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10-1-1942

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### Recommended Citation

Porter, Dorothy B., "The Preservation of University Documents: With Special Reference to Negro Colleges and Universities" (1942). *Faculty Reprints*. 167.

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THE PRESERVATION OF UNIVERSITY DOCUMENTS: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NEGRO COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

DOROTHY B. PORTER

Reprinted from the *Journal of Negro Education*, October, 1942



## The Preservation of University Documents: With Special Reference to Negro Colleges and Universities

DOROTHY B. PORTER

What would the results reveal should a survey be made to determine the extent to which our educational institutions, particularly our Negro colleges and universities, have collected, arranged and preserved their records for purposes of historical research or for the sake of meeting continuous administrative demand for the documents of those past activities reflecting institutional growth. The probabilities are that comparatively little, if anything in the way of systematic collecting and orderly arrangement of university records would be shown by the survey data; for the setting up of the archival process to take care of university files and records is a recent phenomenon of university life. It requires a specialized procedure which must be given a funnel-shaped organization. Without a doubt the value of collecting and maintaining in one place all the records of the institution or even a major part of them is obvious.

It is of special importance that Negro college and university administrators give some thought to and take definite steps towards the task of preserving their institutional records.

University historians and educators could have drawn a far truer picture of the development of our educational institutions had our first generation of administrators possessed the foresight to collect and keep the various college memoranda with which they came in contact. It is true, of course, that here and there in the past can be found a dean, a head of a department or a librarian who did keep such documents, printed and in manuscript, that found their way into his department. Occasionally, small collections of this material have been conserved in the offices of some single department. More frequently they have been de-

stroyed or lost as succeeding officers fell heir to them.

At this moment we are especially concerned with the records of our Negro universities. Smaller institutions of higher learning might, however, take notice and in a similar manner prepare to care for their records.

It may be assumed that there are files in the administrative offices of all universities which must be kept under lock and key and which even many years hence will not be made available to research workers for the purposes of writing even the history of that institution. But what records of universities may be collected, kept and made available for purposes of historical research? They comprise official printed and manuscript documents, correspondence of prominent faculty members with national and international figures, letters, diaries and publications of students which give contemporary facts about their activities and the spirit of the campus, pictures which show the university as it was and is, newspaper clippings, announcements, schedules, programs, record books, books of student organizations and the letters and writings of prominent faculty members along with papers of historical interest, all of which would constitute an important feature of any historical collection.

It may readily be judged from the great diversity of the materials that the archival growth of any university could be endless. Nor is it difficult to realize that once a proper beginning is made to bring together such materials for presentation and use that response on the part of Alumni and interested humanists on the faculty will not be slow.

Indeed, the task of collecting, preserving, putting into systematic order and administering the manuscript and



printed materials relating to a university should be enthusiastically welcomed and supported by every department and all the officials of that university; for it is their duty to assure future generations the abundance of information that will be needed to follow the complex development of the institution and to interpret the relation of various influential movements and personages to its success.

To develop and expand a collection of university documents it is necessary to secure the cooperation and efforts of many persons. This can be done most easily by the appointment of a Committee on University Archives. This Committee should consist of persons who have already shown an interest in university history. The Committee's main function would be the locating and collecting of all manuscript and printed material, official and unofficial, relating to the history of the university. It would be the task of the Librarian, the Secretary, Historian or Archivist into whose hands these records were intrusted to preserve them, catalog and make them available under proper conditions. Since it is impossible to locate in one place all known university records, it is necessary to indicate the location of existing records. Since this is desirable one of the first tasks of the Committee would be to compile a useable catalogue of existing archives and their location. This, of course, should be done with the cooperation of the persons in charge of various university offices.

It seems certain that appeals from the Committee to the Alumni, faculty and administrative body for information relative to the location of present

descendants of some of the earlier officers in order to discover papers still in their possession are in order, and with organized publicity besides, there should be brought to the university a wealth of material relative to its history.

In view of the prospective data, the task of developing and maintaining a University Archival Department would be herculean and in most of our schools would prove a burden on any one individual. The job of merely locating and securing the various materials would consume more time than individuals already burdened could give. Should such a project be possible it would be ideal for each university or college to have a separate university archival department where originals and copies of university documents could be collected, arranged and preserved. Whether this department be established in the Office of the Secretary, the Department of History or the Library is unimportant.

In consideration of the dangers in this war time era to which university records might be exposed it is especially important now for university officials to consider the preservation of their documents. In order to avoid serious losses through possible enemy action or neglect of human hands, most of the records should be microfilmed and the films stored in a safe repository. There should be no gaps in the line of the university history of our Negro institutions. Preserve the written and pictorial history of our colleges and universities so that their past will remain intact as well as play an important part in the life-story of all those who have lived and studied within their walls.