Abstract:
Engaging students, learning outcomes, social media, and advocacy all are key goals for special collections. The Baylor History Blog Project, a cooperative effort of the Foundations and History of Higher Education course and the University Archives at The Texas Collection, addresses all of those goals. As graduate students in the Higher Education and Student Affairs degree program prepare history papers on various topics in Baylor history, they learn to use primary sources from special collections, then share their analysis online with illustrations from the archives. Year by year, the blog will grow and offer a university history resource that promotes archival resources while working to enhance the classroom experience and learning outcomes for students (and faculty). Promoting the blog using social media provides further advocacy for the value of special collections and raises awareness of student work with our resources. This paper will explore the successes and shortcomings of the project thus far and will consider ways such a project could be applied to undergraduate and high school level coursework.
Incorporating archival research into the classroom promotes information literacy, research skills, thesis and argument development, and many other desirable learning outcomes. Dr. Nathan Alleman already was pulling much of this into his Foundations and History of Higher Education class, for which he assigned a ten-page paper on any topic, pre-1975, in Baylor University’s history. For these students in Baylor’s Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) graduate program, the exercise provided many with their first experience in a special collections and with doing primary source, original research. Yet after the papers were handed in and graded, the experience stopped there—Alleman was the only person who ever read all of the papers. Even though he had been teaching at Baylor for only a few years, he knew that there were many alumni and other constituents of the university who loved its history and traditions and would enjoy seeing the results of his students’ scholarship. Alleman had been working with The Texas Collection on providing the Bibliographic Instruction session and reached out to us to see if we had ideas about ways he could extend this project to have a broader reach, saying, “this work should be available to a wider audience who would appreciate not just the basic historical facts, but the organizational context into which students are placing these events.”

The challenge

Of course, archivists are quite happy when people outside the discipline talk about context, and we were happy to provide additional support for this project. Alleman knew that he wanted this to be something the class could add to each year and suggested the idea of a wiki as a possible model. However, Baylor already has in place an agreement with EduBlogs (powered by WordPress), and we thought that a blog would be the best route to pursue. It would be easy to add to year-by-year. More importantly, the Central Libraries has an Academic Consultant who works with faculty on implementing EduBlogs for personal websites and for classroom use, and we could collaborate with that individual to assist with getting the site set up and training students to use the program. Since WordPress currently is a widely-used program,
some students may already have experience with it, and for those who do not, gaining some experience with WordPress in particular and with Content Management Systems in general could be beneficial for students later in their careers.

**Implementing the project**

To assist with the structure of the class as well as that of the blog, Alleman decided he wanted to limit students each semester to a particular set of years. The class already was divided into five themes (Finance, Curriculum, Students/Student Groups, Access, and Religion), with three to four students assigned to each theme. For the first blogging class, we considered starting at the beginning of Baylor’s history in 1845, but those early years are documented with fewer records and would be especially difficult for students assigned to the Students/Student Groups and Access themes to explore. We decided the first round of students (fall 2012) would examine Baylor from 1900-1920, and then the second round (fall 2013) would focus on 1921-1930, a period of much change and development at Baylor. Students researched and wrote their own papers, but within their theme groups, collaborated on a landing page that brought together some of the commonalities and differences that they discovered in researching their different angles on the theme. The writing style remained essentially academic papers on a blog, with no requirement to revise the papers to make them more blog-like. The professor did not want to lose the element of having his students practice writing and citing an academic paper, nor did he want to add blog-writing to the class’ educational outcomes. Most students did include some images to enhance their paper, as well as its visual appeal.

The professor offered some of his own archival research tips to help get students started--focus on depth rather than breadth of research, beginning with a concept and allowing the sources to guide you as you hone it down, and remaining flexible. My favorite tip, though, was “there’s no crying in baseball and no cramming in archival research—put in the time early.” We exhort students to follow all of these tips in our BIs and were glad to hear them echoed by a
professor. He also assigned some helpful reading, both from *The history of U.S. higher education: methods for understanding the past* (ed. Marybeth Gasman): “No food, no drinks, pencil only’: Checklists for conducting and interpreting archival research” (by Jordan R. Humphrey), and “‘Within these walls’: Reading and writing institutional histories” (by Darryl L. Peterkin). Aside from the general implication that archivists might need to be bribed and/or coddled to provide the best resources (of which we tried to disabuse our students—we provide our best resources to everyone!), these articles provided some helpful ideas for researchers new to archives.

We dedicated one classroom session to a sort of “Archives 101” BI, tour of the archives and its adjoining media room (for scanning technology), and brief consultations for each group with the professor and University Archivist (UA). Over the following weeks, students scheduled individual research consultations with the University Archivist to discuss topics and possible resources for exploration. (These consultations were not required, but the majority of students did meet with the UA at least once.) Some challenges encountered over the course of the students’ research included the limitations of our hours (Monday-Friday, 8-5—not nearly as liberal as the Central Libraries’ hours), that most of our materials are not available for checkout or online, and, of course, the students who did try to cram their archival research. We addressed all of these upfront, but in our second year, we emphasized these issues even more in the BI and consultations, and students did have fewer problems with working around the parameters of special collections research. We also learned to better help students who needed to submit to requests to use Baylor’s restricted Board of Trustee and financial records, which can be used only with permission from Baylor’s Chief of Staff. We learned to provide better guidance to students as they prepared their email requests detailing the project and why using these records is important to the research, to attain higher rates of granted permissions.

