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# The Role of a University Archives in Producing a History of a Core Curriculum

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# The Role of a University Archives in Producing a History of a Core Curriculum

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors would like to acknowledge Barb Henry, Director of Alumni Relations at Oglethorpe University, for her support and passion of the university's history.

## The Role of a University Archives in Producing a History of a Core Curriculum

By Laura M. Sinclair and Anne A. Salter

For the past five years, the librarians at the Philip Weltner Library have worked closely with the Alumni Department of Oglethorpe University to plan and execute a themed exhibit for the annual Alumni Weekend event. The Alumni Department's programs in particular illustrate the importance and usefulness of the university's archival collections that aid their efforts in promoting and solidifying ties through shared memories. The librarians and the Alumni department staff have a long history of collaboration utilizing photographs, historical materials, and archival information. This partnership's significance became even more effective in fall 2009, when the Alumni Department for the first time asked the library staff to make a display to celebrate the 175-year anniversary of Oglethorpe University. The careful consideration and attention of the Alumni Department staff, who believe in the importance of celebrating and commemorating the unique history of the university, is an added incentive for the librarians to find those special archival items that capture the imagination of returning alumni and provide them with a sense of connectedness, if not nostalgia, for the university.

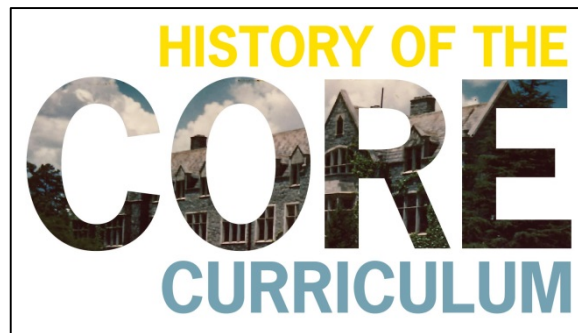
Production on the annual exhibit begins in the early fall with a call from the Alumni staff to the librarians for assistance in determining a meaningful theme for the yearly gathering. The required research for the project proceeds in stages, first by identifying important events in the history of the university. The librarians, with help from volunteers, student interns, and work study students, scour a baseline resource pool

comprised of yearbooks, personality and subject files, university and community publications, and manuscripts for stimulating and significant images and artifacts. The librarians next compile a historic timeline based on that year's class reunion graduation dates. Using this list, the Alumni Department develops

an over-arching theme for branding the spring-time alumni weekend event. For 2014, the librarians and a volunteer identified more than twenty historical events from which a selection could be made. The clear choice was a historic event of profound

significance—the 70th anniversary of the Core Curriculum, the heart of the Oglethorpe education.

Significant events in the history of a university are often diminished over time, relying on collective memory of staff. Opportunities to reconstruct these events are best served by robust archival collections that provide countless resources to recreate and highlight the past. In the case of the history of the Core Curriculum, the university archives yielded several significant documents. These were retrieved from a variety of general resources including speeches, bulletins, reports, papers, general histories, and booklets. Each in their own way contributed to a timeline of events, painting a picture of the Core Curriculum narrative. The documents chosen were of enough evidentiary value to warrant both their context as parts of the exhibit narrative and their actual physical self as an exhibit item and included: *The Oglethorpe Book*; *A New Approach to Education* (University Bulletin); *Freshman Announcements 1944-1945*; *New*



*York Times* article, 1945; “Understanding Oglethorpe,” (paper); “Problem of Moral Education” (project report); “The Emerging Image of Oglethorpe University” (speech); “A House Should be a Home” (speech); “Education in the English Tradition” (article); NEH Grant Report; and “Oglethorpe University: A Sesquicentennial History of Oglethorpe University” by David N. Thomas (unpublished manuscript).

*The Oglethorpe Book*, which expounded the vision of newly appointed Oglethorpe president, Philip Weltner, forever termed this vision the “Oglethorpe Plan.” This change in the academic approach was more than a routine modification in class offerings or curriculum structure—it was an attempt to formulate a new academic program based on what Dr. Weltner called “integration.” By integration, he meant that courses of study available at the institution would provide students with a cohesive, well-constructed program of study. In dealing with students, he did not want them to merely “wander among departmental offerings, pass the total required credits, pay the fees, and go hence with a degree” (Weltner 1944, 2). Rather, he wanted a program of studies which “makes sense from first to last, which hangs together, and promotes the desired result” (2).

