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# Modern Special Collections: Embracing the Future While Taking Care of the Past

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*Abstract*

*As managers of special collections engage with evolving formats and technologies, it is imperative that these professionals remain well versed in papyrus, paper, and principles that inform archival work. The permanence of this content defines our past, informs our present, and shapes our future. However, a constricting interpretation of archival principles heavily focused on the "integrity" of recordkeeping drives collection managers further from the resources needed to do their jobs in this new age of archiving. Thinking in a non-traditional strategic*

manner can ensure continued collection development, access and relevance for the next

generation.

*Keywords: university libraries, strategy, management, library staff development, collection*

*management*

An ever-expanding range of digital collection formats and technologies bring to the archival and special collections profession both new skills and challenges to manage, while the traditional analog formats remain a vital part of our heritage that will always require attention and care. Even as we engage with evolving formats and technologies and increasingly address born-digital content, it is imperative that special collections professionals (including archivists, librarians, and technologists) remain well versed in papyrus, paper, and archival principles that inform our work. At the core of archival theory is the permanence of the material that defines the past, informs the present and shapes the future. The archival concept of permanence transcends the preservation of the physical item and ensures the content remains unchanged. This is important when addressing born digital content. It can be difficult to ascertain the integrity and authenticity of a digital object without proper version control, documentation of the change of custody and an understanding of basic network and computer programming. This cultural necessity must remain our core mission and requires strategic thinking about how we ensure continued collection development, access and significance for the next generation. To create a strategic agenda for modern special collections I propose a broad framework of concepts to consider with archival principles:  Collecting, Connecting, Collaborating and Community. These

are concepts with which the profession is familiar, but how one balances them or customizes

them to manage staff and collections matters and influences how one conducts archival work.

- **Collecting** content from the past and the present and preparing for the future.

- **Connecting** with people through events, exhibits and use of technology.

- **Collaborating** with immediate constituents and external entities such as other cultural

  institutions.

- **Community** – engaging the community that owns, supports or serves the repository or

  creating a new community that will advocate for and donate to the repository.

Special collections in any generation or iteration are 'special' because of the rarity,

scarcity, uniqueness and distinctiveness of their holdings. Each institution that prides itself with a

repository of such gems has the 'only' copy of an item or a 'comprehensive' collection of a

creator or subject that speaks to multiple disciplines. The niche cannot be so narrow that only a

handful of people can benefit, nor so broad that it is not necessary to visit in person. However,

special collections repositories are not museums. The intent is for collection materials to be

accessible and in use to create scholarship, not stored and exhibited periodically. Managing and

developing these distinctive collections requires the same set of fundamental archival principles

handed down from generations, including: appraisal, provenance, preservation, rights, ownership, and advocacy. Although the interpretation and implementation of these principles may vary, how one collaborates and integrates staff skill sets to accomplish these concepts will continue to evolve.

Traditional special collections in academic settings began primarily as rare book collections and/or repositories for the historical disposition of university archives (Swain, 2008). Because special collections grew out of library collections, traditional librarians were often the first keepers and managers of them. In the last 30 years, there has been an active revitalization of special collection departments. These departments were often marginalized due to misunderstanding of the work performed by archivists and the value of collection material. One of the challenges in academic special collections is that many are still recovering from periods of neglect and isolation, where they became passive storehouses or poorly funded hidden anomalies. All too often, staff members have isolated themselves, becoming victims of their own stringent interpretation of archival principles, such as overwrought attention to details and intense description, so much so that processing backlogs are often immense and access and use are limited. Another challenge that still lingers when conducting archival work in this setting is that traditional library metrics are not always sufficient to accurately measure the use and value

of special collections and archives. For example, circulating statistics may not be the best way to

show value of collections or determine the relevance of the work performed.

As management of special collections shifts from librarians to archivists and to staff in

senior level positions, the strategies for such collections must loosen the traditional structures

while still embracing archival principles to protect and care for the collections. Managing special

collections requires sound understanding of archival processing and database applications;

collection expertise and interest; understanding of intellectual property and copyrights; outreach

and advocacy; and most of all dedicated programmer support. These skills and concepts will

ensure the authenticity and integrity as well as promote access to collections preserved in

perpetuity regardless of format. These materials will document disciplines, culture and history

for future generations, the evidence that we build nations upon. There is no one-way to apply,

implement, develop and successfully collaborate with others to accomplish this but it is critical

that we not throw aside the fundamentals of our profession.

