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Capitalizing on short-term collaborative projects

A special collections case study

After the University of Idaho (UI) Library Special Collections and Archives (SPEC) received an unexpected bequest of approximately 340 boxes of science fiction books and manuscript materials, faculty and staff had to think creatively about how to appraise, clean, preserve, and provide basic access to the collection within a short time frame.

Embracing the idea that short-term collaborative projects require less formality, which makes them “low-hanging fruit” and more likely to succeed than long-term collaborative projects,¹ SPEC implemented successful strategies such as cross-training library student employees from other units, applying for use of temporary space on campus, and creative use of available technology. Short-term projects require different approaches and resources than a long-term project. Lessons about flexibility, student learning, and using available technology can be used by other academic libraries facing short-term projects that can at first seem overwhelming.

Project background

Established in 1889, UI is the state’s land grant university with approximately 12,000 students. SPEC is the second largest archival repository in Idaho that collects, preserves, and curates unique materials that document the history of the university, the state, and the Inland Northwest. Major collecting areas include agriculture, natural resources, mining, jazz, and collections that support UI academic programs.

SPEC learned that Vicki Mitchell, a UI alumna, had bequeathed her collection of science fiction and fantasy materials to the UI

Library upon her death in 2017. Both Mitchell and Jon Gustafson, her spouse, were founding members of MosCon, a regional science fiction convention that began in 1978. A staff geologist by day and a writer of science fiction and fantasy by night, Mitchell’s book, *Enemy Unseen*, was listed on the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1990 and published in multiple languages.

Gustafson, who preceded her in death, was a professional appraiser of science fiction art and memorabilia, author, reviewer, and publisher. On-the-spot appraisal of the materials (books, serials, unpublished manuscripts, artwork, business records, local and regional convention records, audiovisual materials, costumes, and collectibles) showed the enormous research potential of the collection. The Mitchell collection documents the science fiction communities of the Inland Northwest currently missing from other archival collections nationwide.² For these reasons, it was worth the time and effort to plan for the acquisition of these unique primary sources.

Major challenges

There were several major challenges, including those specific to the collection (time

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frame imposed by the estate, size of collection, storage space, and original condition) and those found in short-term collaborative projects (availability of equipment, staff, and budget). Solutions to the identified challenges involved thinking creatively and flexibly in order to overcome these challenges.

Part of the time frame challenge was to find a dedicated space to clean and inventory the collection. Because the initial condition of the collection required preservation intervention before being introduced to permanent collection storage space, SPEC needed to identify another location where cleaning could take place before the permanent move. Fortunately, an on-campus opportunity presented itself. UI had recently opened the Integrated Research and Innovation Center (IRIC), which provides flexible, collaborative space for teams of faculty and students gaining hands-on experience across academic departments for short periods of time.

The UI Library applied for and was awarded access to a dry lab for one semester at no cost. Featuring multiple table heights, good lighting, secure room access, electrical plugs, sink, and square footage large enough to accommodate the entire collection, the dry lab was a perfect solution for this short-term project.

Cross-training existing library student assistants

In calculating the number of hours and level of expertise required to complete the project on time, it was determined that additional short-term staffing was needed. This was due to existing faculty and staff all having regu-

lar duties and projects that could not be set aside and that it required working outside the main library building. Library administration gave permission for SPEC to collaborate with other library departments (access services and the curriculum center) to share student employees for one semester. This provided an opportunity for existing student employees to expand their knowledge and skills in a new department and further understand the value of archives and special collections.

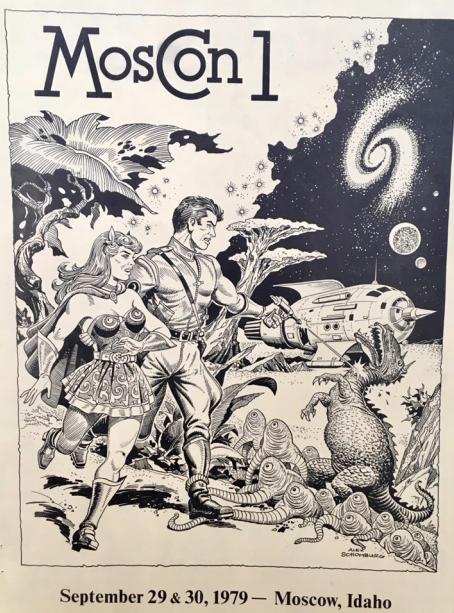
Students also worked together during shifts and could assist and consult with each other using peer-training.