Students completed their papers and submitted them to the professor for review, who
then returned them and gave students a week to strengthen weak spots in their research and/or writing. The class then worked with the Academic Consultant to learn how to create their posts, and thus, the blog began! (See blogs.baylor.edu/hesabaylorhistoryproject.) Topics thus far have ranged the gamut from the rise and fall of Latin education in the curriculum to the availability of study abroad to how Baylor dealt with campus tragedy. Some common topics from the past two years include the roles of athletics in the life of the university, Baylor’s relationship with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and women’s education. One easily can see how some topics can be explored on the blog as they develop over the years, while other decades will present issues unique to the time period.

Our next step in the project was to promote the students’ work on The Texas Collection’s own social media outlets. We prepared our own weekly blog posts to promote each theme, with teasers and links to each student’s paper, and then cross-promoted these posts on our Facebook and Twitter accounts, as we do with all of our blog posts. We rolled out the first group of promotional pieces in the first five weeks of 2013. Looking at our Google Analytics results, we saw 317 hits on these posts since they went up a little more than a year ago—not a huge number, but substantially more people who are finding these pieces than the one professor who saw them before! (The class blog was not set up with Google Analytics, so we do not have numbers for it.) We plan to promote the second group of posts in March/April 2014. The Texas Collection’s Facebook audience has grown considerably in the past year, and we look forward to seeing how that affects clicks through to the class blog.

**Lessons learned and plans for the future**

Publishing papers online did seem to put a little of the good kind of fear into students—knowing their work was out there for all to see, not just in a professor’s filing cabinet. This was further supported by a few comments on the blog, which demonstrated to students that people were in fact finding and reading these papers! The papers still were student work, with the
inevitable typos and occasional errors, but they were generally quality products. Students were excited to share their work online and to have something they could link to in their curriculum vitae, and alumni of the program told us they wish they had done such a blog project.

We immediately saw the benefits of having this Baylor history information available online in another class The Texas Collection assists with, a Museum Studies archives processing class. One of those students found one of the blog posts that happened to be about the organization whose papers she was processing and used it as a resource as she was writing her finding aid. Since then, I have been able to point various researchers to the website as a helpful starting point for their research. And while the vast majority of Texas Collection resources are not online, we had recently completed in 2012 the digitization of the *Lariat* student newspaper (1900-2007) and *Round Up* yearbook (1902-present), and in 2013, we completed the digitization of Baylor press releases that date from the 1920s-1990s, all of which provided outstanding resources for students as they began their research—and were resources that students could use on their own time and in the comforts of their own homes, once they learned how to navigate and search the publications successfully. The students’ enthusiasm for and high usage of these resources also affirmed our decision to prioritize the digitization of these materials.

We did learn after the first round that students needed some guidance on how to cite special collections resources—the traditional style manuals are fairly scanty in their instruction of citing archival collections, photographs, press releases, and similar resources. In fall 2013, we created a handout briefly explaining how to cite some of these resources; we hope to prepare a LibGuide to develop further the proper citation of primary resources. In future expansions of the blog, we also hope to improve navigability of the blog through tagging, and to track better the use of the blog through Google Analytics. We also hope to incorporate the students more in the social media promotion of their blog, asking each to write a teaser tweet about their pages,
which would save us some work in preparing these posts and give them some experience in extreme abstracting!

**Project outcomes**

At semester’s end, students had learned about the process and practice of archival research and had shared the fruits of their labors with a wider audience. By having a public blog, a broader audience can see how archival resources can be used. Additionally, these students are studying to become future directors of student activities, residential life, multicultural affairs, and other student programs--some might even become deans of student life. These future university leaders learned about the existence of university archives and actively experienced how they can be a part of their toolkits for their careers, wherever their careers might take them. In fact, this past February, I coordinated with one of the fall 2013 students who is apprenticing in Baylor’s multicultural affairs office to have a booth highlighting some of our African-American collections at a Black History Month showcase event. By working with a young, tenure-track professor, we are collaborating on a project that shows his innovative thinking and collaboration with other areas of the university, and we are further demonstrating our eagerness to partner with professors on class projects.