For years, information professionals and educators have shared their interpretation or

implementation of guiding principles of archival work. Terry Cook's (1999) essay, "What is Past

is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift" looks at

archival theory over decades and across continents, touching on social and collective memory to

the implementation of archival principles. Discussions about the evolution of archives as evidentiary documents to distinct collections that highlight a person, place, event or discipline will continue. Archival principles discussed include the following: provenance, the context in which records are created and by whom; appraisal, the identification of materials of long-term value; and description, the means by which physically processed collections are described. As is often the case, tension arises at the point of confrontation between the application of principles and responsiveness to the outside forces that influence them, from secure, safe storage environments, to limited resources, and adjustments in policy and procedures to new formats and tools.

However, solely focusing on maintaining the "integrity" of recordkeeping through a constricting definition of provenance or restrictive preservation and access policies pushes the managers of these departments further from the table of resources needed to do their jobs in this new age of archiving. The development of archival theory emulates archival practice and the environment in which the collections reside and social pressures in turn affect the practice of archiving. Collection development efforts are driven either by the curriculum or faculty research, of by donor relations and the university administration. The concept of accepting collecting collections at will or archival work being unobtrusive or unseen to be effective is no longer a

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viable option. Due to changes in formats and access expectations it is more effective for archivists to share why and how they do things, to actively collaborate with others and adjust how they do things for the longevity of collection access.

The concepts developed and upheld for print materials do not always allow for archivists to appraise, acquire, and describe archival records for different uses. It leaves the creator (administration) in control of how a collection was defined and arranged. The profession wavers between provenance and the contextual circumstances of record creation being the core focus of archival activities, rather than the external criteria such as use, public opinion, or historiographical trends being the driving force. That context of activity is difficult to determine due to the large number of records and information in paper, audio-visual, and digital form. Bridging the work of different types of information specialists, has led to a functional approach to appraisal rather than searching for "values" within the content of records. Some focus on the external factors on archival activities including its impact on how material is arranged and described is a shift that has led to the creation of descriptive standards. An underlining theme in the debate surrounding archival principles is the notion that archivists must document their decision-making and strategy. It should be an accepted fact, like historiography, that it is difficult for archivists to collect and provide access in a completely unbiased way. Just like editors of

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books, archivists shape how users interact with the collections. "The technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event" (Derrida, 1998).

Modern special collections should review and revise strategies to support collection development policies. The implication for archival appraisal and retention when a repository collects passively is difficult. Foote points out that in 1970 historian Howard Zinn faulted archivists for neglecting to collect records documenting significant social minorities outside the mainstream of American life (Foote, 2000) (Hinding, 1981). If the repository is collecting "the history of the institution or city" what does that look like? For college and university archivists' collection, development strategy is an extension of the institutional mission and commitment to documenting the administrative, financial, legal and historical record of the institution. In addition, papers of longtime distinguished faculty supplement the official records of the university. These

**Collecting**

There are innovative ways to "curate" and create research collections that provide users with content about a person, place, and ideas. Although the tactile handling of physical materials is important, the question of how archivists and special collections generally are preparing for the onslaught of digital records is critical. In the modern age of special collections, it is possible for a physical collection not to reside at the institution that provides access to it and possible for it to be accessible by an institution that does not own it. Digital surrogates, progressive ownership and remote storage are efforts that defy traditional archival practices but can be viable possibilities. However, traditional preservation including safety and security are important for continuing access. How can we think outside the box? Can ownership of collections be shared or in a variety of locations, rather than all onsite where space is limited? Although ownership often informs how one works with collection material, there are other ways to negotiate so that the necessary work performed to make content accessible happens. Why not a tiered approach, acquiring collections or rights over time? Why not perform archival activities in different places or provide access to portions of it? Pushing these boundaries can lead to collaborations that can consolidate resources and ensure access to a variety of materials while collecting in the digital age. Developing relationships with Institutional Technology departments is paramount. The

ability to understand the processes and terminology of both areas of expertise will insure the proper ingest of digital content, preservation metadata and server storage criteria.

