



Maximizing Partnerships: Faculty Buy-in, Service Learning, and Hidden Collections

Christopher Harter, Director of Library and Reference Services, Amistad Research Center

Elisabeth McMahon, Department of History, Tulane University

Abstract

Beginning in 2008, the Amistad Research Center (ARC), an independent, nonprofit special collections library and archives housed on the campus of Tulane University in New Orleans, initiated a plan to expand access to its collections. This effort has been aided by two Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grants from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). In 2009, ARC began its role as a community partner in Tulane University's service learning program, a post-Hurricane Katrina addition to the university's undergraduate curriculum. These developments have led to a collaborative partnership between ARC and faculty and students of Tulane University that not only provides faculty members with a willing, content-rich community partner that supports their course aims, but also affords undergraduate students a direct, hands-on experience working in a library and archival setting and brings to ARC additional assistance in exposing its hidden collections.


"I think that until I had actually worked in an archives, it was really difficult to get a sense of what that actually would mean. The class readings have given us an introduction to archival procedures and the work that archivists do, and it is really interesting to be able to put this into practice. Working with these documents is such a rewarding experience because I feel like there is so much to be learned, a whole side of history that I could not grasp in this way from just reading a book. It is also rewarding to feel like I can really make a difference in helping to shape the way historians for years to come will find access to this material. It is interesting to think about the fact that, if there were not people to organize and to create finding aids for these resources, it would be virtually impossible for historians to know what was out there or to gain access to it."

—Excerpt from Tulane University student's service learning reflection paper, 2009

Interesting, rewarding, and access are three words that stand out in the student reflection paper quoted at left. *Discovery* is perhaps a good way to describe what this student encountered. The term is certainly fitting to describe the outcome of the grant-funded initiatives at the Amistad Research Center (ARC) over the past seven years and ARC's efforts to partner with faculty and students. That partnership aims not only to expose both parties to the rich sources within the collections, but also to transform them into stakeholders in order to turn hidden collections into bountiful discoveries.

The Amistad Research Center and Efforts to Expand Access

The Amistad Research Center is the nation's oldest and largest independent archives and special collections library that chronicles race relations, civil rights, and ethnic history in the United States. Founded in 1966 as an outgrowth of the United



Church Board for Homeland Ministries' Race Relations Department at Fisk University, an early civil rights training ground, ARC incorporated as a 501(c)3 nonprofit in 1969 and today resides on the campus of Tulane University in New Orleans. Originally founded as a repository for the archives of the American Missionary Association—a Christian abolitionist organization that later worked to found schools for the Freedmen following the Civil War—ARC expanded its collections into the areas of race relations, the Civil Rights Movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and other aspects of the history and culture of ethnic communities in the United States.

This expansion was based in part on an aggressive acquisitions policy that focused on collecting materials documenting underrepresented peoples at a time when such a strategy was not widely emphasized by cultural institutions. However, budgeting and staffing for this nonprofit organization did not always allow for the arrangement and description of these collections according to professional archival standards. Over time, ARC became a well-established research center on the topic of racial and ethnic history. However, a significant portion of its collections remained underused by scholars and the general public because they had not been processed or cataloged, which limited access to holdings. Beginning in 2008, staff sought to change this by embracing the idea of expanding access through the use of increased technology and the pursuit of grants and partnerships.

The Amistad Research Center received the first of two CLIR Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grants in 2008. The initial grant allowed for processing and cataloging specific civil rights-related collections within its holdings, but the major success of that grant was that it aided in re-envisioning how access could be interpreted

and demonstrated in a variety of ways to ensure that ARC fulfilled its basic mission. This was most notably seen through the implementation of collections management software and the development of a comprehensive manual that outlined policies on access, collection development, exhibitions, security, and other areas. The manual also detailed procedures in preservation and handling, processing and cataloging, and data entry for the collections management software. In short, the manual now serves as the major form of documentation for staff, administration, and trustees, as well as a comprehensive training manual for new staff, students, and volunteers.

