

Developing Special Collections & Archives at General Theological Seminary Post-pandemic

MELISSA CHIM

AT GENERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, THE PANDEMIC HAS brought about an opportunity to rethink our collection policy with regard to our special collections and institutional archive. With the move to the remote classroom, my manager and I had to make sure the archives were accessible to students who could not return to campus. We also anticipate that our library will expand its digital resources, most notably student theses and administrative documents. As we move forward in updating our collection policy, we will also have to rethink our access policy too.

The General Theological Seminary was founded in 1817 by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church and is located in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City. The seminary, on average, has about forty to sixty graduates per year. The Christoph Keller Jr. Library (CKJL) is home to a rich theological collection and an archive that also serves as an institutional repository. As the reference li-

brarian and archivist, I have the wonderful opportunity to help students access and interpret our collections.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, our archives collection development policy focused on accessioning sources related to theological research. During the pandemic, my manager and I worked from home from March to September 2020, where we answered reference requests pertaining to the special collections virtually. I also hosted multiple webinars that allowed my students to access our special collections from off campus. As the end of the pandemic comes within reach, we will update our collection development policy to reflect our student and faculty needs. Additionally, the transition of our president will bring in new material that will be our first processed archival collection since the pandemic began.

Similar to many small theological libraries, the CKJL wears many hats in order to meet the needs of its patrons both on and off campus. Its main collection comprises both print and electronic resources related to theological research, particularly the history of Anglicanism and the Episcopal Church. It also boasts a reference collection comprising commentaries, encyclopedias, atlases, and similar materials. Other themes actively collected by the library include liturgics, patristics, spirituality, ethics, and ecumenics. Although the primary language of the library's collection is English, Western European languages and ancient languages such as Hebrew, Greek, and Latin are also prioritized.

The library's special collections and archives serve as both a repository for materials of historic value and as an institutional records repository. Due to the library's size and budget limitations, artifacts related to the seminary are housed in the special collections room, which comprises about 150 linear feet of material. One can find a 15th-century book of hours not far from a copy of the seminary's 1850 board of trustees minutes. Prior to the pandemic, the library did not house electronic copies of institutional material such as student dissertations or seminary newsletters. Our collection policy was last updated in 2014.

Before the pandemic, our special collections received a lot of interest from faculty and students. The library's Books of Common Prayer and Hebrew scrolls are the most often requested items. This is in conjunction with two of the most popular courses, which are History of the Prayer Book and Old Testament. The two instructors of those courses schedule a visit once a semester where students are encouraged to have hands-on interaction with these materials. I use

class visits like these to advertise our special collections and let students pursuing a thesis know that they are welcome to use the archives for their research.

Additionally, we keep a four-case exhibit open to view in our main reading area. We change this exhibit every three months and use items of interest from the archives. For example, we display many copies of the poem “’Twas the Night before Christmas” (written by General Theological Seminary professor Clement C. Moore) during the Christmas season.

With the onset of the pandemic, the library’s approach to its special collections department had to evolve to meet the needs of a now completely virtual seminary community. Since the students could not come to the special collections, I wanted to bring the special collections to them. I presented two webinars during the pandemic: one webinar was on the history of female students at the seminary in honor of Women’s History Month (which was recorded and is currently available to view), and the second was on the seminary’s response to the 1918 flu pandemic and both world wars (not recorded). These were both scheduled to coincide with breaks in the class schedule. Before transitioning to working from home, I took photographs of the special collections materials for each presentation and incorporated them into PowerPoint presentations.

My webinar on the history of women at the seminary focused on four groups: historically significant women in the Episcopal Church (such as Florence Li Tim Oi), the first female students at General (Peggy Muncie, Paige Bigelow, and later Pauli Murray), the first female faculty members (Dora Chaplin), and the campus wives’ group known as the Women of General. I used photographs and documents from the special collections, including a copy of *Dark Testament* signed by Pauli Murray. I also included interviews I conducted over email from former members of the Women of General group. Since the webinar took place over Zoom, students were muted and could only pose questions in the chat function.

My second webinar, however, was presented in Zoom’s classroom mode and allowed students to participate more easily. This webinar focused on the seminary during the 1918 flu pandemic and both world wars. Most of the sources I used came from our board of trustees minutes. I discovered that, contrary to what I expected, the seminary was in favor of students engaging in military service rather than acting as conscientious objectors. I also included photographs in my presentation, notably of student Paul Ken Imai, a Japanese stu-

dent who graduated in 1942 and later worked with congregations affected by Japanese internment. Both webinars ultimately had an equal amount of both students and faculty attending.

