



Archives

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Polishing Diamonds in the Rough: Preparing the OCAD University Archives Student Publications for use in the 150th Anniversary Celebrations

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Polishing Diamonds in the Rough: Preparing the OCAD University Archives Student Publications for use in the 150th Anniversary Celebrations

Archivists often face the insurmountable task of organizing chaos. As the oldest art and design university in Canada, OCAD University began accruing materials to its archival collection without any defined approach to collecting. It was begun, like many other collections, by the community determining that university records were something to hang on to. Therefore materials were accumulated, but not necessarily tracked, not truly *archived* in the sense that their context and relation to one another was never recorded. Eventually, there were projects that took aim at some of the issues in the collection. Some lists were made, some exhibitions set up with research. Large scale digitization projects were undertaken. However, this collection of materials still needed extensive description, and a database to hold all of this information and connect these objects to one another.

In April of 2022, I was hired by OCAD U as the Archivist and began surveying the collection. My plan was to fully describe the collection, secure a database to manage access, and work with the rest of the Library Services department on promotion and outreach. 2026 is the 150th birthday of OCAD University, therefore targeting specific collections to showcase key areas of the holdings for this occasion became a priority. This was a golden opportunity to get people interested in our collections, to connect different generations through archival materials and, most importantly, to share some really beautiful creations.

Enter Erin Hanley. Erin was a student in the Printmaking and Publications program who was employed as a student monitor at the Dorothy H. Hoover Library (we are now happy to say she is studying archives and records management at the University of Toronto iSchool). Erin sought out the University Archives and proceeded to complete the first placement at the Archives with the Centre for Emerging Artists and Designers (CEAD). She completed two semesters of independent study in the Archives under my supervision with faculty support from Alison Judd. The natural choice, as a printmaking student, was for Erin to work on a series entitled Student Publications which is critical to understanding student life at OCAD U through the years.

The earliest publication in the series is *O.C.A. Student Annual*, a student magazine with faculty contributions published in 1927. Various student magazines, newspapers and other disseminated works were distributed with varying rates of consistency. The most recent item in the group of records, entitled *Broadsheet*, was last published in 2017. The publications range

from what would be considered traditional print media to more alternative and unique projects. Items like *Fishwrap*, a newspaper that produced 20 issues between 1984 and 1987, generally took on a classic newsprint format, while others took on more unconventional forms. For example, *Stuff (dates unknown)* produced publications made up of unbound pages in a Ziploc bag, a sewn fabric pocket containing artwork and writing, and card collections held in miniature Kellogg's cereal boxes. *Bedlam (October 1996-February 1997)* bound issue No. 2 with nuts and bolts, while No. 3 featured a CD with 19 experimental audio tracks. Students even created their own *OCAD Trading Cards* in 1999, held in 3x3 plastic sheets and featuring student names, photos, artwork and quotes. The creativity expressed through these items is a valuable resource for understanding who these young artists were and what they were experiencing within the school, the city, and the art world at large at the time of the publication's creation.

This series presented challenges that could be found throughout the archival collection at OCAD U. There were collections management challenges, such as questioning whether some of the materials belong in other parts of the library. There were collections development and privacy issues, including whether certain items should have been collected at all and whether it is ethical to hold on to them. Provenance and copyright were woven into those development issues. There were also housing challenges. With a collection at an art and design university, items often cross the boundaries of textual records, to artwork, to ephemera, thus materials can pose preservation issues.

