

# THE STUDENT AS SUBALTERN: RECONSIDERING THE ROLE OF STUDENT LIFE MATERIAL COLLECTIONS AT NORTH AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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**ABSTRACT:** This article argues for college and university archivists to undertake advocacy and activism to better document student life. It discusses key shifts in archival and historical theory that supported an interest in collecting from a wide variety of people rather than just elites. Next, it describes recent archival scholarship on student life materials and considers the extent to which college and university archives are actively documenting the student experience via the collection of these materials. Analysis of the results of a survey of college and university archivists about the nature of these collections sheds further light on prevailing opinions of student life documentation programs. Finally, this article assesses how these factors combine to explain why students may not have been documented as thoroughly as other groups have been and what archivists can do about it.

## *Introduction*

The archival world underwent a number of major philosophical shifts in the last half of the twentieth century, particularly with regard to the importance of collecting from all facets of society. Archivists and historians debated the role of the archivist and discussed whether archivists should shift priorities to focus more resources on collecting from groups whose subaltern status in society or underrepresentation in business, government, or academia means that their materials have not been collected extensively. While there are several prominent student life collections on university campuses, notably at The Ohio State University, Iowa State University, and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the vast majority of archivists surveyed for this article say that their institutions do not schedule student life materials for accession, and they do not have any organized collecting policy for these materials. The archivists surveyed, however, report that they consider these materials to have significant value, and most say that they are used regularly, if not heavily. Unfortunately, archives tend not to have enough resources to collect these materials systematically. The survey reveals that archivists attempt to reach out to students and student groups where possible but largely depend on serendipity for locating these items.

Results from the survey suggest that without a structured program in place to collect student life materials, this entire group, with its unique experience and point of view, may be omitted from the historical record. In addition, student life materials provide a unique window into the cultural expression of a group and an era, including documentation of taste, style, trends, politics, and attitudes about society that may not be as easily and honestly documented elsewhere. This is one way student life materials can prove invaluable to researchers. In addition to the survey of current archival professionals, this article analyzes historical trends to make a case for why archivists should advocate for the resources to correct this imbalance. By neglecting the student body, university archives are excluding a key group from the documentary record.

### *Literature Review*

In a 1976 article, Nicholas C. Burckel applied the idea of actively “broadening the collecting focus” to acquire materials previously neglected by university archives. According to Burckel, archivists in universities have long been in charge of “collecting, processing, and preserving non-current institutional records of permanent historical, legal or administrative value,” but “the question of how broadly that role should be interpreted and implemented” had not yet been fully explored.<sup>1</sup> Burckel argued that after the establishment of a basic archival program at a university, the archivist might consider “more diverse collecting activities,” aiming “toward a greater commitment to serving all segments of the academic community.”<sup>2</sup> He then described several directions an archivist might take to accomplish this goal, including the collection of student life materials. According to Burckel, “[t]he raison d’être of higher education is teaching and the viability of most colleges rests on enrollment, yet archivists have done little to document the quality and type of students who pass through their institutions.”<sup>3</sup> He listed several reasons for this: “The student population . . . experiences the most rapid change of any element in the university; students are not directly accountable to the board of regents, trustees, or the state legislature, and they pay for services that are not readily quantifiable.”<sup>4</sup> He suggested several familiar techniques for documenting student life: focusing on posters, pamphlets, and paper ephemera, and recording oral histories of students, for example. Student life materials, along with other nontraditional university records, “help to document more fully the role of higher education in society” and will be “used by social scientists of the future.”<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Burckel took a cautious tone at the end of his article, arguing that archivists should experiment with these new techniques, but not let them get in the way of their regular job duties. According to Burckel, while archivists may confront “the difficulty of appraisal, the problem of establishing priorities, and the need to provide certain functions,” their success in improving student life collections will depend on “the ability of the archivist to develop proposals that do not undermine his basic archival function but rather expand and elaborate it.”<sup>6</sup>

At the time Burckel was writing this article, many other archivists and historians were advocating for broadening collection policies. Several prominent historians of the period, among them Howard Zinn, spoke out about collecting materials that document

people from all walks of life to create a more complete historical record. According to historian Peter Novick, Zinn maintained that since history had traditionally focused on the powerful members of society, focusing on the powerless was no less distorting and might in fact restore some balance to historical scholarship.<sup>7</sup> In his widely cited 1977 article, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," Zinn argued that to combat the biases of American society that seek to maintain the power of the powerful, archivists "engage in a campaign to open all government documents to the public" and that they "take the trouble to compile a whole new world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people."<sup>8</sup>

