

# Co-Founding a Queer Archives: a collaboration between an archivist and a professor<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This article details the creation and development of the Oregon State University Queer Archives (OSQA) as the product of collaboration between an archivist and professor. The authors provide an overview of the history of OSQA, including theoretical foundations of queer archival methods; discuss community-based initiatives that have helped to build the archive; and share lessons learned through their collaboration. They conclude by offering recommendations for others who are considering collaborations between archivists and professors on Queer Archives initiatives as well as other community-based archives in higher education settings.

## **Introduction**

Archivists seek to address and fill the gaps in their collections in order to provide a more diverse and inclusive historical record for researchers. In a university setting, it is common for the majority of researchers to be students and faculty, and it is sometimes those researchers who ask why certain stories are excluded from the archives. While archivists may interact with faculty as researchers and sometimes as collection donors or co-teachers, there can also be great potential in working with them on collection development initiatives. As part of their research, faculty often have community contacts, a direct connection to students and their research interests, as well as discipline-specific theoretical frameworks that can enhance collection initiatives. Thus, the perspective and expertise of a faculty member in combination with the practical knowledge of an archivist can make for a powerful partnership to co-found and direct an archival initiative.

This article details the creation and development of the Oregon State University Queer Archives (OSQA) as the product of a collaboration between an archivist and professor. Written together, we provide an overview of the history of OSQA, review some scholarly and theoretical foundations of queer archiving, discuss community-based initiatives that have helped to build the archive, and share some of the lessons learned through our collaboration. Our collaboration can serve as a model for a sustainable approach to collaboratively developing and maintaining a Queer Archives initiative within a higher education setting. Furthermore, we suggest that this model can also be adapted in developing other, similar community-based archival initiatives at universities.

Within the article, we move back and forth between references to ourselves in the third person when we are speaking from our individual perspectives as an archivist and a professor, and a collective “we” when we are speaking directly of the steps we have taken together and with the community to build the archive. Our hope is that by shifting back and forth between these perspectives, we offer both an overview of what our process has been in building OSQA, and at the same time give readers a clear idea of the different perspectives and overlapping commitments that each of us brings to this collection initiative.

## ***Oregon State University Queer Archives: An Overview***

The Oregon State University Queer Archives (OSQA) is a community-led archive directed by its two co-founders, Natalia Fernández and Bradley Boovy, an archivist and a professor respectively. Founded in 2014, OSQA is dedicated to collecting, preserving, and sharing the stories of LGBTQQIA-identified<sup>2</sup> people at Oregon State University and affiliated communities. These communities include not only the Corvallis campus, but also the campuses in Newport, OR and Bend, OR, as well as the communities that Oregon State engages with through its extension and outreach programs in each of Oregon's thirty-six counties.

The idea for the Oregon State Queer Archives first emerged in 2013 from a conversation between Bradley Boovy, an Assistant Professor in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Natalia Fernández, the curator and archivist of OSU's Oregon Multicultural Archives. This initial conversation centered on the importance of recording the voices and stories of Oregon State's LGBTQQIA communities at a time when student activism at OSU and around the United States underscored the need to acknowledge ongoing institutional exclusion and the need for increased support for students from marginalized groups including queer and trans students.

As awareness of the ways in which institutional policies work to exclude queer and trans histories, university archivists have simultaneously enhanced or begun collection initiatives focusing on the lives of LGBTQQIA community members. In addition to the LGBT Storytelling project at the University of Arizona, which provided an important model for OSQA, Gay Bears at UC Berkeley, the Oberlin College LGBT Community History Project, the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria among others, are important models for LGBT archives in university settings. These archives seek to reclaim hidden histories of LGBTQQIA people at their respective institutions. Additionally, such archives have the ability to shift the culture at institutions of higher education towards greater visibility and acceptance by acknowledging and validating the experience of marginalized students and other members of communities connected with universities including faculty, staff, alumni, and administrators.

