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Maximizing Institutional Archives with Limited Resources: A Case Study



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ABSTRACT

This practice-oriented article shares how one small institution on a tight budget without a full-time archivist leveraged existing resources (human, technological, and physical) to maximize 75 years of institutional archives for a recent milestone alumni reunion. Projects included drafting an institutional history, interviewing long-time members of the institution, organizing photos for display, and providing alumni with access to yearbooks. Special attention is given to the process of creating a 20-minute institutional history video, which premiered at an alumni banquet and was shared with other constituents electronically. There is also a focus on project management and collaborating with coworkers in other departments. Part-time archivists or those who are beginning archival management will gain an approach to tackling projects and creating professional results.

Introduction

For many ACL member schools, institutional archives are included under the umbrella of responsibilities assigned to library services, but not every institution has the blessing of a designated, full-time, professional archivist. For those in this category, the day-to-day responsibilities of “regular” library services take precedence; creating, maintaining, and displaying institutional archives is an afterthought reserved for those rare moments of downtime or, sometimes, out of urgent necessity.

Although not necessarily urgent, as my institution had plenty of foreknowledge of the upcoming need to leverage the archives for maximum use at a milestone alumni celebration, the task of pulling together something meaningful out of boxes and files of history was no less overwhelming. However, by the grace and help of the Lord, my institution was able to effectively do just this using existing resources – without a full-time archivist. While I would heartily state that having a professional archivist on staff would be the ideal, my goal with this article is to demonstrate that those without this asset can still use institutional archives professionally.

Background and Institutional Culture

At Emmaus Bible College, I am one of two full-time librarians to serve approximately 270 residential students. My focus is on public services, research instruction, and managing our student workforce. When time allows, I also maintain the institutional archives, which usually happens during summer and extended breaks.

When I started in this position in 2013, the archives were in fairly good shape. There had been several volunteers who had worked together to organize the history of the college and I benefitted from their organization. However, there was a backlog of documents and photos for the archives that had not yet been organized and filed. One of my first tasks during my first summer of employment was to organize those materials; this project allowed me to get very familiar with what was in the archives and also gave me the opportunity to add to the organization the volunteers had begun. Currently, our institutional archives dwell in my office in two four-drawer file cabinets organized alphabetically by topic; approximately thirty well-labeled storage boxes in the closet next to my office; and eight shelves with yearbooks, catalogs, and student handbooks in chronological order (also in the aforementioned closet). Our items are not cataloged and the finding aid that is so often recommended for archives exists only in my head, as time and resources are limited.

In 2014, my institution honored our chancellor for 55 years of service at Emmaus. As part of this, there was a desire to create a video telling the story of this man's work for the Lord and the college over those years, and I was tasked to make this happen. Much of the content came from a four-hour interview with the chancellor and his wife, which I later transcribed and used to create a script for an 11-minute video telling the story of this man's work for the Lord and Emmaus. This also required that I identify appropriate photos and documents to serve as the visual aspect of this video. With the administration's approval, I gave the script and the photos to our creative services manager, who used iMovie to create this video for the banquet in the chancellor's honor (https://youtu.be/jYNye1eGX_o). This smaller-scale project set the stage for a bigger endeavor two years later.

In October of 2016, my institution planned to celebrate its 75th anniversary in conjunction with the annual alumni homecoming. (In general, while there is an alumni homecoming every year, it is every five years that we host a major reunion.) Eleven months prior, in December of 2015, I was invited to serve on a committee that would put this anniversary reunion together. Early on, it was clear that my role was to maximize the institutional archives for this big event, resulting in three distinct projects involving the archives.

Project 1: Yearbooks

The first task was the most simple, which was to creatively display old yearbooks for alumni to peruse throughout the reunion. For reasons unbeknownst to me, the archives had anywhere from zero to twenty copies of a yearbook for any given year. I decided we would display all but two copies of a given year, just in case something happened to the yearbooks on display. I made a count of how many yearbooks from each year would be displayed, loaded them onto a book truck, and wheeled them to our campus coffee shop two days prior to the reunion. Our maintenance team provided an eight-foot table and the food services department provided a classy black tablecloth. I worked with our creative services department and asked them to make a sign for the yearbooks in the theme and brand of the rest of the reunion. The sign indicated that the yearbooks were to stay in the coffee shop, but that alumni were welcome to take a look at them and walk down memory lane.