The completion and development of professional policies and procedures as deliverables for the first CLIR grant helped in planning for the 2011 grant, which called for processing records generated by the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) and its sister organization, the Africa Fund. These related organizations were based out of New York and founded during the 1950s and 1960s, respectively, with the goal of educating the U.S. populace and policy makers on anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements in Africa. Totalling almost 600 linear feet of organizational records, as well as publications and ephemera collected from groups and individuals throughout the African continent, these collections contained a wealth of information and resources for anyone studying U.S.-Africa relations on the macro level and individuals and groups working to end colonialism and apartheid within individual countries. The additional impetus for targeting these collections for processing and cataloging was a growing interest among researchers in accessing these collections, based on the results of a 2009 partnership with a faculty member and students at Tulane University.

Service Learning and the Development of the Archiving Africa Course

In the spring semester of 2009, ARC partnered with Elisabeth McMahon of Tulane University's department of history on a course called Archiving Africa. Dr. McMahon's goal for this course was to expose her students to the rich Africana holdings found within ARC's archival collections as a means of developing an appreciation of historical research methods and to introduce them to the benefits and difficulties of researching and interpreting primary sources. This course was a research-level seminar as well as a service learning course in which students would each commit 20 hours of volunteer time to ARC during the semester.

Service learning as an educational concept emerged in the 1970s. First viewed as experimental, it has gained in popularity on college and university campuses. This concept is defined in various ways, but to quote the [National Service Learning Clearinghouse](#), it is "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities." Tulane University's [Center for Public Service](#) defines service learning as "an educational experience based upon a collaborative partnership between the university and the community. 'Learning by doing' enables students to apply academic knowledge and critical thinking skills to meet genuine community needs. Through reflection and assessment, students gain deeper understanding of course content and the importance of civic engagement."

Tulane University's requirement that all incoming undergraduate students complete one semester of service learning coursework and an additional

semester of independent service learning work with a community partner began in 2006. Elisabeth McMahon joined the history department the following year. As a professor teaching African history, she sought to locate all of the Africana-related collections in New Orleans. Although there were a number of collections available in the city for students to work with, ARC offered the largest collection and one with the most coherent link with the African continent. In designing her class, she wanted to find an archives to consistently work with over time. As a faculty member, she knew that working with an archives in this way would require a considerable amount of time and work, thus it was ideal that ARC had enough materials for her students to use year after year. Ease of location was also a factor. That ARC qualified as a community partner and nonprofit institution, yet was located on Tulane's campus, made it much easier to access geographically than other collections around the city.

McMahon and ARC have partnered three times for the Archiving Africa class. The first two classes, held in 2009 and 2012, focused on the ACOA/ Africa Fund records. Although a portion of the ACOA records (about 146 linear feet) had been previously arranged in 1983, the resulting finding aid was not sufficient to provide access to the myriad letters, speeches, brochures, periodicals, and other documents that formed the collection. Lack of deeper access to the collection had long been an issue for staff and researchers.

Box 86	
f. 1-21	-- Ghana-Collected Items-Gov-Uni -- 1952-'64
22	-- Ghana-Collected Items-Photographs -- n.d.
23-33	-- Ghana-Collected Items-Writings -- 1954-1966, n.d.
34	-- Ghana-Collected Items-Serial-Information Bulletin on African Affairs -- 1958
35-44	-- Ghana-Collected Items-Press Clippings -- 1954-1966

Fig. 1: Example of initial finding aid for the ACOA records, illustrating lack of description.

Of particular interest to researchers were the files for ACOA's activities within various African countries, which number more than 70 cubic feet. These include an extraordinary trove of correspondence between activists, U.S. government officials, African political leaders, organizers, students, and others. The ACOA records provided an ideal trial project for a course-based undergraduate service learning experience for several reasons. First, staff had identified the need to index and inventory portions of the collection as a project that could not be undertaken without staff help. Second, students would work on a large but singular collection, which would provide opportunities to discuss common issues and methods during their work. Third, the collection was diverse enough that students could use it for seminar papers and the professor could use documents for a number of class discussions.


Over the course of the semester, students indexed correspondence and inventoried ephemera in more than 25 boxes, far exceeding Amistad's expectations. (For the purposes of the initial service

learning class, students merely listed sender and recipient, date of letters, and their location within the collection as an aid to locating letters by particular individuals. They did not index or create transcripts for the content of the letters.)

