Central State Hospital Archives Project

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Central State Hospital history

- Founded 1870, Virginia
- Original name: “Central Lunatic Asylum for Colored Insane”
- Requested for mental health care of former enslaved people by Freedmen’s Bureau
- Remained segregated until 1964
- Still in operation today, although contains more “forensic” patients
CSH Female epileptic building, 1898
Male TB colony, n.d.
Charities and correction staff, 1908
Our dryer, 1955
The problem

- Concerns by staff for preservation of records, 1870-1970; rumor of new policy due to HIPAA requirements
- UT Dept of Social Work and School of Information partnership beginning 2008
- Plans for preservation via digitization
Digitization

- Funding secured
- Project archivist Lorraine Dong, PhD student with MSIS in preservation management
- Arrangement and preparation
- Concurrent PhD research toward understanding creation of records
- Digitization by Crowley
  - 400 dpi, full color TIFF
2012 Discussions with stakeholders

- CSH nurses, administration, doctors
- Experts in medical records privacy
  - Legal
  - Policy
- Historians
- Families/descendants of patients
- Archivists
2015 Proposal to Mellon

- Access at Virginia State Library (official repository) while preserving privacy
- Facilitating research about history of African-American access to mental health
- Facilitating family research
- State implementations of restrictions on access (HIPAA, other) analysis
- Policy analysis
- Open-source software products to implement preservation, access, privacy
Plans for software

- Meeting concerns for wide range of sensitive archival materials
- Set up dark archive of unredacted scans and born-digital materials
- Devise means of transcribing handwritten text and analyzing forms
- Creation of searchable/anonymized database to support digital library
- Creation of tools for access restriction
2015-2016 work

- Set up dark archive
- Policy analysis across states
- Questionnaire to states about digital records implementations in place
  - Recommendations for project computer platform(s)
- Questionnaires to families and historians about research needs
  - Recommendations for project implementations
- Solicitation of state archives holding mental hospital records to serve as tests
Future work: evaluate questionnaires

- State archives
  - State hospital holdings
  - Digital archival implementations
- Families
  - What they know
  - What they want to know
  - Preferences for privacy
- Historians
  - Research themes and methods
Future work: designing software

- How to know what sensitive data is in the records
- How to restrict sensitive materials
  - Protecting patients
  - Protecting hospital staffs
- Without restricting families’ access
- Why not just destroy it?
  - Importance for health care going forward
Future work: experimenting in state environments

- Virginia State Library: CSH holdings
- Texas State Archives: Possible ASH holdings
- Mississippi State Archives: State Lunatic Asylum holdings
Potential benefits

- Better understanding of ethical considerations for medical records
- Better understanding of the history of mental health care in the US
Questions?

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