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University Archives and Community Organizations: Ensuring Access through Collaboration

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University Archives and Community Organizations: Ensuring Access through Collaboration

Jessica Holden, Andrew Elder and Joanne Riley | Joseph P. Healey Library, UMass Boston

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1879

The Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters (MCOF) is founded by a group of Irish immigrants to provide life insurance benefits for its members.

1961

The Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters is renamed the Catholic Association of Foresters (CAF).

1964

The Massachusetts Legislature establishes the University of Massachusetts Boston.

1983

The Irish Ancestral Research Association (TIARA) is established "to develop and promote the growth, study and exchange of ideas among people and organizations interested in Irish genealogical and historical research and education."

2005

The Catholic Association of Foresters transfers custody to TIARA of more than 70,000 inactive life insurance and mortuary records. TIARA begins to process and index the records and to provide reference services.

2007

TIARA finishes processing and indexing the first ~29,000 Foresters records (1879 to 1935).

2009

After a flood in their storage area, TIARA approaches several Boston-area archives to find a permanent home for the Foresters records.

2011

TIARA transfers ownership of the MCOF records (spanning 1879-1986) to University Archives & Special Collections (UASC) in the Joseph P. Healey Library at UMass Boston for the purpose of preserving the records of the organization and making them available to researchers.

2012

The Joseph P. Healey Library at UMass Boston recognizes the work of TIARA with its inaugural Community Archives Award, as well as with an exhibition titled *Calling the Heart Back Home: Irish-American Stories from the Archives*.

2012

TIARA volunteers make regular visits to UASC in the Healey Library to continue processing and indexing the Foresters records.

2013

Campus construction projects at UMass Boston make transportation, parking difficult for volunteers. UMass Boston archivists and TIARA volunteers jointly present a project overview at New England Archivists' annual meeting.

2014

TIARA and UASC develop a new initiative which allows TIARA volunteers to work offsite to continue indexing Foresters records spanning 1935 - 1945.

Abstract

How can a university archives establish a successful ongoing relationship with a community organization? What are the benefits and challenges of such a collaboration? University of Massachusetts Boston's Archives and Special Collections (UASC) explored these questions while working with The Irish Ancestral Research Association (TIARA) to preserve and provide access to 79,000 mortuary records from the Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters. Elements of the collaboration included shifting stewardship of the records from the Foresters to TIARA to UMass Boston, integrating TIARA's efforts in processing and indexing the records into the Archives' workflow, providing in-person and electronic access to the records, and hosting public events that celebrate the partnership and educate the public about the records. This poster illustrates the lessons learned during the records' journey from an active business to a community organization to a university's Archives and Special Collections.



Death certificate from a Foresters record



Foresters records before their transfer to TIARA



TIARA's office and storage space



Transferring the Foresters records to UMass Boston



TIARA members processing the Foresters records at UMass Boston



TIARA receives the 2012 Joseph P. Healey Community Archives Award



Contributors at the Irish Immigrant Experience Mass. Memories Road Show in 2013.

Results Summary

Since the beginning of our collaboration in 2011, UASC and TIARA have developed a mutually beneficial working relationship. Together we have made available nearly 30,000 Foresters records and have responded to hundreds of reference requests. The lessons we learned while working to develop a strong partnership with TIARA have helped UASC develop models for working with other community organizations and archives. For more information about the Foresters collection, visit blogs.umb.edu/archives/foresters.



TIARA board member Susan Steele and CAF High Secretary-Treasurer John F. Anderson, Jr. attend celebratory event at UMass Boston.

Our Experience

Lesson learned: Community organizations are in love with their collections.

What worked for us:

- TIARA volunteers are granted special access and maintain a special relationship with the collection through indexing and processing activities.
- UASC created an exhibit and hosted a public event celebrating TIARA's work with the Foresters records that drew more than 150 attendees.
- UASC presented TIARA with the 2012 Joseph P. Healey Community Archives Award.
- UASC and TIARA collaborated on an Irish immigrant-themed Mass. Memories Road Show in November 2013.

Lesson learned: Community organizations often fear bureaucratic gatekeepers.

What worked for us:

- UASC agreed to store the bulk of this collection onsite rather than in our offsite facility.
- UASC waives reproduction fees for TIARA members and CAF members.
- UASC uses university resources to improve and expand searching and look-up tools.
- UASC and TIARA recognize each other as equal partners and continue to build a mutually beneficial relationship.

Lesson learned: A university archives' competing priorities can frustrate community organizations.

What worked for us:

- UASC consistently provided TIARA with clear, honest information about where the Foresters collection fits within UASC's processing queue.
- UASC enthusiastically welcomed TIARA's donation without making unrealistic promises about processing or access.
- UASC is careful to communicate any campus issues that affect TIARA's involvement, such as parking, construction, staff changes or special events.

Lesson learned: Working with a single community organization can involve many stakeholders.

What worked for us:

- One long-time, well-respected TIARA board member and researcher serves as the primary project liaison.
- UASC and TIARA both engaged their institutional and organizational leadership during every stage of the project.
- UASC connects TIARA volunteers with other communities of interest on campus and beyond through academic programs, departmental activities, courses, and student engagement.