The second Archiving Africa class, as well as ARC's second CLIR grant, were the direct results of this initial foray into a service learning partnership. The 2011 grant called for the processing of multiple, later addenda to the ACOA records (140 linear feet) and those of the Africa Fund (350 linear feet). Additionally, 135 boxes of books, pamphlets, newspapers, and other publications collected over the years by the two organizations were to be cataloged within ARC's library holdings. As part of the work plan for the second grant, Dr. McMahon served as a subject-area specialist, helping to identify individuals, organizations, events, and related topics within the collections, which provided more authoritative description during the organization of the records. Students in the course focused their service learning on helping

Sender	Recipient	Date of Letter	Box	Folder
Nyerere, Julius K.	Houser, George M.	1958, 3-25	142	32
Kawawa, Rashidi M.	Jonas, Gilbert	1958, 7-1	142	32
Houser, George M.	Kawawa, Rashidi M.	1958, 7-15	142	32
Munanka, Bhoke	Houser, George M.	1958, 7-18	142	32
Houser, George M.	Munanka, Bhoke	1958, 10-7	142	32
Munanka, Bhoke	Houser, George M.	1958, 10-17	142	32
Chamshama, S.S.	Houser, George M.	1958, 11-6	142	32
Houser, George M.	Chamshama, S.S.	1958, 11-24	142	32
Chamshama, S.S.	Houser, George M.	1959, 1-12	142	32
Chamshama, S.S.	Houser, George M.	1959, 1-28	142	32
Chamshama, S.S.	Houser, George M.	1959, 2-3	142	32

Fig. 2: Example of correspondence index spreadsheet for 2009 service learning class



staff with the initial collection survey of the records, publications, and audiovisual materials, and with compiling the container lists that were then used to create processing plans for both sets of records. (See Appendix for a short project description.)

Partnering Hidden Collections and Service Learning

The Amistad Research Center's integration of a service learning collaboration with Dr. McMahon's Archiving Africa course and the adoption of a hidden collections focus have yielded great results for the students, the faculty member, ARC, and the community of Africanist scholars. As seen in the definitions above, service learning as a concept entails both educational and community outreach components. Part of the collaboration's success is based on the belief by both the faculty member and community partner that service learning is successful when it fully and equally embraces both service and learning. This shared belief is fundamental and has been communicated to students. Students who most effectively embraced their service were those who considered their work in light of ARC's mission and goals, and who thought about the roles of archives and libraries within their communities and society in general. This is a fundamental goal of Dr. McMahon's course. Following are some of the objectives for her Archiving Africa course:

- Introduce students to the practice of history through work in archives, archival methods, and archival research
- Introduce students to the methodology of historical practice and, in particular, the methods of African history
- Allow students to consider the methods necessary to preserve the history of ordinary individuals and non-elite institutions

- Help students see the value of archives for building community identity
- Consider best practices for archives, especially related to collection development and preservation

In addition, during their initial introduction and training at ARC, students were introduced to its history and mission, and they learned how expanding access and having the support of granting agencies such as CLIR aid in fulfilling that mission.

Working with students as part of a service learning course is very different from overseeing student internships, putting on show and tell visits, or conducting inquiry-driven collaborations between librarians/archivists and faculty. Service learning requires that librarians and archivists simultaneously supervise multiple students over the course of a semester. It also requires librarians and archivists to be co-teachers with the faculty member by integrating service learning into course content. ARC staff have had to adjust to different levels of student interest, motivation, and abilities. Although staff encountered a few students who required Dr. McMahon's intervention to spur them to complete their service hours, most students took the service learning to heart and worked diligently at ARC.

Student reactions to the service learning and their work at ARC are seen in their (required) reflection journals and course evaluations. At least one student listed service learning hours as "kind of boring," but most had a more positive experience:

- "The service learning was directly related to a potential path in history, so it was cool to work in an archive."
- "[The service learning] tied in very well with

the course and I felt like I was doing something useful.”

- “All of the experience I have been gaining through the readings we have done and the work and research I have begun at ARC has really brought new aspects to my understanding of archives and how they function.”

Not only did the students find the service learning of interest, they found the opportunity to engage in extended archival research rewarding as well. As Dr. McMahon reported one semester, “In over ten years of teaching, I have never seen a class embrace and take ownership in a research project as this class did with the ACOA materials.”




Fig. 3: Service learning students from Dr. McMahon's class at work.

