as underrepresented groups, in higher education spaces. In the 1970s, scholars Howard Zinn, Gerald Ham, and Gould Colman challenged historians and archivists to consider more inclusive approaches to their work. In “The Archival Edge,” Ham argued that “responses to changing patterns in the pursuit of history, and the increase of other studies once considered outside the proper use of archives, are a temporary corrective. . . . Small wonder then, that archival holdings too often reflected narrow research interests rather than the broad spectrum of human experience.”<sup>6</sup> Gould and Zinn mirrored Ham’s response, challenging archivists and historians to consider more inclusivity regarding archival collections, both culturally and politically.<sup>7</sup> Zinn’s, Ham’s, and Colman’s calls for increased diversity initiatives for underrepresented groups in the archives resonate with many archivists. In more recent scholarship, archivists have explored hands-on approaches to increase the acquisition of student records. Brian Keough’s “Documenting Diversity: Developing Special Collections of Underdocumented Groups” describes the documentation project conducted at the University of Albany to increase the acquisition of community records of underrepresented groups. Keough also expresses the importance of forming a network with various members of the communities, such as potential donors, and student research pertaining to underrepresented communities. Additionally, Keough encourages archivists and/or an advisory board to such projects to consider keeping in contact with those who might hesitate to donate materials because of an unfamiliarity with the archives.<sup>8</sup>

Another avenue that has received limited attention is outreach to alumni groups. In the article “Filling in the Gaps: Using Outreach Efforts to Acquire Documentation on the Black Campus Movement, 1965–72,” Lae’l Hughes-Watkins addresses the importance of reaching out to alumni of underrepresented communities to increase collection development to provide a more complete narrative of university history.<sup>9</sup> Hughes-Watkins notes that “Strengthening these bonds will in turn create important relationships for generations and will serve as the foundation for what is one of the most important goals of the archives community—democracy!”<sup>10</sup> Despite various challenges, such as outdated contact information, and concerns of potential donors, Hughes-Watkins’s outreach efforts demonstrate how alumni can help fill in gaps in archival collections with their personal papers and records.

Kathryn M. Neal provides further guidance in the documentation of underrepresented populations on higher education campuses. Neal urges the need for sensitivity when dealing with diverse populations, quoting from Cesar Caballero about the distrust and conflict between Latinx populations and educational institutions and, by extension, archives, to understand the relationship that diverse populations sometimes have with universities.<sup>11</sup> This illustrates an important point that the history between a university and its underrepresented groups is not always an easy one. Past and ongoing discrimination,

segregation, and exclusion of student groups add another layer of complexity that archivists need to be aware of.

Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, Anne Gilliland, Mario H. Ramirez, and others have highlighted community archives' role in filling in the gaps of underrepresented communities. Initiatives involving input from community members allow trust and control of records that are not always found in "mainstream" archives. Their focus on community archiving emphasizes the value of coming to communities deserving increased visibility, and their efforts provide intersections for college and university archives to consider modeling. In "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives," Caswell and Cifor explain:

Creating space for the voices of communities that are often misunderstood, vilified, and/or deemed unable to speak for themselves and making those stories public, both within those communities and far beyond them, is key to building trust, honoring the voices and experiences of individuals whose stories are too often silenced, and upholding in the wider community our ethical relationships as archivists.<sup>12</sup>

Cifor and Caswell's discussions of radical empathy inspired additional conversations and literature. In a special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," the editors reflect on Cifor and Caswell's radical empathy: "while radical empathy is expansive, capacious, and responsive, it is also bound by its insistence upon uprooting structural harms, and it is about making intentional shifts and actions with the aim of transforming our systems."<sup>13</sup> In the issue, multiple authors discuss their approaches for treating the archives of and relationships with underrepresented communities with immense care. These candid articles emphasize the need to make archives and archival practices more inclusive to help bridge the gap of some archival silences.<sup>14</sup>