One of the ground-breaking ideas of Weltner’s new academic approach was the organization of courses into five divisions of studies. A small blue and white publication, *Freshman*

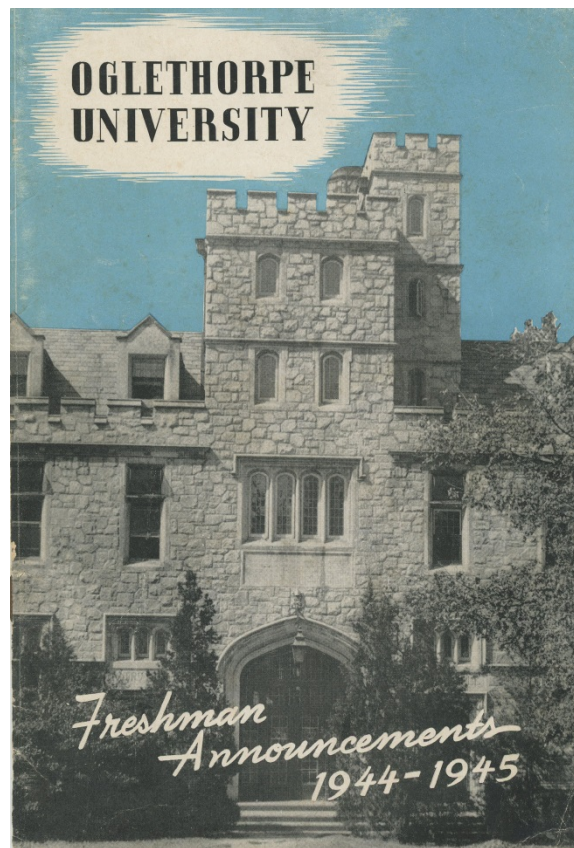
*Announcements, 1944-1945*, took on the dual role of expounding on the new approach by describing the new divisions. Its attractive cover depicting the gothic architecture of the campus met the criteria for including it in the physical exhibit. The contents provided a description of each new division. The Division of Human Understanding embraced studies in English, languages, literature, aesthetics, philosophy, and religion. In this division, freshman students were required to take two laboratory quarters of writing. The objectives of these quarters were “to help students overcome bad or

slovenly habits of expression and achieve effectiveness in the use of their mother tongue” (Freshmen Announcements 1944, 6).

The Division of Citizenship included courses in history, economics, government, and politics. The Division of Business encompassed the fields of mathematics, taxation, business law, accounting, investments, corporate organization, and marketing. The Division of Science gave students experience with advanced work in chemistry, biology, and physics. The Community Service Division provided work in home economics, office management,

education, and public welfare. A Division of Fine Arts was added later. Out of these divisions, students were required to take a core of required courses, which consisted of one half of their overall studies. A degree was obtained through a combination of these courses and their regular major.

Oglethorpe granted two degrees during the Philip Weltner era—the AB degree was



conferred upon those who majored in humanities, fine arts, or citizenship, while the BS degree was awarded to students who majored in science, business, or community service. By completing the different combinations of required and elective courses within the divisions, an Oglethorpe student was prepared to enter into diverse fields of employment, such as business, medicine, law, education, or journalism. Philip Weltner, the master mind behind the Oglethorpe Plan, had set in motion what would eventually become the Core Curriculum still thriving today at Oglethorpe University (Thomas 1986, 223).

Dr. Philip Weltner came to Oglethorpe with a notable career. After receiving his law degree from Columbia University in 1910, the young lawyer settled in Georgia with a stronger passion for the pursuit of justice and social welfare than the establishment of a law practice. He soon was appointed in a leadership position for the Prison Association of Georgia, which assisted ex-convicts, and he was involved with other organizations that were dedicated to the improvements of the harsh conditions of Georgia prison life. To gain insights into these severe prison conditions, Weltner impersonated a convicted felon and was arrested and held in custody for a day, which was long enough to gain notoriety with the public (Cates n.d.). He unsuccessfully tried a second time months later to be imprisoned in the Atlanta stockade. During his first Christmas with his new wife, Weltner asked that they share their Christmas dinner with inmates of a Georgia chain gang at

a prison camp (Bailey 1950). Weltner also worked as the Secretary of the Board of Public Welfare in 1918, and he served in this position without any compensation. His willingness to subjugate himself for the benefit of others was enough to garner public support, and Weltner was eventually instrumental in abolishing chain gangs in the Georgia penal system. In the 1920s,

Weltner made a career move into higher education, drafting legislation on behalf of colleges and universities, and eventually becoming the Chancellor of the Board of Regents.

