

Julieann V. Nilson InULA Scholarship Winners' Essays

ALESSANDRO MEREGAGLIA & SARAH MCELROY MITCHELL

ALESSANDRO MEREGAGLIA

Taking a course on the American Civil War my junior year, I learned that my small, undergraduate college possessed a collection of letters and diaries from students who left college to fight in the war for the Union. After looking through the collection, the librarian informed me of her ongoing efforts to digitize the collection and put scans of the documents online. I volunteered to help with that project and spent several hours each week transcribing the diaries. This experience fascinated me because it revealed a rich, local history that most students didn't know about. But the digitization project also interested me for its potential to reach a wide audience online and to encourage people to learn more about the college through the archives. This experience led me to pursue a career in librarianship, specifically in archives and special collections, at Indiana University's Department of Information and Library Science.

I was also drawn to specialize in archives and special collections given my understanding of the importance of history. Because archival collections – like my undergraduate college's Civil War letters – contain crucial primary documents, they provide the best answers to the historical question "What Happened?" When I worked in my college's archives or, now, when I work at the Lilly Library or in the University Archives, I know my arrangement and description of documents will benefit a researcher in the future. Preservation of those records and the ability to access them easily, therefore, are of utmost importance to both researchers and the general public. Due to my interest in thinking historically, I also enrolled in the Master of History program at IU. The dual masters afford me the opportunity to approach archival collections as a researcher and as an archivist. This is important: knowing how researchers and patrons use collections makes me a better archivist because I have a better understanding of what patrons need.

As I approach graduation in December, I reflect that I have learned much, both in the classroom and also through my library jobs, during my time at IU. Of all I have been taught, however, access and outreach strike me as the two aspects that are most important to the profession and around which I hope to develop my professional identity.

Based on my experiences at IU, one of the primary places for growth in archives is to increase the use of archival materials by students. Students rarely think about the valuable resources held in archives and special collections departments. To encourage greater student use, offering workshops for students explaining how to conduct research in an archive and how to make the best use of archival documents in crafting an argument is one way to introduce students to archives. These "show and tell" sessions can also highlight the best items in the collections and could spark an interest for further research in the students. At the very least, it would expose students to what a special collections department is like and give them the opportunity to observe firsthand "old stuff" (that is, the library's collections). Encouraging use of archives and special collections applies not just to undergraduate students but also to graduate students. They can easily turn to the library's special collections for research projects.

In addition to outreach, access is a key element to good librarianship. In archives, specifically, one means of providing better access to materials is the digitization of those materials. Through my job as an XML encoder for the IU Board of Trustees' minutes, I see how helpful it is to have the minutes transcribed and available for text-searching online. The online availability permits researchers access to those materials anywhere at any time. Moreover, through my work at the Indiana University Archives processing collections, it is clear how valuable digitizing documents is to patrons. While preparing an exhibit on IU during World War I with a fellow library school graduate student, we used a student diary from a previously digitized collection. Visitors who enjoyed our exhibit could go home and read the entire diary online. People who may never visit the reading room can use our collections thanks to digitization. To be sure, it's impossible to recreate the experience of handling a rare document by hand online. But, nevertheless, having that document available online increases access and alerts users to the possibilities for further research in the archives.

Upon graduation, I hope to work in a college or university archive or special collections library. A position like that would afford me the opportunity to blend both of my passions – history and libraries – by providing access to historical documents and imbuing those documents with a sense of history.

SARAH McELROY MITCHELL

When I applied to the MLS/MIS program a little over a year ago, the focus of my personal statement addressed the democratic principles held by libraries, and my great desire to help people from all walks of life as they researched and learned. I was not sure in what direction my degree would take me, but I knew that I wanted to be a source of help and encouragement to library patrons.

In the first fall semester of my program, I registered for an introductory course in rare book librarianship. I was immediately drawn to the world of special collections libraries, and to the unique resources found within these repositories. My innate reverence for books was never so satisfied as when I held a leather-bound first edition and breathed in the scent of centuries. I was amazed at the visceral link between myself and the people who had worked to write, bind, and disseminate these books so long ago.

However, when I looked at the other people using the reading room at the Lilly Library, I usually saw professors, serious visiting researchers, and library science graduate students like myself. It was rare to see an undergraduate student that was not being led around by their instructor, and even rarer to see an interested member of the community not affiliated with the university. I wondered why, when there were so many fascinating items with which to interact in our library, so few people were taking advantage of the opportunities. I came to realize that most people found the concept of a closed-stacks library intimidating, particularly when a special registration is required.

Because my aim in beginning the MLS program was to help people of different backgrounds and education levels, I began to question whether a career in special collections libraries was right for me. Most of the researchers I saw at the library knew how to use the collections nearly as efficiently as I did. However, all my doubts were put to rest when I was given the opportunity to work with some members of the Lilly Library's public services department. I soon saw that these librarians field countless questions each year from around the globe, and that it is impossible to predict the myriad ways that they might be called upon to use the library's vast holdings on any given day.

When I was given the opportunity to help teach a class for a group of undergrads visiting the library, I knew that I had found my true calling. I loved presenting different materials to the students, and reveled in speaking to them about what made each book or document special. When the spectators expressed genuine amazement and interest, I felt as light as air, a feeling that lasted for hours after the class had ended. I feel sure that at least a few of the students in my class would visit the library again to marvel at what the library had to offer.

In recent years, many special collections libraries have increased the attention they give to education and outreach. It is of vital importance that students and other potential patrons are given encouragement and assistance during their first visits to the library. If we are able to encourage more people to use our libraries, we can be sure that we have increased the quality of our public service operations. Moreover, by gaining active users, we will undoubtedly help new and exciting voices as they contribute to countless academic fields. In my career as a librarian, I hope that I can be a part of a renaissance in special collections libraries, encouraging a new appreciation among scholars for the study of rare and one-of-a-kind materials.