The literature of culture centers can be found in books and journals on the history of higher education pertaining to the late 1960s and early 1970s. African American studies professor Fred Hord's book, *Black Culture Centers: Politics of Survival and Identity*, is currently the only book that thoroughly discusses the history of Black culture centers and the efforts of Black students to create such spaces. Lori D. Patton's numerous works describe the importance of culture centers. Her coedited work, *Culture Centers in Higher Education*, describes the different types of culture centers on campuses with the goal of dispelling common myths about these centers: "Culture centers dedicate themselves to this work, which, for the most part, historically White institutions fail to do. It is our hope that in documenting the significance of these counterspaces, we contribute to ongoing struggles of survival and resistance in the margins of higher education."<sup>15</sup> Patton's dedication to documenting their history and the impact that culture centers make for underrepresented communities particularly at predominately white campuses is exemplary of how archivists at these institutions can consider filling in the gaps with these centers' rich records. In her book, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois*

1965-1975, Joy Williamson-Lott discusses the integral role of the Black cultural center's program development during the Black Power movement at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Much of Williamson-Lott's research for the book came from the University of Illinois Archives, including documents covering the Black Student Associations' demands for a Black cultural center. Author Kimberly Sanders's article, "Black Culture Centers: A Review of Pertinent Literature," provides literature on Black culture centers and discusses the emergence of multicultural centers. Sanders gives a brief history and provides studies and calls for additional research.<sup>16</sup>

While Hord, Patton, Williamson-Lott, and Sanders discuss the value of culture centers, these crucial spaces deserve more literature in academia, including from archivists. Some culture centers have existed for only a short period of time, yet archival literature should cover more fully their role in fostering safe spaces for many cultural groups on campuses, especially as many archivists at universities speak about the need for increased dedication to filling in the gaps. Culture centers have commonly emerged through student advocacy and are often incorporated as a part of the university. These centers, and their affiliated student groups, might be transferring their records to archives and archivists who have a limited understanding of their history and ongoing activism. Chaitra Powell, Holly Smith, Shanee' Murrain, and Skyla Hearn explain in their article, "This [Black] Woman's Work: Exploring Archival Projects that Embrace the Identity of the Memory Worker," that the "ethical practice of archival work necessitates that we 1) learn the history of the communities, 2) understand the relationship dynamics (institutional, intergroup, geographic), 3) identify gatekeepers and collaborators to ascertain the needs and manage expectations, and 4) defer to community knowledge."<sup>17</sup> Archivists' ethical duty is to educate themselves about the context of the formation of culture centers and student organizations and their relationship with the university. Incorporating these concepts will increase dialogues and can alleviate misrepresentation of records.

The body of literature described here, while rich in content, does not widely address the issues of selecting and appraising the records of student cultural organizations and culture centers at universities and colleges. The following case studies examine two archivists' experiences of working with student culture centers by discussing the history of the projects, approaches for building trust between repositories and student cultural groups, and how history and trust building can help to inform future appraisal decisions and strengthen relations with underrepresented groups.

### **Case Study 1: Ethnic Student Center at Western Washington University**

In the late 1980s, student leaders from ethnic and cultural clubs at Western Washington University (WWU) discussed the needs for a space for students of color on campus and a strong commitment to diversity from WWU. While negotiations with university administration about the space were positive, little was done. This prompted acts of student activism, including a sit-in at President Kenneth Mortimer's office. Student activism and a supportive community of students, staff, and faculty helped to push the issue back onto the table, and university administration and student leaders reentered

discussions. The outcome was the establishment of the Ethnic Student Center (ESC), which opened in April 1991.<sup>18</sup> The ESC is home to over a dozen ethnic and cultural clubs that help students in “transitioning to Western [Washington University], developing cultural identity, providing a sense of community, and being active in social justice.”<sup>19</sup> The center also provides resources and a safe environment for all students to work on club programming, to study, and to hang out.<sup>20</sup>

### *Project Overview*

In the winter of 2010, the WWU university archivist met with the ESC director to discuss an inventory project to document and appraise the records held by the center to preserve its history in the University Archives. The ESC director welcomed the discussion, as he was looking toward the twentieth anniversary of the center in 2011. Given the ESC’s roles as a safe space for students and a central location for ethnic and cultural student clubs, the selection, appraisal, and acquisition of ESC records would help the University Archives to document the activities, activism, and history of students of color on campus, thereby filling in the gaps in its existing holdings.<sup>21</sup> The existing records held by the University Archives regarding the ESC and its clubs were produced by other university offices, creating an outsider’s narrative of the center and the clubs. Working with the center to acquire its records would help to build better representation of its work and activism within WWU’s institutional memory. Not only did the ESC hold its own administrative and historical records, it also provided office space and storage for current clubs and preserved the files left by inactive clubs. Several affiliated clubs long predated the formation of the center, including the Native American Student Union, the Black Student Union, and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA). Collecting their records provided an opportunity to capture the history of these student groups on campus before the establishment of the center.

