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Community-Centered Archives Practice: Opportunities, Challenges, and Recommendations for Institutions

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Community-Centered Archives Practice

Opportunities, Challenges, and Recommendations for
Institutions

Community-Centered Archives Practice: Transforming Education, Archives, and Community History (CCAP TEACH) is an initiative of the UC Irvine Libraries - Department of Special Collections & Archives, Orange County & Southeast Asian Archive Center. This initiative was made possible in part by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, through Grant 2105-10639. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is the nation's largest supporter of the arts and humanities.

We are grateful to the memory workers who attended the CCAP TEACH National Summit at the University of California, Irvine in October 2025, who are the true authors of the challenges, opportunities, and recommendations summarized in this report. We continue to be inspired by each of you.

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Introduction

As academic institutions are called upon to address systemic inequities, research libraries must evolve to be active agents of social justice. Community-Centered Archives Practice - Transforming Education, Archives, and Community History (CCAP TEACH) is an effort to address this shift by outlining a model that prioritizes ethical stewardship, shared authority, and the (re)distribution of resources to ensure that community-based organizations are not merely subjects of study, but equal partners in the preservation of their own legacies.¹ By integrating these values into the fabric of academic libraries, community-centered archives practice as a model aims to solidify the responsibility of academic institutions to contribute meaningfully to social justice-focused scholarship, pedagogy, and community partnerships.²

Community-centered archives practice seeks to bridge the gap between higher education and the marginalized communities whose histories have often been excluded or maligned by traditional archival practices. It acknowledges the positionality (i.e. power dynamics, resources, afflictions, and limitations) of academic institutions and necessitates active resource investment that supports memory work focused on underrepresented histories. Community-centered archives practice compels academic institutions to prioritize opportunities to participate in mission-critical work to transform education, archives, and community history in service to the greater good.³

¹ Community-Centered Archives Practice: Transforming Education, Archives, and Community History (CCAP TEACH) is an initiative funded by the Mellon Foundation and led by the University of California Irvine Libraries, Special Collections and Archives' Orange County and Southeast Asian Archive Center. CCAP TEACH included several components including: training and compensating students; direct payments to community-based organizations; assessment projects emphasizing ethical and responsible digital collections; sub-awards for academic libraries to apply the CCAP model; developing a comprehensive resources hub; and the National Summit. "Community-Centered Archives Practice: Transforming Education, Archives, and Community History." CCAP TEACH UC Irvine Libraries Special Collections and Archives Orange County and Southeast Asian Archive. <https://sites.uci.edu/ccap/>.

² In this report, the acronym CCAP refers to the Mellon-funded project. The phrase "community-centered archives practice" refers to a model for collaboration between community-based groups and academic institutions co-designing archival projects that center marginalized histories and commit tangible resources towards this work. "Community-Centered Archives Partnerships." OC Southeast Asian Archive, UC Irvine Libraries. <https://ocseaa.lib.uci.edu/partnerships> and Vo Dang, Thuy (2026) "TEACH and CARE: How Community-Centered Archival Practice May Transform Education, Archives, and Community History," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 13, Article 10. <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol13/iss1/10>.

³ Prior research and scholarship demonstrate the affective response to the experience of seeing (or not seeing) oneself represented in archives. See Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez (2016) "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing": Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives. *The American Archivist*: Spring/Summer 2016, Vol. 79, No. 1, pp. 56-81. <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56> and Audra Eagle Yun, Jimmy Zavala, Krystal Tribbett, and Thuy Vo Dang (2020) *Transforming Knowledge, Transforming Libraries - Researching the Intersections of Ethnic Studies and Community Archives*: Final Report. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47c2h0dd>.

A transformation of archival practice necessitates the calling in of academic and institutional archives practitioners from across the United States with a breadth of situated knowledge and expertise, as well as a vested interest in reciprocal community memory work. This report details the design and implementation of a national summit convened for two days in October 2025 at the University of California, Irvine with the specific intention of planting the seed for a coalition of community-centered archives practitioners. It details discussions and recommendations identified by over 50 memory workers from community groups and academic institutions from across the U.S. to leverage knowledge-sharing and evidentiary models for sustainable infrastructure tied to staffing, budgets, and technology needed to make authentic community partnerships an operationalized, everyday practice.

Summit Design

The CCAP TEACH National Summit was created as a convening to brainstorm and gather information on existing and emerging approaches to sustaining archival initiatives undertaken by the collaboration of academic institutions and community groups to identify, preserve, create, and make accessible minoritized histories. The Summit sought to build connections between practitioners and communities, and also identify and plan around shared opportunities and challenges, as identified by participants during the event. Grant funds were directed to cover travel, accommodations, and meals for attendees, fostering equity for attendee participation across a variety of perspectives.