University-based archives extend the legacy of community-based archives that grew out of activist movements over the last four decades. Initiatives such as the Lesbian Herstory Archive (Brooklyn), ONE National Institute (Los Angeles), GLBT Historical Society (San Francisco), the Irish Queer Archive (Dublin), IHLIA (Amsterdam), Spinnboden (Berlin), Archives lesbiennes (Paris), and several others represent initiatives in North America and Western Europe to collect and preserve the stories of LGBTQQIA people and communities.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the setting, queer archives have clearly caught on as a thematic collection focus as well as, in many cases, a new way of theorizing archival practice.

### ***Scholarly Foundations of OSQA***

Increased scholarly interest in queer archives indicates that it is an important area for scholars and practitioners in all areas of the academy to take into consideration as we continue to examine and critique the ways in which institutions of higher learning give priority to knowledge from certain communities (white, middle-class, English-speaking) over others (queer and trans people, women, communities of color). Scholars working in fields from archival studies to English literature and cultural studies have brought their unique disciplinary perspectives to bear on the archive as both a physical site for collecting and preserving records, as well as a way of understanding and critiquing culturally embedded practices that structure our knowledge of the past and help us imagine different futures.<sup>4</sup> As often happens in academic spaces, scholars and practitioners fail to leave the confines of their disciplines to share experience and knowledge with each other. This is particularly evident in work on the "queer archive," as Michelle Caswell points out in her recent article "The Archive' is Not an Archives." Here Caswell discusses a troubling lack of interdisciplinarity in humanities scholarship on the archive, and situates archival studies within a larger scholarly tradition that encompasses research, scholarship, as well as archival practice.<sup>5</sup> Caswell points out important distinctions between the ways in which humanities scholars and archival studies scholars or practicing archivists understand and engage in archival work.

More recently, scholars such as Jamie Lee have brought their experience with archival practice to bear in theorizing queer archives as spaces that nurture not only scholarly inquiry but also affective and emotional relationships with archival records. Kelly Eichorn writes about the work of an archives as “reparative.”<sup>6</sup> That is, collecting the stories of people who have been marginalized, specifically in the context of an institution such as a university archives “is not simply to preserve and legitimize materials that may otherwise slip into historical oblivion but to authorize them as *cultural* rather than exclusively *subcultural* products.”<sup>7</sup> Although it can be argued that including LGBTQQIA lives in an institutional archive such as ours limits access to those stories to scholars, students, and others who are able to easily cross the threshold of academic libraries, in another respect, the archivists are able to leverage their expertise to preserve stories that would otherwise not be kept. Furthermore, the institutional archival framework not only “authorizes” the records of queer lives, as Eichorn points out, but those records simultaneously change the face and nature of the archives and the institution, blurring the boundaries between life stories and the act of archiving.

We regard our collaboration as an opportunity to redress some of the disciplinary divides between university archivists and scholars, bringing together the contributions from these often-divergent perspectives in the academy through our collaboration on OSQA. Speaking as a faculty member whose research bridges cultural history and queer theory, much of Boovy’s engagement with archives has been through theorizing “the archive” as a theoretical space. In working together with Fernández, Boovy has had the opportunity to gain insight into how archives come into being and are built and maintained in ways that have challenged and enriched his understanding of the theoretical archive. In particular, our collaboration has provided Boovy with a deeper understanding of the amount of community engagement involved in starting a collection initiative with LGBTQQIA people. This community aspect is crucial to the mission and vision of OSQA, which seeks not only to collect the stories of LGBTQQIA people, but also to challenge the practices through which archives have come into being — the work of the archivist — and the ways in which archival records are used — the work of the professor.

