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# Build it and they will come: integrating unique collections and undergraduate research

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The “build it and they will come approach” is a largely accepted proposition in the library community, particularly in the area of special collections. There is, at times, little critical analysis given to collection development, digitization efforts or information literacy instruction in regard to how these hard-to-serve but research-rich materials might be used in the classroom. Instead, there exists a benevolent know-it-all expert determining which collections warrant preservation, digitization, acquisition and, ultimately, attention. At California State University (CSU) Channel Islands (CI), the user – teachers and students – is the focus of all special collection activities, and we have devised innovative ways to both encourage students and faculty to engage these materials as well as foster their appreciation, awareness and use on campus.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper explores three ways that librarians at the John Spoor Broome Library encourage and facilitate the use of primary documents housed in unique collections to support undergraduate student research.

**Findings** – The use of high-impact teaching practices, like undergraduate research, is an important tool in promoting retention and increasing graduation rates, particularly for underrepresented minorities. At CSU CI and the John Spoor Broome Library, engaging students with primary documents is a focus of unique collections work that benefits both students and the Library alike.

**Originality/value** – Digitization is a key component of most special collections work in the library world today, but perhaps efforts focused on promoting use are lacking. At CI, use is the primary focus of all unique collections work and, thus, could be a model for other libraries and archive departments.

**Keywords** Archives, Undergraduate research, Special collections

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

The “build it and they will come approach” is a largely accepted proposition in the library community, particularly in the area of special collections. There is, at times, little critical analysis given to collection development, digitization efforts or information literacy instruction in regard to how these hard-to-serve but research-rich materials might be used in the classroom. Instead, there exists a benevolent know-it-all expert determining which collections warrant preservation, digitization, acquisition and, ultimately, attention. At California State University (CSU) Channel Islands (CI), the user – teachers and students – is the focus of all special collection activities, and we have devised innovative ways to both encourage students and faculty to engage these materials as well as to foster their appreciation, awareness and use on campus. In particular, we focus on student research, an important high-impact teaching practice (HIP), as a way to engender utilization of unique collections.

## Literature review

This paper recounts three case studies at CI demonstrating effective ways students use unique collections in the classroom. For the purposes of the literature review, it is important to link these local, specific examples to broader topics in librarianship. There are three themes that are referred to in this paper:

- 1 student research as a tool to market and promote unique collections;
- 2 the way unique collections can impact another HIP, the senior or capstone experience; and
- 3 how effective unique collections management can benefit other library efforts such as reference, outreach and information literacy.

For student research and HIP teaching, I point to “High-Impact Educational Practices: An Exploration of the Role of Information Literacy” (Riehel and Wenier) and “Focusing on Student Research in the Institutional Repository” (Barandiaran) as particularly strong and relevant pieces negotiating the area between information literacy and unique collections. I also point to “Enhancing the Research-Teaching Nexus: Building Teaching-Based Research from Research-Based Teaching” (Willcoxson) as well, although the focus is not on unique collections. For more

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general pieces on student research as an important HIP, “High-Impact Educational Practices and the Undergraduate Research Offices and Programs: Models and Practices” (CUR) and virtually anything published by CUR is important. I found “Ensuring Quality & Taking High-Impact Practices to Scale” by George D. Kuh and Ken O’Donnell particularly helpful.

For the capstone or senior experience example, the experience is different but not too far removed from an embedded librarian model, on which there are a number of interesting articles, including “Transitioning to the Embedded Librarian Model and Improving the Senior Capstone Business Strategy Course (Helms and Whitesell)” and “Student’s Research Experiences During Consulting Projects: Three Themes Emerging from Case Studies” (Holler-Phillips).

Related is “Transforming the One-Shot Library Session into Pedagogical Collaboration: Information Literacy and the English Composition Class” (Jacobs).

The third theme of this paper is concerned with archival management and the way that unique or special collections can be somewhat forgotten when it comes to other library functions, such as outreach, information literacy or even reference. If conducted properly, unique collections can very well serve as the face of the library and can be an important part of the undergraduate experience. In this area, the key text is “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing” (Greene). Also, “Building Teaching-Based Research from Research-Based Teaching” (Manning) and “More Access, Less Backlog: How The Kansas Historical Society Got Its Groove Back” (Gorzalski) deserve mention. Likewise, “Optimum Access? Processing in College and University Archives American Archivist” (Prom) informs on intriguing changes in archival practice and management.