In 1974, F. Gerald Ham delivered his path-breaking address, "The Archival Edge," which was published subsequently in the *American Archivist* in 1975. Ham began by stating firmly that it is the job of archivists to "select" information, not simply to be custodians of documentation passed by records creators, as was a traditional perspective. He stated his interest in creating a "representative record of human experience," which not only rejects the notion of the archivist's responsibility only to the records creator for which he or she works, but also emphasizes the archivist's role in documenting the daily lives of people in all walks of life, not simply the business transactions of the powerful. Most importantly, noted Ham, "the archivist must realize that he can no longer abdicate his role in this demanding intellectual process of documenting culture."<sup>9</sup> A number of other archivists in the ensuing decades added to the literature about collecting from a broad variety of groups and why it is important to do so.<sup>10</sup>

In 1992, Helen Willa Samuels published *Varsity Letters*, a functional analysis of colleges and universities, which revolutionized how archivists consider documenting these institutions. Samuels argued that student life materials should be considered essential to the collecting mission of a university archives. In the chapter "Foster Socialization," she focused on these materials and noted the kind of organizations on campus that might provide documentation of student life activities. However, she was primarily concerned with illustrating collecting goals, not prescribing details about how to implement a collecting strategy. She touched on the mechanics of collecting, but did not explore the issue in detail.

More recently, the majority of articles written on college and university archives focus on encouraging students to use the archives, or on working with faculty to incorporate primary source materials from archives into the curriculum. Articles also cover student records (e.g., transcripts, letters of recommendation, and admissions materials) as opposed to student life materials. While student records might be scheduled in a university's records management program, student life materials generally are not. A survey undertaken by Tamar Chute and Ellen Swain in 2004 made a clear distinction between student records and student life materials. While their survey focused on the way archives collect student records, Chute and Swain did indicate that several respondents preferred to collect student life materials, such as brochures, flyers, and other published ephemera, in part to circumvent privacy regulations like FERPA while still documenting the student experience. When they asked respondents whether they thought student records in general were worth collecting, 75 percent said they were. Chute and Swain reported that one respondent explained, "The main reason

for a university to exist is to serve its students—by not documenting their experience, it calls into question the totality of the historical record of an academic institution.”<sup>11</sup>

In the professional literature, interest is increasing in the subject of collecting student life materials. At The Ohio State University, Tamar Chute has discussed her work to reach out to student organizations. In a presentation at the Midwest Archives Conference in 2000, Chute outlined an attempt to establish a student advisory council to get recommendations on how to publicize the archives and increase collecting from student groups. Because she was not a student, her intention was to gain the students’ perspectives, and she learned that the archives needed to spend more time explaining and advertising why it is relevant to students.<sup>12</sup> Michele Christian at Iowa State University, another key scholar of student life documentation, undertook an oral history project to record life events of students. She argued that since traditional techniques for records transfer prove impractical for student life materials (due, for example, to high turnover of student membership in organizations), these oral histories can fill in the gaps.<sup>13</sup>

A recent article by Sarah Buchanan and Katie Richardson discussed the UCLA Bruin Archives Project, which used local graduate students enrolled in archival education programs to work with the archives to survey campus student groups, develop a collecting program, and process student group collections.<sup>14</sup> Another article, by this author and Debbi Smith, surveyed students about their knowledge of university archives and their willingness to donate their student life materials.<sup>15</sup>

In an important 1994 article, John Straw discussed his goals and methods for documenting the “total student experience” at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, including the development of its Student Life Center. Christopher Prom and Ellen Swain, also at the Student Life Center, have written extensively on this subject. In her 2004 article, “Connecting Students of the Present, Past, and Future: An Activist Approach to the Collection and Use of Student Documents in the University Archives,” Swain outlined a number of key trends in historical research that encouraged the development of student life collections, particularly the shift toward social history and documenting the subaltern.<sup>16</sup> She also cites two master’s theses from the mid-1990s that surveyed university archivists about their attitudes on student life materials; the results of both surveys are similar to the survey results discussed herein.<sup>17</sup> She also described the many and varied outreach programs established at the University of Illinois. In another article, Swain discussed an advisory committee created to help members of student groups coordinate with the archives, to suggest ways to improve organizations’ record keeping, and to develop procedures for transferring student group records to the archives.<sup>18</sup> And Prom and Swain, in yet another article, appraised student organization websites for their documentary value and discussed ways archivists might capture them for their archival collections.<sup>19</sup>

According to John Thelin, documenting student life on campus is essential to developing a campus narrative, which contributes to the long-term viability of the university. He refers to a 1972 study that found that “nondescript colleges and universities who neither internalized nor projected to alumni or to the outside world any discernible sense of their special heritage or mission” were the same “colleges and universities that lagged in endowments and fund-raising.”<sup>20</sup> Thelin also discussed the scholarship of Allan Nevins, who argued that going to college has increasingly become a rite of

passage and cultural touchstone that should be documented, especially in light of the wide variety of subcultures that flourish in a college environment.<sup>21</sup>