At about the same time, the university archivist was discussing potential internship projects with a graduate student in the History Department’s archives and records management program. The graduate student expressed a strong interest in the ESC project since she was a longtime member and officer of an ESC club and a former undergraduate employee of the center, and she had recently researched the center’s history.<sup>22</sup> Using the intern’s specialized expertise, the university archivist assigned her to the project for the spring and summer quarters. This was an important move, as the university archivist was the only professional staff member at the archives and, while knowledgeable about the center, he did not have the same deep community ties as the intern. The university archivist was open to learning more about the center’s history, but, at the same time, realized the importance of deferring to community knowledge. The ESC staff were already enthusiastic about working with the University Archives, and they expressed further excitement in having one of their community members integrally involved.

The project involved inventorying the physical files within the ESC storage room and club office space. There was also discussion of reviewing the digital records on the ESC’s

server space; however, due to time restraints of the internship and not having a strong digital archives program in place, those files were not included. The intern conducted the inventory and served as the main contact between the archives and the center. With the university archivist, she performed an analysis of the records retention schedule and drafted specialized file plans for the records of the center and its clubs. Over the spring quarter, the intern inventoried the administrative and historical records of the ESC and moved on to the club offices during the summer quarter while most of the students were gone and not occupying the small spaces. The intern then compiled the inventory into a spreadsheet with columns for the office name, location, record type, file title and description, notes, date range, and retention assignment. Before recording file titles, the intern labeled each office based on who was utilizing the space, using the preferred acronyms for the ESC and the club. To record the physical location of the files, the intern also assigned a letter and number code to every filing cabinet drawer and storage box included in the inventory. Each file was also assigned a broad category based on its contents: administrative records, awards, club files (for club records held in ESC staff storage space), conferences, events, financial records, history files, project files, public relations, and scholarship files.

After the initial inventory was complete, the university archivist and the intern appraised the records by comparing the categories and descriptions of the files in the inventory against the general university records retention schedule to identify corresponding record series within the schedule.<sup>23</sup> Because the clubs were officially affiliated with and funded by the ESC, a department of the university, the files they produced were considered university records and fell under the collecting mandate of the University Archives. Even though the retention schedule was created with the functions of university offices and departments in mind, it still applied to most of the club files. Materials with archival value that did not have a strong corresponding record series in the retention schedule could be assigned to a broader record series with generic descriptions such as “special projects and activities” and “history file,” which were designated for transfer to the archives. These broader record series allowed flexibility in the appraisal of club records without having to revise the retention schedule. This emphasized the advantage of working with a community member to help make appraisal decisions and to determine what should be considered a “history file.” The intern was able to navigate the numerous club acronyms and could easily recognize the wide variety of event names. With an understanding of the center’s activities, the intern was able to readily identify the informational and evidential value of a file’s contents, quickly recognizing the importance of event materials and papers from conferences and workshops buried under vaguely named folder titles. She knew that dinners, dances, and other events put on by the ESC and its clubs were not just fund-raisers, but also opportunities for broad outreach to the university and the public, and celebrations of culture. Workshops and conferences also functioned as settings for developing leadership skills and community building.

While revising the schedule to better accommodate collecting from university-funded student organizations would be ideal, this was a practical solution to keep the project moving. As a public institution, changes to the records retention schedule require

approval at the state level. The current (as of June 2022) WWU general records retention schedule does include sections on “Student Socialization and Enrichment” and “Cultural Enrichment” and notes that the records are unique to individual offices and that recommendations are tailored for individual offices.<sup>24</sup> One set of materials that did not fit within the retention schedule was artifacts, consisting primarily of old club T-shirts. Because the storage and care of these items were beyond the capabilities and collecting policy of the University Archives, the university archivist and intern decided to encourage the clubs to offer the artifacts to the library’s Special Collections department, which was better equipped for handling artifacts and actively collecting such items for its Campus History collection.