Perhaps the most rewarding outcome of the service learning classes was to see students return to ARC in various ways. Students became more knowledgeable of ARC as a valuable on-campus resource, knowledge they then spread to their peers. In addition, some students returned to ARC to complete individual internships or work as part-time student employees. One student from the first class was hired as a student assistant and worked as part of the second CLIR grant because of her experience and interest in

continuing to work with the ACOA records.

Dr. McMahon's exposure to the ACOA records, both as teacher and scholar, has added to the content of her Archiving Africa course as well as to other courses. For the service learning course, students' experience at ARC has often influenced class discussions. Dr. McMahon encourages students to describe their own work and to share discoveries of relevant resources and documents that may be useful to their classmates as they develop seminar papers. Dr. McMahon finds that students approach primary sources in very different ways when they are conducting research, as opposed to when they are inventorying or describing the materials. While the first often entails students narrowly searching for specific information or documents, the second allows them the leisure of exploring the collections more fully. She found that “By working in the collections first, they have an opportunity to explore and have a better sense of the sources before they decide on a paper topic. It gives them a better sense of what historians really do. Rather than simply searching databases, the service learning allows students to do research in a way that is more holistic to the practice of the profession. They get the chance to work with uncataloged materials and to discover what is hidden within.”

Most of the students in the classes were history majors. As the Archiving Africa course incorporates a strong methodology component both in class discussions and during the service learning, Dr. McMahon has found that students gain a better understanding of what historians do in terms of working with documents. They also gain a better understanding of professions that are allied to the field of history, such as those of archivists and librarians. In course evaluations, students repeatedly felt they were making a difference through the work completed at ARC,



viewing the outcome of their service learning as something tangible, with long-term impacts.

During the most recent Archiving Africa class, in 2014, Dr. McMahon incorporated scholarship that resulted from the increased access to the ACOA records provided by the first two classes and funding from CLIR. This increased access to archival collections led to new scholarship, which serves as the basis of classroom discussion for future students. That new scholarship is a fitting legacy of the partnership. This collaboration, as well as the receipt of support from CLIR in expanding access to ARC's collections, resulted in a sustainable and adaptable partnership that

focuses on the merger of service and learning to the benefit of all involved—faculty partner, students, ARC, and its global constituency of scholars and researchers. The collaboration has allowed us all to become stakeholders in turning hidden collections into bountiful discoveries.

References

Center for Public Service, Tulane University: <http://tulane.edu/cps/students/servicelearning.cfm>.

National Service Learning Clearinghouse: <http://www.servicelearning.org>.

Appendix

Short Version of Project Description for Spring 2012 Service Learning Class

Project Description


The Amistad Research Center will serve as the community partner for the service learning component in HISB497. The Center has received funding from the Council on Library and Information Resources to process the remaining portion of the ACOA/The Africa Fund records. Students from HISB497 will assist the ARC by conducting preliminary inventories and surveys, physically shifting the collections, and conducting preliminary preservation work on the materials. A series of tasks will be developed and students will be allowed to sign up for tasks based on their class schedules. Initial tasks will concentrate on these areas:

- Inventory audiovisual materials within the collection to provide information on format, date, title, etc. In addition, students may

index VHS tapes containing episodes of "South Africa Now," a weekly news program produced by The Africa Fund from 1988-1991.

- Inventory books, pamphlets, and periodicals produced by ACOA/The African Fund or collected by the organizations. Many of these were produced by organizations within various African nations and are not widely held by library institutions within the United States.
- Shift and separate records of ACOA and The Africa Fund at Amistad's offsite facility. Will require lifting boxes of 40 lbs.
- Create container lists summarizing content, formats, and dates of records.
- Begin preliminary preservation work and organization of file units within the records.

Students will be given detailed instructions for this project and will partake in an initial introduction to the Amistad Research Center and



training session. Amistad staff will discuss issues of access and preservation in archives and how these relate to the project at hand.

For the inventorying of audiovisual and printed items, using an Excel spreadsheet, students will enter information according to set criteria. Students will also be given composition books with which to record questions, organizational information, or related documentation.

Goal

The goal of this project is to enhance access to the records of the American Committee on Africa and The Africa Fund for researchers and scholars worldwide. Student assistance will help the ARC to jumpstart its work on this grant-funded project and aid staff in later phases of the project. The project will also introduce students to resources that may assist them in their coursework for HISB 497.