After a diverse and extraordinary career of service, he believed that Oglethorpe should offer students an education that would help them to “make a life and make a living” (Oglethorpe University Bulletin 1946, 3). Upon his arrival at Oglethorpe in 1944, the nation was in the middle of a world war and plagued with financial

difficulties, making the recruitment of students and survival of a university difficult. Weltner realized a need for a fresh approach to the entire educational process. In order to achieve his “plan,” Weltner needed the best and brightest faculty willing to experiment with this new approach to education.

Once again, *The Oglethorpe Book* re-entered the exhibit narrative as it captured in print Weltner’s desire to grow a faculty of exceptional qualities. As he stated in the first edition of the *Oglethorpe Book*, he felt that the quality of faculty ought not to be judged by the number of papers appearing in professional journals, but rather on how well the faculty “inspire students with love for truth” (Weltner



Dr. Philip Weltner receiving the Shining Light Award from President Vonk, 1973.



1944, 2). Evidence of the importance of this statement was reiterated in a subsequent university bulletin in which Weltner coined the phrase: “a small college, superlatively good” (Oglethorpe University Bulletin 1946, 3). This expression has been echoed down the decades and remains today as a well-remembered quote. Among the notable instructors that Dr. Weltner brought to Oglethorpe were George Seward, Wendell Brown, and Gerhardt Niemyer, among others (Thomas 1986, 220-221). In the fall of 1944, these three professors became part of the hub in setting the Oglethorpe Plan in motion. Additionally, their recruitment began the custom of Oglethorpe’s employing exceptional, passionate teachers to instruct within the Core program. They were to achieve national mention through an article in the *New York Times*.

A small copy of the newspaper article from the *New York Times* remains in the archives, capturing the significance of the work being accomplished on the Oglethorpe campus. The article appearing in the spring of 1945 featured the Oglethorpe Plan and made front page news.

“The barrier that separates the liberal arts and vocational courses,” the article stated, “have been broken down at Oglethorpe” (*New York Times* 29 April 1945, E9). This “new approach to the teaching of the liberal arts” provides the students with a “general education,” that would “enlarge the student’s power to live happily with himself, and become a useful, creative individual” (E9). Under Weltner’s leadership, and in conjunction with the establishment of

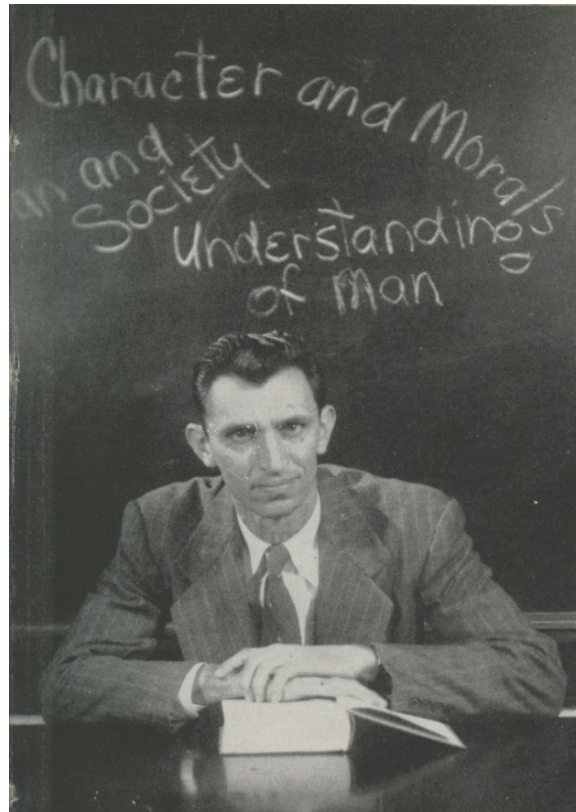
the Oglethorpe Plan, Oglethorpe University received accreditation in 1950.

The Weltner curriculum, known as the Oglethorpe Plan, remained relatively unchanged during the next several years through the subsequent presidencies of James Whitney Bunting (1953 – 1955) and Donald Wilson (1956 – 1957). After Weltner’s presidency, Stanley Daugert, an Oglethorpe professor of philosophy, became one of the primary supporters of the Oglethorpe Plan,

writing two well preserved manuscripts that praised the benefits and quality of the plan: “Understanding Oglethorpe” and “Oglethorpe and the Problem of Moral Education.” Together these two works detail a history of the Oglethorpe Plan, with suggestions for improving upon the existing system by adding fine arts to the five areas of significance in the curriculum. Daugert’s sometimes painfully detailed work remains a milestone in capturing not only a reaction to the program but the significance of its existence and a critique of its performance.

Daugert’s two manuscripts provided significant narrative to the exhibit. Although they were not visually stimulating, they were included in the exhibit and augmented by reproductions of images of Daugert and some three-dimensional university materials that helped to support the documents.

