Indigenous Archival Materials Statement

For GVSU Special Collections and University Archives, June 2022

Archives live in community with past, present, and future. As archivists, we see connections between place, culture, and everyday experiences within our collections and how these connections inform the stories that are told in our histories. Grand Valley State University’s Special Collections and University Archives is located on the ancestral territory of Anishnaabek, the People of the Three Fires: The Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi.

Every university is built on stolen, indigenous land. We are guests on their land and one way to practice right relations is to develop genuine ways to acknowledge the histories and traditions of the people who originated here first, who are still here, and who tend to the land always. As we make this acknowledgment, we know it is but an important first step, and that there are many more that we need to take. As custodians of University and local history, it is our responsibility to acknowledge that our Western frameworks for preserving that history are limited and are not applicable to all collections, especially those of Indigenous communities.

Archives are inextricably linked with Euro-American cultural history. In fact, settlers have used archives to control, erase, and decontextualize Indigenous people and their cultures, histories, lifeways, and identities throughout history. Historical documentation within our archives frequently derives from anthropologists, ethnographers, and other non-Indigenous historians whose work often decontextualized Indigenous history, culture, and knowledge. Our collections are complicit in the impact of settler-colonialism.

Materials within our collections may be traumatic to Indigenous people who use them. Special Collections and University Archives maintains three volumes of records from the federally funded Harbor Springs boarding school, The Holy Childhood of Jesus, whose mission was to “kill the Indian, but save the man.” Anishinaabek communities still experience the harm from these boarding schools. We preserve these materials not to glorify or glamorize, but to serve as stark reminders of the cruelties of the past. In providing access to these materials, we acknowledge their history of trauma.

We pledge to:   
1) provide Indigenous-related materials for research with appropriate context

2) ensure Indigenous-related materials are accessible to all Indigenous community members who wish to use them  
3) appropriately care for, exhibit, and promote Indigenous-related collections