An open, virtual gathering was hosted in 2022 as a preliminary tool for outreach to archival practitioners across the United States⁴. The feedback and ideas shared during the initial virtual gathering made it clear that archival practitioners are eager to connect and build best practices around ethical partnerships with communities in the service of more inclusive historical memory and recordkeeping. In subsequent years, it became apparent that National Summit attendees would benefit from activities and a physical space that prioritized in-person dialogue, fostered a sense of intellectual freedom, and supported visionary thinking. The project team recognized that the Summit's work must be conducted in a space that acknowledges the power dynamics of bringing together workers across professional contexts, recognizing institutional privilege, and the lack of representation of marginalized people within the archives, library, and technology sectors.

⁴ The call for participants was shared widely and asked attendees to invite others in their networks.

The project team decided to use a combination of facilitated breakout activities to focus on addressing systemic challenges to sustaining community-centered archives practice, following anti-oppressive facilitation practices and interpretations of exercises from Liberating Structures and related activities to foster co-ideation and shared problem-solving among attendees. Introduced and published by Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless, Liberating Structures is a framework and set of simple facilitated activities that require engagement from everyone in thinking, problem-solving, building trust, and brainstorming solutions to shared challenges and opportunities.⁵ The project team expected all participants to abide by a set of community agreements, which were included in the attendee handbook packet and linked from the Summit web page. As part of the program, the project team sought to create an environment in which participants would feel comfortable participating in group discussions as their authentic selves, without computers or other technology, using the skills and knowledge they brought with them.

With regard to the identification of National Summit participants, individuals were invited to submit a preliminary feedback form indicating their capacity and willingness to engage and participate in an active, dynamic, and in-person strategic summit. These individuals were identified via a variety of methods, including: CCAP TEACH grant sub-awardees; affinity group email listservs (such as the Community Archives Collaborative and the Community Archives Happy Hour attendees); recent publications and conference presentations; and participation in the initial virtual gathering in 2022.

Although the attendee representation goal was intentionally focused on academic archival professionals, we also identified archival studies and ethnic studies scholars, representatives from community-based archives, as well as representatives from community-based groups doing archival projects. We sought out representatives from both ends of a community-academic archives partnership, but discouraged multiple representatives from a single institution, to avoid overrepresentation of wealthier universities. It was imperative that potential attendees affirmed their commitment to participate concretely during the National Summit; not as a passive listener, but as an active representative and expert.

The project team distributed a planning survey to Summit participants to help shape the focus and priorities of the Summit. Respondents expressed strong interest in discussing the sustainability of community-centered work, including long-range planning for community archives, sustaining partnerships beyond short-term or grant-based funding, and ensuring appropriate compensation for community narrators and collaborators. Many emphasized relationship-building, particularly maintaining trust with local communities, navigating competing schedules and institutional demands, and addressing power imbalances, access issues, and

⁵ Lipmanowicz, Keith and Henri McCandless. "Liberating Structures - Introduction." <https://www.liberatingstructures.com>

displacement through placekeeping practices. There was also considerable interest in preparing and supporting students for embedded work in community archives, including partnerships with K–12 schools to strengthen pathways into the field and clearer guidance on how archivists prioritize community engagement within constrained workloads. Additional topics included best practices for digital repositories, preservation of physical and audiovisual materials, public-facing community forums and workshops, and the importance of continuing community-focused work amid challenging political climates, with some respondents noting uncertainty about sustainability following the conclusion of the grant.

Key Findings

Interconnected themes tied to power, access, and accountability arose as attendees contemplated power dynamics and the complexity of accountability that shape collaborations between institutions and community-based groups. Participants described a landscape where community-centered archival work is deeply valued but structurally unsupported. Burnout, lack of resources, and institutional barriers were recurring concerns. Major opportunities and challenges are summarized below.

Institutional and bureaucratic barriers

Participants expressed a shared frustration with institutional structures that lack policies, procedures, and cultural norms that support community-centered practice. Their concerns went beyond logistical issues. They point to deeper structural misalignment between institutional processes and community-centered work.

Participants noted that institutions may tout the value of mutual aid, community voices, and grassroots models, but rarely know how to operationalize these ideals in concrete ways due to institutional and bureaucratic barriers. For example, institutions have a hard time compensating community partners monetarily for their contributions to collaborations. A major thread was the challenge of getting institutional buy-in from business offices, administrators, and leadership. The lack of fiscal resources from institutions causes memory workers to have to rely on short term external grant funding which is not always guaranteed.

Several concrete administrative challenges emerged including payment methods for community partners and students, as well as branding risks and responding to changes in leadership. Additionally, academic archival workers often lack administrative support and/or knowledge of how to navigate methods of compensation (such as honoraria, vendor contracts, or reimbursements). Restrictions

on how funds are used to support community-centered archival initiatives were cited as creating a patronizing or paternalistic dynamic in which the institution oversees what should and can be given to community groups, challenging community group sovereignty.

