At Oberlin College there are some professors who have been bringing their students to the Archives for various courses for years, but in the last 5 or so years we have seen a dramatic increase in professors interested in exposing their students to archival materials and to presentations by the archivists. Partly this is in response to direct email contact from the College Archivist, Ken Grossi, who scans the course offerings for each academic year and invites certain professors to consider scheduling an instruction session with us. But it is also in response to a growing academic commitment to primary source teaching for undergraduates.

At the beginning of any teaching session in the Archives, the College Archivist and I always preface our presentations to students with background on the Archives and what we do, and explain the differences between Archives and Special Collections, and how everything we show them relates to the history of the College and is often part of a larger archival collection. We also show them how to navigate our website and finding aids online, and show that collections are often connected to other collections. We want them to feel comfortable coming back to the Archives on their own for follow up research or for any interest they may have in exploring our holdings.

My experience with teaching with objects at Oberlin College has been in support of two art history courses: the History of Photography and Introduction to Western Architecture. These are two areas in which I have some expertise, while the College Archivist has others to offer. Art history faculty are, of course, already object-focused, so my approach to photographic materials and architectural records as visual objects works well for them. In the case of photography, the faculty member requested that I present a selection of materials from the whole history of photography from its inception to digital ascendancy, and speak on the processes involved in their production. I made a selection of materials and gave the professor a descriptive list for her approval a week before the session.

The list of materials not only demonstrated the history of photographic production and technique, but also included objects that the students could handle with their bare hands, with instruction on handling: cased images like daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, cabinet cards and cartes-de-visite (by their edges), portraits mounted in original presentation mats, photograph albums, a framed panorama, lantern slides, and glass and film negatives and transparencies encased in sleeves and viewed on a light box. I also include a few cameras or pictures of specific cameras that generated the images. Recently my department acquired a large format, studio portrait camera from 1901 that belonged to a local photographer.

Many of the students had never seen a negative or transparency before, and so the processes involved in the production and use of 20th century negatives were just as mysterious to them as the 19th century objects. After introducing all of the materials to them I
invite the class to handle them and explained how they could safely be handled. Students who are given an opportunity to experience the objects physically come away with a much better grasp of their physical qualities and how they were produced, and their historical contexts.

My approach to photographic materials, like that of most of my colleagues who work primarily with visual materials, is to appreciate them as cultural objects whose presentation formats are as historically significant as the images that rest on the physical carriers. The social contexts of their creation and use are as important as the images. And in the case of photo albums, the placement and sequence of photographs, along with captions, make them a form of time-based media that suggest narrative. I noticed that the students were particularly interested in the student-produced albums of photographs made with the Brownie camera around 1905. I had explained George Eastman’s brilliant marketing strategy to make photography accessible to non-photographers with the Kodak Brownie, and included a copy of a newspaper advertisement. The whimsical photos made by early 20th century students at Oberlin marked a change from the more formal images that preceded them in the chronological sequence of materials on display from the history of photography.

As for architectural records, these come in a variety of materials including presentation sketches and paintings, models, photographs, masters for reproduction on paper, linen and film, and the copies such as blueprints and brownlines. While you may think that most of these are not objects per se, I would argue that, as with photographic materials, they illustrate processes of production, often creative in nature. Our original presentation drawings by the architect Cass Gilbert, for example, have artistic value as well as evidential values.

Just getting some exposure to these materials in person helps students to understand the design process and the work of architects and contractors. The design drawings at various stages of revision indicate the interplay of architect, client and builder on a project. The architectural historian at Oberlin requires that the students in his course produce a short paper based entirely on archival research on one of four building complexes on campus. These students get intense exposure to primary sources through this assignment, and our staff works with them throughout the semester to develop an angle on their topic and dig into the records. Some go to great lengths to investigate correspondence between the various offices on campus and the architects to track the story behind a building. In this way they experience the interconnectedness of archival materials, and begin to understand the importance of records and the role of the Archives at the College.