This was well received by both alumni and current students, who enjoyed seeing older pictures of some of their professors and chuckling at the outfits and hair featured in previous generations. Some of our students are children of alumni who actively searched for their parents' (and sometimes grandparents') photos.

At the end of the weekend, I took inventory of the yearbooks and they were all accounted for. The tear down for this display was quick and easy, and there was no cost involved.

Looking back, I would have asked this display to be highlighted in the reunion's informational packet. Although the coffee shop naturally drew people in, more alumni may have enjoyed the yearbooks if they had known they were there. Additionally, I would have brought a smaller set of yearbooks to the reunion's big event, a banquet off-campus, so that alumni could enjoy the yearbooks there as well. My recommendation for those who do something similar is to ensure that this sort of display is either in a prominent location or well-advertised for attendees.

Project 2: Heritage Wall

This project was one that had been on my to-do list, but gained traction (and urgency) in the face of a major reunion. In the 1990s, the women who had volunteered in the archives had hung various historical photos around campus, including class pictures, photos of the previous buildings and locations of Emmaus, and a few shadow boxes of memorabilia. While these added a dimension of history to the walls of the institution, the frames had become outdated and there was not any coherent timeline or explanation for why certain photos were grouped together and hung in various locations around campus. It became clear that while these displays had served their purpose for a season, something different needed to be done for the upcoming reunion.

There are two very long hallways on the campus of Emmaus, one of which is the main thoroughfare for students and employees traveling from the main offices and classrooms to the dining hall and dorms. The other is hardly used, but offers a great view of the campus grounds and lots of sunlight. This second hallway was where the administration agreed I could display some historical photos.

Initially, I had planned to hang class photos in chronological order down this hallway. However, as I pursued this project, I realized this was not the best item to feature as class photos after 1983 were sporadic and the quality varied. I enlisted the consultation help of our president's wife, who has excellent decorating skills, and our creative services manager, who also has an eye for what looks good. In conversing with them, we decided it would be better to feature 7-10 photos from each decade of Emmaus' 75-year existence to tell a visual story of the institution instead of hanging class pictures. This providential conversation was a critical turning point in the completion of this project.

At this point, it was back on me to decide which photos would be displayed for each decade. Using a high-end scanner borrowed from the local public library, I had previously scanned several hundred photos from the archives and saved them to my computer, organizing them generally by decade. I rooted through these and scanned a few more to my computer, and also contacted our creative services department for more recent photos of the institution that had been used for our publicity and admissions materials. Upon gathering all of these, I gave a thumb drive with the proposed photos to the administration for them to approve. They requested a few minor substitutions, and then granted me permission to hang these photos.

In talking with the president's wife about this project, we agreed that a gallery wall for each decade would be the best route for this display. The many windows in this long hallway provided natural dividers for each section, with a few sections to spare at the very end of the hall for future growth. We agreed that black frames of various sizes would provide the most versatility and keep the hallway looking up-to-date for many years to come.

I researched the prices of black frames at Walmart, Amazon, and our local Michaels craft store. I made a list of how many of each size we would need, and created a document outlining the potential cost from each place. Ultimately, we bought 47 black wooden frames in either 8x10 or 11x14 openings for \$280. Some of these were normal frames, and some of them were "floating" frames, where the photo is placed between two pieces of glass without any additional backing. This was a nice type of frame for oddly-shaped photos and allowed me to avoid the math and expense of matting photos. In the Lord's providence, there was a great coupon for 20% off a purchase and many of the frames we purchased were advertised as buy one,

get one free. It was exciting to see the Lord's timing and provision for this purchase, as this cost was far below my original estimations.

To create an attractive gallery wall, we also needed a few smaller black frames for each decade. For this, I ordered four 7-piece gallery frame sets in black from Amazon for a total of \$96. The combination of the frames worked well for the gallery wall idea; the frames were all black but not all exactly the same, which provided subtle variety and made it easy to add additional frames later on, if desired.

