Navigating Archives

Some Practical Tips for Working at University Archives

- ✓ **When to go**: University Archives is open during standard business hours (Mon. through Fri. 8:30 to 5:00), so you will need to plan ahead to get there during that window.
- ✓ **What to do beforehand**: Confirm with the archivist that you plan to come at a certain time. You can do this by email. Also, identify what collections you plan to see. When possible, browse the available online inventories prior to arriving and bring a list of collections to see (note box & series number and folder title).
- ✓ **What to bring**: A laptop (for note-taking) and a pencil (no pens allowed). You can use a digital camera to capture images of material you will use for your research, which is a good alternative to photocopying (more on this below). Don't bring food.
- ✓ **What to do first**: Ask for help! Tell the archivists exactly what you are looking for – even if you don't know what the names of the sources might be. More below.
- ✓ **How to get copies of materials**: Try to think ahead on duplication…figure out what you'll want to reference at home, and request a copy of this material as you encounter it. Make sure to fill out appropriate form. Archives staff will photocopy or make scans for you, however, sometimes this may take a few days to have ready, so plan ahead.
- ✓ **How long it will take**: Exploring in an archive can take longer than you might think - especially at first – so give yourself 30 or 45 minutes at a minimum each time. Plan to return to the archive more than once, and to document each visit with careful notes about what you viewed.

Some Principles and Guidelines for Working in Any Archive

- ✓ **Don't limit yourself to the collections or artifacts that seem most obvious** (though don't skip them either!). When you need assistance in identifying potentially-useful material, ask for help!
- ✓ **Imagine how a given document or its creator might have interacted with other document or people**, and use these insights to identify additional material that could be relevant as you seek to situate the document in a given cultural moment or context. In other words, do comparative, contextual readings and don't hesitate to ask for guidance in identifying good associated documents. Keep in mind that **most documents are part of larger collections** of related (though maybe not similar) documents. Exploring these collections may help you to understand a given document's contexts, and/or may lead you to new documents.
- ✓ **Think about cultural context on multiple levels**. As you consider any document, look at **its original creator** (which may not be one particular person), **its original situation** (at the university, within St. Louis, within a political or social context, after a major event, etc.) and its **original function(s)**. You can also consider its uses or situations at times other than its moment of creation – what cultural significance it may have had since.
- ✓ **Ask lots of questions**! Beyond browsing the University Archives website, the best way to identify the *unobvious* sources is to ask the archivists or your instructor to help you identify material that might be "hidden" from your view.
- ✓ **Be prepared to "follow the trail of breadcrumbs."** You may come in with ideas about what you hope to find that are not borne out by the collection. You may also find that the trail of evidence leads you in unexpected directions. If you find a rich and fascinating source or collection that you weren't looking for, consider framing new questions for your project that make the most of this material. And document your process (collect the breadcrumbs!) so you know how you got from artifact to artifact. Later, you'll be glad you wrote everything down.
- ✓ **Be prepared to look in other archives**, and to seek out secondary sources that will help you understand the artifacts you find in this one.