Cross-training involved sessions on safely handling and cleaning books, media, and three-dimensional objects from the collection, including the use of vacuums capable of filtering out mold spores. Though archival quality vacuums were outside of the budget, SPEC purchased two Metro toner vacuums determined to have similar functionality and attachments. Students

learned safety procedures for working with materials that potentially included mildew and mold and wore protective gear including masks, aprons, and gloves. Staff also provided students with written procedures and instructions designed for this specific project.

Using temporary tools and technology

Because this project was considered short-term, SPEC found ways to avoid purchasing permanent tools and technology while increasing productivity on a short timeline. The collection arrived without an inventory, which prevented making initial appraisal decisions. Since cleaning the collection required



Poster from the 1979 MosCon Convention.

handling every item, staff capitalized on the high-touch process by creating an inventory of books and serials using a book app.

SPEC avoided expensive equipment purchases by borrowing two iPad Minis for the semester through the library curriculum center. Staff investigated the use of book apps to create a basic inventory of monographs and serials that would assist with future appraisal decisions. Staff chose BookCrawler (\$2.99, Apple App Store), which uses the camera feature to scan ISBN barcodes and draws from a database to populate fields for each entry.

An important consideration in choosing this app was that it allowed data to be exported as a CSV file. The database includes many fields, including title, author, publication date, publisher, edition, page count, ISBN/ISSN, and more. It also allowed for manual entries for materials that were published before ISBN and LCCN numbers were in use, which was important for many of the books and serials in this collection.³ Staff developed procedures about which fields should be completed manually for a minimal item record. By avoiding filling in each field for manual entries, staff were able to apply a More Product Less Process approach to inventorying the collection. The 'Tags' field was used to enter the box number for each item so that specific books could be found later. Making a quick inventory using an inexpensive app meant that SPEC was able to create a record of what books arrived with the acquisition and a way to sort and identify multiple copies and trends to determine collection strengths.

Opportunities for teaching primary source literacy

Using the concept that library student employee experiences in special collections and archives contribute to primary source literacy and lifelong learning,⁴ the Mitchell collection provided a unique opportunity for students to expand their skill set in understanding, caring for and curating archival collections. Students from multiple library departments (special collections, curriculum center, access services) learned about aspects of preserva-

tion while making connections within a complex collection.

For example, costumes and textiles had limited research value until students discovered photographs linking items to specific events and timelines. Students were introduced to analytical and theoretical concepts, while balancing practical considerations found in the SAA-ACRL/RBMS Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy.⁵ In particular, students met learning objectives including situating an object in its context (4C), communicating information held by an object (3B), understanding how records are collected and made publicly accessible (2D), and demonstrating historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and actors (4F). This experience demonstrated how students can still learn new skills and concepts throughout short-term projects.

Opportunities for outreach to new audiences

While the dry lab was situated outside the UI Library but still on-campus, it proved to be an excellent choice in location to work due to its security and workspace. It also provided an unforeseen opportunity to promote the interdisciplinary nature of the UI Library and SPEC. The glass walls allowed anyone walking by to see the work being done inside, and eye-catching science fiction materials hung inside the doorway. This space also provided scientists and other researchers in the building an opportunity to learn about what we do and types of unique collections that are available. SPEC was invited to participate in the weekly lunch and learn lecture series for interdisciplinary research inside the IRIC Building, which provided another opportunity for outreach to a nontraditional audience, including the local newspaper.⁶

Two examples of indirect outreach that resulted included a featured news story written for the university website and an internal photoshoot to use in library promotional materials. Tamar Chute defined indirect outreach as "reaching individuals who may never visit the archives . . . who come to believe that

their beloved university is known, in part, by the existence of its archives as a resource to the wider community.⁷

After visiting the dry lab and seeing the collection and student learning taking place, library administration scheduled a photo shoot to capture images to use in library promotional and fundraising materials. Another effect of indirect outreach was the university's communication and marketing team prioritizing an in-depth article on the project. A writer interviewed staff and student employees, which became a feature story on the website and was distributed to local and regional media outlets.⁸ These all served as opportunities for SPEC to highlight and demonstrate the work within the department as well as promote unique research collections across campus and the community.