Collecting policies can often support the mission of the institution or be user centric, whether they are internal or external, undergraduate or graduate, faculty or donors or other constituents. Although formats play a role in collection development strategy by informing the costs and skill set required to process and make content accessible they should not be the dominant criteria. With the progress made in processing, preserving and accessing digital formats and obsolete media, archivists continue to focus on looking holistically at the content. "Institutions have relied on collectors to collect," says Lazorchak, "But people and organizations have to start collecting these [digital objects] earlier in their life cycle. In the past we could wait for a collector to collect over decades, and then acquire those materials, because they were in a format that was still understandable" (Swain, 2008). It is not sustainable to collect in the interest of one person or group when that person or group's interest wanes; the collection should remain relevant and useful in order to sustain resources for its ongoing management (staffing, funding, and use). It is unfortunate that archivists are shifting their train of thought to "the now" due to a shift in format rather than realizing the power they have to gain access to the tale where the bounty of resources resides. As daunting as born digital records are, so can be obsolete media

such as audio, video, film and any other unfamiliar or poorly supported medium. How long will

content in a special collection department be inaccessible, filling up spaces because of the

inability to address non-print material? Where is the strategy to address the limited skills and the

unknown? Do not ignore these challenges or become passive or defeated. Persistency matters –

whether one submits grant applications or keeps the attention on the annual report, one must

mention the 5,000 audiocassettes or inability to accept 10 terabytes on a hard drive. Someone,

some collaboration, some breakthrough will and can happen to make one's valuable collection

accessible -- if nothing else to review the content and determine its fate or disposition.

Sometimes just creating an inventory and knowing what one has can guide what to do with

materials.

Thinking about collecting and preserving born digital content means "collecting in the

now." Collecting in the now or rapid response collecting is a strategy where cultural institutions

engage and collect content that document a current event in a timely manner. Although,

archivists will continue to receive central processing units (CPUs) and hard drives, they will also

collect content directly from the web or a server. Projects that seek to capture current events

using social media are an example. The collected reactions to the event as it happens can become

rich historic data for researchers later. Another active collecting strategy is participatory

collection development, where the community is directly involved in the creation of the collection. There are projects that result in the community informing or creating the description, or projects can develop partnerships to expand collecting areas. As we combat information overload, we no longer can wait for permission to clean our basements and attics. Nor do digital formats allow us to want to preserve, describe and manage future content. Relationships with potential donors and content creators that inform history must be made "in the now," while they are living. One way to do this is participatory collection development, which in the broadest sense is about helping people recognize that they can contribute to the evidence used to write history, because acquiring collections is about trust and about what future generations will need to learn about the society and world in which we live. As much as custody and provenance of records are useful, so is capturing content before it disappears. Although these projects abruptly change the appraisal of collections, they are important nonetheless. These projects also lead to collaborative efforts that offset costs and result in new marketing strategies and access. Collaboration helps participants value preservation more and improves their understanding of what is involved in archival work. It also pushes repositories to rethink ownership. With the increase in content on the web and digitization, archivists have to become more knowledgeable than before with contract negotiations and rights issues. Participatory collection development

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challenges those notions. Is it possible to provide immediate access to unowned content, even temporarily? Is it possible to own it in the future to provide the best preservation or to ensure that the owners of it do so?

**Connecting**

The debates about appraisal and arrangement and description in modern special collections remain relevant. What and how much to keep continuously challenges archivists along with non-print formats and the sheer mass of information. The framework to consider supports the process by which archivists identify materials of long-term value. Whichever theory is applied or whichever informs archival activities – it is evident that for future success, an archival strategy with a focus on permanence is required regardless of format. Permanence of information with a broad interpretation and use of new technology may change how archivists view ownership, storage and collection development. James O'Toole often argued that archivists must leave their bias aside when selecting and appraising and embrace collecting it all collaboratively (O'Toole, 2000). "… archival thinking over the century should be viewed as constantly evolving, ever mutating as it adapts to radical changes in the nature of records, record-

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creating organizations, record-keeping systems, record uses, and the wider cultural, legal, technological, social, and philosophical trends in society" (Cook T. , 1997).

The future of sustainable archives is about connecting with people and connecting them with information in a coherent and seamless manner both digitally and in person. Digitizing a scrapbook with a page-turner application in addition to having it on display in an exhibit or accessible in a reading room for someone to touch and review is an example.  Increasingly, there are descriptions and digital images of collections available online. They are not always as searchable as popular search engines, but there non-the-less. Engaging the community in this way can create funding and collecting opportunities. Tools from social media to databases can be useful applications when applied strategically with purpose not because everyone uses them. Applying a framework to guide archival work in the department shapes the actions needed to address specific challenges or goals within the repository. A strategy could be to work with creators or people familiar with the creators and collecting areas to help grow collections. It is impossible to be an expert in every area in which one collects. A grocery store manager does not taste every product in the store but knows what she has, how it is used and how it benefits her clientele.  Collaborations among institutions that share the same mission or perhaps have similar collections are an opportunity for grants and simple points of access through websites and digital

projects. In this generation of explosive technology use, the walls of our institutions no longer confine us. Is it possible to have an arrangement where the creators of the materials assist with description, with funding or with space? The design of participatory collection development involves actively engaging all stakeholders to help ensure the result meets the needs of each.

