

## DOCUMENTS

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### MISREPRESENTATION & MISUNDERSTANDING

On the Misrepresentation & Misunderstanding of Library Archives and Special Collections in the case of the *National Review's* "Investigation" of Documents Housed in the Richard J. Daley Library at the University of Illinois at Chicago – August 2008.

Recent news reports on a so-called "coverup" of archival material of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge related to Democratic Presidential candidate, Senator Barack Obama, have characterized the limits to access to these materials as a "coverup" and/or a "conspiracy."<sup>1</sup> We feel the need to point out that the sorts of situations described by *National Review Online* contributing editor Stanley Kurtz happen all the time with library special collections, and maddeningly frequently to those like himself who obviously know very little about how academic archives work.

First and foremost, libraries are large and complex organizations, and the communications made to Stanley Kurtz, *National Review* contributing editor, by staff of the University of Illinois – Chicago (UI-Chicago) about the availability of the requested collection, especially comments by a part-time graduate student, are not *prima facie* evidence of anything. Rather, they provide evidence that the state of one collection in a large library with millions of individual items is not intimately known in its entirety at the initial points of contact.

What is clear is that the *National Review's* contributing editor's comments and other stories in the press show that these writers are noticeably unfamiliar with how special collections in academic libraries actually work.<sup>2</sup> Instead of doing their homework, they assume there must be a "conspiracy" in the shadows. Had he actually done due diligence, Mr. Kurtz at least should have known that there are many standard policies on library special collections extant that he might have read that spell out clearly the points he mischaracterizes. Most are posted openly on the web. They explain in clear detail precisely why Special Collections departments, such as the one at the UI-Chicago, take the actions they do in the course of "events" such as those describe in his *NationalReviewOnline* (NRO) post.

Here's an easily accessible example and we use Louisiana State University (LSU) simply because it covers well the points we wish to make. Any idle search of other academic archive procedures will find many similar policies. From LSU: The "Policy on Access to Unprocessed Collections" at Louisiana State University Library states that "Patrons may not access

unprocessed manuscript collections, photographic collections, or record groups without the express written approval of Curator of Manuscripts.”<sup>3</sup>

As any researcher knows, even the best endowed academic libraries do not have complete inventories of what is in their archival collections, resources moreover whose individual items often number in the many millions. We are sure UI-Chicago would welcome a significant gift from Mr. Kurtz’ to catalog these items that have so vexed him and which doubtless have little more than finding aids. Indeed most archives have strict rules to prevent the filching of items by the dishonest researcher determined to remove materials for profit or to withhold valuable information from other researchers. These incidents happen with dismaying frequency. See, for example, the case of Gilbert Bland caught stealing antique maps from a library at Johns Hopkins University.<sup>4</sup> That is why security is at such a premium in library special collections, even for processed collections.

The requirement to submit a photo ID and/or to sign in is universally the standard, as is the request that personal property be stored. Anyone with an ounce of familiarity will understand why pencils must be used (so as not to permanently mark up irreplaceable materials – even by accident) and so on. Also the amount of materials that can be requested is always limited. Many archives require advance requests in writing as well. On top of this, in an age of diminishing privacy and expanding “property” rights over intellectual property, researchers must be aware of both sensitive personal information and residual ownership of copyright and thus seek permissions for re-use or quoting at length.

Again, Louisiana State University Library notes that, “Before we can provide access to an unprocessed collection, staff must review it for sensitive and private information such as social security numbers and medical or academic records, as well as for materials covered by donor-imposed or legal restrictions,”<sup>5</sup> and library special collections often must limit access, and say so directly: “unpublished material dating from 1971 and later may only be consulted with the permission of the office which created it” (from Georgetown University Library<sup>6</sup>); see also the policy of Cornell University Library Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections for other examples.<sup>7</sup>

The Special Collections department at the UI-Chicago (the collection under scrutiny by Kurtz) also states these basic, broad policies clearly in their online documentation.<sup>8</sup> Why Mr. Kurtz would impute some sort of conspiracy only shows how ignorant the writer is of standard library protocols nationwide.

The vast amount of unique materials in library special collections, plus the labor-intensive nature of the work of processing them to make them available, coupled with chronic staffing shortages are widely cited in the library literature. This too Mr. Kurtz might have taken the time to review had he wished to be better informed before crying foul.

“For those who simply can’t visit, we will do what we can to help in spite of severe staff limitations and legal restrictions on [providing] copies” (Georgetown University Library). There is even a Mellon-funded grant program designed to stimulate new and faster approaches to processing what is widely recognized as a huge national backlog of research materials to make them available to researchers (called, ironically enough in this case, “Cataloging Hidden Collections.”)<sup>9</sup>

In summary: As librarians and researchers ourselves, we suggest Mr. Kurtz visit research archives more often so as to understand better the difficult problems they face in making their collections accessible, such as those at UI-Chicago. We also ask that, at a minimum, the Society of American Archivists and the American Library Association speak out in support of the archive, and the fine staff who work at the University of Illinois-Chicago Library. Mr. Kurtz’s seemingly paranoid innuendos say nothing about librarianship, still less about the exceptional archive at UI-Chicago, and everything about one archive visitor’s unfamiliarity with even the most basic protocols of primary research. Carrying on with mischaracterizations on a news site such as NRO about something the writer is so obviously, and woefully, ignorant seems ill-advised at best and to the experienced research community which we serve, just plain misinformed.

John Buschman, Georgetown University Libraries  
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#### *Footnotes*

- 1 Kurtz, Stanley. “Chicago Annenberg Challenge Shutdown?: a cover-up in the making?” *NationalReviewOnline*, August 18, 2008 <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=MTgwZTVmN2QyNzk2MmUxMzA5OTg0ODZlM2Y2OGl0NDM=>
- 2 see LIBRARIAN <http://librarian.lishost.org/?p=1218>
- 3 “Policy on Access to Unprocessed Collections” at Louisiana State University Library <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/unprocessed.html>
- 4 “An audacious map thief revealed.” <http://www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/0201web/arts.html#map>
- 5 “Policy on Access to Unprocessed Collections” at Louisiana State University Library <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/unprocessed.html>
- 6 Georgetown University Libraries. Special Collections, <http://www.library.georgetown.edu/dept/speccoll/rules.htm>
- 7 Cornell University Library Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/services/registration.html>
- 8 University of Illinois at Chicago. Special Collections and University Archives. <http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/>
- 9 Council on Library and Information Resources. “Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives: Building a New Research Environment (2008).” <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/index.html>