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Anne A. Salter

Oglethorpe University, asalter@oglethorpe.edu

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Using a GHRAB Grant to Reclaim a University Archives

Anne A. Salter

Anne A. Salter is the Director of the Philip Weltner Library at Oglethorpe University. She can be reached at asalter@oglethorpe.edu.

Introduction

College and university archives are rich and dynamic resources of campus history. Without a clear sense of mission and programming, they can be overlooked as research destinations. A well-defined program linked with funding sources is one means of connecting these collections to the campus community. Through the assistance of a GHRAB (Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board) grant, one college archives evolved into a viable research destination. The process is outlined in this paper.

Methodology

Until recently, an abundance of materials relating to the rich cultural heritage of Oglethorpe University was not accessible. A program designed to open the archives housing these resources made it a research destination for the campus. The program included developing an inventory of the collection, storage and housing of its contents, cataloging, and preservation. A key component in the success of the opening of the archives was the receipt of a GHRAB Grant, obtained for the purpose of microfilming the student newspapers. Upon completion, access to the newspapers was made available and a vital record of the campus history was permanently preserved. Also, the grant brought notoriety and credibility to the archives.

The Project

The project began in 2001 and consisted of several stages: inventory and storage, accessioning, funding, and public relations/marketing. Each stage built on the strength of the previous. Several decisions made at the inception of the project proved to be keys to success. These included devoting library funds and staff time to the project and seeking a source of outside fund-

ing. Fortunately, two major resources were already in place: an archives room and research level collections.

Oglethorpe University's archives enjoyed a strong foundation from which to launch the project. The library building renovation of 1991 included an archives room with work space and collection storage. Additional equipment purchases included proper shelving, file cabinets, furniture, and a computer. Documents dating back to 1835 and numerous other materials had been collected by the college and stored in the archives. Continuing the acquisitions program was easy given the excellent head start. Specifically the collections included student newspapers, correspondence, yearbooks, photographs, manuscripts, etchings, drawings, and papers of the past presidents. The colorful history of the campus was well represented.

Campus History

Founded in 1835 in Midway, a town near Milledgeville, Georgia, Oglethorpe University is one of the oldest liberal arts colleges in the South. The campus closed during the Civil War and reopened in the 1870s only to fold because of financial setbacks. Thornwell Jacobs successfully opened the school again in 1916 when the campus was relocated to its present site on Peachtree Road in Atlanta, Georgia. President Jacobs utilized his extensive imagination to attract patrons to the campus. Under his guidance, Oglethorpe, like Harvard and Princeton, was one of the first institutions of higher learning to bestow honorary degrees on famous Americans, including women. His idea for a time capsule – the Crypt of Civilization – preserving examples of 20th century life, attracted national and international attention. Such an interesting history of campus life needed to become a more well-known feature on campus.

The next step was to complete the proposed project and open the archives to the campus.

Collection Inventory

An inventory of the archives was necessary before cataloging and projects for securing outside funding could be established. The task was especially arduous because many of the records had been separated from their original collection. In several instances no documentation existed to qualify the relationship of the item to the history of the campus. Fortunately, the school newspapers had been retained. These papers, with their detailed reporting, provided answers to many questions related to identifying archival holdings. Acid free folders and document boxes were an expensive but important investment for proper storage.

Accessioning

Completion of the inventory provided an excellent catalyst to the next step – the creation of accurate accession records. The accession record provides donor information, a description of the gift, and a unique number composed of the year of donation to identify the material. This information was transferred into a searchable database by donor name and accession number. Collections were stored on the shelves in accession number order for easy retrieval.

Funding through GHRAB

The decision to apply for a GHRAB¹ grant proved to be an excellent strategy. GHRAB offers a number of opportunities not available through a national granting agency, including a workshop, an on site visit, and free publicity. GHRAB's focus on Georgia records also eliminates the lengthy narrative the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts require to prove a proposal merits national interest. GHRAB provides funds for the organization and care of Georgia records made available to the public. Grant applicants are expected to match at least twenty-five per cent of the grant request up to the maximum award of \$5,000. The match may be in kind and can include staff time, supplies and other related expenses.²

Prior to applying, interested parties attend a half day workshop that enables them to understand more fully the types of projects funded throughout the years and the importance of providing public access to these materials. The session also provides a perspective of the types of grants that others are considering. The workshop is a unique opportunity to meet interested participants and share ideas. In addition, GHRAB provides an on site visit to each applicant and their archives.

This on-site visit is a productive experience, especially for institutions undecided about which of their worthy projects to fund first. Such was the case with the Oglethorpe University archives. Three major projects were at the top of the priority list for funding –preservation of the school newspapers, scanning of the visual arts collection and preservation photocopying of historic clippings file. The opportunity to participate in an on site visit with a member of the Georgia Archives allowed staff time to interact with an expert and formulate an educated decision within the context of the entire archives.

After the visit and ensuing discussion the project selection became clearer. Based on the criteria of preservation need and importance of content, the student newspapers were selected for microfilming. In addition, a follow-up grant to index the papers seemed a logical application for a future grant. The visual arts scanning project was put on hold. The preservation photocopying was completed using student assistants. The major expense for the latter project was the purchase of acid-free photocopying paper. Three-hundred pages of clippings were accurately copied, dated, and filed in appropriate subject categories. Consequently, the students became excited about the archives and its holdings, and news about the archives began to travel.

¹ The GHRAB grant is funded by the Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board which makes funds available to non-profit organizations throughout the state. Funds are provided from a variety of resources including the NHPRC (National Historical Publications and Records Commission).

² For more information see the web site www.sos.state.ga.us/archives/ghrab.grants/grants.htm

In 2004 the GHRAB grant application was written and a grant of \$5,000 awarded to cover the university's cost to microfilm the student newspapers. Easy record keeping, excellent reminders about quarterly reports, and constant contact as needed with granting officials are some of the hallmarks of GHRAB's operation. A local filming company was interviewed and accepted the job. They provided both pick up and delivery of the papers. Preparing the papers for filming, creating filming targets, checking the chronological order, and checking the film quality kept staff and student assistants busy for the duration of the grant period. Thanks to the GHRAB grant, the newspapers are now a preserved, viable resource for the campus community. The microfilming of the papers became the first step in a full-fledged preservation program for the archives.

Public Relations

As an added bonus, GHRAB provides local publicity for grant recipients. In addition, any organization receiving a GHRAB grant is eligible to apply for a year-end award. The award ceremony held at the Georgia Archives includes a presentation to representatives of the institution. State senators from districts receiving awards are invited to attend. Award winners receive a plaque specifically designed for their project and photo opportunities with the Secretary of State. The ceremony and awards are an excellent way to promote collections and network with other participants and members of GHRAB.

The GHRAB grant also created positive residual effects. The process of prioritizing collections for outside funding raised awareness of the great potential the archival holdings had for various components on campus. For example, the photograph collection serves as an excellent resource for departments creating web sites and news flyers. University units frequently request photos and information on the history of the campus. A student internship provides hands-on experience with archival processing. The Alumni Office includes the archives on its annual campus tour. Campus exhibits utilize images and artifacts from the archives. The archives is an appreciated resource.

Summary

Campus archives are often a resource disregarded or even ignored until a well structured program can link its collections to campus-related activities. Devoting time, energy, staff and budget to making it a reliable and active unit is well worth the effort. Good public relations associated with the archives and its resources combine to make it an important part of the campus community. Finding the right grants to assist with the effort pays off in many ways, including notoriety for the institution and funds to complete these goals.