This series needed to be researched, analyzed for collections management decisions, rehoused and ready to go for the 150th anniversary celebrations. The initial research phase presented a key issue, some of the materials in this series were found not to be accurately categorized as 'student publications.' Research allowed us to break down what kinds of publications (or objects) the materials actually were. These findings led to some collections management decisions. Two major decisions that had to be made were regarding coursework. There were two different types of coursework that were showing up in the holdings. One was catalogues from theses and exhibitions, and the other was student assignments. OCAD University has an Open Research Repository, managed by our Scholarly Communications Librarian, Chris Landry. This repository is intended to hold scholarly content from the OCAD U community including theses, exhibitions, video content, publications etc... Therefore, the

argument was made that thesis catalogues and student exhibition outreach material should be held there. However, there was some desire from students to browse the paper copies from past shows and theses. It can often be the case where users want access to physical, paper materials as well as online catalogues. The department wanted to be mindful of space and resources, which are always in short supply. Setting a precedent for collecting paper copies of thesis catalogues would inevitably present space issues down the line. The solution was to work with the art and design Librarian to go through catalogues and determine what to keep or weed, based on collections management policy and what was present in the collection already. Along these lines, multiples were weeded to save space. Only two copies were retained of publications that were determined to be in the best physical condition to keep in the University Archives. This saved considerable space while still answering the call for what was being requested by the community.

The latter issue with coursework held by the University Archives was the presence of student work from courses. On the surface this does not seem so terrible; apart from presenting similar issues to the catalogues. One could suggest that the materials belong in the Open Research Repository. However, the issues that arose were a direct result of the aforementioned nature of collecting. It was apparent that materials were donated to the University Archives when staff and faculty were clearing their office, their departmental spaces, classrooms, library spaces et cetera... This process was done without a transfer, documentation, context or general record of how materials came from one location into the holdings. For some materials, like publications, that were copyrighted by the student union and circulated widely, this did not present an issue. In the instances of this coursework, however, it did. The courses mentioned focused on creative writing and students wrote of topics that were often very personal in nature. If students are submitting to the repository, they sign off on the permissions for sharing materials but this was not the case for the items that were showing up in the archival holdings. With no record it could not be determined whether these were, for example, in someone's office and got dropped off upon their departure from the University. In this case, students could have absolutely no idea that their assignments, which often included sensitive personal information, were possibly accessible to the OCAD U community and beyond. This presented a privacy issue, of course, but also an ethical one. After discussing with the department it was determined that it was not ethical to keep these materials in the University Archives or to transfer them to the Repository. Instead,

contact with creators would be attempted to notify them that the Archives possesses their work and inquire if they wish to submit to the repository, otherwise they would be deaccessioned from the collection.

Creating descriptions at file level was the main goal to increase accessibility for the OCAD U 150 planning committee. File level descriptions allowed for all research efforts to be brought to the forefront, creators to be identified and the research stage enabled the department to reach out to the community and connect in order to better describe materials. Having Erin in the archives initially began with her doing item level description for this series prior to OCAD U 150 being on the radar. Having her available for independent study allowed the Archivist to break down this project into a research phase followed by a processing phase, which was an incredible and invaluable asset. The descriptions and rehousing were done systematically at the same time. Materials were put in updated acid free housings. Previously, many items had been placed in plastic housings, which were removed. Furthermore, many materials were identified for flattening and moving to flat storage. Among these were objects that were printed on newsprint (usually not an archivist's favourite when it comes to preservation - because of the acidity). The newsprint however, could now be identified for a digitization project to allow these publications to be accessed virtually, minimizing physical use and allowing for access if further issues with the physical copies were to arise. Some items contained unconventional materials such as paper made from socks, other fabrics and textiles, playing cards in cereal boxes, pages in ziploc bags... We had to make the decision to keep some materials in their original format in order to preserve the intention of the creator. Additionally, items like CD's needed to be held in consideration, much like the newsprint, for future digitization projects.

Working on this series was really a labour of love that demonstrated that mismanaged collections are worth the work. The student voice that rings out from this series is a vital piece of the history of the university. From this point, the University Archives can venture further into research, identifying gaps, finding specific communities to properly donate materials, working more directly with the student union and striving to build a resource not just showcasing the OCAD U community but that provides insight, more broadly, to the art scene in Toronto and its robust history. This starting point is an exciting place for the Archives to have arrived at and the

hope for further development, partnerships and community involvement will no doubt be showcased in OCAD U's 150th anniversary celebrations.