Once the files in the inventory were assigned retentions, the intern composed two sets of recommendations, one for the ESC and the other for the clubs. Each plan defined what a “record” is, established guidelines for archival and nonarchival records, provided a recommendation for organizing files moving forward, and included a link to the general university records retention schedule.<sup>25</sup> These recommendations provided transparency in the process and a clearer understanding as to why certain decisions were made. The club recommendations also included a general history of the center and emphasized the importance of creating more representation within the institutional memory of the university. While the recommendations were written for club officers, they also explicitly encouraged an open dialogue with their members, so all were aware of their records, history, and the archival process.

### *Challenges*

Even with the help of a community member, the project faced challenges. First, the University Archives had to establish the records’ creators and ownership. While the records of official university clubs were considered university records, the perception of ownership can be just as important as actual ownership. Students may consider the records they produce during club activities to belong to them or the club itself, and not to the university. To muddle ownership even further, ESC administration held the records of active and inactive student clubs mixed within its own files. Even though these records were clearly produced by the clubs, they were in the physical custody of the ESC staff. The university archivist and intern chose to inventory all files held by the ESC staff and within the club offices to create a complete picture of the physical holdings of the center and to treat them as university records within the inventory. This was important to make sure that the clubs were aware of and complied with certain retention policies, especially as the clubs regularly engage with outside vendors for events using money provided by the ESC or other university funds. Keeping these kinds of records for their legal retention period was important in case the center needed them for reporting purposes or if past contracts needed to be reviewed. Not communicating this information could potentially be detrimental to the clubs. The recommendations written for the clubs communicated why their files were considered university records, and the intern explained their status in person to club representatives. This was met with a few questions but a general understanding of the reasoning behind the decision.

To help acknowledge the students' sense of ownership over their own history, no push was made to immediately transfer archival materials to the University Archives. It was left to the center and its clubs to choose when to send records over, and they were reassured that there was no time limit on when materials could be transferred. The intern also emphasized that club members and the public would have access to the materials and that, while the clubs could not remove the records from the archives, they could receive free copies. She also stressed the security the archives provided for records, meaning that files were less likely to go missing as students left the university or cleaned out offices. This would ensure a continuity in the preservation of their history that future community members could access and feel a connection to.

Gaining the trust of the students was another challenge and demonstrated the need for community engagement. After inventorying the administrative files of the ESC, the university archivist and the intern sought the permission of the active clubs to access their individual offices within the center to do the inventory and appraisal. This was done to show the students the same level of respect and consideration that the university archivist would show university staff in accessing their records. The intern secured a place on the agenda for the Ethnic Student Center Steering Committee meeting, which included representatives from all the affiliated clubs and was chaired by the vice president for diversity, a student elected by the general student population. The university archivist was unable to attend the meeting, so the intern went on her own to give a short presentation about the project and archival services and to ask the representatives to speak to their clubs about accessing the offices over the summer. The representatives were enthusiastic and did not foresee any objections. However, the vice president for diversity expressed concern over the University Archives having an inventory of club files and feared that their financial records would be audited and placed under the scrutiny of university administration. While the student did not actively vocalize distrust for the University Archives, he did communicate a suspicion of university administration. The representatives and the vice president for diversity then engaged in a lengthy discussion about the project, with the representatives in favor and the vice president more skeptical. This portion of the meeting, which was intended to be a short presentation, had turned into a delicate situation. Wanting to ensure that everyone had accurate information, the intern stayed for the entirety of the discussion, beyond the time allocated for the agenda item. Being present meant that the intern could answer questions about the archives and the intention of the project and clarify any misunderstandings. While only the vice president expressed concerns during the meeting, the intern addressed them respectfully and with a familiarity of the history behind the questions. The intern was also aware that similar questions and apprehensions might come up among other club members, so it was important to provide clear answers. The intern explained that the inventory was not intended to be shared beyond the ESC and the clubs, that units outside of the archives were unlikely to be aware of the project, and that the risk of an audit due to the project was extremely low. Once the vice president and the representatives resolved their differences of opinion, tentative approval to access the offices was given and was eventually permitted.

Just as Kathryn Neal warned, this incident demonstrates the potential distrust between historically marginalized groups and university administration.<sup>26</sup> Even with no immediate plans to transfer the files to the University Archives, the act of inventorying club files by a university unit was viewed with suspicion. It also showed that a unified response one way or the other should not be assumed and that differing thoughts and opinions should be expected within any community. Given the uneasy history between university units and the center's students, the concerns should not have been a surprise. Having a community member involved allowed open communication and a nuanced response on behalf of the University Archives that seriously addressed the apprehensions of the student, and the intern's presence and participation showed a commitment to the interests of the student clubs.

