UC SANTA BARBARA

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The Pandemic Memory

In these extraordinary times, the UC Santa Barbara Library knows it's crucial to document the experiences of campus students, faculty and staff. To that end, Special Research Collections (SRC) archivists have launched the COVID-19 Community Archives Project.

Calli Force, an archivist who leads the ambitious effort, said her group was already scouring the web to preserve digital coronavirus content produced by UCSB and some local government bodies, but hadn't collected content specifically about the campus community.

"After consulting with other colleagues in the field, it became apparent the most efficient way to gather content was to welcome submissions from our patrons," said Force, who works in the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA), a division of the SRC. "This process also allows us to eliminate bias in appraisal and selection of materials. UCSB community members can come to us with their stories and unique experiences while also allowing us to focus our efforts on the processing of the digital content as quickly as possible."

The special project, which is separate from the library's normal web archiving and departmental record keeping, is indeed casting a wide net for submissions. Force said all manner of materials in most any file format are welcome, and the project is set up to allow for maximum accessibility. Most of all, she urged, be creative.

“Feel free to share your original photographs, poems, short stories, blog posts; perhaps you wrote and recorded songs during the quarantine — we’d love to preserve and share your music for others to enjoy for years to come!” she said. “There is no limit to how many times anyone can submit either; people are encouraged to participate as often as they wish. Everyone should know their story is important and worth saving and sharing with posterity.”

Matt Stahl, university archivist, noted that the archives project is taking three approaches to documenting COVID-19 at UCSB. In addition to community submissions, the library is web archiving official websites and social media accounts.

“Equally important to these two approaches, though, is the ongoing maintenance of record-keeping and archiving procedures in departments,” Stahl said. “Campus departments should be retaining records of their COVID-19 response, along with other departmental records, so that they can be transferred to the University Archives at some point.”

The library’s archives traditionally serve as the administrative and institutional memory of the campus, as well as a repository of faculty papers. Materials from student and community life, however, “have been lacking,” Stahl said in a memo on university archives collection development.

“We are actively seeking to collect archival materials from student organizations in order to document the history of student and community life here at UCSB,” the memo states. “Similar to administrative records, we will accept materials related to the founding and governance of student organizations, correspondence, and significant cultural events.”

For Force, the community archives project is an opportunity to give the public a space to document their lives during the pandemic.

“My personal hope is to make it clear that archiving experiences in real time is a necessary component in the healing process when a community is under crisis,” she said. “It’s vital for libraries and historical repositories to act as cultural heritage first responders and serve our community in a way that allows for self-expression and catharsis while also preserving the truth, not only for evidentiary value but also for self-edification, to capture a historical moment in its most raw and unfiltered form. I hope people will feel heard and see their content later in the online exhibit and know they contributed to something really special.”

The project is open-ended, Force noted, and she encourages people to submit as long as they're willing. The archives staff has worked to make the project as accessible as possible.

"I'm really proud of my colleagues for being so open and supportive throughout this project's planning and implementation," Force said. "I'm fortunate to work with a group of professionals, each with such different strengths, who encourage and foster growth in more progressive and inclusive archiving practices."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.