Two more flat print items took on a significant role in the exhibit in the form of two speeches



Professor Stanley Daugert is captured in this ca. 1949 image from the Yamacraw yearbook.

by subsequent university presidents. These presidents, Agnew and Beall, began a process of fine tuning the program to adjust to changes in education on a national scale.

When Dr. Donald Charles Agnew began his presidency in 1958, he too made the decision to keep the Oglethorpe Plan as the heart of the academic program. He also reaffirmed the idea that students should have a commitment to service within the community. Dr. Agnew addressed this in a state of the university address given in February 1960, stating that “we are growing not just physically but in the sense of mission and in the sense of obligation” (Agnew 1959). Under

President Agnew, who regarded the small size of the student body as an impediment to the university’s success, the number of students more than doubled within five years. There were other minor changes as well, such as the re-naming of some of the core courses to more traditional names. Dr. David N. Thomas, a history professor at Oglethorpe University, in his work “Oglethorpe University: A Sesquicentennial History” notes the example of the course “Man and the Universe” being renamed “Science.” Additionally,

the catalogue of courses was changed to its familiar title, *Oglethorpe University Bulletin*. Agnew was also responsible for establishing faculty tenure, granting its faculty a guarantee of their academic freedom.

Yet another speech would continue the process and provide continuity in the changing pattern of education. This time it was president Beall’s turn to use the same platform to instigate

change. In his 1965 speech delivered to the student body, Dr. Paul Rensselaer Beall stated that a liberal arts education was necessary to “expose our students to their heritage so that they have a frame of reference in evaluating contemporary hysterics” (Beall 1965). Beall arrived at Oglethorpe in the midst of profound changes in American culture and society caused by reaction to the Vietnam War. During his relatively short tenure of 1965–1967, Beall introduced a number of foundational changes to the Oglethorpe Plan. He reduced the number of academic divisions to four, as well as made changes to their titles. Instead of Weltner’s labels of Human Understanding, Citizenship,

and Community Service, the titles were changed to Humanities, Social Studies, and Behavioral Science. The division name of Science remained unchanged.

As significant written information of stellar nature was not available, the aforementioned Thomas manuscript helped supply a more thorough understanding of the presidency of Dr. Paul Kenneth Vonk, who served from 1967–1975. Vonk enlisted Dr. Philip Weltner as an academic consultant, transforming aspects of the Core program to resemble

some of the original characteristics of the Oglethorpe Plan. This reactionary move provided noteworthy modification in course names to more abstract-sounding titles, similar to Dr. Weltner’s original course titles. President Vonk maintained the emphasis on the required core of courses, but he also introduced the internship program to give students hands-on employment experience in their fields of interest (Thomas 1986, 337). Following Vonk,



Students on the stairs at Oglethorpe University’s campus during Weltner’s era, ca. 1951.

the next president, Dr. Manning Mason Pattillo, Jr., left an excellent paper trail of well-written materials including his own seminal report, "Education in the English Tradition." This gem of continuity for the Oglethorpe Plan was printed in an annual report of the university, marking that workplace document with significance beyond its original intent.

In a statement prepared by Pattillo for the 1977 Annual Report, he detailed how Oglethorpe has "been shaped principally by the English tradition of collegiate education." "The colleges in the English tradition," wrote Pattillo, "emphasize broad education for intelligent leadership" (Pattillo 1979, 8). Aside from stressing "the basic academic competencies—reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning—and the fundamental fields of knowledge—the arts and sciences," Dr. Pattillo, like Philip Weltner, was adamant that the Oglethorpe education must include

close relationships between teachers and students in order to "stimulate intellectual activity" and help develop students as mature individuals (8). "Factory-like instruction, conducted in huge classes," said Pattillo, "is the very antithesis of the English tradition" (9). From 1975–1988, Dr. Pattillo led the university as president. Under his leadership, the faculty selected a core of fifteen courses that were required of all students. Dr. Pattillo was dedicated from the start of his presidency to the maintenance of a core liberal arts course of study. The Core Curriculum had become not only a tradition, but a fixed and unchanging item in the curriculum. Change was coming in the form of a major grant.