Several other scholars agreed with Thelin's argument that collecting student life materials can be a boon to a university's public relations, particularly with alumni. Elizabeth Konzak and Dwain P. Teague pointed out that "[b]uilding strong relationships with alumni is vital for the success of both the archives and development office. The sense of university pride an alum feels when they provide materials to the archives is a powerful emotion. They know that, due to their contribution of materials, the history of their university is being preserved forever."<sup>22</sup> Sandra Roff, in her study of a program documenting student life at Baruch College in New York, agreed that "alumni as well as the academic community crave a strong connection to the history of the institution, and providing access to these historical materials can serve as a public relations tool."<sup>23</sup> She added that archival materials and ephemera illustrating student life can provide unique perspectives on events in the college's history—perspectives that more official accounts may not cover. This adds to the unique value of this documentation and supports the idea that these materials should be collected.

It is evident that archivists writing about student life materials are convinced that these items are essential to university archival collections. They help provide a narrative of the school's history. They are excellent for public relations, especially for alumni and fund-raising. And, perhaps most important, they provide information on the birth of social movements, popular culture, and society, and can provide ample resources for scholars in these areas. However, it is equally clear in the literature—even as early as Burckel's work—that the same major hurdles to a collecting program continue to be noted: the turnover in student populations, capturing and maintaining student interest, and limited funding and staff time.

### *Survey and Analysis*

While numerous studies exist on establishing student life documentation programs, the attitudes of a broad cross-section of university and college archivists on this subject have not been studied as extensively. To examine this topic, a brief survey was conducted using SurveyMonkey to see if archivists other than those writing on the subject agree that student life materials are important to collect and to see if they followed through on that opinion by organizing a documentation program. The survey was distributed online, primarily using listservs associated with the Society of American Archivists and its sections and roundtables. A total of 110 responses were received during the month of November 2012 (see questionnaire in Appendix 1).

First, respondents were asked about the size and makeup of their institutions to effectively compare the collections and resources available. Nearly 83 percent reported working at a four-year university, with others reporting that they work at a four-year college. Fewer than 2 percent of respondents said they work at a two-year institution. Those surveyed were also asked about the size of the student population at their institutions; responses were fairly evenly split between small, medium, and large institutions, though 42 percent listed a student population of fewer than 5,000.

When asked about the number of staff members employed at each institution, a plurality of respondents (31 percent) said they work at a place with fewer than two (full or part-time) archivists, not including student or volunteer help. Another 28 percent said that two to three archivists are employed in their department, and 20 percent noted three to four employees. Therefore, the vast majority of respondents, 79 percent, have four or fewer trained staff members (see Figure 1). Many respondents stated that limited staffing is a key reason archivists collect fewer student life materials than they would like. However, when asked, fully 100 percent of respondents reported that they collect student life materials, which the survey defined as “campus publications, play programs, athletics materials, Greek life materials, student organization records, etc.”

The survey asked specifically whether institutions had an official collecting policy or program for student life materials, and 72 percent of respondents reported that they do not. An open-ended follow-up question asked respondents to write in their methods of acquisition, listing as many as they liked. Four answers were provided most frequently: 51 percent mentioned liaising with student groups as a key way of acquiring student life materials; 20 percent said that they rely on random donation of materials; and 12 percent listed outreach or solicitation by archival staff. Only 9 percent stated they regularly schedule deposits of student life materials through a records management program, or mentioned having a retention policy that includes student life materials (see Figure 2).

After asking about the nature of their institutions and current collections, the survey asked whether the archivists felt they were collecting too much, too little, or about the right amount of student life material. Eighty-three percent of respondents declared they would like to collect more student life materials. They cited a number of difficulties in building these types of collections. One major concern was the ad hoc nature of collecting these materials and the large gaps in the documentation within each collection. Since most respondents do not schedule student life materials for accessioning, they are received irregularly and unevenly; 28 percent of respondents listed this as a concern. The same percentage mentioned the related issue that some events, groups, or time periods are documented in great detail, while others are not documented at all. Several respondents (7 percent) also reported that it can be hard to maintain contact with student groups, particularly in light of frequent changes in leadership. Some were concerned about having limited staff time to collect student life materials (11 percent), as well as no infrastructure to collect them online, where these materials frequently can be found (12 percent) (see Figure 3).

When respondents were asked who uses their student life collections and how frequently, 50 percent indicated that students use the materials for research, another 9 percent mentioned classes using the materials as part of their coursework, and 31 percent cited administrative departments such as alumni relations or marketing and outreach. Another notable user group mentioned was alumni; 26 percent included alumni in their list of users (see Figure 4).

