

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies: A Guide to Engaging the Archives

Why the Archives

Archival research and primary source materials help students...

- Raise questions about epistemology and the construction and transmission of knowledge.
- Understand the relationship between materiality and meaning, evidence and events.
- Consider the perspectives of people interacting in different times and spaces.
- Reflect on individual and institutional legacies and their impact on the current moment.
- Connect larger historical narratives to regional and local history.
- Experience the excitement of discovery and original research.

Instructional Support

Instructors are encouraged to work with a staff archivist in planning and implementing a class session at the Archives and Special Collections. Archivists can discuss with students what sorts of materials are housed in archival repositories, what primary sources are, and/or how to navigate and search for collections. Archivists can also help devise in-class activities in order to allow students to handle and analyze historical documents. [Schedule a class visit](#) (please schedule at least two weeks in advance).

In-Class/Onsite Activity Ideas

- In a small group, examine one item (chosen ahead of time by the archivist and instructor). Determine the following information about it: who (creator), when (date), where (location), what (form and subject), why (function), and for whom (audience).
- Create a list of possible search terms. Search the archives and locate three collections that might be relevant to your topic of interest.

Independent Assignments or Long Term Project Ideas

- **Primary Source Analysis:** Spend some time examining one of the collections below. Choose one item that you think best represents the collection and explain why you think it is an important artifact. What does the item reveal about the fight for women's rights or life for women at Purdue at that time? How does it contribute to our understanding of the history of women's rights in the U.S.?
- **Feminist Health Activism Scavenger Hunt (small group):** Go through the S.H.E. records, locate each of the following terms. Record the document details and location of your find: Boston Women's Health Collective; consciousness raising; an example of a natural health remedy; herstory; a reference to *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; a sex education tool; evidence of outreach or advocacy; a clipping about birth control; a reference to women of color; an item addressing lesbian sexuality or health.

- **Historical Discourse Analysis:** Choose 3-5 items from one of the collections below that represent different perspectives on a particular issue (for example, birth control or women in education). Analyze the historical discourse captured by these items. What does this discourse reveal about feminist values *then*? How might these arguments hold up today?

Possible Readings for Students

- Zanish-Belcher and Anke, eds. *Perspectives on Women's Archives*. Society of America Archivists, 2013.

Resources of Interest

- Archives & Special Collections homepage: <https://www.lib.purdue.edu/spcol>
- [Women's Studies Resources at the Archives and Special Collections](#)
- Paulus, Jr., M. J. "What is Primary?: Teaching Archival Epistemology and the Sources Continuum" (2012). *SPU Works*, Paper 18. Web (PDF).

NOTABLE COLLECTIONS

[MSP 108 Paulina T. Merritt papers on the Indiana Women's Suffrage Movement, 1860 – 1906.](#) Paulina T. Merritt was an Indianapolis woman involved with the women's suffrage movement of the late 19th century. Merritt also donated the land and a three-bedroom home to create the Indianapolis "Alpha Home" in 1886, a home for ex-slave women in need of support and a place to live. A great resource on the suffrage movement in Indiana.

[MSF 150 Sisters for Health Education \(S.H.E.\) records, 1978-1982.](#) Sisters for Health Education (S.H.E.) was a Purdue University student organization which functioned to inform, support and provide referrals to women in the Purdue community regarding birth control, problem pregnancy, rape prevention and counseling, and general women's health concerns.

[MSF 366 Dorothy Stratton papers, 1935 – 2006.](#) Stratton served as Dean of Women at Purdue from 1933 until 1946. During her tenure, she oversaw the creation of a liberal science program for women students in the School of Science as well as an employment placement center. Her papers include material about establishing a liberal sciences program for women students, concern for the post-war occupations of women, correspondence regarding the status of women on campus, and an emphasis on women as global citizens.

[MSF 334, Helen Schleman papers, 1920 – 2001.](#) Schleman (1902 – 1992), noted "unapologetic feminist," came to Purdue in 1934 as director of the first women's residence hall. A notable Dean of Women at Purdue, Schleman is acknowledged for having fought for women's rights at Purdue, including terminating the curfew for women students and spearheading a freshman conference program for women. Schleman's feminist activism is documented throughout the collection.

[MSF 467 Barbara Cook papers, 1932 – 2007.](#) Cook came to Purdue in 1956 as a counselor in the Office of the Dean of Women. Over the years, she served many roles at Purdue and has been nationally recognized for her efforts in promoting career opportunities for women. This collection also includes Cook's "Student Unrest Binders" from the 1960s. In Cook's [oral history interview](#), she mentions that her

college advisor refused to write a letter of recommendation for her to attend grad school because he thought it was a waste for women to do so when they should just be homemakers.

[MSP 49 Council on Status of Women Records, 1988-2012](#). This collection documents the activities and impact of the Council on the Status of Women at Purdue University. The collection would likely be useful for researchers interested in women's rights, affirmative action, equality and diversity in the university, women in higher education, advocacy in the university, and prominent women at Purdue University.

[UA 7 Women in Engineering Program Records, 1935-2012](#). Documents the creation of the program, and its activities and successes. Also included is information on Dr. Lillian Gilbreth and the first woman to graduate in engineering at Purdue. The collection would be useful to researchers interested in women in STEM and traditionally male fields, women's history, and the role of public universities in the women's movement.