SIMSArchive: Reflections on Processing 50 years of LIS Student Association Records

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Abstract

A reflection on processing LIS student association records in preparation for their move to the Dalhousie Archives, from the perspective of an MI student. This reflection comments on the importance of preserving student knowledge, a workshop series that was developed to provide instruction and learning opportunities for archive-minded students, and key takeaways from the project that may be of interest or significance to other academic student associations grappling with managing and preserving the records of their organizations

Keywords: archive; LIS; student association; records; knowledge; practice

The School of Information Management Student Association (SIMSA) at Dalhousie University has made its home in several academic units across the Halifax-based Studley campus. Dalhousie's Library and Information Science program first resided in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, where it was seeded in 1969 as the School of Library Service (SLS); the program was renamed to the School of Library and Information Studies when it moved to the newly founded Faculty of Administrative Studies in 1975, which became the Faculty of Management Studies in 1984, and later the Faculty of Management. In 2005, the School adopted a new name: the School of Information Management (SIM), and in 2019 the Master of Information (MI) program was launched.

The School's student association has persisted almost as long as the School itself has. The School of Information Management Student Association (SIMSA) passed its first governing constitution in 1970 (under the name the Library School Students' Association), making it one of the longest-running student associations amongst MI/MLIS programs in Canada. SIMSA's primary objectives as described in its constitution, last updated in September 2022, are 1) to provide a forum for the opinion of the student body; 2) to promote communication and collaboration among students, between students and faculty, and between students and alumni; 3) to represent members of the student body within SIM in aspects of the School such as development, curriculum, scholarships, work experience programs, and professional development; 4) to promote academic and social activities connected with the School; 5) to represent students in matters pertaining to the rest of Dalhousie University and the wider community; 6) to foster relationships with and encourage cooperation between other student organizations within the Faculty of Management and in Canada; and 7) to ensure matters of equity, diversity, accessibility, anti-racism, and decolonization are prioritized within the student body, the School and the University, and in the professional field of Information Management. All students registered at SIM are automatic members of SIMSA, and the student association is managed by an executive body consisting of 9-14 members sitting in seven roles: (Co)-Chair, Financial Chair, Communications Chair, Academic Chair, Non-Academic Chair, Digital Publications Chair, and EDIA & Special Projects Chair. Two chairs on average sit in each role: one incoming executive member and one outgoing (varying throughout the year based on when elections are held).

Possessing 7 specific mandates which largely encompass liaising internally within SIM and with external groups, SIMSA directs most of its attention towards communicating with students, faculty, the university, and the wider community. It provides spaces and forums through events and programming to encourage and facilitate these communications. SIMSA also supports related entities in the Faculty of Management, including the Dalhousie Journal of Interdisciplinary Management and the Information Without Borders conference. SIMSA is not a solely project-based organization; it serves its members through embedded programming, through its

existence as a resource for students, and through its agreed-upon responsibilities with the School. Its diverse range of programming makes for a variety of records generated by the organization- from promotional materials, creative journals, and invitations- to grant applications, governing documents, and financial materials.

Throughout the years, SIMSA has housed the paper records it generates in a metal filing cabinet, which has stood in the SIM common room since 2005 and likely dates to the 1970s, based on the container's labels. When the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted in-person student attendance at SIM in 2019, knowledge continuity between class cohorts was significantly affected and the cabinet thus presented a mystery to the students of the 2022 and 2023 classes. When SIMSA undertook common room revitalization efforts in the spring of 2022, the cabinet keys were located, and with them, 50 years of records. The SIMSArchive project was subsequently conceptualized as an archival effort intended to process physical SIMSA records. The student association felt it important to preserve the history of the association and make it accessible to the SIM student body and the future chairs of SIMSA.

A workshop series was organized alongside these processing efforts to give SIM students the opportunity to learn about archives, work through the core archival functions, and contribute to processing SIMSA's materials. Physical materials were to be appraised, arranged, rehoused, and preserved in preparation for their move to the Dalhousie Archives. Organized and instructed in a joint effort between Dalhousie's Digital Archivist Creighton Barrett and MI student Maddie Hare, the project's overarching objectives were to 1) offer students a low stakes learning environment in which they could engage with archival theory and practice, and 2) make SIMSA's records more accessible to students through their processing and preservation. The workshop learning outcomes were envisioned to introduce students to the core archival functions (appraisal, arrangement, rehousing, description, preservation), provide a hands-on learning opportunity for students so they could gain practical experience with performing archival work, and offer opportunity for students to work with material relating to the student association to which they belong to inform a deeper understanding of both SIM and SIMSA.