### *Outcomes*

At the end of the project, the recommendations were submitted to the ESC and its clubs, along with an inventory of their records. While no immediate transfers of materials were made to the archives in 2010, the 25th anniversary of the ESC prompted an accession of materials in 2014. With access to the records, the University Archives was able to scan a few hundred photographs for the center in support of its anniversary celebration. A second accession was transferred in 2017, bringing the collection to nearly 24 cubic feet of archival records, covering 1975 to 2016.<sup>27</sup> Even though the students involved in the project and discussions were gone, the existing relationship between the University Archives and ESC staff opened the door for the acquisitions. The records provided primary source materials on ADEI (Anti-racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), race, identity, and representation and became a popular resource for classes visiting the archives.<sup>28</sup>

The project also provided a meaningful experience for both the intern and the university archivist. The intern had been a member of an ESC club since her freshman year and spent her senior year as an employee for the center. She was excited to be able to apply her studies as an archivist and historian to preserving the history of the ESC, which had provided her with friendships, employment, and a safe space. After her internship, she remained a resource to other students at the center about the archives and an advocate for preserving the center's history. For the university archivist, the project helped to lay the foundation of a fruitful relationship with the ESC. Collecting the records was not just about documenting the center's history, but also building representation within the archives and acknowledging the biases and inequities that shaped the archival collection.<sup>29</sup> It was also "a way to make the archives more accessible, welcoming, and familiar to all of [WWU's] students—so they can see themselves in the records."<sup>30</sup>

The broader value of these records has become more apparent in recent years as the students and administration work toward making WWU a more inclusive campus. This includes opening a new and highly visible Multicultural Center in 2019, which houses the ESC; naming a residence hall after the first Black student to attend the university and starting a Black affinity housing program; making efforts toward reinstating the Ethnic

Studies College; and renaming Huxley College as the College of the Environment in 2021, due to its namesake's ties to racist ideology.<sup>31</sup> The ESC records within WWU's institutional memory demonstrate a long history of student activism and the struggle for support, space, and visibility on campus, reflecting present-day efforts.

## Case Study 2: Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Since its establishment in 1963, the University of Illinois Archives has acquired an extensive collection of records highlighting the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's (UIUC) history, yet there remain gaps in the archival holdings. The culture centers on UIUC's campus serve as central spaces for many underrepresented groups. The University Archives has cultivated dialogues with the culture and resource centers for many years, and, as a result, collection development with these centers' records has steadily increased. The Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center (the first culture center at UIUC) is one such center with which the University Archives has gradually formed a sustainable relationship with over the years. Furthermore, appraising its most recent transfer of records has revealed the multifaceted ways the center serves multiple communities on the UIUC campus.

In 1967, 233 Black undergraduate students and 107 graduate students were enrolled at UIUC, making up 1 percent of the total student body enrollment.<sup>32</sup> By the fall of 1968, the university had approximately 690 Black undergraduates, its largest enrollment of Black students up to that time.<sup>33</sup> Over 500 incoming Black students were admitted under the Special Education Opportunities Program (SEOP), commonly known as Project 500.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the university was not prepared to accommodate every student enrolled in the SEOP program, which resulted in unresolved financial aid and housing issues.<sup>35</sup> Not only were SEOP students disappointed with these accommodations, but Black students collectively were also disheartened by the triggering of racial tension on campus.

The increase in Black students galvanized the Black Student Association's (BSA) efforts for increased reform against racial divides. In the February 18, 1969, edition of its newspaper, *Black Rap*, the Black Student Association published a list of 35 demands,<sup>36</sup> including, "the immediate establishment of a black cultural center large enough to accommodate all black people which will be run by the Black Students Association."<sup>37</sup> Hoping to alleviate some of the racial unrest, the chancellor conceded to some of the demands, and, later that year, the Afro-American Cultural Center was established.<sup>38</sup> The center created and continues to offer programs such as a speaker series, lunches, spaces for organizations to meet, study spaces, and other programs and services relating to students' needs and enriching students' knowledge of Black culture. The cultural center also attracts many Black faculty, staff, and community members. The Afro-American Cultural Center was eventually named the Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center in 2004, after Bruce D. Nesbitt, the center's longest-serving director.<sup>39</sup> Before the concept of a Black cultural center existed, members of the Nesbitt family, and many other

