Yale Talk: Conversations with President Peter Salovey

Episode 12: Students and University Library Help to Write Yale’s History

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone. Welcome to Yale Talk. I am Peter Salovey, and I am delighted to conclude the fall 2020 semester—and the first year of Yale Talk podcasts—with a very timely look into the university archives.

We are at the midpoint of an academic year unlike any other, when—in a very real sense—our students, faculty, staff, and alumni are helping to write Yale’s history.

Whether you spent the past three months on campus or working or studying from home, here in the United States or on the other side of the globe, no doubt you—like so many around the world—have found creative new ways of operating.

The Yale University Library is no exception. In the months since the pandemic came to New Haven last spring, an extraordinary team of staff members, led by Barbara Rockenbach, the Stephen F. Gates ’68 University Librarian, has come together to expand Yale’s web-based collections; digitize course materials; increase off-campus access to the library’s holdings; offer virtual library instruction, workshops, and support services; and safely reopen the libraries to faculty, staff, and students who are approved to be on campus.

One member of that team is here with me—virtually!—today. I am joined in conversation by Michael Lotstein, Yale’s university archivist, who is based in the Manuscripts and Archives division of Sterling Memorial Library.

After Yale had made a quick pivot to remote instruction for the last six weeks of the spring semester, Mike and his colleagues launched the “[Help Us Make History](https://makehistory.library.yale.edu/)” project, inviting students to document, in their own words and images, their academic and personal experiences during the pandemic. The response has been outstanding, with hundreds of students submitting reflections on the challenges, unexpected bright spots, and day-to-day minutiae of life at Yale in the time of COVID.

We’ll have the opportunity to hear some of what they have written a little later on, but first, Mike, thank you: thank you for joining me today to talk about this project, about the university archives, and about the long tradition of students and alumni helping to contribute to Yale’s archival records.

**Mike Lotstein**: Thank you for having me today.

**Peter:** Before we get to “Help Us Make History,” Mike, can you tell our listeners about the Yale archives, broadly speaking?

**Mike:** The university archives was founded in June of 1939 by a vote of the Yale Corporation to preserve records that document the administrative, cultural, social and academic history of the university. But over the past eighty years, it has evolved into something so much more, as a means to preserve university records. I believe it serves as a significant resource for the documentation of student life and student experiences at Yale.

**Peter:** And as the university archivist, you are also closely engaged with teaching and learning at Yale. Tell me a bit about your work with faculty, with students, courses, and perhaps, how that work has changed in light of our current situation.

**Mike:** Well, I work regularly with faculty and students when they engage with university records in their courses. Our biggest customer, obviously, is the history department. We work with them very closely, but we also work with practically every type of course you can imagine. The kinds of records with which faculty and students engage include the records of various administrative officials, records of student organizations, diaries of former students, photographs, recordings of speeches and lectures, and on and on. The university archives hold a remarkable breadth of records that document Yale’s history and its influence locally, nationally, and internationally.

In terms of students, I tend to work with them more on an individual basis, on either senior essays or final paper projects. I work with grad students on their dissertations and even alums who are writing books on Yale history. We worked very closely with Anne Perkins when she completed her book, *Yale Needs Women*, back in 2019.

We also work very closely with student organizations in preserving their archives. I work with groups like the Pundits, the Elizabethan Club, the Political Union, and even *a cappella* groups like New Blue, and quite a few more. We want to ensure that even if their records don’t end up in the university archives, that they have the tools and training to ensure that they’re able to maintain their own local archives. And the impact of the pandemic on my work—at the end of the day, essays and papers still need to be written, reference questions still need to be answered, and offices will still need assistance gaining access to their records. I’m on site every other week filling record requests from offices, working with students, and then the weeks when I’m home, I’m working remotely to ensure that the work of the archives continues.