The processes of appraisal, deaccessioning, and arrangement affect the decisions about selection and style that establish the archives. Again, embracing new interpretations of archival practices to better reveal and access collections and investing in the customization and new creation of information content management systems is important (Gilliland-Swetland, February 2000). New technologies and uses of relational databases, tools, standards and encoding schemas have enhanced how archival principles are implemented, but require more strategy and discussion on how the work is done. Many decisions at a conceptual and theoretical level need to be made and are more complex when dealing with different formats. Using these tools can allow archivists to generate access points or an arrangement that goes beyond the creator or custodian of the material. With the use of technology, the interconnectedness of the materials make for a far more robust finding aid and search experience, but it also can complicate things. Moving away from traditional curatorship of physical objects doesn't mean we ignore them; it means we think beyond how "it's always been done."

**Collaborating**

Collaborative work with others in the profession and with constituents will continue to shape the definition and value of archives as both place and value. Without archivists sharing a common good and maintaining an agreement on our purpose we may lose the battle in our constantly shifting roles stewarding the archives of the future. For the department's relevance, sustainability, and acceptance by a wider audience, an articulated strategy and clear message about the activities of an archivist and functions of an archive must evolve.

It is important to develop collections rich in content that will support interdisciplinary work and multiple generations, as well as ones were are able to preserve and to which we can ensure access. One of the growths in the area of selection and appraisal involves the creator and/ or community in the development process. Let us not ignore format and function but place a heavier or equal emphasis on outcome and advocacy. Documenting the strategy used when conducting appraisal in a cooperative fashion, such seeking faculty and researcher input will help identify gaps in the collections and can serve as a resource to manage expectations. Regardless of format with the understanding that archives are organic, often growing largely unobserved out of individual and corporate activity in collaboration, we can better describe and provide access to

the content. As formats evolve, it is more important for archivists to be involved actively at the inception or to work with the community or creator to maintain the integrity of the material and advocate for long-term preservation and access. Access involves an arrangement or identification of materials (file naming) in some fashion. Archivist should continue to serve as a trusted source of information and therefore, will need to be skilled or have access to someone with the skill set to determine authenticity and accuracy of born digital content.

Managers of modern special collections must consider alternative and active ways to develop collections; archivists must collect the past, present and future at the same time. The present and future can be done through partnering with others, allowing the creators or community to compile materials or help develop lasting relationships so that repositories and the concept of archives are in the forefront of one's mind. However, there is much compromise as we collect in this fashion; archivists must be able to explain their work in simple terms and thoughtfully to differentiate their work from clerical assumptions. Archivists do not file paper just as librarians do not shelve books. Explaining how archivists determine what to collect and why something is not as valuable as the creator believes are important elevator speeches to have ready. It is always good to have a document that captures the direction and strategy of the department's work. Archivists must think differently about immediate ownership and more

about access and by any means necessary. It is no longer sound to collect and store materials

that are not accessible by others in one's lifetime. At the same time, archivists should be

knowledgeable and have access to someone or a resource that can assist in negotiating terms of

agreements. These terms should manage expectations for all parties involved; from physical

ownership transfer and permissions, these agreements define how to address each collection.

Although there are differences in managing paper and born-digital content, there are also

similarities. Although challenged by new formats, provenance and original order still provide

valuable context for archival professionals and researchers. There are similar processing steps,

but the technical metadata for digital formats has the same value as condition does for printed

materials or audiovisual formats. Unlike physical processing for paper, there are more

automated processing steps for digital content. Similarly, there are opportunities to use content

searching to locate digital items that are not available for physical items. On the other hand, as

for physical records, processing steps done by humans, or steps that require a great deal of

analysis, can create processing backlogs even if they apply to many files at a time. Providing

access regardless of format will require archivists to develop a strategy and stick to it. Sometimes

preserving an item creates obstacles to access (format migration and emulation), but the mission

to provide some way of discovering materials must remain at the forefront regardless of existing

minimal access and discoverability of materials within the collection. Embracing the spirit of

collaboration assists archivists in defining archives with permanence at the core so that

constituents and collaborators accept or at least consider the difficult decisions made to ensure

long-term access by preserving the content in all formats (Manoff, 2004) (Tanya Clement, 2013).

This does not mean one's repository is the single one preserving or owning it all. It's a balance-

based approach.

