Major Gift to Establish the Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center

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The creation of an archives center at the Institute for Advanced Study has been funded by a $3.5 million gift from the Leon Levy Foundation. The Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center will allow the Institute to formally organize and preserve important historical materials, and serve as a repository for papers, oral histories, photographs, and other essential source materials moving forward. The gift reflects the continuing, dedicated support of Institute Trustee Shelby White and the Leon Levy Foundation, a not-for-profit foundation formed after the death of White’s husband Leon Levy, a leading financier who served as an Institute Trustee from 1988 to 2003.

“We are immensely grateful to Shelby White and the Leon Levy Foundation for providing us with the resources to meet a pressing and critically important need for the Institute,” said Director Peter Goddard. “This donation will ensure the preservation of the Institute’s Archives, a resource of great historical importance, and demonstrates the outstanding generosity and vision of Shelby and the foundation, from which the Institute has benefited enormously over the years.”

The gift from the Leon Levy Foundation will cover initial capital costs for the Archives, and fund an endowment to support operating costs now and in future years. The gift has enabled the hiring of Christine Di Bella, most recently the archivist and project director for the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries’ Consortial Survey Initiative based at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, as the Institute’s first full-time archivist. In addition, the gift will make possible the employment of support staff and oral historians, facilitate improvements to the existing archival space, and create additional space to house acquisitions projected over the next twenty years.

White, founding Trustee of the Leon Levy Foundation, said her interest in creating the center was sparked by an anecdote about John von Neumann, the renowned mathematician who came to the Institute in 1933 as one of its first Professors and worked there until his death in 1957. “When his daughter, Marina Whitman, told me that she did not give the Institute his papers because it did not have an archive center, ” White said, “I knew that the Institute needed one to help ensure that the valuable papers of its distinguished Faculty be preserved.”

White and the Leon Levy Foundation have supported the Institute in a range of significant ways. During his fifteen years on the Institute Board, Leon Levy contributed considerable talents in his role as Vice Chairman and President of the Corporation (1995–2003), and shared an intellectual vitality that greatly benefited the Institute. The New Initiatives Fund established by Levy and White in 1998 has promoted progress in new and important programs such as systems biology and theoretical computer science, and has supported emerging research in mathematics and astrophysics. Since the 2005–06 academic year, the foundation has funded a Leon Levy Member in the School of Social Science.

Since the Institute’s Archives were formally established in 1986, they have existed as an informal adjunct to the Historical Studies–Social Science Library, through the part-time efforts of Library staff. Primarily a paper-based collection dating from the 1930s onward, the Archives currently include official correspondence of the Director’s Office, minutes of meetings of the Faculty and Board of Trustees, correspondence and files concerning past Faculty members, records of the Electronic Computer Project, and other documents. In addition, the Archives house the papers of the late John Bahcall, Professor in the School of Natural Sciences from 1971–2005, and copies of the lecture notes of the late Ernst Kantorowicz, Professor in the School of Historical Studies from 1951–63. The Archives also contain the Institute’s oral-history tapes and transcripts and a collection of photographs of the Institute’s buildings and grounds, the Electronic Computer Project, Faculty, Directors, and others affiliated with the Institute.