The greatest challenge in presenting these webinars was the inability to encourage students to physically interact with the historical materials on display. One way to overcome this challenge in the future is to incorporate video of the archival material into a PowerPoint presentation. For example, I can record myself opening a book so students can experience the sound of the pages turning and the spine cracking. They will also be able to see how the paper has aged over time. Although this will not fully replicate the ability to touch an object, showing students video footage will allow them to engage with the special collections while attending class virtually. I plan to utilize these techniques for the 2022–2023 year.

As the pandemic draws to a close and we transition back to working physically in the library, we will revisit our collection development policy regarding our special collections. This change is also very timely as the seminary transitions to a new president. The papers I received from the retiring president are the first collection I will process post-pandemic. As a small library, our special collections room also serves as our institutional repository. One major change brought about by the pandemic is revisiting the question of acquiring a digital repository.

In addition to processing this new collection, the library no longer requires students to submit bound copies of their theses before graduation. As of summer 2020, students submit a PDF of their finished thesis to both the library and registrar's office. Additionally, many of the physical materials within the president's papers are available electronically. One major challenge of having a combined special collections and institutional repository is physical space. A digital repository will relieve this burden, but questions of cost, technology (such as using a cloud-based repository), and sustainability also arise.

Another consideration when updating our policy will be with regards to content. Our current policy states that "The Library Archives does not have space for, and thus cannot receive reprints, bulky artifacts, or more than two copies of reports and publications" (see appendix). Transitioning to an electronic repository might open the library to the possibility of having multiple copies of a document. Routine correspondence and announcements, which are currently not accepted into the archive, may have a place in a digital archive.

With regards to the retiring president's papers I am going to process, having a digital repository would allow me to keep both hard and electronic copies of the president's correspondence. Ideally, a digital repository will be a supplement to, rather than a full replacement of, our special collections and archives room.

Another concern when updating our collection development policy with regards to the institutional repository is access. Prior to the pandemic, students, faculty, and board members had complete open access to the institutional repository collection. Researchers from outside the seminary were required to fill out a research request form and generally have open access to institutional records. Requests for institutional records after 2010, however, are directed to the president on a case-by-case basis. In light of the incoming president's papers and student theses being mostly in electronic form, the library will have to consider how to develop a new access policy for digital materials. As conversations about digital repositories continue, my manager and I will keep these materials on the library's server and grant access as needed.

The Christoph Keller Jr. Library's archives collection development policy reflects the educational needs of the seminary community. The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired the library to update its policy to make the archives and special collections accessible to students and faculty engaging in virtual classrooms. Transitioning to a digital repository will bring both opportunities and challenges, particularly in light of the first collection I will process post pandemic. Consequently, the library's collection policy must evolve to preserve the seminary's heritage into the future.

Appendix: Collection Development Policy of the General Theological Seminary

As a rule, General Theological Seminary institutional records are considered by the Library Director to be appropriate for the Archives when they document policy development and precedents, major projects, or university rights and responsibilities; if their subject matter caused considerable comment on the Close or in the media; if they involved litigation or large sums of money; or, if they have been vital to the operation or spiritual life of the Seminary. Materials such as

grant applications are to be considered for inclusion, as they often contain historical narratives and statistics and other related materials that can be useful for researchers.

Institutional materials considered by the Library Director for archival status include:

- Correspondence and subject files of the Dean, President and Seminary administration.
- Publications, such as newsletters and annual reports.
- Records of program or curriculum development.
- Departmental minutes; committee minutes and reports.
- Self-studies, histories, and accreditation reports.
- Records about symposia and special projects.
- Records about cooperative efforts with other institutions.
- Records about relationships with government, business, or industry.
- Photographs (if identified).
- Faculty materials, including papers and selected publications.

The Seminary Records Retention Guidelines are used by individual departments to determine whether administrative or transactional records and documents should be retained or destroyed. Library staff is available to assist individual departments in evaluating their non-current files and determining whether they are appropriate for the Library Archives.

The following guidelines are intended to be helpful for departments with institutional records they identify as having possible archival value. The Library Archives does not have space for, and thus cannot receive reprints, bulky artifacts, or more than two copies of reports and publications. Routine correspondence (for example, requests for course information and acknowledgments) is generally not valuable, nor are announcements, directives, and other memoranda distributed to the Seminary as a whole.

The Archives does not accept records in hanging files or loose-leaf binders; nor are loose, unfolded papers received. These should

be re-folded into manila folders. Records of distinct offices, committees, or organizations should not be intermixed. Records that are soiled, moldy or identified as having environmental damage should be photocopied and the originals discarded or sealed and preserved, according to their value.

The transfer of records from offices and departments of the Seminary to the Archives is considered permanent. When files and office materials are transferred to the Archives, they become part of the Library's Special Collections and are made available to staff and patrons only in the Special Collections room of the Library, with access subject to Library policy. Offices and departments are advised to ensure that they have no current or frequent need for any records intended for transfer. These records are subject to the same terms and conditions of use and reproduction as other items that form part of the Library's Special Collections.

