Exploring Hidden Collections through Academic Service-Learning

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Dr. Christine Angel, assistant professor of Library and Information Science at St. John's University, began the Hidden Heritage Collections Project in the spring of 2013. The project draws on the university's Academic Service-Learning (AS-L) program to create a partnership between local archives and St. John's. Focusing specifically on archives that have hidden collections or that are little known to the general public, the program allows qualified graduate students from the Division of Library and Information Science (DLIS) to work in the archives and at the same time apply their hours and work experience toward course requirements.

The first archives to express interest were the Center for Migration Studies and the Paulist Fathers. Both of these archives sought help in gaining intellectual control of their collections and in preserving them digitally. Dr. Angel proposed that the archives partner with St. John's through the AS-L program. The first set of AS-L students began at the Center for Migration Studies archives in spring 2013, and each student completed twelve hours' work during the term. In writing assignments both before and after their projects students reflected on their expectations and experiences of working in the archives.

Students now write posts concerning the objects and projects that they have worked on at their AS-L sites in the Hidden Heritage Collections blog (hiddenheritagecollections.org).

The blog serves a dual purpose. While promoting the archival artifacts of various community-partner collections, it also provides students with needed social media experience. The archives and students formed reciprocal partnerships through the course of this project. Students were able to demonstrate archival theories to community partners, providing them both with rewarding experiences. Father John Foley, C.S.P., at that time vice president of the Paulist Fathers and currently their assistant archivist, stated to students in an AS-L interview: "AS-L is opening [the Paulist Fathers] up to the wealth of information that we actually have in our possession but previously just did not understand would be useful and valuable to others." Dr. Mary Brown, archivist of the Center of Migration Studies and of Marymount College, has said about AS-L projects: "[The students] are going to go on to take care of the documents that all historians rely on, and, increasingly, you'll be the ones 'publishing,' via digitization and virtual exhibits, these documents."

The Hidden Heritage Collections Project has greatly expanded since its inception. Community partners now include archives in the academic, public, and private sectors. For more information on the project or to see student work please visit hiddenheritagecollections.org.