Authentic, reciprocal community partnership versus institutional co-optation or performative support

Participants voiced concern about institutions undertaking community collaborations superficially (i.e. co-opting rather than collaborating). Many noted that institutions that (still) subscribe to the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) benefit from the *optics* of community engagement, but do not offer the labor, community expertise, or funding to sustain these values. The group noted that DEIA policies often are “aspirational (at best)” and “lacking teeth.” One group captured this bluntly: “Institutional statements about supporting communities are performative.” Attendees acknowledged that without recognizing community knowledge, values, or priorities, partnerships become one-sided, and risk reproducing dominant or exclusionary narratives.

Furthermore, when institutions and community-based groups do collaborate, participants noted the absence of “mirrored reflection,” meaning institutions have difficulty matching the same level and commitment of labor, expertise, and emotional work that community members contribute in community-institutional partnerships.

Burnout, capacity, and the limits of institutional support

Participants repeatedly emphasized the tension between community expectations and institutional capacity, especially when projects expand beyond what staff can realistically sustain. Several groups named the “yes/and trap,” where community partners’ visions grow while institutional support does not. Administrative burdens such as justifying work, navigating bureaucracy, and “jumping through hoops,” consume archival professionals’ time and energy, especially for those acting as bridges between communities and institutions. Participants asked about survival, questioning how to balance their own bandwidths while continuing to do community-centered archives work in environments that do not actually support it. That said, independent consultant attendees acknowledged the practical considerations of how to make a living while supporting community archives ethically. Summit attendees who represented community groups also called attention to the capacities of already heavily burdened community partners to navigate the challenges of working with institutions and expectations to contribute to partnership goals.

Resource inequity between institutions and community partners

Practical challenges related to resource inequity also surfaced during the discussion. Attendees raised the point that resource inequity also exists around community-based groups' access to the opportunities, tools, grants and funding that institutions may have for collaboration. Partnerships often depend on individuals (both internal and external) who know how to navigate institutional systems. There is no clearly defined pathway for community-based groups to find out how to connect with institutions around shared memory keeping goals.

Ethical and practical concerns about AI and digitization

Participants identified the tension created when institutions adopt approaches like artificial intelligence (AI) and DEIA without addressing underlying structural issues within them that do not protect vulnerable groups like those underrepresented in the archival record.

The increased use of AI in the archival profession sparked conversation among attendees. The group asked, when is it ethical to use AI, particularly when doing community archiving work? Questions around how to ensure safety and consent, and what happens when institutional pressure pushes communities into digitization without adequate planning or safeguards, sparked lively discussion. Participants referenced existing guidelines and emerging research, but noted that many institutions lacked policies and many community groups lack access to such resources.

Recommendations for Institutions

Despite the various challenges of community-institutional partnerships, all attendees agreed that they are committed to this work, and will continue to be. Participants rejected the notion that doing community-centered archives work is optional. On the contrary, participants insisted that they would continue values-driven, community-centered archives work, come what may. Attendees identified both practical steps and philosophical approaches at both the individual actions and institutional commitments that can strengthen and sustain community-centered archival work.

Make it part of what we do

Many emphasized that this work should be integrated into daily responsibilities rather than treated as extraneous. As one participant put it, community-centered archives work should be “expected, required workload. Make it part of what we do.” They expressed a desire to see community-centered archival work embedded in job descriptions, strategic plans, and departmental goals to make it harder for institutions to ignore or trivialize. Participants emphasized leaning into personal and departmental values, even when institutional climates shift and being ready to seize small opportunities. One table declared, “Go through the crack in the door when you notice it.”

Authentic, reciprocal partnerships are built on trust

The long history of institutions extracting from the most marginalized communities and the prioritization of institutional goals over community values demands a sincere evaluation of how to enter into community – institutional partnerships. Attendees voiced a desire to challenge traditional hierarchical dynamics and foster more authentic, reciprocal partnerships where community-based groups are not tokenized or used as checkboxes. The group encouraged community-centered archives practitioners to acknowledge their positionality within institutions in order to build trust and protect collaborations, especially since “this work is increasingly risky.” The current political climate challenging the role of DEIA in academic institutions includes myriad challenges to work that focuses on underrepresented groups, creating a chilling effect in trust-building efforts. In some cases, individuals from both institutions and community groups expressed concerns for their safety when publicly associated with these partnerships. Participants noted that trust cannot be assumed; it must be intentionally established, and the needs of the community prioritized. One practical suggestion from participants: create mutual agreements between community partners and institutions to be clear about what you can and cannot do, with what resources, and with parameters on timing and communications.⁶

Radical redistribution of resources

Participants underscored the economic realities shaping community-centered archival work, arguing that meaningful progress requires a radical redistribution of resources from larger, well-funded institutions to smaller organizations that often

⁶ See Sharon Mizota's "Sharing Your Stories Online: A guide for community organizations and their partners. UC Irvine: Community-Centered Archives Practice: Transforming Education, Archives, and Community History (C-CAP TEACH)," <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/33j9k9rs>.

shoulder the bulk of community engagement. They discussed crowdsourcing as one pathway, including pooling funds, labor, and knowledge to sustain community archives. Other proposed practical strategies ranged from sliding-scale fees to partnerships with iSchools to offering free webinars for community archivists. Compensating community partners with unrestricted funds was a recurring suggestion. Participants also suggested paid internships for students as a concrete, actionable step both to support labor and to build capacity.