Use of these materials ranged from “very infrequently” to “6–10 times per week.” When the responses were tallied, 39 percent indicated the materials are used once per month or less; 40 percent indicated they are used weekly or frequently (wherever possible, responses of “frequently” were interpreted using the context of the response). Responses to this question ranged widely, however.

It is clear, then, that the archivists responding to this survey believe in the importance of student life collections. The respondents would like to collect more of these materials, but several key hurdles prevent them from doing so. First, they lack resources in terms of staffing, time, and budget. Second, usually no collecting policy mandate or records schedule requirement for collecting these materials exists, so there may be no clear, established institutional backing or resource support for such a project. Third, student life materials are hard to collect: it can be difficult to maintain contact with student groups as student leadership changes frequently and students tend to be unaware of the archives and its collecting mission.<sup>24</sup> Given that the vast majority of the institutions surveyed had four or fewer staff members, limited resources, and no policy mandate for collecting student life materials, it is not surprising that collecting these materials tends to be a low priority.

Student materials fall outside the traditional records management scheduling structure of universities, which means these materials are not regularly or consistently accessioned. Student life materials are difficult to collect due to the nature of the groups and their members, and these organizations may not have a tradition of keeping records (or keeping them for any length of time). At many colleges and universities, collecting these materials has traditionally been perceived as “above and beyond” the mandate of a university archives: an added bonus, but not the primary mission. The archivists surveyed seemed to want to change that. They feel strongly that student life materials are important and should be collected, so it seems clear that archivists should take steps to achieve this goal.

### *Conclusion*

Student life materials document the unique character of a university and how that character changes over time. Such collections can help brand a university and aid with outreach to alumni and with fund-raising. They help document aspects of a university’s culture that other sorts of records do not and thus should be considered a key part of the collecting policy of any academic institution.

In addition to documenting the university’s culture, though, these records tell us about the students themselves. Students are the largest and clearly one of the most important groups within the university. Further, they are a discrete group whose interests may differ from those of the rest of the university and from other groups to which students might belong or identify with outside of the university. In addition, ways to document the lives and interactions of young people in an organized way are limited, aside from student life materials created at colleges and universities (although these materials document only a certain subgroup of young people). Given the relationship between higher education and the development and gestation of political and social movements, collecting records of college students and groups is essential to learning about these issues. These materials are key to understanding the historical development of a particular set of people in a particular time and place. These primary sources are building blocks of good and original research.

Until recently, archivists were tied to documenting the day-to-day business of higher

education via the traditional means of scheduling and accessioning records from campus offices and departments. Given the push to try to document a wider swath of society, though, it is important that they now figure out ways to document the lives of students in a more organized, consistent way. But, as the results of this survey show, major problems exist in implementing a student life documentation program: a lack of institutionalized support, no official mandate to collect these materials, and therefore no resources to support their collection. The archivists who have written most extensively about documenting student life have experimented within the context of large universities such as Ohio State, University of Illinois, UCLA, and Iowa State. At institutions of this size, more students and archivists may be available to work on initiatives like this; for example, the project at UCLA used archival education graduate students to process student life collections.<sup>25</sup> Many institutions with small shops would likely not have resources for such a project unless they specifically asked for them.

Therefore, the next steps should be to advocate for adding these materials to collecting policies and records schedules, and for finding resources to put toward the extra work required to consistently and systematically collect from student groups. Clearly, though, this support will not be forthcoming unless archivists ask for it and make a strong case for why it is essential, especially in financially tough times. If archivists can make the argument to administrators that student life materials are essential and that ignoring them would significantly weaken the historical record, fund-raising capabilities, and public profile of the college or university, perhaps archives of all sizes can begin taking the necessary steps to document student life on campus.

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## NOTES

## Appendices

### Appendix I: Survey

#### Survey on Student Materials

**\*1. At what academic institution do you currently work?**

- College (2-year)
- University (4-year)
- Other (please specify)

**\*2. Approximately how many undergraduates are enrolled?**

- Less than 5,000
- 5,001 - 10,000
- 10,001 or more

**\*3. What is the job title for your current position?**

**\*4. How many staff members currently work at your archives?**

**\*5. Does your archives house student life materials (eg. campus publications, play programs, athletics materials, Greek life materials, student organization records, etc.)?**

- Yes
- No

**\*6. Please describe how student life materials are acquired.**

**\*7. Is there an official collecting policy or program in place for student life materials?**

- Yes
- No

**\*8. Select the statement you agree with the most:**

- I feel the archives is collecting more student life material than we need.
- I feel the archives is collecting about the right amount of student life material.
- I feel the archives should be collecting more student life material.