**Community**

It is archival and manuscript collections that often are subject to digitization, especially

when ownership is clear. Special collections dominate the content of this arena, but can also lead

in coordinating and managing digital projects. No one denies the importance of archives as

evidence or the organic nature of them, but for the success of special collections, application of

these principles should not isolate them to the point where it hurts them. To prevent this, modern

special collections should balance the four principles of collecting, connecting, collaborating and

community and investigate traditional and non-traditional strategies to meet the needs of the

department.  Flexibility and innovation are two key factors in managing modern special

collections. Perhaps the strategy is to digitize materials and return the physical item because your

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concern is content not original item. To "collect in the now" (which is key to selecting and appraising in this non-print generation), might it be feasible to acquire collections that do not require ownership, at least not immediately? How do you build trust quickly to capture content that has far less sustainability than paper? A tiered approach to obtaining collections will benefit the creator(s) and the repository.

There is opportunity to work with non-archivists and non-librarians, people who have established relationships in communities or with people who have the collections that will complement your existing collection and support your collection development policy. Although the appraisal process is delayed or minimal, you gain trust from people you did not have and demystify the reputation of your institution and the archival process. For example, in order to diversify existing collections, working with someone with an existing relationship with someone in the community that you want included in the repository lessens the time needed to build individual trust to acquire the collection. Having a trusted colleague to gain access and acquire collections builds trust with the community and constituents. To shift from a passive collecting agency and actually document society while it is generating content, archivists must go beyond the walls of their repository. These relationships will create increased funding opportunities and resource support.

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There is too much information and too much change for one person or repository to do it alone. Collaboration includes participatory collection development, but also leads to sharing resources and marketing/ access opportunities. Collaboration goes beyond cooperation. It is multiple parties coming together for a common cause and sharing the workload in resources. Resources can mean server storage, physical storage, staff labor and/or expertise, money, staff and whatever combination one can conjure. Regardless of size, most institutions are struggling. For the best means of access and without minimizing robust description and the time it takes to arrange and describe content, there must be a balanced strategy, one that focuses on the tasks and functions with little remorse, one that provides active use of collections while ensuring its long-term safety. Can archivists clearly articulate to leadership and constituents what is involved in making collections available physically and digitally? Moreover, when we can, we develop relationships that provide resources to keep our repository / department vibrant.  Why not settle on creating a strategy that will market your materials and abilities, rather than pondering for too long the relevance of archival theory or the challenges in applying? This would mean changing the definition of a successful archival program, special collections department or comprehensive collection. Decide on realistic goals and consult with your administration or your advocates/

allies who can help accomplish the goals to successfully develop, maintain and ensure access to these collections.

Collaboration with researchers and scholars responsible for the analysis and summarization or application of knowledge from collection content also informs arrangement and description, collection development and access. "Collecting, arranging, and curating 'thematic research collections' and 'digital scholarly editions' means that the role of the scholar is likewise becoming increasingly enmeshed with the activities traditionally assigned to the archivist" (Tanya Clement, 2013).Special collection departments are microcosms of a library. These departments handle rights issues, donor relations, contract negotiations, selection and appraisal, as well as manage facilities and staff. They can be most valuable to a library / or college/ university, yet the least understood and therefore often the most overlooked. Whether a program no longer exists or faculty supporters retire, materials in special collections, unlike the library, cannot be deaccessioned. Therefore, special collections departments must be flexible and willing to reinvent themselves and serve a broader audience. Long gone are the days where faculty chooses to work for the institution that houses collections solely for their enjoyment and research purposes. With digital technologies, these collections can reach a global constituency.

What remains true in academic special collections is that they are forced or required to remain in alignment with their parent institution, the library. To continue to justify value, focus shifted from just preserving (storing, securing) to physical and remote/ digital access. It is difficult to uphold the mission of the parent when communication is weak. In *College University Archives Reader*, an archivist states the challenge to "integrate the institutional archives more closely with the convention library materials, especially through access of finding aids and sophisticated websites." Only in this way will the archives have a chance at having a place on the list of library funding priorities. (Swain, 2008) Modern special collections must expand this line of thinking and create a strategy that supports activities of which archivists/ librarians are not accustomed. It should produce a new generation of managers as well. A balanced and customized approach will ensure that archives and special collections remain relevant for generations to come.

Archives are about preserving memory. Educating the community and seeking their involvement are important to build and acquire collections, but also to describe and sustain them. The community will fund these endeavors as well. Managing forward, archivists must push the boundaries of tradition, while addressing the backlog to ensure discoverability of what has been collected. Keeping an open mind in order to preserve the history of one's society is worth the

experimentation and stepping out of one's comfort zone. By doing so, archivists will help current

and future generations understand the past and support the creation of new knowledge.

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