# A Perfect Storm: Maximizing Faculty Buy-in, Service Learning, and Hidden Collections

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**Abstract**. Beginning in 2008, the Amistad Research Center, an independent, non-profit special collections library/archives housed on the campus of Tulane University in New Orleans, undertook an institutional focus 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. In 2009, the Center 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 Amistad and faculty and students of Tulane University that not only provides faculty with a willing content-rich community partner that supports their course aims, but affords undergraduate students a direct, hands-on experience working in a library/archival setting and brings to the Center additional assistance in exposing its "hidden collections."

## Introduction

> 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 student's service learning reflection paper, 2009

"Interesting," "rewarding," and "access" are three words that are noticeable in the student

reflection paper quoted above. Let us summarize those words into one: "Discovery" is perhaps a good way to describe what this student encountered and it is certainly fitting to describe the outcome of the combination of grant-funded initiatives at the Amistad Research Center over the past seven years and the Center's efforts to partner with faculty and students to not only expose them to the rich sources within the collections, but to transform them into stakeholders in efforts 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/special collections library that chronicles race relations, civil rights, and ethnic history within 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, the Center incorporated as a 501(c)3 non-profit in 1969, and today resides on the campus on Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. 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, the Center expanded its collections into the areas of race relations, the Civil Rights Movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and the other aspects of the history and culture of ethnic communities within the U.S.

This expansion was based in part on an aggressive acquisitions policy that focused on the collecting of materials documenting underrepresented peoples at a time when such collecting was not widely emphasized by cultural institutions. However, budgeting and staffing for this non-profit organization did not always allow for the arrangement and description of these collections according to professional archival standards. During its existence, the Center became

a well-established research center on the topic of racial and ethnic history. However, a significant portion of its collections remained underutilized by scholars and the general public due to lack of processing and cataloging, which limited access to the Center's holdings. Beginning in 2008, the Center's staff sought to change this by embracing the idea of expanding access to its collections through the use of increased technology and the pursuit of grants and partnerships that would aid Amistad is its efforts.

Amistad received the first of two Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grants from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) in 2008. The initial CLIR grant not only allowed the Center to process and catalog specific civil rights-related collections within its holdings, but the major success of that grant was that it aided the Center in re-envisioning how access could be interpreted and demonstrated in a variety of ways in order to ensure that the Center 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 the Center's policies on access, collection development, exhibitions, security, and other areas. The manual also detailed procedures in the areas of 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 Center staff, administration, and trustees, as well as a comprehensive training manual for new staff, students, and volunteers.

The completion and the development of professional policies and procedures as deliverables for the first CLIR grant aided in the planning for the 2011 award, which called for the processing of 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. Totaling nearly 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, as well as 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 by researchers for access to these collections based on the results of a partnership with a faculty member and students at Tulane University that took place in 2009.

**Service-learning and the Development of the Archiving Africa Course**

In the spring semester of 2009, the Amistad Research Center partnered with Dr. Elisabeth McMahon of Tulane University's Department of History on a course entitled "Archiving Africa." Dr. McMahon's goal for this course was to expose her students to the rich Africana holdings found within Amistad's archival collections as a means of developing an appreciation of research methods used by historians and to introduce them to the benefits and difficulties of researching and interpreting primary sources. This course would not only be a research-level seminar, but a service-learning course, as well, in which students would each commit 20 hours of volunteer time to the Amistad Research Center 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."[1] Tulane University's Center for Public Service describes it in this way:

"Academic Service Learning is 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."[2]

Tulane University's requirement that all incoming undergraduate students complete one semester of service-learning course work and an additional semester of independent service-learning work with a community partner began in 2006. Dr. Elisabeth McMahon joined the History Department faculty the following year, and as a professor teaching African history, she sought to locate all of the Africana-related collections in New Orleans. While there were a number of collections available in the city for students to work with, the Amistad Research Center offered the largest number of collections and the most coherent link with the continent itself in its collections. In designing her archives class, she wanted to find an archive that she could 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 for her that Amistad had enough materials for her students to use year after year in classes. The ease of location was also a factor for her. That Amistad qualified as a community partner as a non-profit institution, yet was also located on Tulane's campus, made working with Amistad much easier than other collections around the city.

McMahon and Amistad have partnered three times for the Archiving Africa class. The first two classes, held in 2009 and 2012, both focused on the ACOA/Africa Fund records.

[1] National Service Learning Clearinghouse (http://www.servicelearning.org). Accessed 2 February 2015.
[2] Center for Public Service, Tulane University (http://tulane.edu/cps/students/servicelearning.cfm). Accessed 2 February 2015.

Although a portion of the ACOA records (approximately 146 linear feet) had been previously arranged in 1983, the resulting finding aid was not sufficient to provide access to the myriad of letters, speeches, brochures, periodicals, and other documents that formed the collection. Lack of deeper access to the collection had long been an issue for the Center and researchers.



Figure 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 numbered upwards of 70 cubic foot boxes. These include an extraordinary trove of correspondence between activists and government officials in the United States and political leaders, organizers, students, and others across Africa. The ACOA records provided an ideal trial project for a course-based undergraduate service learning experience for a number of reasons: 1) Amistad staff had identified the need to index and inventory portions of the collection as a project that could not be undertaken without assistance due to staffing levels, 2) students would work on a large, but singular, collection, which would provide opportunities to discuss similar issues and methods during their work, and 3) the collection was diverse enough that students could use it as a source for seminar papers and the professor could utilize documents for a number of class discussions. Over the course of the semester, the students

indexed correspondence and inventoried ephemera throughout 25-plus boxes, which far

exceeded Amistad's expectations.[3]

| 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 |

Figure 2. Example of Correspondence Index Spreadsheet for 2009 Service Learning Class

The second Archiving Africa class, as well as Amistad'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 ACOA/Africa Fund staff were to be cataloged

within Amistad'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 assisting

staff with the initial collection survey of the records, publications, and audiovisual materials and

the compilation of the container lists which were then used in the creation of processing plans for

both sets of records. (See Appendix for abbreviated version of the project description.)

