

The Consortium Institutional Archive: A Model for Preserving Memory at a Historically Black Seminary

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Institutional archives remain largely a product of affluent, predominately white colleges and universities in the United States. Many schools with limited resources cannot support an archive. The historical structural inequities faced by many HBCUs only compound the difficulty of establishing and maintaining these repositories of institutional memory. The field of archival studies has largely told its history through the lens of white institutions; scholarship engaging historically black archives, especially at HBCUs, remains limited. This paper examines the history of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) and its archives and the ways in which institutional history has been preserved by the ITC over time. The ITC is a federally recognized HBCU consortium of seminaries in Atlanta established in the late 1950s as way to make accredited graduate theological education available to clergy in predominately black Protestant denominations. Informed by research at ITC's archive, this paper considers the consortium model both as a means of attaining accreditation and a vehicle for facilitating the establishment of institutional archives. The ITC offers an example of collaborative archiving to preserve multiple voices and histories of historically underrepresented institutions and a model of institutional self-publication to preserve and share institutional memory.

Keywords: consortium, archive, memory, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, HBCU, Interdenominational Theological Center, ITC

Higher education institutional archives remain largely a product of affluent, predominately white colleges and universities in the United States. Many schools with limited resources cannot support an archive. The historical structural inequities faced by many historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) only compound the difficulty of establishing and maintaining these repositories of institutional memory. The field of archival studies has largely told its history through the lens of white institutions. Scholarship engaging historically black archives remains limited. This paper examines archivist literature as it relates to HBCUs; examines the history of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), a consortium of historically black seminaries in Atlanta, Georgia; and considers the ITC's consortium institutional archive model as a means of preserving institutional history at a historically black seminary.

Archivist Literature

Professional archivist literature has begun to examine critically the absence of women in the institutional archival landscape and the challenges of archives at women's institutions. The Society of American Archivists chose Tanya Zanish-Belcher and Anke Voss's "Perspectives on Women's

Archives" (2013) as the guild's 2018 One Book, One Profession selection. However, scholarship engaging historically black archives, especially at HBCUs, remains limited. "Through the Archival Looking Glass, a Reader on Diversity and Inclusion" (Caldera & Neal, 2014) is part of the SAA's same series, but, as its title suggests, it is focused more broadly on diversity and inclusion in predominately white archives. Scholarship on black institutional archives and archival practices remains scant in the archivist literature. In fact, scholarship on African American higher education institutions more broadly remains limited as there continue to be few dedicated venues for such scholarship. The "Journal of Blacks in Higher Education," founded in 1993 as an academic journal focused originally on African Americans in higher education, now functions more as a news magazine on African American higher education. It sometimes features original research but often reports on statistics and news related to African Americans in higher education. The launch of the "Journal of HBCU Research + Culture" (2016), provided a venue focused primarily on HBCUs, but the journal has had difficulty securing continued funding and subsequent issues of the journal have been delayed. In short, scholarship on African American higher education is limited, and

scholarship on African American higher education archives is extremely scarce (HBCU Story Inc., 2015).

An article published in the “Journal of Archival Organization” (2005) by Susan Gunn Pevar, now retired from Lincoln University, an HBCU in Pennsylvania, provides a telling reflection of the state of archives at Lincoln at that time:

The archivist who works alone in a repository, rather than as part of a team—the so-called “Lone Arranger”—has the responsibility of handling all areas of archives management, including appraising, accessioning, processing, arrangement and description, reference, and outreach. This essay describes one real-life situation, in which the normal challenges of the Lone Arranger have been compounded by poor environmental conditions and previous long periods with no professional staff managing the archives. (Pevar, 2005, 51)

Pevar published a follow up article in the “Journal of Archival Organization” (2011), titled “Unfinished Business: The Uneven Past and Uncertain Future of One Historically Black University’s Archives—A Personal Reflection,” in which she asserts that the restructuring of the Lincoln University library and the related closure of its special collections and archives jeopardizes access to and preservation of important records of African American history. Pevar chronicles the recent history of special collections and archives at Lincoln University in the hope that it will raise questions about the state of other archives, particularly those housing records of historical significance to minoritized groups (Pevar, 2011).

While Pevar’s reflections do not represent the state of all HBCU archives, they are emblematic of a general lack of funding and prioritization of archives across many of the just over one hundred HBCUs in the United States. A faculty colleague at a historically black seminary recently shared that his school’s administrative records, which were held by the seminary’s archives, had no finding aids, were not cataloged, and were currently physically kept in plastic storage bins in a basement. Our exchange prompted conversations about what had contributed to the tremendous success of preserving institutional history at another HBCU seminary, the ITC, despite it also contending with similar repercussions of structural racism in American higher education.

The Interdenominational Theological Center

My reflection on the ITC grows out of research on the history and practices of accreditation at seminaries in the United States, especially members of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) (Hessler, 2021a). ATS is an institutional membership organization composed of Protestant, Roman Catholic, Christian Orthodox, and Jewish theological

schools. Its Commission on Accrediting serves as the primary accreditor of graduate theological education for Christian religious professionals in the United States and Canada (Hessler, 2022b). In my other work, I use archival materials from different seminaries to show how member institutions exert influence on ATS and the how the Association exerts influence on the member schools.