I then had the photos printed from my thumbdrive at the local Walmart photo center, which had the cheapest prices for photo prints. (Because the photos would be in a sunny hallway, I did not want to hang any originals for fear of sun damage.) This was a time-consuming task, taking a few hours, as the individual photos needed to be printed in different sizes. Additionally, I needed to make some on-the-spot switches in sizing, as some of the photos I wanted as 5x7 or 8x10 prints would have been too pixelated at those sizes. The cost for printing these photos came to about \$100 for 90 or so photos.

I put the photos in their frames and organized them by decade. I connected with the president's wife and our maintenance team to determine the best time for the photos to be hung. The morning of the agreed-upon date, I moved the boxes of photos from my office and placed them at the spots in the hallway where they would be hung. The president's wife worked on the positioning of the photos in each decade, and the maintenance team hung the photos as she designated. This part of the project took about four hours, but I was not very involved as I had delegated this aspect to the president's wife (who is much better at this sort of thing). The end result was a beautiful, chronological gallery wall telling the story of Emmaus from its beginnings in 1941 to the present day, finished just in time (one week prior) for the 75th reunion. The total cost for this project was about \$480.

As I reflect on this project, I would have done a few things differently. I certainly desired to have this project completed much earlier, as we were a bit cramped for time in getting everything finished before the reunion. Additionally, I would have included a small, framed description of each section, labeling each decade and highlighting major events that took place in that time period; as it stands, it can be deduced that this wall is in chronological order, but most of the photos are not labeled. It would be relatively simple to add these; we would just need to do some rearranging of each section to make space for another frame. However, in light of the additional responsibilities on my plate during that time (including an accreditation visit from the Higher Learning Commission, barcoding our entire library, and preparing to switch to a new integrated library system [ILS]), I'm grateful for the Lord's help in providing great people to work with on this project and His perfect timing in getting it finished.

Project 3: Heritage Video

In conjunction with the reunion committee for the 75th celebration, I was tasked to create a video history of the college similar to what had been done a few years prior to celebrate the retirement of our chancellor. I was assigned this task in December of 2015 with the following timeline:

February 15, 2016: Historic video/audio/photos have been identified

April 15, 2016: Historic video/audio/photos have been obtained and digitized

May 1, 2016: A draft video outline/storyboard has been written

July 1, 2016: An approved outline/storyboard is ready for production

August 15, 2016: A draft video history is ready for review and edits

September 15, 2016: A final video history has been approved for distribution

October 15, 2016: Video is ready for debut and reproduced/packaged for distribution

October 29, 2016: Video is debuted at Reunion Banquet

This was a much larger task than the previous video we had made for our chancellor, and although I was familiar with the rough timeline of key events in Emmaus' history, I needed some fresh perspective and content. I began going through semi-annual board meeting minutes from Emmaus' first board meeting in 1944 through the 1990s, and took notes on a Google document noting the date of the meeting, key decisions or events highlighted in the minutes, and the source of meeting minutes (some of these notes ended up being from other sources, such as cabinet meetings). I worked on this for about three months, in addition to my daily library tasks.

Once these notes were finished, I started writing. I went decade by decade, identifying key events based on the board meeting minutes to create an outline, and then used other primary sources in the archives to provide the details. For example, I had meeting minutes that recorded, from a board perspective, the purchase of a second piece of property for Emmaus to start a branch school in the late 1940s. In addition, the archives included transcribed interviews with some of the founders (recorded in the 1990s) that supplemented many details, as well as copies of the newsletters of the institution from that time period. With all of these resources, I pieced together the events in narrative format. I purposed to stay as close to the primary documents as possible, so that my bias would be considerably lessened.

As I finished each decade, I looked through the scanned images from that time period that I already had on my computer and organized them in folders labeled

by decade. I also took this time to scan any other photos or newsletters from the archives that could be potentially useful in telling the story.