**\*9. You said, "[Q8]" Please explain your choice in the box provided:**

**\*10. How frequently are the student life materials used, and by whom?**

**\*11. Do you plan on instituting a program in the future?**

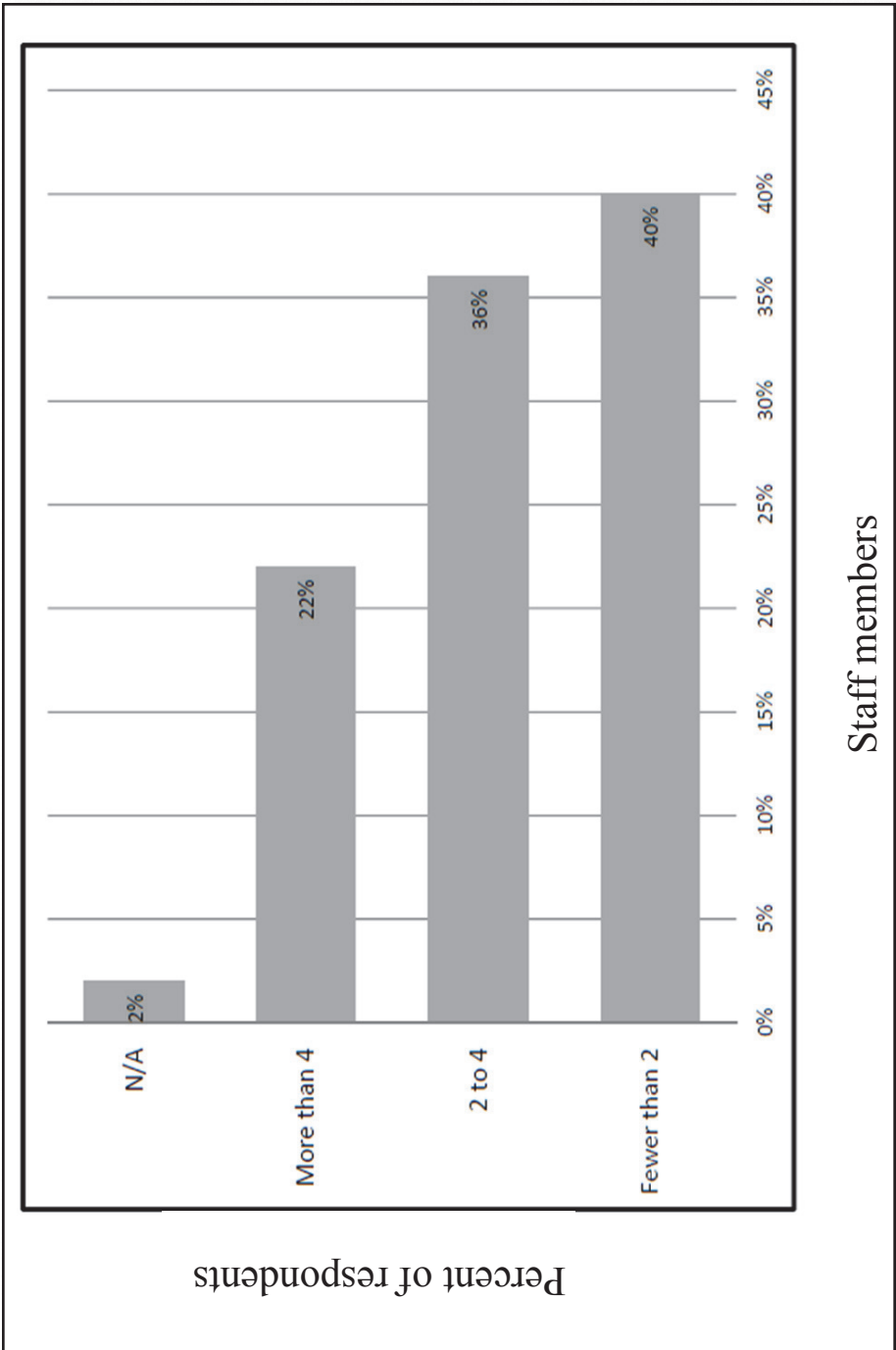
Yes

No

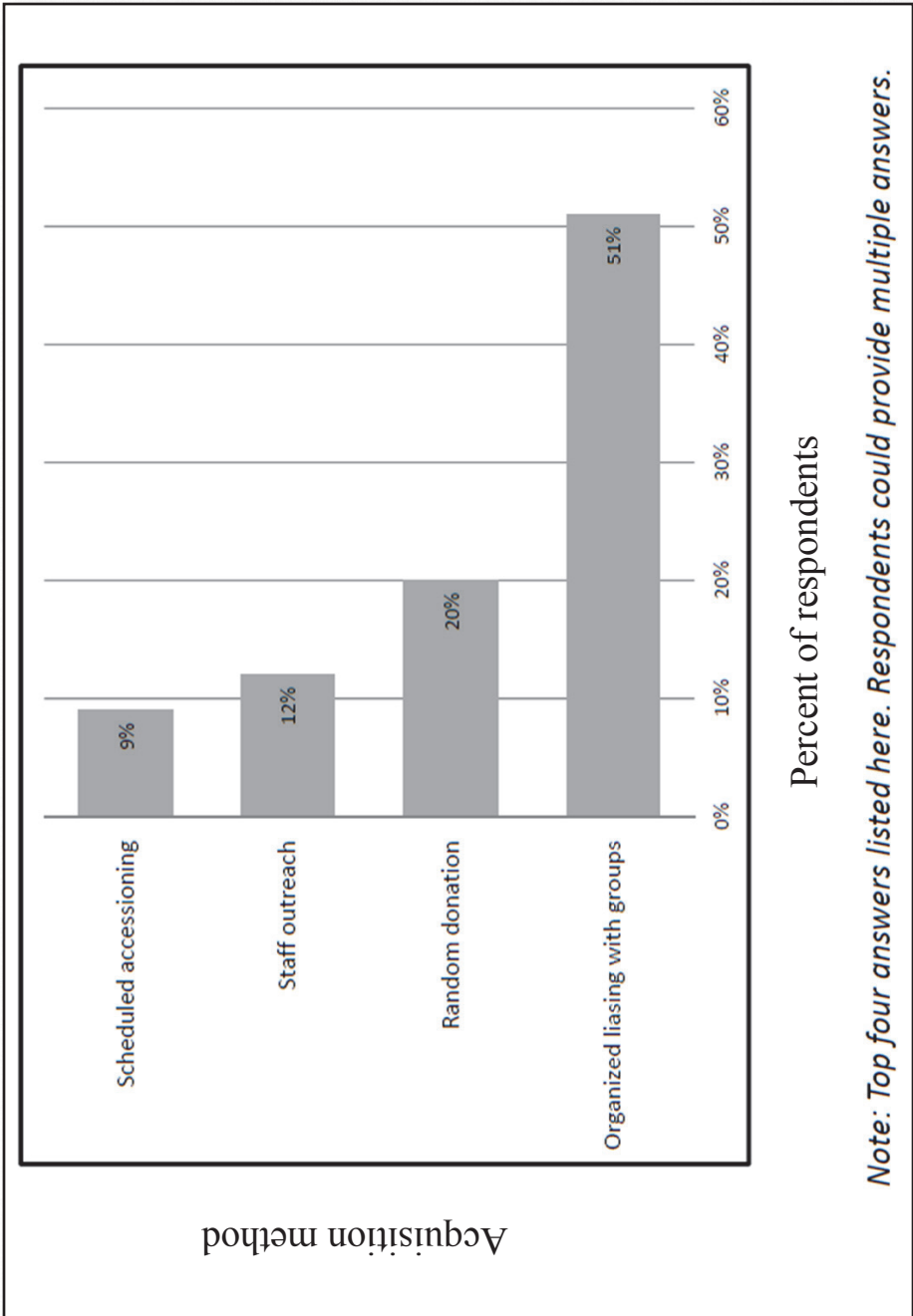
**\*12. When do you plan to begin? What kind of program do you envision?**