Processing in practice

The SIMSArchive project took a collaborative approach to archival work and encouraged experiential learning and reflection by having students with little to no archival experience work through the core archival functions and process materials from start to finish. The first step was crafting an archival policy for SIMSA (see Appendix A) as SIMSA possessed policies only relating to records management, and so Creighton advised formulating an archival policy to guide the project. A workshop series was then outlined (it originally included a fourth workshop on digitization, but the time constraints of the academic year only allowed for three workshops to be undertaken):

    1) Appraisal

    2) Arrangement and rehousing

    3) Description

The workshop series took place over the fall and winter terms. The first workshop on appraisal had students look through the records to get a sense of what they contained, identify records for preservation, and begin thinking about a logical series. Two boxes of records were weeded from the collection and destroyed. The second workshop covered the basics of arrangement, and records were moved into files and rehoused into 3 legal-sized boxes. Most of the filing and rehousing took place outside of the formal workshops as instruction and discussion were the focus of the workshops themselves. The third workshop on description instructed students on the proper labelling of files, archival description, and the RAD descriptive standards. Students described records in a shared Excel workbook where titles, series, descriptive notes, and other data were included for each file.

Archival processing provided both opportunities to work with the physical aspects of archiving: arranging material, sorting through records, rehousing them into files, as well as the intellectual aspects of archival work. Deciding upon a series required conversation around SIMSA's persistent core functions and activities, and how a logical series could be decided upon that would be relevant for future archiving efforts. In addition to representing the student body in all aspects of their educational and professional experiences in SIM, SIMSA also promotes academic and social activities throughout the year such as Lunch and Learn programs and holiday and end-of-year

social gatherings. SIMSA holds fundraising initiatives to support these events, traditionally with the sale of apparel, books, and baked goods. With this diversity in mind, the workshop group decided on a series that aligned with SIMSA's primary functions: 1) Administration (Executive meeting minutes, official correspondence internal or external to SIM, official documentation, governing documents such as constitutions, meeting minutes, agendas, voting processes, subcommittee materials, guides, reports; 2) Finances (Budgets, audit materials, fundraising activities); and 3) Student Relations (Materials relating to event promotion/organization, social and special projects programming, academic matters, student forum records, and materials relating to the student experience). In workshop 2, Series 1 and 3 were combined to simplify the series and account for material overlap.

At the time this reflection was written, description is ongoing, and SIMSA is working on writing a fonds-level description and an authority record for the association. Archival materials will be donated to the Dalhousie Archives in the summer of 2023 and sit alongside the School of Information Management fonds. A filing cabinet of material (since removed from the School's offices) has effectively been reduced to three legal-sized boxes that capture the 50-year relationship of students with their School. Students who attended the workshop were exposed to archival theory and practice, and SIMSA now has the foundations of an archival program that can continually inform the way it preserves its records.

Implications and meaning for future practice

Key takeaways from this project include a deeper understanding of SIMSA, and the School of Information Management and new ideas for future events/programs informed by past cohorts. Several executive members of SIMSA participated in the workshop series and delighted in the parallels they discovered between previous cohorts and their own. Fundraisers for the organization Books Beyond Bars, the creation of SIM apparel, the cataloguing of the SIM Young Adult and Children's Library, and other events, had been dreamt up by previous SIMSA members, without our knowledge. The thread of common values and shared objectives saw a reimagining of SIMSA events and initiatives decades apart.

Another key takeaway, informed by the project's objectives, was a richer understanding of Archives and Records Management, and the Library and Information Science profession. Archives engagement was approached with a communal, learn-as-you-go approach that was structured alongside learning materials such as briefing notes on archival concepts communicated through PowerPoints, ad hoc lessons imparted by Creighton in response to emergent challenges or questions, and hands-on interaction with archival materials.