In the early 1990s, under the leadership of core faculty members, President Donald Stanton,

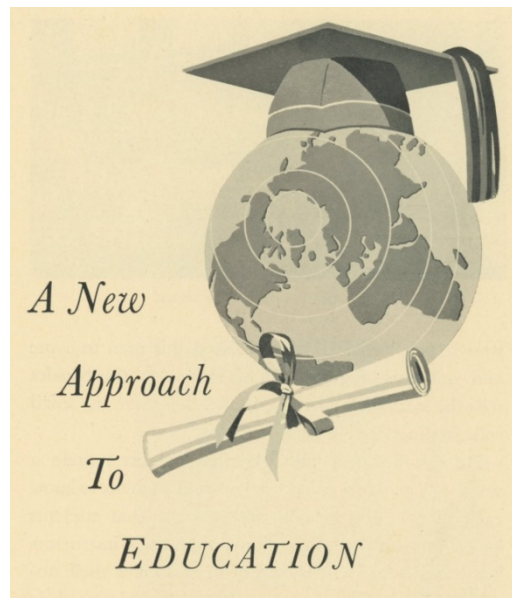
and Dr. Victoria Weiss, the Core Curriculum was significantly revised after Oglethorpe received a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The newly revised Core was aimed at "providing a common learning experience for all students in which each course takes a distinct approach to understanding the five key questions central to the human experience" (Weiss 1999). The Core was now centered on discussing five thought-provoking questions: What are our present ways of

understanding ourselves and the universe? How do these ways of understanding evolve? How do we deal with conflicts in our ways of understanding? How do we decide what is of value? How do we decide how to live our lives? (Weiss 1994).

Archivists know that a document of seeming little significance today can become an exemplary item in thirty or more years. For the NEH grant document, only a few decades were required for this to take on

such importance. The grant provides a treasure trove of information on the next steps in the history of the Core Curriculum. The document itself was placed on exhibit along with some companion materials representing a noteworthy conference, the Core Convo. These items provided the much needed path of the narrative, bringing the history of the Core up to the present. It was the grant proposal in the 1990s and its acquisition that determined the future of the Core.

The Core program today continues to progress under the leadership of faculty and the administration. Core faculty work together through frequent conversation to provide an integrated approach to learning. These discussions happen through informal and formal gatherings, such as Core workshops in



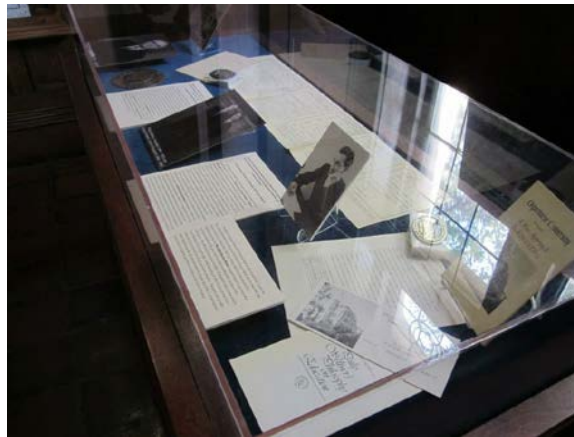


which they brainstorm ideas and examine and discuss each other's syllabi, writing prompts, and editions of texts. Dr. David N. Thomas encapsulates the dedication to the Core well when he writes that "the successive generations of Oglethorpe leadership have agreed on the proposition that mathematics, science, social studies and the humanities are of continuing import regardless of a student's primary professional interests" (Thomas 1986, 400). Today, Oglethorpe University, with one of the longest standing Core programs in the country, has few rivals in its continuous commitment to the liberal arts education.

Like the Core Curriculum itself, the exhibit on the Core required much attention and research in order to create and execute a display that both provided an adequate and accurate narrative and captured the interest of the alumni through visual representations. The delight of finding historical documents that provided rich and pertinent context was the first step in designing and executing the exhibit. The next step was envisioning the exhibit. Since it was primarily paper-based, a method of attracting viewers and capturing interest had to be considered. The librarians came up with a plan to create story boards which would be suspended over display cabinets. The story boards would provide a chronological history of the Core, while the documents cited in the text would be housed in the display cases. In addition, images of the academics that helped develop the Core were used along with select three-dimensional items. An excellent visual reinforcement and

context was provided in the form of a lecture to the alumni. Using many images from the materials on exhibit, the PowerPoint that accompanied the lecture served to introduce the audience to a number of items they would see in the exhibit.

The librarians have found that celebrating the university's history has, of course, led to a rich partnership with the Alumni Department and consequently enhanced relationships with alumni of the university. Conversations



between librarians and alumni at the exhibit opening have resulted in alumni visiting the archives for their personal research and in alumni donating significant items for the collection. The annual alumni event has also helped the librarians publicize library achievements that may be of interest to the

alumni population. The personal touch, the relationship between exhibited material and social memory serve to enhance the college experience. University archives house the written and visual memory of the campus. Research using a variety of these materials can often be a personal experience of detailed selection. Exhibiting materials around a theme-based concept creates a public experience and an awareness that cannot be duplicated.

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