### ***Beginning, Developing, and Sustaining OSQA***

#### **Beginning a Queer ARchives Collection Initiative, 2014-2015**

In the summer of 2014, we began the research stage of developing a proposal to the OSU Libraries to begin a queer archives. First, we ensured that our proposed initiative was in line with the mission and values of the university, had buy-in and support from various stakeholders, and developed the proposal in collaboration with input from a variety of perspectives. We knew that aligning the archives with the university’s mission to be committed to outreach and engagement, to promote social and cultural progress, and to foster diversity and social responsibility would increase our chances of gaining administrative support. Since the values of our institution also shaped the library’s mission and strategic plan, we presented our idea to the library director as well as the director of the Special Collections and Archives Research Center, where OSQA would be intellectually and physically housed. We specifically requested a long-term commitment in terms of staff time and funds for an OSQA student worker. We also connected with Boovy’s program — Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies within the School of Language, Culture, and Society (SLCS) — to ensure its support of his commitment to the initiative.

To kick start our idea and invite the local community to join us, in the fall term of 2014, the library and SLCS co-sponsored a lecture and workshop at OSU by Dr. Jamie Lee of the University of Arizona to talk about her experiences in developing the Arizona Queer Archives established through the university’s Institute for LGBT Studies. We used Lee’s visit not only as an opportunity for us to learn from her, but very importantly, as a way to engage our stakeholders. We invited the local community, faculty/staff, program directors, students, and Corvallis area residents, to both events to learn about the importance of LGBTQQIA archival initiatives, share our idea for a queer archives for OSU, and solicit feedback from community members regarding their vision of a queer archives. We had a great deal of positive feedback from the events’ participants with the recommendation for more opportunities to gather and the desire to be a part of the queer archives development process.

At this time, we also took on an undergraduate intern who had expressed interest in incorporating queer archives into her honors thesis work. She assisted us in the process of planning our community meetings and gave us a direct connection to

the Pride Center and its students. Eventually she asked both of us to be on her thesis committee. The three of us met regularly to mentor her as part of her thesis work and continue building the archives. After discussing possible thesis topics with the student, she decided to conduct an oral history project and create a documentary about the history of the OSU Pride Center. The thesis and documentary represented an important watershed in the early development of the queer archives. It became clear to us that, in addition to collecting and preserving the stories of community members, OSQA would also serve as a site for the creation of new stories connected to LGBTQQIA histories at OSU.

To continue and facilitate the conversation with community members, we hosted a two-hour community meeting the next term, in January 2015, at the university's Pride Center. We invited those who had attended the events from the previous term and welcomed newly interested participants. During this meeting we began by having attendees share their experiences in archives and ideas about archives, discussed the community's vision for the archives, what the archives could be and do, and brainstormed ideas for who else we could invite to the conversation. Our intern, who had many connections in the community, helpfully put us in touch with many people in her network. We also reached out over email and through word-of-mouth promotion to connect with other community members including faculty, staff, and students.

The mission of the OSU Queer Archives (OSQA) is to preserve and share the stories, histories, and experiences of LGBTQQIA people within the OSU and Corvallis communities. This mission is rooted in three central commitments:

- fostering intersectional community activism across and providing opportunities for students' engagement and activism
- resisting erasure of queer and trans narratives
- positioning the collection as a space to imagine alternative futures for LGBTQQIA communities and people

After conversations with community stakeholders, we decided to call the archives the OSU Queer Archives and to specifically use the word "queer" because of the term's inclusivity, which is something the community wanted to ensure. It is important to acknowledge that not all members of our community identify with or feel comfortable using the word "queer," but given our commitment to questioning barriers to archival engagement and access as well as collecting the stories of LGBTQQIA community members, most stakeholders agreed that "queer" was the most fitting choice. To brand the archive, a graphic design student developed some options using the archives' acronym "OSQA" and the community meeting participants voted on the final selection.

