

African American Studies: A Guide to Engaging the Archives

“Archives are the bulwark of a free society.” – Desmond Tutu

Why the Archives

Archival research and primary source materials help students...

- Raise questions about epistemology and the construction and transmission of knowledge.
- Understand the relationship between materiality and meaning, evidence and events.
- Consider the perspectives of people interacting in different times and spaces.
- Reflect on individual and institutional legacies and their impact on the current moment.
- Connect larger historical narratives to regional and local history.
- Experience the excitement of discovery and original research.

Instructional Support

Instructors are encouraged to work with a staff archivist in planning and implementing a class session at the Archives and Special Collections. Archivists can discuss with students what sorts of materials are housed in archival repositories; what primary sources are; and/or how to navigate and search for collections. Archivists can also help devise in-class activities in order to allow students to handle and analyze historical documents.

[Schedule a class visit](#) (please schedule at least two weeks in advance).

In-Class/Onsite Activity Idea

This is a suggested idea for an in-class activity.

- Examine one item from the collections listed below in Notable Collections (chosen ahead of time by the archivist and instructor). Determine the following information about it: who (creator), when (date), where (location), what (form and subject), why (function), and for whom (audience).

Independent Assignments or Long-Term Project Ideas

Choose one of the following assignment/project ideas.

- Spend some time in discovery with one of the collections below. Choose 2-3 items from the collection that you feel are important. What is the intrinsic value of these items? What is their extrinsic value? What do they contribute to our understanding of the legacy of African American students or faculty at Purdue?
- What story, event, or piece of Purdue's institutional history do you feel should be preserved that has not yet been? Collect items and documents and create a digital archive that tells that story or preserves that history. Use one of the collections below as a model.

Possible Readings for Students

- McCulskey, Audrey T. "The Current Status of Black Women's History: Telling Our Stories Ourselves." Perspectives on Women's Archives. Society of America Archivists, Zanish-Belcher and Anke, eds. Society of American Archivists, 2013: 65-70.
- Library Trends 64.4 (Spring 2016). Special Issue: Reconfiguring Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Archives – available via Project Muse.

Links of Interest

- [Conduct Research](#), Purdue University Archives and Special Collections.
- Paulus, Michael. "What is Primary? Teaching Archival Epistemology and the Sources Continuum." SPU Works. Paper 18. <http://digitalcommons.spu.edu/works>

Notable Collections

- [BCC Digital and Historical Archives Project \(digitized\)](#)
The Purdue Black Cultural Center collection is a selection of pamphlets, posters, essays, and other unique content housed by the BCC. Staff at the Black Cultural Center chose items for digitization and provided those scans to Purdue Libraries for online display.
- [MSP 310, Helen Bass Williams papers, 1915-2004](#)
The Helen Bass Williams papers were created and collected by Williams and document her personal life, education, and work as a civil rights activist in the South, educator, and counselor and professor at Purdue University. Types of materials include birth, marriage, and death certificates; correspondence; poetry; professional papers from her work in the South and at Purdue; articles and stories by Williams on Black history and

experiences in the Civil Rights Movement; photographs; memorabilia; awards; pamphlets and publications; and audio recordings.

- [**MSP 154 Purdue University African American Students, Alumni and Faculty collection, 1961-2014**](#)

Historical information gathered from numerous newspapers, Debris yearbooks, directories, statistics, and questionnaires sent to black alumni and donated by Alexandria Cornelius during her research. Also included are Black Cultural Center newsletters, along with programs and flyers from the Black Cultural Center and The African American Studies and Research Center. Prominent alumni featured include, Helen Bass Williams, Glenn Robinson, Lawrence Burton, Judge A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Eugene B. Jackson. Types of materials include: brochures, by-laws, various clippings, directories, flyers, historical documents, newsletters, photocopies of articles, programs, questionnaires and statistics.

- [**MSA 248, Pictorial Record of African-American Students at Purdue University**](#)

A pictorial collection of all African American students who attended Purdue University from 1889 - 1992 compiled by Alexandra Cornelius.

Collections containing documents on “Student Unrest”

- [**MSF 467, Barbara Cook papers, 1932-2007**](#)

Cook came to Purdue in 1956 as a counselor in the Office of the Dean of Women. Over the years, she served many roles at Purdue and has been nationally recognized for her efforts in promoting career opportunities for women. This collection also includes Cook's two "Student Unrest Binders" from the 1960s.

- [**UA 37, Purdue University Executive Vice President and Treasurer records, 1921-2000**](#)

Box 9 contains documents relating to various campus demonstrations of the late 1960's to early 1980's, debates about how best to address student unrest at Purdue and nationally, and creation of Purdue's Student Bill of Rights, and free speech and speaker policies.

- [**MSF 495, William Buffington Collection of Student Protest Papers, 1967-1984**](#)

This collection documents student protests against U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia that took place on and off Purdue's campus. This collection also documents student activism against tuition hikes, as well as the university and police action taken against protestors. Most material focuses on the years 1969-1970.

- [**MSP 99, Collection of Student Newspapers at Purdue University, 1942-2008**](#)

This collection of alternative student newspapers at Purdue University documents newspapers produced by students at Purdue University and the Greater Lafayette area. It primarily features underground newspapers that reflect the counterculture of the 1960s-1970s. Other newspapers, primarily from the 1990s-2000s, feature varying political perspectives, such as the conservative *Purdue Review*.

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