ATS begins accrediting theological schools in 1938; only two black institutions were initially accredited, Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta and Howard University Divinity School in DC. While Atlanta was home to several other black seminaries, Gammon had received initial accreditation because it was an official Methodist Episcopal Church seminary, and the Methodist Church played a significant role in the development of the Association. Under the leadership of Dr. Harry V. Richardson, Gammon initiated a series of inter-institutional conversations which resulted in the founding of the ITC in 1958 as a joint initiative of four seminaries: the Baptist-affiliated Morehouse School of Religion; the Methodist Church-affiliated Gammon Theological Seminary; the African Methodist Episcopal Church-related Turner Theological Seminary; and Phillips School of Theology, related to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

In response to the 50th anniversary of the founding of the ITC, Kenneth E. Henry, retired Associate Professor of Church History, and Mark Ellingsen, then Associate Professor of Church History at the ITC, collaborated to produce a comprehensive history of the institution, “Making Black Ecumenism Happen: The History of the Interdenominational Theological Center as a Paradigm for Christian Unity” (2008). The narrative focuses primarily on the evolution of the ITC as a paradigm of ecumenism in the African American community. The authors indicate that the ITC was very much a collaboration of several denominationally-affiliated, historically-black seminaries each with small enrollments, small faculties, and other struggles. However, they make a point of noting that the lack of accredited status among the founding schools, save Gammon, was a primary driving force for the collaboration, rather than individual schools’ precarious finances:

In private conversations with [United] Methodist Bishop James Thomas, a key player in the formation of ITC through his involvement in The Church’s Board of Education in the 1950s, he insisted that we put to rest the myth that ITC was created because the seminaries needed money. The issue, he insisted, was accreditation, to improve the quality of Black theological education. Funds were only an issue, it seems, insofar as constituent seminaries were not giving enough to make accreditation of their individual schools possible. (Henry & Ellingsen, 2008, p.18)

The Consortium Institutional Archive Model

The ITC's consortium model, which pools resources of several small institutions, made accredited graduate theological education more broadly available in the African American community in the 1960s. The consortium model is both a means of attaining accreditation and a vehicle for facilitating the establishment of successful institutional archives (Hessler, 2020; Hessler, 2021b; & Hessler, 2021c). In aspiring to create a seminary with accreditation alongside established white seminaries in the Association of Theological Schools, the leadership of the ITC adopted many systems of other schools in the Association, including models of and for a library and institutional archive. The Association's own stringent library standards for member schools certainly influenced the ITC's library and archival model and practice; however, rather than viewing the library or archive as a project and practice of an individual school (like most of the predominantly white institutions), the ITC developed its library and archive as a collaborative resource of the constituent institutional members of the ITC. The holdings of all member schools were jointly managed by the consortium while remaining assets of constituent member schools.

Over time, the ITC has collaborated with the Atlanta University Center Consortium, a consortium of Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, Morehouse School of Medicine, and Spelman College, to support a robust library and archives program. In 2016, the Atlanta University Center's Woodruff Library won the Excellence in Academic Libraries Award from the Association of College and Research Libraries. It was the first HBCU to win the award (Diverse: Issues in Higher Education, 2017). The Woodruff Library's Archives and Research Center operates on the same paradigm as the ITC's earlier archive, where individual holdings remain property of member institutions of the Atlanta University Center Consortium, but the holdings are jointly managed and warehoused.

Ariella Aisha Azoulay, in "Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism," proposes a differentiation among "**the institution** of the archive, the **regime** of the archive, and **archival practices**" calling into question the entire institutional archive model (2019, p.169). I am not trying to argue that the mode of institutional archive developed in white American higher education in the twentieth century and adopted by the ITC is the optimal one but rather that the variety of benefits of shared resources presented by a consortium institutional model can support a sustainable archival program in a variety of modalities. The collaborative archiving of the Atlanta University Center preserves multiple voices and histories of historically marginalized and underrepresented communities and institutions. The robust archival program stewarded by a consortium is able to achieve more than an assemblage of individual, moderately resourced institutional archives.

The pooled resources of a consortium have not only made possible the "luxury" of an institutional archive for the ITC, which is so often unattainable by other HBCUs because of structural inequalities, they have also created space for other forms of scholarly output (Hessler 2020). Richardson's second book (1976), "Dark Salvation: The story of Methodism as it developed among Blacks in America," would not have been possible without the shared resources of the ITC, and remains a definitive volume on black Methodist history in the United States. In the absence of other venues for scholarly histories, the ITC developed and maintains its own press and journal, using self-publication to preserve and share institutional and community memory. Well before the publication of "Making Black Ecumenism Happen" in 2008, the ITC published Richardson's (1981) "Walk Together, Children: The Story of the Birth and Growth of the Interdenominational Theological Center." Described as the "first volume dealing with the history and development of the ITC," "Walk Together, Children" served to preserve the institution's history and to make the histories of its constituent schools readily accessible to its various publics. The "Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center," which has operated on a subscription model for more than 45 years, announced in 2019 that it would become entirely open access as the ITC looks for additional opportunities to resource the black theological community. In recent years, the ITC archives have also been able to support external publication of institutional histories of member schools (Henry, 2021).

Conclusion

The archives of the Atlanta University Center Consortium, including the archives of the ITC, makes possible the preservation of vibrant institutional memories. Among the tasks of the theological school executive is the theological and ideological framing of the institution itself. For senior higher education administrators, engagement with primary textual sources is critical in this work of institutional narrativization, which itself invites critical examination of both past and present institutional practices and identification of implicit institutional values. Narrating administrative and institutional history is as fundamentally important to shaping the ideological commitments and practices of an institution as the pedagogical commitments of faculty, but its success is deeply dependent upon institutional memory (Hessler, 2022a). The consortium model provides an alternative paradigm for preserving and sustaining institutional memory and the practice of institutional narrativization. As the higher education landscape continues to shift around us, a consortium model for institutional archives may be a necessary intervention to maintain the extant institutional archives of several smaller, historically minoritized schools and to preserve the institutional histories and memories of these institutions.

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