In the spring term we also collaborated with the university's oldest LGBTQQIA student group, the Rainbow Continuum, to plan two events during the May 2015 Pride Week to begin promoting OSQA. We felt that organizing events would enhance the public profile and visibility of the archives on campus. More importantly, we agreed that public events that increase the visibility of underrepresented communities have the power to change the culture of an institution. It was in this spirit that we held an event titled "The Unfurling: Everyone Has a Story" that took place alongside the annual Pride Week Opening BBQ at the university's memorial union quad. Guests brought items that represented significant memories and moments in their lives. It was an informal storytelling event and a time for the LGBTQQIA community to come together and share meaningful experiences with each other and with other members of the OSU campus community. At the end of Pride Week our OSQA intern screened her documentary film and talked about her experiences conducting the oral history interviews. She promoted OSQA and noted that her work would be donated to the archives and would soon after be made publicly accessible.

#### Developing a Queer Archives Collection Initiative, 2015-2016

After the end of the first academic year of beginning OSQA, we met to begin thinking more strategically about the archive and developed ideas to implement throughout the 2015-2016 year. We discussed ideas for continued outreach to the community to promote OSQA and keep the community engaged as well as ways to strengthen existing partnerships and develop new ones. We also realized that our growth over the first year had raised certain logistical challenges related to the administration of OSQA, and decided it was necessary to clarify our division of tasks and duties.

Throughout our collaboration, we have striven to be intentional and mindful of our common interests as well as the differences in our respective duties in relation to the archives. For example, we facilitated conversations with community partners including the Pride Center, WGSS, and professors with whom we hope to collaborate. These conversations also often included topics such as the importance of meeting regularly, division of tasks roles. For example, in our first year we held community meetings but the two of us also met on an ad hoc basis. In year two, we began scheduling weekly meetings to ensure a steady workflow and growth of the archives.

## Administration

In order for us to more efficiently keep track of our work and for community members to contact OSQA rather than us as individuals, we created a Google drive account with a shared login as well as an OSQA Facebook page with a shared individual "account" to be able to share the page's administration. We used the archives' already existing Oregon Multicultural Archives website and blog to add a web page specific to OSQA, to write blog posts and tag them as OSQA. We designed promotional flyers with the OSQA contact and web presence information. It was important to us to ensure that OSQA did not come only from us as individuals, but that the community saw it as theirs and interacted with the archive itself; we hoped this strategy would allow the archive to be something that would last beyond us as the co-founders. Additionally, a shared e-mail account and social media presence made the administrative components easier as we could both see and respond to messages. We also thought about and discussed our time commitments to the archives and realized we needed assistance. As we also wanted to create opportunities for students to be able to work with OSQA, we decided to supervise an intern for the fall term of 2015 and hired an archives student worker for the academic year. The intern assisted us with the outreach components of the archives; he had strong pre-existing relationships with the university's student groups, including LGBTQQIA student groups. In addition to these tasks related to community building, the archives student worker worked more behind the scenes scanning Pride Center scrapbooks and transcribing oral history interviews. The student worker scanned OSQA materials to make them accessible online and transcribed oral history interviews.

## Outreach

To continue our community engagement, we organized three community meetings and hosted or partnered on several campus events. The community meetings were held each quarter, fall term through the spring term. As they were the year before, these meetings were our opportunity to update community members on the work of OSQA and to hear their input on the development and vision for the archives. Each year in October, the OSU campus celebrates Queer History Month. Early in the month we hosted an event in the archives reading room to bring community members into the archives, showcase archival materials, and screen the OSU LGBTQQIA community documentary completed the year before. In the interest of maintaining strong relationships with administrators as well as ensuring OSQA's visibility and institutional support, we invited the director of the Special Collections and Archives Research Center to open the event and inaugurate the archives, and also sent invitations to faculty across campus including the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts.

Shortly following our inaugural event we partnered with Queer History Month's organizers to film their event "The History of Queervallis" in which two guest speakers affiliated with the university shared their knowledge of queer history on campus and in the Corvallis area. The next month, our OSQA intern collaborated with the OSU Native American Longhouse Eena Haws to co-host an OSQA event during Native American Heritage Month to discuss gender and sexuality in Indigenous communities. With each event, OSQA's community continued to grow.

