

Best Practices Session Proposal: Association for Advancement of Computing in Education

**Documenting and Digitizing the Student Experience: A Collaboration Between Iowa State University's Carver Academy and the University Archives**

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**Introduction**

This presentation will focus on a collaborative documentary project, which is an effort to document minority undergraduate students and their college experience at Iowa State University. The purpose is two-fold: first to better connect these students with their own individual college experience, and to also provide historical documentation for students of color at Iowa State University, which in the past, has been difficult to create or collect. One of the most difficult aspects of university life to create and/or collect documentation, is without a doubt, for the student experience. John Straw observes that "A significant part of the education process never gets into print or recorded anywhere but in the student's memory."<sup>1</sup> In regards to recordkeeping practices, university offices, administrators, and faculty are much more consistent in retaining and transferring materials as part of the university's records retention schedule. In addition, there are even fewer traditional papers or records documenting students of color at predominantly white institutions, such as Iowa State University. However, what little may exist or be created, is increasingly digital and electronic. This provides additional preservation challenges for the Archives.

**History and Background**

I would like to give some historical background and context for both the Carver Academy and the University Archives prior to detailing the project and the challenges we have faced in saving this material for future researchers. The Iowa State Carver Academy, consisting of approximately 400 students (100 incoming freshmen), is designed to promote the holistic development of the ISU George Washington Carver (GWC) scholars in their acclimation to Iowa State University, academic success, individual identification, community service, leadership skills, and career goals. The Carver Scholars are determined by a merit-based evaluation, based upon a combination minimum high school GPA or standing in the high school graduating class and minimum scores on the ACT or SAT. This is a multicultural scholarship in that we strive to offer a balance of scholarship to students who are in underrepresented ethnic groups. The Carver Academy

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<sup>1</sup> John Straw, From Classroom to Commons: Documenting the Total Student Experience in Higher Education," *Archival Issues* (Vol. 19, No. 1, 1994), p. 24.

offers guidance and enrichment to its participants in an environment that fosters continuous learning, achievement, diversity and integrity. All students must enroll in an introductory seminar (University Studies 205; Leadership and Peer Mentoring for Carver Academy Seminar Leaders, 2 sections) that focuses on the following: “engaging students in explorations of topics concerning racial and ethnic identity development; the histories and experiences of underrepresented and underserved social identity groups in U. S. society; and the definitions and meanings of diversity in academia.” It was this course in particular, that seemed to lend itself to a documentary project, with the results being deposited in the University Archives.

The University Archives, part of the Special Collections Department in the Iowa State University Library, was founded in 1969, and contains over 16,000 linear ft. of archival collections; 1,000,000 photographs; 10,000 motion picture films; and 55,000 rare book volumes, with the earliest dating to 1475. Increasingly, the Department is accepting digital and electronic records, the most recent being 225,000 digital images received from University Relations in the summer of 2011. The Department maintains an active public service, outreach, and tour program to both on and off campus groups, including academic classes, the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, ISU Learning Communities, Extension and 4-H groups, and K-12 student groups such as National History Day. An obvious choice for curricular outreach was the University’s Carver Academy, based on these previous experiences. However, this was the Department’s first effort at collecting primarily digital records for documenting the student experience. As Marjorie Rabe Barritt described in “Documenting Students at Colleges and Universities in the United States: Academics, Alumni, Athletics and Much More,” the 21<sup>st</sup> century archivist has the responsibility to “identify, collect, and administer this valuable record no matter what the format of the records.”<sup>2</sup>

The document/narrative project and assignment was designed to allow students to reflect upon their experiences at Iowa State University both as members of the Carver Academy and the university and Ames communities as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Students developed autobiographical narratives in several formats, primarily textual, digital, photo and video. Students could begin with a description of their family or community, or to focus on the here and now. Each student granted permission for their narrative to be archived as part of the University Archives.

The narratives were to be authored in electronic format and could exist as one of the following forms, as noted in the course syllabus:

*Textual narratives are traditional typewritten documents in electronic or printed forms. Typically typewritten documents are created using computer word processing programs (i.e. MSWord). Textual narratives can also be created using such tools as computer blogs.*

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<sup>2</sup> As she observes from the vantage point of 1998, 21<sup>st</sup> century students may keep lecture notes, but they will be on a laptop, participate in electronic conferences, will telephone or e-mail, as opposed to writing letters. As of 2011, students take images and video on their phones, and Facebook and texting is in the process of replacing even e-mail.

<sup>3</sup> This is a “conscious documentary effort,” as articulated by Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities*, p. 78.

*Digital narratives go beyond electronic textual narratives and rely less upon the written word. Digital narratives can consist of digital still photos or digital video, or a combination of these and other digital media, to tell the story. Digital cameras and video equipment are available for check-out in campus labs but many personal cell phones are all equipped to deliver still and video photography.*

*Photo narratives are documents that consist primarily of still photography and minimal text to tell the story. These narratives can be in print or electronic form. When in electronic form (digital narrative), the digital photos are presented using a computer presentation program or capture and delivered using video software.*

*Video narratives use video photography to tell the story. Digital videography used for a type of digital narrative can incorporate audio narration but typically uses minimal text. Computer-based programs are available to create and edit videos from raw footage.*

There was no concrete template provided for the students, as they could determine what needed to be included and how the narrative was structured. They were invited to cover the topics they wished to cover, including their arrival on campus, a description of their family, community or K-12 environment, or their current campus experience. The goal was to introduce them to the concept of narratives as research, and to see themselves as important participants in the construct of university history.