Relationship-building and long-term engagement

Attendees emphasized a need for archives professionals working within institutions to hone human-centered skills, particularly relationship-building, communication, and care work, despite institutional settings that often de-value these competencies.

Participants also identified relationship-building and long-term engagement as areas where they could take action immediately. The group suggested finding like-minded allies and building networks inside and outside the institution in order to strengthen collective capacity. Participants noted that collective action necessitates bringing more voices into the room, appealing to motivations for preservation, and developing protocols for addressing goals, challenges, and opportunities. Gathering in shared spaces, cultivating longer relationships, and holding strategy planning meetings with stakeholders for mutual ideating and forecasting were among tangible next step recommendations.

Participants expounded on the need for continued relationship building among themselves, as well. They emphasized the importance of staying in contact and maintaining relationships fostered among themselves beyond the Summit. The group voted to start a discussion platform where they could skill share, troubleshoot, solicit collective advice and expertise, share resources, and have open and candid conversations.

Agency, boundaries, and burnout

Throughout the summit, burnout, capacity and the limits of institutional support emerged as major challenges as practitioners seek to support community archival efforts respectfully and transparently, and not overpromising what they can do. One solution offered was to “start with well-defined, smaller projects” and maintain transparent communication with partners about capacity. Participants highlighted the need to separate functional tasks “to get it done,” use discretion in how time is spent, and prioritize relationship sustainability and resource stewardship. Participants also encouraged one another to “find your power to make decisions” including the ability to say “no.”

Training and skills development

Participants expressed their interest in knowledge-sharing, including information sharing and cross-training, as a means to stay in touch and build capacity for community-centered archives practice across the United States. As a representative sample, participants provide a meaningful set of topics that can be considered key components of professional development, education, and training for community-centered archives practitioners. Archivists looking to work at the speed of trust, to balance urgency with capacity, and to sustain reciprocal partnerships between academic archives and community organizations should focus on learning and development in the following areas:

1. Ethical, care-centered, post-custodial work

Training and education in archival studies literature focused on post-custodial models of collaboration, instilling an ethics of care, and yielding to community knowledge. Of particular focus is how to enact these values in practical terms.

2. Building and sustaining equitable relationships

Practical and educational training on how to develop, maintain, and adapt relationships with community-based organizations over time.

3. Communication strategies

Within and outside of traditional archival studies, practical guidance on identifying and implementing communication methods with new and ongoing partnering organizations, including how to address when plans break down and managing communication efficiently with time and resource constraints.

4. Defining institutional roles concretely

Beyond rhetoric, concrete strategies for active support including financial resources, staffing commitments, space, and mutual aid. This can look like actionable tools, documentation templates, transparent agreements, and clarification on resource commitments (time, money, and other resources).

5. Sustainable and alternative funding models

Looking towards community organizing and non-profit sector training, learning how to pursue funding options that are not dependent on traditional grants.

6. Project and financial management (with limited resources)

Training and education centered on project management and financial activities in under-resourced organizations, with an emphasis on practical approaches to budgeting and management of deliverables. Some aspect of

this is how institutions can support revenue generation for community-based organizations.

7. Digitization and digital stewardship best practices

In general, training on best practices for implementing digital reformatting projects, preservation basics, and stewardship of digital files that are driven by community memory priorities.

Conclusion

Together, the limitations and opportunities for improvement outlined in this report underscore why the sustainability of community-centered archives practice is tantamount to the future of memory work. The people involved in the National Summit do not see this work as project-based. Community-centered archives practice must be sustained and remain committed to the long-term preservation, accessibility, and curation of the voices, perspectives, and memories of people who have been misrepresented, marginalized, erased, or maligned in the historical record.

In centering social justice, community-centered archives practice is approached not as extractive and focused on custody of the stuff of history, but rather as inherently non-extractive, collaborative partnership with and among those represented in archives and to whom these histories belong. Traditional modes of archival stewardship are being redefined and practices are being transformed to meet communities where they are, not where we want them to be. In identifying the myriad challenges and opportunities, these recommendations provide a roadmap for making community-centered archives work everyday practice.

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