## Developing and Strengthening Partnerships

Throughout OSQA's second year we focused on further developing and strengthening the partnerships we began the year before and made new connections as well. We made sure to maintain our relationships with the university's Pride Center, one of the university's cultural resources centers; the Rainbow Continuum, an informal group that gathers weekly and organizes Pride Week in May; and SOL, a student-initiated collaborative effort to support and improve campus climate for

LGBTQQIA persons of color.

We also reached out to other state archives in Oregon with a focus on LGBTQQIA collection initiatives, including the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, a community-based archive established in 1994 in Portland, Oregon, and the University of Oregon's (UO) Special Collections and University Archives lesbian land collections. The UO's collections comprise over 13 individual collections, including the personal papers of women and records of specific communities pertaining to the lesbian separatist movement in America. We connected and partnered with them to get to know their collections to avoid collection development overlap and to refine our scope and to learn from their experiences as both university and community-based archives. In April 2016 we presented as a panel in a discussion format at the Northwest Archivists conference, the region's archival association.

Our most recent partnership evolved out of one of our community meetings with a history professor who mentioned she was teaching a course about the history of gay and lesbian movements in the United States. She expressed interest in working with OSQA and together we developed a term project for the students to work in pairs to conduct oral history interviews with her Corvallis community connections. We co-taught the class a number of times to introduce them to the archives, provide oral history interview training and follow ups, and conducted a live interview for the class to observe. In total we added ten oral history interviews to OSQA, and we plan to further connect with a number of the interviewees regarding materials they could donate to OSQA. Partnership initiatives between the archives and faculty members, such as the one detailed above, provide an important pedagogical tool for teaching students the importance of preserving history, and allow them to engage creatively in questioning different modes of knowledge production.

#### Sustaining a Queer Archives Collection Initiative, 2016 and beyond

In looking toward the future, we have a number of plans, not only for the next academic year but also into the next five to ten years. At this point we have not developed any form of assessment for the work we are doing. We have our community meetings, which provide us with informal assessment from our stakeholders; however, we may create more qualitative and/or quantitative assessment tools to gain feedback to better our work. We also plan to design a more proactive approach to collection development. As of the end of the 2015-2016 academic year, our OSQA collections consist of materials documenting OSU's LGBTQQIA histories and the additional oral history interviews conducted by students. One of our strategies will be to use those interviewees as community contacts and potential donors themselves. We also plan to continue our relationships with professors within the history and queer studies programs to connect with their networks and to work with their students on more archival projects. As a collection focus, we intend to be more mindful in addressing the gaps in OSQA — voices we know exist, but do not yet have a presence in the historical record, for example the stories and perspectives of queer and trans people of color. In order to more effectively implement our ideas, we plan to bring all of our ideas to our next community meeting to then develop a strategic plan for the OSQA.

#### ***Lessons Learned and Recommendations, from Both Perspectives***

Over these past two years in our relationship as co-founders of OSQA, we have found that working from our two perspectives (archivist and professor) has enabled us to combine our areas of expertise, inspire one another to remain committed to the work we are doing, and more fully develop the archive. We still have a number of questions related to the future of OSQA and its continued growth. In particular, we will continue to work on our relationship with various community members, in particular students whose stories are a crucial part of the archive as the OSQA community has envisioned it. The power relationships at universities being what they are can make sharing stories about queer and trans lives a challenge, in particular for students from communities that are otherwise marginalized, including students of color, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. In order to work towards our mission of recording the voices of the most marginalized members of our university community, we are currently reflecting on how to create a community-based archive where students feel that sharing their stories will not put them in danger or make them the target of institutional inequity or violence from their fellow students. What safeguards can we build into our collecting initiative that allows contributors to share stories and materials that may not always depict the institution in the most positive light? With the proper safeguards in place, on the other hand, a queer archives can also provide LGBTQQIA community members with the

opportunity to tell their stories and share them with the future, while also protecting the individuals to whom those stories belong from institutional exclusion or retaliation. In this respect, the gatekeeping function of the archives works in both ways. Future conversations about OSQA will include parameters around access to content, offering community members the opportunity to choose in what ways and when they prefer to have their materials and/or stories shared. As OSQA continues to grow and evolve, we plan to develop solutions to our challenges with the community's input.