Black families, heavily supported Black students who were new to the local and university communities.<sup>40</sup>

### *Project Overview*

Over the years, the Bruce D. Nesbitt Center had accumulated a variety of historical documents, thus creating its own archives. Through the years, the basement was filled with administrative records, student organization records, various other historical documents, and a variety of audiovisual content. Around 2011, a doctoral LIS student served as a liaison between the University Archives and the Nesbitt Center. As a result, the University Archives acquired 18 cubic feet of archival records from the center, but many historical documents remained in the basement.

When the Bruce D. Nesbitt Center prepared for renovations between 2014 and 2019, the center moved to a temporary location.<sup>41</sup> A student group that recently donated its records to the archives encouraged the new director of the Nesbitt Center to contact the Student Life and Culture Archives, a program of the University of Illinois Archives. Shortly after communicating with the student life and culture archivist, the student organization and a team of archivists recovered a multitude of historical documents, photos, audiovisual materials, and ephemera from the Nesbitt Center.<sup>42</sup>

### *Challenges*

Developing appraisal and processing procedures for the collection has been time consuming. The records include an extensive photograph collection of student life, over 600 audiovisual items, publications, correspondence, event fliers, meeting minutes, and information on organizations that met in the space. The same student group that assisted the cultural center and the archives with the transfer of records inquired if it could volunteer to work on appraising and processing the collection. The Student Life and Culture Archives received multiple monetary gifts to pay the students for their time.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, the processing has been more time consuming than expected. Some delays occurred due to the students' limited availability, along with some staff shortages and other project deadlines. The records recently came under the care of the newly appointed archivist for multicultural collections and services,<sup>44</sup> and, shortly after her start date, the processing was halted due to the stay-at-home order caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While working remotely, the archivist and her intern were able to work on the recently digitized content in the collection, and, since resuming in-person work, the archivist continues to gradually work on the collection with some student support. Additionally, the multicultural collections archivist receives assistance from the library's preservation unit to review over 600 audiovisual records of the center's events.

During the appraisal process, documents were discovered about a student organization<sup>45</sup> founded many years before the cultural center was established. The organization had previously held its meetings at the Nesbitt Center but had then become inactive for several years. Although the organization eventually restarted, its members might not have been aware that the center kept its records. The records also contain some

information that requires content restriction. Additionally, because the organization is a chapter of an international organization, some policies might exist regarding what materials can be transferred to a university archives and which should be sent to the organizations' headquarters. These different factors prompted the archivist to reach out to this organization to determine the best way to handle the materials. Discussion led to a consensus that some records had privacy concerns and should be returned.<sup>46</sup> The members are content with the majority of their records being housed at the archives, and conversations between the archives and the organization are ongoing. While the archives had not planned to return the records once they were deposited, this careful attention to detail during appraisal allowed the archivists to further cultivate a relationship with the student organization.

### *Outcomes*

The multicultural collections archivist is now considered a stakeholder by the Bruce D. Nesbitt Center and regularly checks in with the center to see how she can assist it. She also facilitated a workshop with archives' colleagues and the library preservation unit for staff of all of the cultural houses (as requested by one of the directors). The workshop included an introduction to the archives, including how to preserve digital and analog materials. The head of library preservation and conservation gave advice regarding simple methods to assist with preserving the longevity of physical materials, and the center learned how such preservation efforts assist the archives. The positive feedback from the first workshop is encouraging implementation of future workshops, and two other cultural centers have also contacted the archives regarding transferring their records. The ultimate goal is that these initiatives will provide more clarity about the archives' role with the university community, increase engagement, and build trust with underrepresented groups.