**\*13. Please explain why you don't plan on instituting a program in the future.**

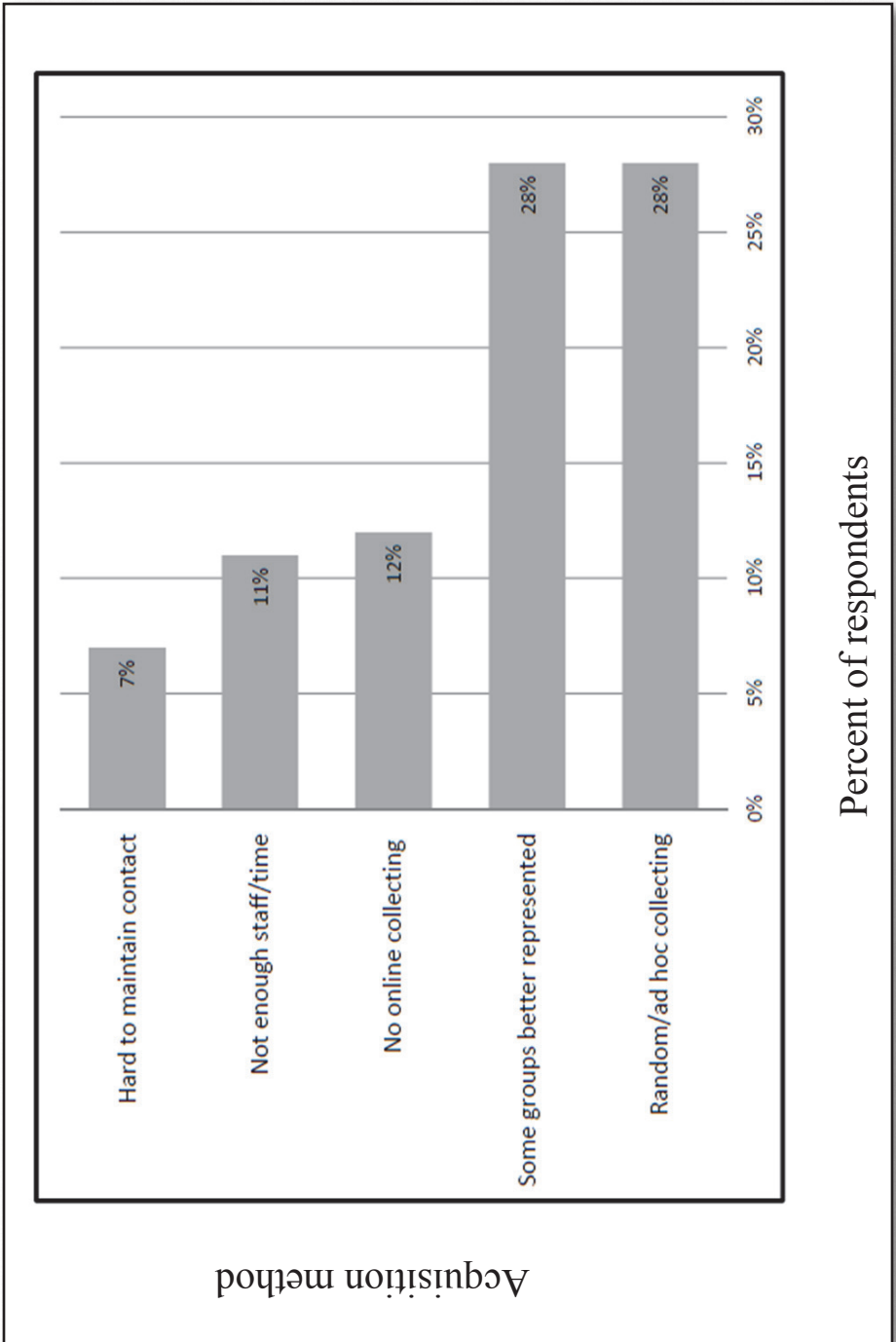
*Figure 1: Archives Staff (excludes students and volunteers)*