### ***Recommendations for Similar Initiatives***

Below is a set of recommendations from our individual and shared perspectives. These are action-based items that we continue to practice as we further develop and sustain OSQA.

From an archivist:

- Research and connect with other LGBTQQIA archival initiatives to avoid competing collection scopes.
- Highlight collections already within the archives that feature queer stories and identify the gaps that require collection development work.
- Educate the archives' stakeholders on the archival process to ensure transparency and to give them realistic expectations regarding timelines and time commitments.

From a professor:

- Identify courses across campus and disciplines that touch on relevant topics. Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; Queer Studies; Ethnic Studies; and History were obvious choices at our institution, but other programs such as Education, Sociology, and Human Development might also be interested in collaborations.
- Have conversations with professor-collaborators early on. Many professors are not familiar with archival practices, and may not recognize the importance that archivists place on video and sound quality in interview recordings or questions of long-term preservation and migration to new formats as technology changes.
- Work with faculty in advance of the course, and ask to design assignments and the course schedule together.

From both:

- Develop a trusting relationship by sharing collaborative experiences prior to beginning a joint archives initiative.
- Share and discuss literature with one another regarding your areas of expertise.
- Be clear about the roles within the shared management of the archives; both with each other and with the community.
- Connect and work with archives' stakeholders using individual and/or shared personal, professional, and community networks to build the archives.
- Work with administrators in both collaborators' networks to ensure and maintain institutional support, including but not limited to financial support.
- Communicate realistic time commitments.
- Set up regular meetings to discuss and plan.
- Find a balance between outreach and archival work.

### ***Conclusion***

The OSU Queer Archives is one small part of the broader history of Oregon and of queer history in the United States. Our vision is for OSQA to highlight the stories within the university and its local communities and to also be a reflection of statewide and national issues and themes. In this way, we hope to showcase the uniqueness as well as the interconnections of queer stories and lives. As we continue our journey as collaborators, we are excited by the opportunities to further work on collection development strategies, co-teach classes and design assignments, and strengthen both the community and institutional commitment to OSQA to ensure that it lasts beyond our professional connections to the university.

## **Notes**

1. The authors would like to thank Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives Research Center, the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program, and the OSU LGBTQQIA community for their support in building OSQA. We would also like to thank Tiah Edmunson-Morton and Dr. Natchee Barnd for their help in revising this article.
2. We have chosen to use LGBTQQIA throughout for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and allies” to represent OSQA’s interest in collecting and preserving stories from community members with a range of diverse experiences. We recognize some of the limitations of this choice, in particular in the ways in which it might suggest commonalities in experience across these different identities, and the ways in which sharing stories with an archives poses a different set of challenges for people based on their social location. We discuss some of these considerations below in the section on lessons learned.
3. Tirza True Latimer, “Conversations on Queer Affect and Queer Archives,” *Art Journal*, Summer (2013): 35-37.
4. See, for example, Ann Cvetkovich important work *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. For more recent perspectives see also the collection of articles edited by Daniel Marshall, Kevin P. Murphy, and Zeb Tortorici, *Queering Archives: Historical Unravelings*, *Radical History Review*, 120 (2014).
5. Michelle Caswell, “‘The Archive’ is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstruction*, Vol. 16, No. 1. (2016): 3.
6. Kelly Eichorn, 26.
7. *Ibid.* 26.

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