Through appraising the documents from the Bruce D. Nesbitt Center, the cultural center recognized the enduring historic value of keeping the abundance of records housed at the center for multiple decades. Through the appraisal process, the archives not only connected with a cultural center, it also rekindled ties with a historical organization at the university. This success echoes the recommendation of former University of Illinois archivist and Society of *American Archivists* president Maynard Brichford: "Archivists need to be an ear for the voices of the past, present, and future; a careful concern for our professional colleagues; a sense of organizational unity; an openness to innovation; and a commitment to meeting the needs of the public as a whole."<sup>47</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Given the challenges presented by established structures of power at universities, high student leadership turnover, and the difficulty of clearly communicating collecting policies and intentions, the acquisition of student records is never straightforward. However, it is a rewarding process and an important one for capturing a complete picture of a campus's history. The benefit of working with culture centers is that they often have permanent

staff members who can serve as liaisons between the archives and the students and help lay the foundation for a strong and enduring relationship. Archivists should take advantage of the consistent organizational structure of these centers to help overcome the obstacles of the transitory nature of the student population and to provide consistent transparency through the appraisal and acquisition process. Lessons learned from the case studies presented here can help to smooth the path for future projects and for building new, or building upon existing, relationships with cultural student organizations.

The first lesson is that establishing clear lines of communication with student groups and culture centers is key. No miscommunication can occur between the archives staff, the student groups, and the directors and staff who work with the students. Misunderstandings about the archives' collecting policies can lead to missed opportunities or, at worst, make it appear that the archivist and the unit itself do not care about the records of underrepresented students.

Second, archivists must understand the history of the groups they are working with. The history of a student group can help to provide context to the records the archives is collecting and will help to inform the selection and appraisal process. This research can inform archivists' understanding of the relationship between the students and traditional structures of power within the university, including campus libraries, archives, and museums. Archivists should also be aware of what materials regarding the student groups currently exist within the archives and other campus collecting repositories, taking note of the record creators and their position within the university. Knowing what is currently within the university's institutional memory, and whose perspective is being represented, can help archivists build a case to student groups for transferring their organizational records.

Third, archivists should leverage community connections whenever possible. Not all archives can hire specialized staff and faculty to make connections and collect from student or multicultural groups, and student workers with specialized expertise will not always come along, so finding and building connections will take an active effort. Establishing a relationship with the director or another staff member of a culture center will promote better understanding of their organization and any affiliated student groups that utilize the center. Advertising internships and work opportunities to culture centers and clubs, visiting club and culture center tables during information fairs and fundraisers, and asking to speak at leadership trainings that centers may offer help strengthen community connections. Recruiting students to participate in projects to document and transfer records can help to foster relationships and trust between the community and the archives. These connections may also appear among archives or library staff members who are active or former members, or who serve as advisors for student organizations.

Fourth, knowing a student group's history and leveraging community contacts can help to build trust, but it is not a given. The relationship between the university administration and underrepresented student groups is not always an easy one, and archivists are a part of the power structure that has long excluded students of color. Patience and gentle persistence on the part of archivists may be necessary. Archivists need to find the right balance of actively making the archives and its services known to student groups and culture centers, while waiting patiently for transfers of records and not rushing the process.

Fifth, archivists need to accept that some underrepresented communities may not want to deposit their records with the archives, preferring to stay out of the official institutional memory. As Safiya Noble explains, "The right to be forgotten is an incredibly important mechanism for thinking through whether instances of misrepresentation can be impeded or stopped."<sup>48</sup> This approach may feel counterintuitive to the profession, but archivists should be mindful that legitimate reasons exist for not having an interest in building trust with structures of power. If an opportunity arises to understand why those barriers exist, archivists can gain insights that may assist them in establishing more inclusive practices in the future.

Finally, while not explicitly discussed in these case studies, access must become the focus of these collections once the materials come through the door. Archivists need to be transparent about what is going to happen to the records once they are acquired. Speedy processing is not always possible, and archivists must be honest and not overpromise when the records will be processed and a finding aid produced. At the same time, access should not be denied to students and staff of culture centers because a collection is not perfectly arranged and described. Archivists should strive to provide students with access to their records whenever possible with reasonable limitations on access to restricted information as outlined in laws such as FERPA and HIPAA. Students and the staff who support them should not feel like their records and history have disappeared into the folds of university bureaucracy.

These methods and lessons learned will help archivists determine the best approaches to relationship building, making selection and appraisal decisions, and acquiring materials from underrepresented student organizations. Instant results cannot be expected, and archivists need to be patient and persistent, keeping open lines of communication when building these relationships. Even enthusiastic partnerships with community participation may not produce immediate acquisitions. But, pursuing and nurturing these relationships are essential, otherwise university archives will only continue to reinforce narratives of power.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## NOTES

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