## Background

The John Spoor Broome Library is a digital teaching library at CSUCI. CI serves 5,000 full-time undergraduate students and is committed to its four mission-based centers: The Center for Integrative Studies, the Center for Service Learning, the Center for Multi-Cultural Engagement and the Center for International Experiences. It is no coincidence that foci of all four of these centers are often listed as HIPs, as the university embraces a number of HIPs explicitly and implicitly. Thus, it is fair to say that the Broome Library and the unique collections housed in Broome do have an advantage over some universities, in that faculty, staff and student are often conversant if not downright committed to using HIPs in their classrooms.

At unique collections, the guiding light is use. Being both small and new, the Library and its special collections unit note that being impactful is important. As an outreach tool, we need to ensure that our students and faculty are aware of us. As a teaching enterprise, we need to bring students and faculty into our doors, and the following case studies or working examples of this proposition. In this paper, the terms unique collections, special collections, archives, the institutional repository and archival collections roughly mean the same thing: that is, non-traditional book and journal (in both analog and electronic formats) library collections. This is a reflection

of the organizational scheme at the Broome Library, where all of these materials are coordinated and under the Head of Unique Collections and Scholarly Communications.

Guiding student research at CI is the Student Research Steering Council, currently co-chaired by a librarian faculty member. The Council awards travel money to students and faculty for research; oversees local actions to send teams to, for instance, the CSU system-wide student research competition as well as other research conferences; and attempts to introduce student research in one form or another to all undergraduates. Having a leadership role in the university’s student research activities allows this librarian faculty member to not only maintain currency with student research initiatives on campus, but to actually guide them, and is an important component of any and all planning within unique collections.

## Case studies

Student research is an HIP that benefits greatly from primary resources, precisely the materials forming unique or special collections or archives. At issue is getting students to use these hard-to-serve but research-rich materials. At CI, we accomplish this by:

- having a librarian faculty member co-teach an interdisciplinary research-based class for true freshmen;
- having a librarian teach an independent research class; and
- by partnering with faculty teaching capstone or senior experience classes, which is another HIP.

## Case study: UNIV 198

In the fall of 2012, a librarian, Matt Cook, and a political scientist, Sean Kelly, offered an inter-disciplinary course requiring students to process a previously unavailable archival collection of papers from a former Congressman. Students enrolled in the course would:

- meet a university general education requirement;
- create a visual representation of the data that they uncovered and created;
- be exposed to fundamental principles in political science, librarianship and archival studies;
- be introduced to key topics of the 1960s and 1970s;
- use technology to create and distribute their work; and
- enjoy a student research-based learning environment.

The genesis for the course derived from an exploration of the archival collection and a conversation that followed it. In 2011, the university obtained the papers of Congressman Harold T. “Bizz” Johnson, who served the Sacramento, California area from 1958 to 1981. While assessing the collection, Kelly and Cook encountered a number of constituent letters that were written in opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Kelly and Cook were struck both by the raw emotion captured in the letters as well as how wonderful those texts might be as a teaching tool, not only in regard to the Civil Rights Movement, or Vietnam or Watergate, but in studying the political process and in exposing students to student research.

As Kelly and Cook contemplated their pedagogy, they noted a series of opportunities that were related to their course goals. By using iPads, they were exploring the use of technology in the classroom. By opting to use Popplet, a

