

# Making Space for Archival Anxieties:

## Developing a Graduate Student Archival Research Community at UC Santa Cruz

### Background

Established in 2014, the Elisabeth Remak-Honnef Center for Archival Research and Training (CART) at UC Santa Cruz includes a paid fellowship program that trains graduate students in archival processing techniques and exhibit curation.

The program was started to integrate primary source materials more fully into the teaching and research mission of the university by providing practical experience for graduate students, while enhancing access to archival collections for all.

One particularly beneficial outcome of this program that is frequently expressed by fellows is that **arranging and describing materials alongside archivists helps to develop their own archival research skills as graduate students**, as well as giving them practical work experience in a library setting.



Center for Archival Research and Training

### Addressing a need, finding a model

Our staff wanted to **expand the impact** of the CART program beyond the handful of students that we are able to hire and pay each year to participate in the fellowship. The library's Outreach & Exhibits Librarian and I started brainstorming a way to expand this impact and address the needs of UCSC graduate students. We had seen the obstacles that students experience when coming to the reading room to do research, and had heard multiple CART fellows express their appreciation for their honed archival research skills after processing a collection and curating an exhibit (see quotes below).

We found some similar programs and communities to use as models, notably the **Collaborative Research Seminar on Archives and Special Collections** co-hosted by **Graduate Center at CUNY** and **NYPL**. This two-part seminar was open by application and "[provided] space for CUNY students, faculty, and staff to engage the praxis of incorporating archival and special collections research into their work" [1].

*"The CART Program demystified the archive"*

*"[My CART experience] will be invaluable when I conduct my own research of primary materials, and I highly recommend this program to anyone interested in developing their archival skills" [2]*



### CART Commons

CART Commons is an informal meeting group -- a safe space in our library for grad students to express their opinions, fears, and feelings about using archives and other library materials. Throughout both of these components of the CART program -- the fellowship and the commons -- we look at the experiences of students **holistically** to see the interconnectedness between the personal and the professional. The lives of graduate students can be overwhelmingly busy and complicated, and we aim to create spaces where they can:

- ask questions about researching in the archives
- share their challenges and anxieties about research
- make serendipitous discoveries in the archives
- gain practical skills in a library setting
- foster connections with students across disciplines, as well as library staff
- bring their whole selves to the table.



### Topics

Each informal meeting usually centers around a certain topic. Some past and planned topics include:

- Conducting and using oral histories
- Planning your archival research trips
- Hands-on exploration with our archival holdings
- Finding archival research fellowships, other funding
- Faculty presentation on his "Guerrilla Research" techniques with primary sources
- Finding and using digital primary sources
- Information session on the CART Fellowship
- "Locavore research" - tailoring one's research to the materials locally available
- Building skills in digital scholarship tools and methods
- Teaching with primary sources in undergraduate classes

We often integrate different digital **tools** into the sessions that students can use in their teaching and research, including:

- Tropy - for managing archival research photos and notes
- Padlet - for brainstorming as a group and organizing ideas
- Sli.do - for gathering anonymous feedback and questions
- Zotero - for managing sources and citations

### Challenges & Questions

- Are we meeting actual student needs, or being prescriptive?
- Low turnout sometimes but consistently positive anecdotal feedback from students
- Which meeting time(s) will be best for welcoming the most students?

Significant changes in the last several months:

- #COLA4all campaign: students protesting lack of cost of living adjustment dismissed from teaching appointments
- Uncertainty and anxiety around COVID-19

**How can we support students during these times, when archival research is understandably taking a back seat to other priorities? How can we use the virtual space to attend to their whole authentic selves and their concerns?**

### Looking Forward

At this point, we are pausing our in-person sessions due to COVID-19. We see this as a time to regroup and reassess what CART Commons' core purpose should be. Questions we are asking include:

- What are the **needs** of graduate students at UCSC that we can address in CART Commons?
- How do we **learn** about these specific needs, instead of anticipating what they may be?
- How can we better facilitate connection and community **remotely**?
- What does CART look like in a completely remote environment? Can we take components of the fellowship program and bring them to remote CART Commons meetings?
- What **assessment** tools can we use going forward?

Our plan for Summer 2020 is to host a **virtual reading group**. Staff members have chosen two articles on digital archives that we will discuss for our first reading group meeting via Zoom. After the first session, we will ask participants to submit an article idea and help facilitate the next discussion.



### How do we start?

At UCSC, we are fortunate in that we immediately got the go-ahead to start this group, and the CART program already exists as a foundation for the Commons component. Here are some tips to start this kind of community at your institution:

- **Brainstorm** reasons to start this community, and topics you could cover. Is there a need that you can address or a gap in archival research methodologies on campus?
- Write a **statement of purpose** for your group. What is the mission, the reason for this existing? How does it relate to the greater mission of your organization?
- Think of existing **partners** at your institution, and get in touch. This can include faculty with whom you have done instruction, graduate student services staff at your institution, and library staff liaisons to graduate students.
- Write down ways to **promote** this community and your first meeting. Word of mouth can be very effective. Ask your partners to tell graduate students they know who may be interested.
- Poll students on their research interests, and bring out archival materials that may be of interest. Include time for **hands-on** exploration.
- Have **snacks!** (away from the materials)
- Hold the space for a particular audience, like graduate students, but be **open** to welcoming other interested participants like undergraduates and faculty members.
- Be **flexible**. Assess how you're doing, listen to student feedback, and be prepared to change course if needed.

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### Footnotes

1. <https://collabseminar.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>
2. Quotes from past CART fellows, shared with permission