The SIMSArchive project offers useful example and takeaways of how students in LIS programs can engage in informal, hands-on learning that helps translate classroom curriculum and theory into practice. Opportunities for this are bountiful, and often merely require creativity to identify and organize. Other examples of interactive learning that have occurred at SIM include book-binding workshops set up by previous SIMSA members, records retention schedules and classifications applied to SIMSA records conducted as projects for SIM's Records Management course, and Knowledge Management case studies that audited the association's current practices and made recommendations, also undertaken in fulfillment of class assignments.

This project did not occur without its challenges. The structure of the academic year meant that student presence on campus was mostly limited to the fall and winter terms. Workshops were situated in a busy course calendar and scheduled in among other academic events, talks, professional development sessions, SIMSA events and initiatives. Further, student attendance was limited by work and personal schedules, including those of the workshop organizers and instructors. Workshops were rescheduled and delayed, and the fourth session did not take place altogether. The majority of archival work was conducted outside of the workshops themselves by SIMSA executive. Despite this, substantial progress was made and SIMSA now has more experience to draw from when organizing future workshops and considering attendance strategies. Further, the primary objective of the workshops was to provide a learning space for students, and in this the workshops were successful. Other lessons learned related to reconciling SIMSA's priorities and objectives as an organization with traditional archival practice. It was difficult to conceptualize an organizational series for an association with such a diverse range of activities, and for reasons of simplicity, only

2 were decided upon. Due to the reduced volume of material that survived the weeding process, only 2 series were ultimately needed to appropriately file records, but this intellectual process did evoke questions of how to process and manage materials of an organization in constant flux. This project required SIMSA to get clearer on its functions, activities, and goals, and so elicited reflection on the part of SIMSA executive members about what the future of the organization could and would look like.

Significantly, this reflection fulfills an additional objective of the SIMSArchive project, which was to publish a written report or reflection on archival processes to provide transparency on the efforts that went into digitizing SIMSA records, a general account of how material was processed, and key takeaways and lessons learned for future SIM students and other LIS students and practitioners who may derive useful insights from SIMSA's experiences. Indeed, sharing experiences with other students and the wider archival community has been illuminating, motivating, and useful. The SIMSArchive project was presented at the Association of Canadian Archivists Student Chapter at the University of Columbia (ACA@UBC) Seminar and Symposium in February 2023. Additionally, it has been the subject of discussion during Canadian Information Science Students' Association (CISSA) meetings, where other LIS students across Canada have voiced support and shared their experience with student records, a well-documented challenge in higher education communities resultant of high student turnover rates.

As SIMSA continues operating past the 50-year milestone, the changes it will face are imminent rather than hypothetical: the School of Information Management will change its name in the summer of 2023 to the Department of Information Science (DIS) as the Faculty of Management undergoes restructuring. In advance of this name change, SIMSA adopted the new moniker "Information Management Student Association" (IMSA) at its 2023 Annual General Meeting. SIMSA's constitution, ratification, website, documentation, and branding will all be affected.

What the SIMSArchive project has illuminated, apart from a richer understanding of archival practice, is the persistence of what connects students in the MI program across time: a unifying spirit based on shared interests. Those interests are grounded in the values and competencies of librarianship that students enter the MI program to learn

and are demonstrated in practice through student association members who possess a deep commitment to service of their peers. Future members of (S)IMSA need not bear the same organizational name to participate in a half-century tradition of being a core part of the formative experiences of future librarians and information professionals.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A

SIMSA Archival Policy

Section 3 (Policy and Procedure) of SIMSA's Records Management Policy

3.5.1 This policy applies to documents that are determined important to retain in perpetuity. That is, longer than the records retention schedule accounts for.

3.5.2 Records appraised as eligible for preservation should be digitized if they are not borne-digital and kept on the SIMSA OneDrive folder.

3.5.3 Physical records that are donated, passed on, or found around the School of Information Management or within the SIM community should be appraised and determined worthy or unworthy of preserving in perpetuity digitally or physically at the Dalhousie Archives

3.5.4 Records that are deemed worthy of preserving in physical format should be donated to the SIMSA fonds in the Dalhousie Archives for preservation.