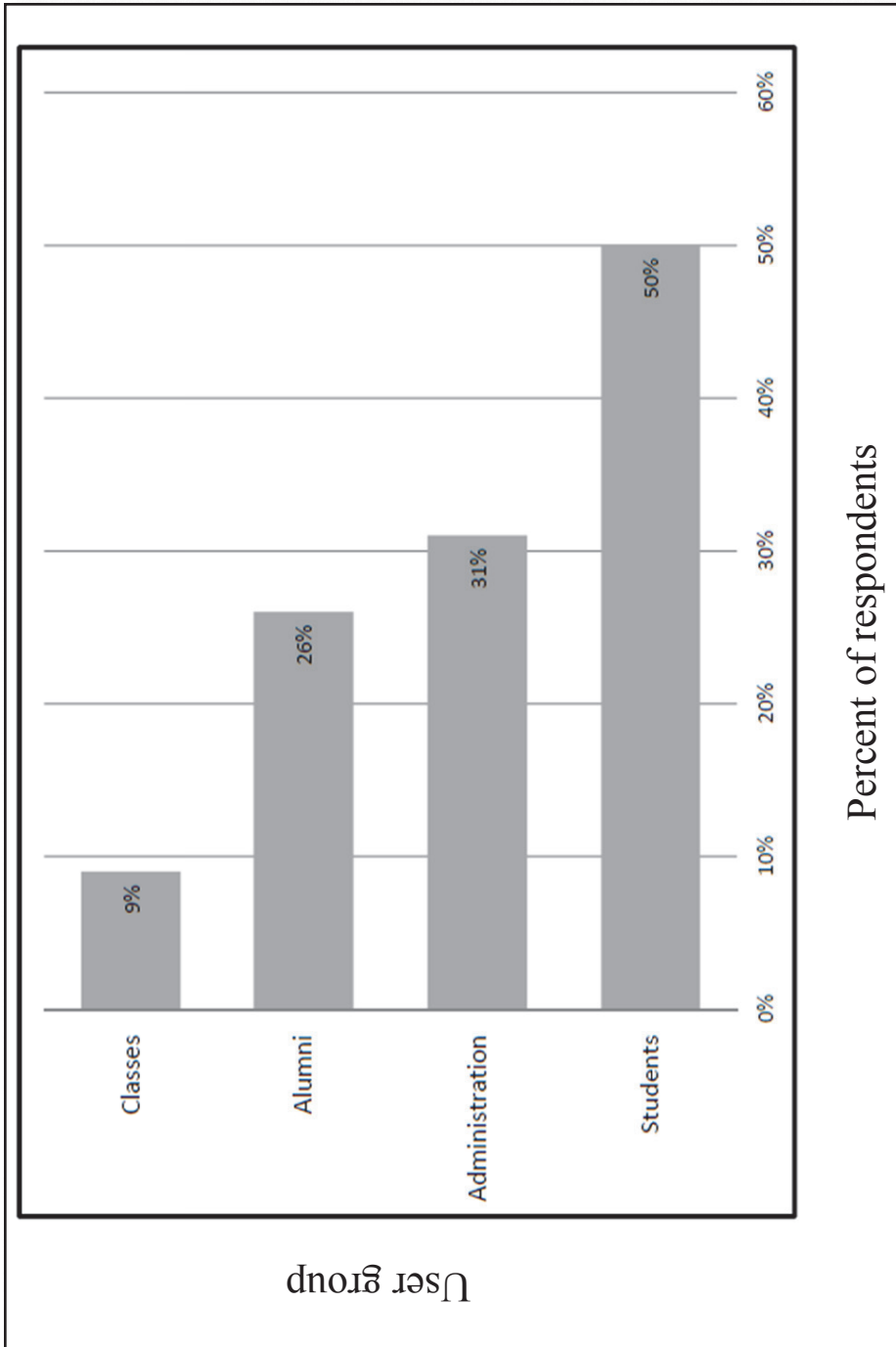
**Figure 2: Acquisition of Materials**



*Figure 3: Difficulties Building Student Life Collections*



**Figure 4: Users of Student Life Collections**



1. Nicholas C. Burckel, "The Expanding Role of a College or University Archives," *Midwestern Archivist* 1, no. (1976): 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 6.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 426.
8. Zinn 25. [need full cite]
9. Ham, "Archival Edge," 12–13. [need full cite]
10. See, for example, the work of Patrick M. Quinn, "Archivists and Historians: The Times They Are A-Changin'," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 5–13; and "Archivists Against the Current: For a Fair and Truly Representative Record of Our Times," *Provenance* 5, no. 1 (1987): 3.
11. Tamar G. Chute and Ellen D. Swain, "Navigating Ambiguous Waters: Providing Access to Student Records in the University Archives," *American Archivist* 67, no. 2 (2004): 226.
12. T. Chute, "The Unremembered Country: Connecting to Undergraduate Students and Their Organizations at OSU" (paper presented at the Midwest Archives Conference Spring 2000 Meeting).
13. Michele Christian, "Documenting Student Life: The Use of Oral Histories in University Archives," *Archival Issues: Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference* 27, no. 2 (2002): 111–12.
14. Sarah Buchanan and Katie Richardson, "Representation through Documentation: Acquiring Student and Campus Life Records through the Bruin Archives Project," *American Archivist* 75, no. 1 (2012): 205–24.
15. Jessica L. Wagner and Debbi A. Smith, "Students as Donors to University Archives: A Study of Student Perceptions with Recommendations," *American Archivist* 75 (2012): 538–66.
16. Ellen D. Swain, "Connecting Students of the Present, Past, and Future: An Activist Approach to the Collection and Use of Student Documents in the University Archives," *Journal of Archival Organization* 2, nos. 1–2 (2004): 42.
17. See these theses: Thomas K. B. Cherry, "Academic Archives and Student Organization Records" (master's thesis, School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, January 1995) and Lynn E. Pritcher, "Archiving the History of Higher Education: Records Management and Student Organizations" (master's thesis, School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, July 1997). These are quoted in Swain, "Connecting Students," 44.
18. Ellen D. Swain, "College Student as Archives' Consultant? A New Approach to Outreach Programming on Campus," *Archival Issues: Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference* 29, no. 2 (2005): 113–31.
19. Christopher J. Prom and Ellen D. Swain, "From the College Democrats to the Falling Illini: Identifying, Appraising, and Capturing Student Organization Websites," *American Archivist* 70 (Fall/Winter 2007): 344–63.
20. John R. Thelin, "Archives and the Cure for Institutional Amnesia: College and University Saga as Part of the Campus Memory," *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, nos. 1–2 (2009): 7.
21. *Ibid.*, 8.
22. Elizabeth Konzak and Dwain P. Teague, "Reconnect with Your Alumni and Connect to Donors," *Technical Services Quarterly* 26 (2009): 225, as quoted in Sandra Roff, "The College Archivist as College Historian: Baruch College Celebrates Its Historical Roots," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, nos. 3–4 (2010): 252–53.
23. Roff, "The College Archivist as College Historian," 252.
24. Wagner and Smith, "Students as Donors to University Archives," 538–66.
25. Buchanan and Richardson, "Representation through Documentation."