## **Results**

In addition to their narrative project, the students also toured Special Collections/University Archives, in order for them to better understand the context of the project. I made a special effort to focus on the existing documentation for students of color (including George Washington Carver, their scholarship's namesake) and to focus on the Department as being a resource for them.

A total of 29 projects were donated to the Archives, and were in a variety of electronic formats, including 9 Powerpoint presentations; 10 MS word documents; 3 PDFs; 1 audio; and 1 video slide show. Two were donated in hard copy format—one was text, and the other was in a scrapbook form, using printed photographs. All the projects were accessioned (accessioning includes the collecting of information about the collection) as part of the Department's regular workflow for all donated collections. In addition, students signed a deed of gift donating their collections to the Department, and transferring legal title and copyright. Examples ranged from Mark Jongman-Sereno's 77-page PDF, Ashley Halverson's 5-page narrative, to Morah Nguyen's audio narrative and Hana Yoon's video slide show. As Biana Contreras noted in her text/image narrative:

*"History is remarkable. I took a tour of the special collections and university archives here at Iowa State University and was amazed that I was holding and looking at books from the 1400s. Now here I am writing my own narrative to be put in the archives. I too am a part of history. But sometimes that is hard to comprehend as a 19 year old college*

*student. I hope that whoever is reading this one day will learn from me.”<sup>4</sup>*

The projects are maintained in both their electronic formats and were stored as CDs and printed out for the physical collection.<sup>5</sup> The electronic versions are hosted on the Library's server, on CDs in the collection (Office of Multicultural Student Affairs Carver Academy Records, RS 7/5/6) and if possible, printed copies were also created for researchers. It should be noted however, that for digital materials, printing is often a poor substitute as so much of the original context, design, and background are lost. However, at this point in time, there is simply no easy way to provide online access to these materials. In regards to the preservation, the University Archives chose the easiest methodology for preserving these materials for the long term:

1. Saving digital versions to the library server, ensuring continual migration to new formats
2. Also preserving a CD copy, providing the easiest access for any visiting researcher. However, CDs face significant degradation over time (a life span of an estimated 5-10 years) and need to be continually copied to new formats. In addition, technological obsolescence, and the ability to actually read the CD is a continual problem.
3. Also providing print copies in the collection. Print does not replace digital and its context or software to appropriately view the material, but still can provide a backup for the user.

### **Future Challenges**

The technology involved in this documentary project certainly will continue to be a challenge for the University Archives in the future. Server space, technological obsolescence, needed metadata (description about these digital materials), preservation of software to read digital documents, the difficulties in access and need for equipment, staff skills and time all provide issues that need to be resolved.

The long-term preservation of web sites, blogs, Facebook, and other Web 2.0 social media will also be a challenge. Currently, the University Archives relies on the web site preservation program, Archive-It, to select and permanently capture web pages. Created by Brewster Kahle and the Internet Archive, the goal of Archive-It is to save born-digital information on web sites and to serve as a web-archiving tool.<sup>6</sup> It offers the ability to select, catalog, and provide public searching of collections of archived web sites. Web sites viewed through the Archive-It search interface are date-stamped and clearly identified as archived, to ensure the content is seen in its proper historical context, and not confused with current versions of the same sites. This subscription currently costs app. \$11,000 annually, and demonstrates the critical need for continual financial support for this kind of preservation. In

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<sup>4</sup> Carver Academy Records, RS 7/5/6, University Archives, ISU Library.

<sup>5</sup> State Archives of Minnesota, Guidelines for Electronic Records,  
<http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/electronicrecords/erguidelinetoc.html>

<sup>6</sup> Archive-It: <http://www.archive-it.org/public/faq.html>

short, preserving historical documentation in electronic form, represents a significant financial, as well as time and effort on behalf of archives staff.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this kind of documentation project is extremely important for preserving the experiences of students, and especially those students whose stories may have been left out of the traditional university history. It offers each of them the opportunity to ensure their stories are included, and allows them to see themselves as part of the wider picture of American history. Archives will need to become even more creative about collecting, preserving and provide access to student records such as these in the future.

## **Resources:**

Barritt, Marjorie Rabe. "Documenting Students at Colleges and Universities in the United States: Academics, Alumni, Athletics and Much More." (1998)

<http://www.germe.info/kiosque/archivistique/MBarrittBarcelone.PDF>

Samuels, Helen Willa. *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities*. Chicago: Scarecrow Press and The Society of American Archivists, 1992.

Straw, John. "From Classroom to Commons: Documenting the Total Student Experience in Higher Education." *Archival Issues*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1994, pp. 19-29.