**Project extensions**

We also see potential for this project to be expanded to undergraduate and high school level coursework. We have showed his blog to a few other Baylor professors who actively use our materials for undergraduate classes in the hopes that someone else might want to start a similar project, and we have seen some enthusiasm about the idea, though no takers thus far. The class size does need to be relatively small, at least at the outset of the project—teaching 20+ students to use even a simple program like WordPress does take time and energy away from the main subject matter of the class. At Baylor, there already are professors doing similar
projects using EduBlogs in undergraduate classes, such as the TED 4341: Secondary Social Studies Curriculum course. In that upper-division class, pre-service teachers consider an event, issue, or person/entity that has often been excluded from traditional social studies curriculum, and develop a website providing background on the issue, as well as primary source documents and document-based questions and activities. These blogs are stand-alone, but also are linked to a central site, blogs.baylor.edu/studentashistorian. Generally the primary source documents linked to on this site are those available from the Library of Congress or other large archival repositories; we see no reason why they might not work with The Texas Collection more to provide classroom context for some of our primary source materials!

For junior high and high school classes, we think a simple blog project could be an attainable goal. High school students in Texas are expected to be able to use primary resources, per the TEKS website. Common Core State Standards (not adapted by Texas, but still relevant to know) calls for students in grades 6-8 to be able to “cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources”, and to “determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1 and 2). A blog exercise, scaled differently, could be an excellent way to practice these skills. Students could be assigned to write a short blog post on a person or place in Texas history, after doing research at The Texas Collection, or perhaps they could be assigned a few selected primary sources and asked to write an analysis of them. Students would hand their posts in on paper first, to make sure the content is up to par for the age and skill level of the students—we want to make sure the school is well-represented online! The teacher could work with their library technology team or similar group ahead of time to have the blog site set up and ready to be populated, and then once the blog posts are ready, dedicate class computer time to working on inputting the content into the sites. In addition to support their history and literacy education efforts, the project would
enhance students’ technology skills as they learn to use a Content Management System.

**Archivists and librarians in the classroom**

While there has been some debate about the degree to which archivists should insert themselves into the classroom, “they generally accept that understanding such pedagogies is useful for building bridges between teachers and themselves. Many academic archivists also seize opportunities to teach undergraduates about the nature of research in their repositories, lifting the veil from their professional practices” (Cox, Alcalá, and Bowler 371). While Cox et al. (p. 377) see challenges in the differences in classroom educators’ goals and those of archivists—“educators focus on the use of primary sources as pedagogical issues, such as critical thinking skills, rather than on learning about the substance of archives or historical research methods”—we at The Texas Collection are happy to assist with such educational goals. Information literacy and the development of critical analysis skills are important learning outcomes. Understanding the nature of archival organization, how to use a finding aid, developing archival research strategies—all of those elements that interest the archivists will come as students immerse themselves in their research. As Katherine Corbett noted:

> The high school student who learned to test scientific generalizations by experimentation in the laboratory did not have a similar opportunity in the history classroom. Primary historical sources, the basis of the generalizations delivered up in their textbooks, almost never made it from the archives to the classroom. The process of historical discovery remained a mystery; the results of that process became data, memorized for tests and then quickly forgotten…. When history becomes a participation sport, students develop skills they will continue to use long after they have forgotten textbook facts. (300)

Bringing archives to the classroom experience offers a lab-like opportunity for students to create knowledge and make their own discoveries. Watching students find that perfect resource or even their “smoking gun” is nearly as exhilarating to watch as it is for the students to
experience.

Such projects also help reinforce in students’ minds the ability (and eagerness!) of librarians to assist students. In my consultations with students, many of them mentioned that they have rarely used librarians’ assistance for past projects, preferring to find their own resources. Using special collections materials all but requires them to reach out for assistance, especially if they have not done such research in the past. Cheryl Bielema et al.’s 2007 article on library collaboration on distance learning efforts provides relevant insights:

As reference librarians, most contact with students is fleeting, lasting generally less than 10 minutes in a semester, and very rarely more than 1 hour. As collaborators, librarians have had an ongoing, established role in the progress of the course—which makes the flow of information, the assessment of needs, and the facilitation of requesting assistance (either from student to librarian, or from librarian to instructor, or instructor to librarian) less intimidating, simpler, direct, and specific. (340)

Bielema et al. also noted that students in the distance learning course were more aware of the librarians in this setting and more willing to ask questions (341), which we also have found to be the case with students embarking on primary source research projects. Our experience with this project is similar to that set out in Erin Dorris Cassidy and Kenneth E. Hendrickson’s 2013 piece on micro-level collaboration with faculty. As they worked to prepare general information literacy exercises and increase their communications with students, their goals shifted “toward a more micro presence, in which a librarian works closely with an individual faculty member and shapes her contributions much more specifically to the goals and needs of a specific class” (460). Each class has its own needs and desired outcomes—the challenge (and fun) is working with the professor/teacher to ensure that a common set of goals have been established and are being met.

Conclusions
By working with educators at various levels and creating online resources, special collections archivists and librarians can promote their repositories and services both to students as well as a broader audience. Such collaborations with educators reinforce in them the value of their libraries and archives as they work to help students reach their educational goals. By using social media to promote these efforts, an audience of potential patrons beyond academia may become aware of student work on subjects and resources that may be of interest to them and thus inspire their own research.
Works Cited