This writing and gathering took place over about one and half months in the summer of 2016. (The summer months allow more concentrated time for projects, as we hold minimal summer classes and I work in my office rather than at the reference desk.) I finished the initial draft in July of 2016 and met with one of the vice presidents for review and input. It was clear that the draft had a lot of details and good information, but it needed a consistent theme woven into the facts in order for it to flow and have an impact on its viewers. The vice president and I discussed potential themes and eventually landed on interweaving the faithfulness of God's provision (both financially and in providing the right people at the right time to work at Emmaus) throughout the text. She also recommended that I interview a few more key people who would be able to recount specific instances of the Lord's provision throughout the years. Finally, she asked me to include more information about race relations in the 1960s, as Emmaus was located in Chicago at that time and was one of the only schools in that area that was not segregated, as well as give more detail about four Emmaus alumni who died on the mission field in the 1970s.

For the rest of July and August, I met with three people on our campus who have a long history with Emmaus, and interviewed via phone, email, or Facebook three additional individuals. For some of them, I needed background information about their relationship with Emmaus (when they began working here, for example, and the positions they had). I asked all of them to relay situations of God's provision for Emmaus from their personal experiences. There were several stories of checks coming at just the right time to make the Friday afternoon payroll or complete needed upgrades prior to accreditation visits, as well as countless recollections of the Lord providing just the right person to do a particular job at the college. I purposed to weave these into the narrative as well.

For those I met with in person, I recorded the interview using the Voice Memo app on my smartphone, transferred the memo to my computer, and then played the audio at half the normal speed using Windows Media Player so that I could transcribe it while it played.

The next draft I submitted to my vice president was much more polished and the theme was clear throughout the document. I had included some of the stories of the people I had interviewed as well. My vice president reviewed it and made some changes, condensing it in a few places to meet the time constraints of the video (although she recommended I keep the original for use as a starting point for a longer institutional history in the future). With the administration's approval, I received the final draft at the end of September of 2016, just a few weeks prior to the reunion.

With the final draft in hand, I took about four days to go more carefully through the photos and documents I had scanned for this project. I now organized them in folders on my computer by each paragraph, and numbered them so that the order of display would be clear. I also realized that some of the photos we wanted to use were not part of the Emmaus archives, and I would need to seek permission to use them. I did this via email, and all requests were granted. We included a small part at the end of the video acknowledging which photos were ours and which were used by permission and from whom. I then loaded all the organized folders of photos onto an external hard drive, and met with the creative services manager who put the video together.

The creative services manager used iMovie on his Apple computer to create the final product. He stated that this program does well with slideshows and automatically adds things like transitions and photo movement. This was a good program for our 20-minute video, but it might have had some challenges if it was much longer or if it had more video footage (ours was mostly photos). The total time he spent on this part of the project was about 40 to 42 hours. He recorded one of our faculty members for the narration, which took about two hours, and then an additional four or five hours to edit the narration. The editing of the video as a whole (adding in the narration, transitions, overlaying music) took about 35 hours. He also did some back-and-forth with the administration in the days leading up to the reunion, and they had some feedback and a few things they wanted to change before it premiered at the alumni banquet.

The video history was warmly received at the alumni banquet and later on social media as the institution shared the video via YouTube (linked to the main Emmaus website) and Facebook. As of March 2017, the YouTube version (<http://www.emmaus.edu/our-heritage>) had 507 views, was shared 240 times, and liked at least 186 times. Here are some of the comments from Facebook:

“Love Emmaus. What a precious heritage. So many good memories.”

“So incredibly grateful for our time at EBC!”

“That video was so well done! Totally enjoyed going through the history of the college.”

“So so well done!!! I was so thankful to have been part of such an incredibly legacy in attending Emmaus! It was such an encouragement to see this video and be amazed at how the LORD allowed such miracles in the growth of the school and the locations and buildings it's been in! It was so good!

“That was encouraging to watch.”

“This is a pretty cool video on the history of Emmaus Bible College. It's worth the time it takes to watch it. See what God has done!”

The cost for this project was quite minimal (although the labor it required was immense). At this time, we have not put this video on DVD and given it to alumni, although that has been discussed. By sharing it on social media, we were essentially able to get this piece in front of our alumni and constituents without spending a dime. I was able to scan photos with both the local library's high-end scanner, and a lower-end scanner that my library had previously purchased for document delivery for distance education students. We did spend about \$100 on a 1TB Western Digital external hard drive. By capitalizing on the talents within our institution, we did not have to pay to have this video made.