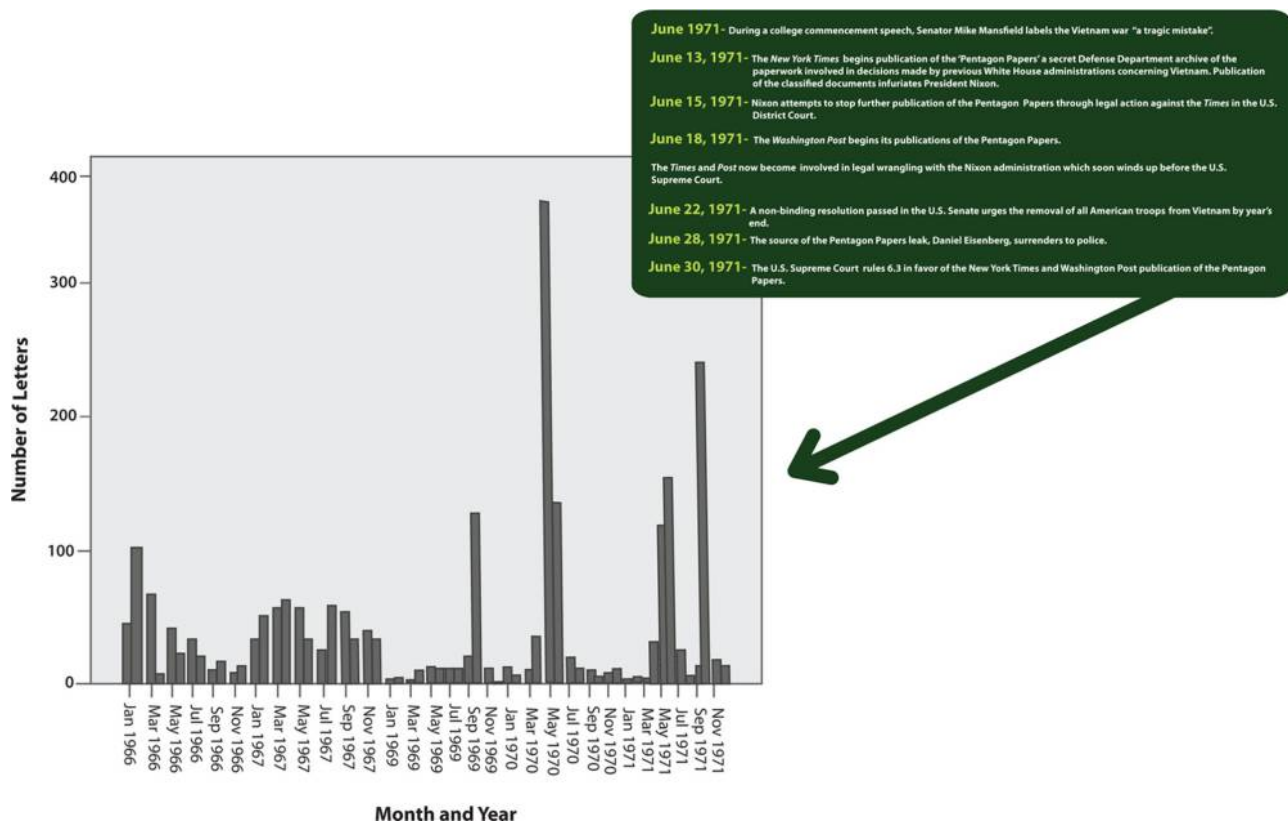
data-visualization application, they were supporting visual learners. Simultaneously, they were rethinking the very nature of the archival finding aid and the way that researchers access collections remotely, which allowed them flexibility to explore a new methodology for describing a collection. Additionally, they would be strengthening the relationship between archival collections, primary documents and student research.

On the first day of class, students were asked to count constituent letters on Vietnam and to note whether they were Pro or Con. Many students were nonplussed by the idea of simply counting letters. Certainly, in some respects, it is no drier than an introductory lecture involving a faculty member reciting her/his syllabus, but for some reason, the students were not totally sold on the value of the activity. However, after Kelly created a graphic representation of the data drawn from the counting exercise (below), it began to dawn on them the significance of the exercise. They recognized, or began to recognize, the potential of the collection as a data source and the relationship between primary sources and political science (Frisch *et al.*, 2012; Frisch and Kelly, 2009) (Figure 1).

This opening assignment roughly served as a model for the remaining 16 weeks. Students would access the collection on a variety of topics, such as space, watergate, water rights, etc. and make sense of them with hopes of providing a map to their subject area for future researchers. This mapmaking was both a type of student research and an intentional ploy to suggest to students that they possessed the ability to conduct primary document research.

Toward the course conclusion, teams were brought together on three larger subject areas present in the collection –

**Figure 1** Variations in letters by month



Vietnam, Civil Rights and the Great Society. All three of these groups submitted their research topics to the Southern California Conferences for Undergraduate Research (SCCUR) held at Whittier College, and all three were accepted into the competition.

On November 23, 2013, Karen Castaneda, Francesca Former and D'Arcy Gray presented their poster on Civil Rights; Nathan Knecht, Jonas Lee and Danielle Novato presented their poster on Vietnam; and Crystal Marin, Syndel Migliori and Sylvia Rubio presented their poster on the Great Society.