**Peter:** So tell us, what was the genesis of “Help Us Make History”?

**Mike:** Well, it became clear early on that we were dealing with something extraordinary. We knew that the university archives needed to determine how to document the impact of the pandemic on university life, especially student life. So our initial focus was by posting an online survey, in April 2020, to capture student experiences with the pandemic, especially how they were coping with not being on campus. And we collected responses to the survey up until the end of June. We received more than two hundred responses, and the students were very forthcoming and quite frank in describing their success, or lack thereof, with remote learning; the impact of the pandemic on their family lives; and what they miss most about being away from Yale.

It was based on the early success of the survey that we launched the “Help Us Make History” project in May of 2020. We created the online component in collaboration with the library’s [Digital Humanities Lab](https://dhlab.yale.edu/) to continue to capture student experiences. We provide students with regular prompts to which they can contribute photos, videos, or written accounts. But by far, the biggest success we’ve had to date is on the most recent prompt, in which we asked students, “What do you want future students to know about being a student at Yale in 2020?”—with the idea being that fifty, a hundred years from now, a student will be writing their senior essay or final paper on what life on campus was like in the early twenty-first century during the pandemic, and these student accounts would become first-hand primary sources of what life was like on campus.

We combined the online version of this prompt with two in-person events at Sterling Memorial Library, in which we invited students to come to the library and fill out physical postcards in which they would briefly jot down their experiences of being here on campus during 2020. The in-person events were the brainchild of the university librarian, Barbara Rockenbach, along with the Student Library Advisory Council. Their goal was to figure out ways in which the library could help alleviate student stress and to provide fun activities for them to participate in. We collected over 270 in-person physical postcards, and to date we’ve also collected about 150 online versions as well.

**Peter:** That’s wonderful. My wife, Marta, is on the board of StoryCorps, and this project, “Help Us Make History,” reminds me of the kind of work that StoryCorps does that perhaps those listening might hear on public radio in this area on Friday morning.

**Mike:** It’s true.

**Peter:** I know that submissions to the project have all been made anonymously, but I understand that you’ve invited some current students to read a few excerpts for us. So, let’s hear a few examples.

**Mike:** Students, for the most part, are pretty optimistic, or they’re at least trying to stay positive.

**Regina Sung:** I hope that every person, not just at Yale, will be more in touch with humanity and we will have a stronger, more connected and socially conscious society. I hope that people will not go through the motions the way we did before COVID and instead go through our days with gratitude.

**Solomon Adams:** COVID made me realize humans are indeed animals of adaptation. We have found ways to work more efficiently and creatively with whatever resources we have. I rarely cooked, didn’t know how to, before COVID hit, but I make my own meals three times a day, and it seems like I found a new hobby.

**Mike:** But students have also been open and sharing the difficulties and challenges of their lives.

**Emma Levin:** One of the hardest things is the isolation. Most days I don’t leave the house. I went from college, an atmosphere where I was never alone and constantly surrounded by people my age, to my household, where I only see my parents and two dogs.

**Solomon:** The loss of structure is a big one, loss of a daily chronicled routine in the sense of traditional schooling. Wake up at a certain time, walk to class on time, walk to residential college, sleep, etc. Now, since we’re scattered all over the world, it is waking up at 4 a.m. or staying up until 3 a.m. for online classes. It’s the weird feeling of worlds colliding, of being in your childhood bedroom while talking to your professors and classmates on Zoom, while your mom brings you cut fruit. I miss the old structure a lot.

**Mike:** And they also have advice to share with each other—and all of us.

**Solomon:** It is important to stay in touch with your friends, old, new, Yale, high school, any, consistently for your own sanity and mental health, even if it gets difficult. It’s easy to overbook yourself when everything seems virtual and quicker.

**Regina:** While a stark departure from the pre-pandemic way of life, there is a simplicity and order to having everything truncated to a desk and a screen. You come to cherish your past, long for your future, and simulate your present with mementos and Zoom birthdays. This simplicity will vanish one day when a COVID vaccine will become available. When this happens, I hope that people will remember how simple life can be.