Upon reflection, there was not a lot I would have changed with this project. Again, I would have loved to have had more time toward the end, rather than feeling crunched for time, but this must be tempered with the unusual busyness of that particular semester. Also, had I been starting from scratch with scanning historical photos, I would have decided on a consistent naming system to make the items easier to find. This would have saved me a bit of time, as I would have been able to search more effectively rather than scrolling through one hundred photos from the 1940s to find one particular photo that I knew I had scanned in the past. Hatton (2006) provides great insight on how to do this; I highly recommend that anyone just starting out with archives read this article.

Overall Lessons Learned

This was the first time I took on three archival projects of varying degrees of intensity for the same event. Here are four takeaways from my experiences:

1. For those who haven't had archival training, yet are thrown into archival projects, it is okay to keep it simple. You don't have to start big; just start something!

My training in archival work is limited to an online basics of archives course through the American Association for State and Local History (<http://www.aaslh.org/>) which I took in 2013. I learned a lot from that course, but felt that I did not have the time or the resources to get everything in the Emmaus archives to the place that the AASLH recommends with regard to technology (scanners, cameras, a digital repository) or organization (finding aids, indexing, cataloging). However, I did the best I could with what I had, and, by the grace of God, was still able to maximize the archives for this event. My encouragement for others in a similar position is to not let your lack of resources hinder you from stepping into and organizing an archival project. Do the best with what you have, and your administrators will be impressed that you can do so much with so little!

2. Being a good project manager (even just the ability to see how a big project can come together) goes a long way when working with archives.

This was essential, especially for projects two and three. It was vital for me to be able to see both the big picture and identify the individual steps to make that big picture come together. I know there are programs that are available for managing projects, but for me, it was easy enough to write down all the steps I needed to complete on individual notecards, display them prominently in my office, move the notecard to a section marked “done” when I had completed that portion, and then move on to the next step.

3. Teamwork is essential and don't be afraid to delegate.

Projects two and three would not have happened if I was the only one responsible for them. It was vital to have the maintenance team on board to hang all 100 photo frames, and to enlist the help of someone who is strong in an area where I am weak (namely, the confidence to put interior decorating skills on display for the world to see). I could have figured out iMovie, but my work computer is a PC, and it would have taken me five times longer to create the video; the work of the creative services manager was absolutely required. Working with these individuals outside the library department was both fun and made my work much easier. Don't hesitate to tap student or volunteer help when it comes to projects like these. With clear directions, a student or two committed to an archival project can be invaluable in scanning and naming photos to create short (or long) videos.

4. If archives are in addition to many other responsibilities, communicate with your supervisor about what may not be completed.

These projects took place during the busiest semester of my four years at this institution. In addition to a major reunion that nearly all departments were involved in, we had an accreditation visit from the Higher Learning Commission in the same month, which also impacted nearly all departments. This sometimes made it difficult to get the feedback I needed from my administrators, as they were understandably busy with their normal day-to-day duties in addition to bearing the bulk of the load of the accreditation visit. Additionally, the reunion occurred when we were in the process of completing an eight-month barcoding project to get 120,000 items barcoded and the data ready to be transferred to a new ILS. These were three big things on top of the normal day-to-day tasks of teaching, managing students, and circulation. There were many days when I prayed for strength and help from the Lord to get everything done that needed to be done, and many days when I really did not think we were going to make it. I needed to communicate with my supervisor that some of the work I had

planned to complete in preparing for our new ILS would need to wait until after we had switched over if I was going to also complete the video history and the gallery wall. He was very understanding and had no problem putting a few data clean-up projects on hold so that I could focus on the archival work that needed to be done.

Conclusion

Archives are an important part of institutional identity and are incredibly useful in connecting with alumni and constituents. While it is ideal to have a full-time, professional archivist working in this area of an institution, it is not impossible for lay-archivists or those who do archives in addition to library work to be trained in the basics and be impactful in this area, too. For those who wear many hats, making a bit of time for archives on a regular basis can lead to great projects and displays that promote the institution and add value to library services. †

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

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