

Cultural Appropriation and the University Archives: Providing Access to Culturally Sensitive Records

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Abstract: A university's history may not always reflect society's current standards of cultural awareness, inclusivity, and sensitivity. When using archival materials, researchers frequently encounter unexpected images, documents, language, and artifacts that speak of this past. This platform presentation explores the difficulties encountered while providing access to potentially offensive materials and how to prepare for the sometimes strong reactions people have to them. Many times these reactions put archivists in the position of defending an institution's past while simultaneously trying to remain neutral in order to allow researchers to interpret the material on their own. But what does one do when the researchers in question are undergraduate students unaware of their institution's past? How should a university archives prepare its staff for a researcher's emotionally charged reaction to something they were not prepared to encounter? How should archivists maintain a commitment to providing access to institutional history while simultaneously demonstrating the desire to be aware and sensitive to the needs of specific communities or groups? At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for example, students may ask why the university made use of Native American culture for their mascot; allowed its students to perform and dress in blackface, or why an alumnus and eventual faculty member used the term "darky" when describing an African American baptism during the late 1800s. Current research has primarily focused on the social responsibility of archivists and the importance of developing relationships of mutual respect with communities and groups, but few studies have discussed access issues surrounding culturally sensitive materials. Using examples found within the University Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, this presentation will explore possible solutions to developing culturally responsive archival practices and public services.

About the author:

Jameatris Rimkus is the *Archivist for Reference and User Engagement* at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign since 2012. She is a member of the Society of American Archivists. Her research interests include the arrangement and description of culturally sensitive materials, the development of reference practices that incorporate cultural awareness along with the development of access policies to sensitive materials and how that influences access.