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Bringing Stories to Life by Sharing Archival Material

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Bringing Stories to Life by Sharing Archival Material

Abstract

Last summer I researched the experiences of women at Gettysburg College during the pivotal decade 1965-1975 with the support of a college grant, the Koble Fellowship, a ten-week humanities based faculty-mentored research project. I tracked women's experiences at the college during this period and designed a digital scholarship project to share their stories. As a history major and as a feminist, a project about the history of women and their activism on campus nicely complemented by interests. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Women at Gettysburg College, digital scholarship, archival research, Pennsylvania Historical Association

Disciplines

Archival Science | Digital Humanities | Higher Education | Women's History

BRINGING STORIES TO LIFE

BY SHARING ARCHIVAL MATERIAL by Christina Noto

Last summer I researched the experiences of women at Gettysburg College during the pivotal decade 1965-1975 with the support of a college grant, the Kolbe Fellowship, a ten-week humanities based faculty-mentored research project. I tracked women's experiences at the college during this period and designed a digital scholarship project to share their stories. As a history major and a feminist, a project about the history of women and their activism on campus nicely complemented my interests. I originally became acquainted with Special Collections & College Archives in Gettysburg College's Musselman Library for a project for my first-year seminar *The Sixties Revisted*. At that point, while I enjoyed my experience working there, I did not appreciate the full value of Special Collections.

When the summer began, I spent time with other fellows to learn about research methods, digital tools, copyright laws, and writing for the web. The copyright discussion was particularly helpful. With the help of Gettysburg's archivists I devised a release form for my interviews and focused on making the form comprehensive so that future generations of scholars can use the information without worrying about copyright issues.

Although Special Collections was my primary resource, I wanted to use every research opportunity available to me. During reunion weekend in June 2016 I interviewed four women who graduated in 1971. As I was at the beginning stages of my research, I benefited from listening to them reflect on their experiences. Seeing their enthusiasm, laughter, and smiles as they recounted their stories inspired me to create a textured project that would document this important part of their lives.

Much of my research focused on a "sleep-in" that several women planned in March of 1969 to protest "women's hours"—a curfew that prevented women from staying out in the evenings past a certain time. Although I wanted to

focus on that specific event, I realized that I also needed to understand the context in which the students were protesting. Because of this, I decided to take a broader approach and look at women's experiences on campus from 1965-1975. The first source that I reviewed was the *Gettysburgian*, our college newspaper. I then looked through meeting minutes, all of the oral histories about my time period, the college yearbook, and various other publications. Some elements of my topic were not documented as well as I had hoped, but this is a struggle common to historical research. The "sleep-in" in particular was difficult to document through printed materials. By looking at different kinds of sources, including the college president's papers, I was able to fill in more pieces of the story.



Christina Noto (left) with her research mentor, Dr. Michael Birkner, at the Pennsylvania Historical Association's annual conference. October 2016. Photograph courtesy of Christina Noto.

Sometimes when I was looking through sources questions popped into my head. I found the staff of Special Collections to be extremely helpful, and they often had specific knowledge of the period I was researching. When I began creating my website, I needed images to make the project more interesting and interactive. The staff scanned several documents and photos for me. Without the digitization of these sources, it would have been difficult to complete my project and make it visually appealing.

In October, I presented my research at the Pennsylvania Historical Association's annual conference and placed second in the undergraduate poster presentations. Without Special Collections and the interviews I conducted, my project would not have been possible. Since I pursued my project research over the summer, I was able to concentrate in ways I could not during the semester. I am increasingly comfortable examining sources, asking questions, and thinking through issues relevant to my project.

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This summer I will analyze and contextualize Civil War sheet music from the Civil War Sheet Music Collection in Special Collections. I am modifying this project from my *Gender and the American Civil War* class into a brand new digital initiative.

Archives provide valuable information about the past, but more than that, they inspire fresh thinking about almost any topic. Whenever I hear an organization is “cleaning their files,” I encourage them to contact Special Collections to make sure important information can be saved and archived. I am so grateful to our archive and the professional staff who have enriched my experience there. Working with primary sources has made me a better student and historian.

Christina Noto is a member of the Gettysburg College Class of 2019. Please visit her 2016 digital project on the experiences of women at Gettysburg College, 1965-1975 at: <http://christinanoto.sites.gettysburg.edu/education/women-of-gettysburg/index>. ■

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MARAC at the time, represents nonetheless a benchmark for MARAC in its efforts towards fostering further educational opportunities.” Regarding her tenure as chair of MARAC, the Committee member noted “her work while chair in promoting new initiatives while paying attention at the same time to essential housekeeping needs (e.g., the updating of the “Green Binder”).”

Again, in her own words, when our honoree was asked about goals for our profession, as a candidate for president of the Society of American Archivists, she noted that the

“leadership must make sure that we have active and motivated members who are dedicated to helping the Society meet the goals of technology, diversity, advocacy, and public awareness.” When considering advocacy, she noted that “advocacy, in the end, will be most successful if there is a broad base of support among the public for archives.”

This individual’s secondary nominator noted that this individual “is a welcoming presence, being particularly friendly and approachable to new members. At the same time, she exhibits a seriousness of purpose, reflecting her professionalism and her commitment to the organization and her colleagues.” Her primary nominator summarized her letter by saying, “[she] has served as a mentor and role model to many an archivist. She is always willing to provide support, guidance and encouragement. Generous with her time, she rarely (if ever) says no when asked to serve on a committee, give a presentation, or write a column, article, or book review.” Again, from the nomination letter received, regarding this individual’s leadership, her “approach in these roles is as much as she carries herself in her other work, thoughtful in her words and actions and considerate of diverse opinions and perspectives.”

To conclude, I am going to again use our honoree’s own words against her when she was asked about advice for new archivists. She noted that it is “easy to get the basic skills that one needs to be an archivist but [doesn’t] think we always focus on the importance of getting those skills. As we work with so many different formats we must know how to acquire, appraise, preserve, arrange, describe and provide access to the collections in our care. Archival graduate educational programs should make sure that students do not leave their institutions

until they have these skills.” In addition, she noted that there are “other skills both current and new archivists must have in order to be successful. Usually these skills are not taught in academic or professional development programs.”

She noted that “we should be self-aware and understand our strengths and weaknesses and seek out and be open to feedback from a variety of sources... Not only should we talk to our friends, co-workers and supervisors but also talk to those you disagree with or dislike. They may give the best advice of all... Archivists need to be prepared to deal with ambiguity, complexity and change. We need to look at situations from different viewpoints and come up with ideas for solutions not just complain. We need to be able to find connections between disparate ideas, reframe how people think about an issue, invite new collaborations, experiment and take risks... We should be able to develop a rich diversity of relationships and inspire trust through integrity and competence... We can’t move forward without sharing ideas, listening, discussing issues, and compromising.”

By now this individual should realize who I have been talking about, and for those of you who may still be in the dark, it is my great honor and extreme privilege to announce the winner of the 2017 MARAC Distinguished Service Award, Danna Bell. ■