**Emma:** The pandemic has really shown me that you can’t prepare or plan out everything. One of my friends always says that everyone has their own scheme for how things turn out. Well, every scheme imaginable has probably been thrown out the window due to COVID-19. The pandemic honestly has fundamentally altered the way I go about life, encouraging me to be spontaneous and appreciate everything I have.

**Peter:** So for the most recent prompt in this project, you asked contributors: “What would you like future students to know about being a Yale student in 2020?” What are some of the insights into current life on and off campus that they’ve shared?

**Mike:** Someof the themes that have come out are despite the uncertainty of the pandemic, the election, racial issues, and the overall state of the world, they feel close to their friends at their residential colleges; they’ve made friends elsewhere on campus but have never met some of them in person, which is very weird to them. Overall, no one regrets coming to Yale. First-years especially are glad they decided to come to campus.

**Solomon:** Life on campus is great for the most part. After all, as a first-year, I have nothing to compare it to. And so just the feeling of independence is amazing. I spend my weeks looking forward to the weekend when I can hang out with my friends and relax. But in doing so, I wish myself closer to my date of departure. It will be strange studying remotely in the spring, but I must say that I’m beyond grateful for the short time I have spent here at Yale with my fellow Yalies.

**Mike:** And students who filled out the postcards genuinely have a sense that this is an historical moment for Yale.

**Emma:** I’m currently working on a research paper. I’m a sophomore, which means that I have to take classes remotely this semester. Finding sources for the project has been a bit difficult, but Yale Library has been kindly shipping books to my home address, and I’ve also found some archives online or at the local library. It is a very strange time, both because of the pandemic and various other issues—U.S. political tensions, climate change, a rapidly changing social internet, etc. And I can’t wait for things to return to normal, or at least an improved version of the norms we are accustomed to.

**Regina:** COVID has slipped into being a more easy part of my life and has become my new normal. Submitting a daily health check is routine. Getting tested is made simple and easy, and it’s become about as normal as attending a class, even carrying with it similar levels of stress. Wearing a mask is normal—I feel naked without it. Putting on hand sanitizer happens without a second thought, and hugs are few and far between.

All of these habits and practices, which once felt so foreign and abnormal, have become typical, ordinary. It’s important to know that while COVID has stopped some activities, it has not shut down so much of what college is. Do I hope it goes back to normal? Of course, it can’t happen soon enough. But does that mean we’re looking at these months as full of wasted time? Not at all.

**Peter:** That is terrific to hear. Thank you so much to the students who contributed all of these thoughtful reflections.

Mike, hearing these comments, which will give future generations such a compelling window into the experiences of this unusual year, I want to ask, how will students and others access the “Help Us Make History” records in the future, and what’s next for this project?

**Mike:** The postcards, the physical postcards that we took in, will be processed into the university archives and will be available for researchers to use probably sometime in 2022, depending on when we decide to end the project.

The digital files will be processed into the library’s digital preservation system and will be described and made available just like any other physical archives would be.

We have two new prompts that are unpublished on the “Help Us Make History” website that are ready to go. The first one we’re going to put up in December, right around the time the semester is coming to an end, asking students to tell us about their biggest accomplishment of the semester. And that can be photographs. It could be video. It could be a written account, much like the current prompt that we have up now. And then in January, right before the semester starts, we’re going to have a prompt asking students to give incoming students advice on how best to handle being on campus for the spring semester.

**Peter:** So, Mike, thank you so, so much for a wonderful and memorable conversation.

**Mike:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Peter:** And thank you to the three undergraduates who contributed their voices to this podcast, reading their fellow students’ submissions to the project: Solomon Adams, Silliman College Class of 2024; Regina Sung, Pierson College Class of 2024; and Emma Levin, Benjamin Franklin College Class of 2023.

To all of the undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students at Yale who have submitted materials to the “Help Us Make History” project, you have my appreciation and admiration. The project remains open, and I encourage you to continue sharing your perspectives.

To friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining me for Yale Talk and this fascinating exploration of the university’s history in the making. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.