The course is designed to expose students to the basic tenets of archival standards, to finalize them with the essential building blocks of political science and to excite them to the possibilities of conducting research using primary materials. The students not only successfully completed the course objectives, but they exceeded them by presenting their original research results to their peers and to faculty.

### Case study: VCCW

In the fall of 2013, the Broome Library received an archive of documents, images and ephemera from the Ventura County Commission on Women (VCCW). Sadly, it was not a donation but a one-year loan from the VCCW until the materials could be returned to the County of Ventura for archiving. With the permission of both the VCCW and the County of Ventura, Broome Library staff worked diligently to digitize the entire cache of material, totaling some 13,000 unique digital files, in 2013.



Unlike some archives and special collections repositories, the Broome Library is less concerned with object ownership and more concerned with researcher use. Thus, it was an easy decision to “accept” this collection, which excludes physical storage but is instead limited to electronic files, metadata and Web access. At CI, the Broome Library uses D-Space to preserve digital collections, and it serves as the institutional repository.

The VCCW is a non-governmental organization that advises the Ventura County Board of Supervisors on issues impacting women and girls in Ventura County, which makes their collection an important resource for any student studying this subject at CI. Analysis of the collection with sociology faculty suggested that this collection would and could be used by CI students immediately. With input from those same sociology faculty, the library found a willing researcher in Cassandra Ludwig, a senior sociology major.

Ludwig enrolled in UNIV 498, an independent research course taught by a faculty librarian, Matt Cook. Ludwig used the archive to examine the relationship between VCCW published reports and legislation debated and passed by the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, the thought being that this analysis would indicate the efficacy and impact of the Commission.

The “class” met weekly, but researcher Ludwig was expected to access the collection on a schedule of her own keeping and use the weekly meetings to update Cook. Ludwig surveyed meeting minutes, official correspondence, annual budgets and research reports to map a perceived strategy for the VCCW, or goals. In addition to these materials, Ludwig focused on the one publication most associated with the VCCW, the “The Status of Women and Girls in Ventura County”, which was published in 2008 and 2013. This work impacted Ludwig and what started as a true sociology project developed into an interdisciplinary one, as Ludwig used the tools of a historian, political scientist and anthropologist to understand better not only the VCCW but also the political landscape and social setting of the organization and the county.

In Ventura County, political administration and authority is shared between the County supervisors and governments of 10 cities inside the County. But is fair to say that the County deliberates and takes a leadership role on matters from zoning to prisons to the environment. As the VCCW reports directly to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors and as that same Board considers legislation on “quality of life issues” ([www.ventura.org/residents](http://www.ventura.org/residents)), Ludwig focused on this political body to examine how the VCCW impacted their agenda and legislative output.

As noted in a university publication ([www.csuci.edu/news/channel/fall-2014/if-studentresearch.htm](http://www.csuci.edu/news/channel/fall-2014/if-studentresearch.htm)), Ludwig enjoyed applying her knowledge and skills to graduate school and, hopefully, serving Ventura County by working at a local not-for-profit. Cook is serving as her teacher on this project in name only, noting:

Research is self-directed since, as Cassandra points out, she is creating new knowledge. Although I am there to answer questions and try to create a framework for her, it is Ludwig that will be determining which topics she will focus on and how her project will unfold. It is the very reason that we collect and preserve unique collections in the Library—they benefit students and their education.

As the UNIV 498 class is a credit-bearing course, it was agreed upon that Cassandra’s deliverables would consist of two essays about the VCCW which would contextualize the digital collection. Thus, in addition to the digital collection, there will be a timeline, history and essay on the relationship between the VCCW and the county government.

Digitizing collections that students will use is an easy concept to understand, even if those collections would not physically be housed at the library digitizing the materials. What makes this special is that CI only digitizes collections that we know students use, regardless of where they reside. And to strengthen that concept, the librarians teach credit-bearing courses for students utilizing unique collections. Perhaps instead of “Build it and They Will Come”, it should be “Build it and They Will Come—or Fail the Class”.

### Case study: capstone

By targeting faculty teaching capstones, the Broome Library is able to both market our unique collections and aid student research. Somewhere between a brief orientation to archives and a one-off Information literacy session, addressing capstone students about research tools resources, particular primary documents, is a valuable way to both market your unique holdings as well as identify students who are conducting research as part of their senior undergraduate experience. Making these connections is particularly effective and perhaps a vital way to develop an audience and better understand need.