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[3] 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 transcript the content of the letters.

**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 its adoption of a hidden collections focus has yielded

great results for the students, the faculty member, the Amistad Research Center, 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 success of the

collaboration between Amistad and Dr. McMahon's classes is based on the belief by both faculty

member and community partner that service learning is successful when it embraces both aspects

– service *and* learning – fully and equally. This shared belief has been fundamental to both

parties and has been communicated to the students. Students who have most effectively

embraced their service to Amistad have been those who have considered their work in light of

the Center's mission and goals and who have thought about the roles that archives and libraries

provide within the communities they serve and in society in general. This is one of the

fundamental goals of McMahon's course. Not only is the Amistad Research Center integral to

Dr. McMahon's course, but the idea and functions of archives and libraries is, as well. The

course objectives for her Archiving Africa course include, in part, the following:

1) Introduce students to the practice of history through work in archives, archival methods, and archival research.
2) Introduce students to the methodology of historical practice and the methods in particular of African history.
3) Allow students to consider the methods necessary to preserve the history of ordinary individuals and non-elite institutions.
4) Help students see the value of archives for building community identity.
5) Consider the best practices for archives, especially understanding collection development and preservation.

In addition, during their initial introduction and training at the Center, the students are introduced to the history and mission of the Center, as well as how expanding access and the assistance of granting agencies such as CLIR aid the Center in fulfilling that mission.

Working with students as part of a service-learning course is very different than individual student internships, "show and tell" visits to special collections, or inquiry-driven collaborations between librarians/archivists and faculty. Service learning requires that librarians and archivists supervise multiple students at once over the course of a semester while also taking on the role of co-teacher with the faculty member through the integration of the service learning into the course content. This has meant that Amistad staff have had to learn to adjust to different levels of interest, motivation, and abilities on the part of the students each time the course is taught. While Amistad has encountered a few students who required intervention on the part of the Dr. McMahon to spur them to complete their service hours, the majority of the students have taken the service learning to heart and worked diligently to aid the Center.

Student reactions to the service learning and their work at Amistad can be seen in the reflection journals they keep for class and in course evaluations that were shared with the archives liaison. While at least one student listed their service learning hours at Amistad as "kind of boring," the majority reflected a more positive and thoughtful 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 through the work and research I have begun in the ARC has really brought new aspects to my under-standing of archives and how they function."

Not only did the students find the service learning of interest but the opportunity to engage in extended archival research was rewarding, as well.  As Dr. McMahon has reported during 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."



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

Perhaps the most rewarding outcome of the service learning classes has been to see students return to the Center in various ways. Exposure to the Amistad through the service learning classes has made students more knowledgeable of the Center as a valuable on-campus resource. A knowledge they then spread to their peers. In addition, some students have returned to the Center to complete individual internships or work as part-time employees after completing their service learning at Amistad. One particular student from the first service learning class was hired as a student assistant and worked as part of the second CLIR grant due to 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 course content of her Archiving Africa course, as well as others. For the service-learning course, students' time at Amistad often influences class discussions and they are encouraged by Dr. McMahon to describe not only their own work, but to share discoveries of relevant resources and documents that may be useful to their classmates as they develop seminar papers. Dr. McMahon has found that students approach primary sources in very different ways if they are conducting research versus inventorying/describing the materials. While the former often entails students narrowly searching for specific information or documents, the latter allows them the leisure of exploring the collections more fully. She finds 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 un-cataloged materials and to discover what is hidden within."

While not all of the students partaking in the service learning classes have been history majors, the majority have been. As the Archiving Africa course incorporates a strong methodological component both in class discussions and in 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 allied to the historical field, such as archivists and librarians. In course evaluations, students have repeatedly felt like they were making a difference by the work they have done at Amistad, 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 was able to incorporate scholarship that resulted

from the increased access to the American Committee on Africa records provided by the first two classes and funding from CLIR. This continuity of increasing access to archival collections, leading to new scholarship, that is then serves as the basis of classroom discussion for future students is in a way a fitting legacy of the service learning partnership between Dr. McMahon's classes and the Amistad Research Center, as well as the direct result of support from granting agencies such as CLIR.

In considering its role in aiding libraries and archives to extend access to unprocessed and uncataloged holdings, CLIR has recently articulated five values that summarize its efforts - scholarship, comprehensiveness, collaboration, sustainability, and openness.[4] The collaboration between the Amistad Research Center and Dr. McMahon's Archiving Africa course, as well as the receipt of support from CLIR in expanding access to the Center's collections, has resulted in a sustainable, but adaptable partnership that focuses on the merger of "service" and "learning" to the benefit of all involved – faculty partner, students, the Amistad Research Center, and its global constituency of scholars and researchers – so that we may all become stakeholders in turning hidden collections into bountiful discoveries.

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[4] Christa Williford. "So what do we mean by 'hidden'." (http://connect.clir.org/blogs/christa-williford/2015/02/12/so-what-do-we-mean-by-hidden). Accessed 15 February 2015.

Appendix: Detail 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 Center 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:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Shift and separate records of ACOA and The Africa Fund at Amistad's offsite facility. Will require lifting boxes of 40lbs.
4. Creation of container lists summarizing content, formats, and dates of records.
5. 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, utilizing 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 Center 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.