History 498, a capstone class, is an elective class for history majors at CI. A librarian met with the Chair of History to discuss a methodology of more effectively involving the library in both the utilization of unique collections for that class but also how information literacy might be more beneficial to students enrolled in the class. If scaffolding is an important characteristic in information literacy throughout an academic discipline, then having a unique collections library attend to that traditional function in a history capstone is logical.

That discussion led to the history faculty member, Dr Catherine Bae, leading the spring 2014 capstone course. A brief conversation over coffee included an indication of faculty needs, wants and desires as well as an explanation of library goals. It was decided that faculty librarian Matt Cook would join the class at the first meeting and continue to attend subsequent meetings as needed. Like an independent research class, this capstone class’s sessions or meetings were not lectures or typical class meetings, rather, they were more akin to check-ins. That is to say, the history faculty member would attend the “class” to provide feedback to students who felt they needed it. When appropriate, Cook would also attend. He also provided his contact information and encouraged students to schedule “reference” sessions for students encountering library-related issues, such as access to primary documents.

At that very first class meeting, Cook was to lead a lecture on conducting research. This session focused on two concepts: how to find primary resources in the discipline of history, and special collections housed at the John Spoor Broome Library that could serve as or assist in a capstone research project. Cook discovered at this session, much to his

surprise, that many students knew their topic already and, instead of considering an exploration of a local repository, sought primary documents to support their own inquiries. Librarian Cook assumed that many students might be open to topics based on their accessibility in the main campus library. This simply was not the case and it begs the question of whether introducing library unique collections to students in capstone is perhaps too late.

Still, one student did take advantage of unique collections housed in the John Spoor Broome Library, largely due to this initial class session. History senior Derek Bush initially had hoped to study the 1980-1990s Washington DC hardcore music scene. Discussions with Bush over the course of two weeks led to a reappraisal of his research topic, which changed to one linked to unique collections housed into the library.

In 2013, CI faculty member Dr Sean Carswell donated his estimable collection of “zines”. The 1990s saw a small publishing revolution in the form of zines: independently or self-published magazines that sought to give voice to underrepresented people or groups. These zines ran the gamut from fanzines promoting music, film or literary genres to publications that told the very personal stories of their authors. The popularity of zines reached its apex in the 1990s. The founders of Razorcake/Gorsky, Inc., the Los Angeles-based 501(c)3 publisher of the nation’s largest zine dedicated to independent music and culture, amassed an extensive collection of these zines spanning over two decades. Razorcake/Gorsky has donated their collection to the CSU CI library.

The stories encapsulated within these zines represent a multicultural ethnography of emerging artists over the past decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Many of the writers, artists and musicians who tell their stories in this collection have gone on to become award-winning writers, NEA fellows, best-selling authors or musicians and fine artists who exhibit their works in major galleries. The digital collection at CI allows scholars, fans and the uninitiated free access to these rapidly disappearing stories. Since this donation, the Broome Library has been working on the goal of all student research efforts at the Broome Library, which is student learning. Bush possesses a personal interest in punk music but also wanted to conduct primary document research as a way of improving both his skills as well as his portfolio in preparing for graduate school. Thus, the input of the unique collections librarian suggesting that a student use unique collections housed in the Broome Library was not so much an attempt of establishing relevancy, rather, it was part of an instruction conversation that librarians have with students all of the time – the way that students frame research questions and engage resources.

Bush is currently using the analog and digital collection and has scheduled oral interviews both with Dr Carswell as well as employees of Razorcake. Thus, the student is actively engaging primary documents and expanding his understanding of punk music and the nature of research. Bush has agreed to share his work, including the oral interviews, with the library, and it is hoped that his scholarship will be posted online to contextualize the “zines” online collection.

## Conclusion

The literature is quite clear that traditional archival practice is changing, with the focus being on the user and access, and although special collections in libraries are different than archival collections, it is fair to say that these collections too are more user-focused. The growing appreciation for the importance of undergraduate student research in the university community is an extraordinary opportunity for unique collections to engage users. It is incumbent on professionals in unique collections to find teaching opportunities to leverage their collections so that they can maximize relevancy, promote use and attendance and engage students meaningfully.

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