Opportunities for new collecting areas

After acquiring the Mitchell collection, an opportunity arose to purchase the Richard W. Dodson Collection,⁹ which contained correspondence and book manuscripts written by E. E. "Doc" Smith and other famous science fiction writers. Smith graduated from UI in 1914 with two degrees in chemical engineering. He was one of the first science fiction authors to write about interstellar travel and published the *Lensman* series. After further consultation, SPEC purchased the collection because of its alumni connection, themes related to the Mitchell collection, and a way to contribute to the national research agenda on science fiction and fantasy fandom and literature. The collection could also help support UI academic programs, such as the MFA in creative writing.

Conclusion

What began as an overwhelming situation morphed into a successful collaborative short-term project that emphasized temporary solutions without first having to invest in and improve library infrastructure. This short-term project was more likely to succeed due to collaboration with library departments to cross-train students, extending beyond bor-

ders of a physical library through campus collaboration,¹⁰ and flexibility around equipment and technology purchases. SPEC also benefited from unexpected outcomes, such as expanded opportunities for teaching with primary sources on the job, nontraditional outreach opportunities through reaching an audience that otherwise may have not been exposed to library resources or services,¹¹ and a new strategic collecting area.

Most academic libraries operate within restraints such as time, staff, and budget. Using short-term collaborations allowed SPEC to accept this rich collection without sacrificing necessary steps, such as preservation and appraisal, and ultimately provided a spotlight for the value and importance of archives and special collections in academic libraries.

Notes

1. Erin E. Meyer, "Low-hanging Fruit: Leveraging Short-term Partnerships to Advance Academic Library Outreach Goals," *Collaborative Librarianship* 6, no. 3 (2014): 117, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol6/iss3/3/>.

2. Eaton Journal of Science Fiction, "SF Archival Collections," accessed February 18, 2019, <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=14sErCx7y3nalkAYeAOU6GbhCrFE&hl=en&ll=51.07757799999995%2C114.131212&z=8>.

3. Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208-263, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aaarc.68.2.c741823776k65863>.

4. Erin Paschel-Stoddart, "Let Me Tell You What I Learned": Primary Source Literacy and Student Employment in Archives and Special Collections," *The American Archivist* 81, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2018): 438-459, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.2.438>.

5. Society of American Archivists, "Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy," *Society of American Archivists*, accessed February 17, 2019, <https://www2.archivists.org>

(continues on page 472)

"I think I've already been doing this. I just didn't realize it was SoTL!"—*Melissa Mallon, Vanderbilt University, mallon.melissa@gmail.com*

Pitfalls of Neutrality: What Does Inclusivity Mean in Libraries

The program "Pitfalls of Neutrality: What Does Inclusivity Mean in Libraries" was sponsored by ACRL's Women and Gender Studies Section (WGSS) and cosponsored by the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA-OIF). Four speakers grappled with issues of concern to librarians deciding how best to make patrons feel welcome and included in our libraries. Laura Bonella, WGSS past chair, served as convener.

Raymond Pun (instruction/research librarian at the Alder Graduate School of Education) spoke about his experiences sponsoring a Wikipedia edit-a-thon on women's history, including sharing some critical emails received from community members. He noted that the Wikimedia Foundation found that less than 10% of contributors identify as female, leading to skewed content.

Jennifer L. Dean (dean of university libraries and instructional technology) and

Julia Eisenstein (associate librarian) at the University of Detroit Mercy Libraries discussed the process of implementing gender-inclusive restrooms in their Catholic university.

Despite already having single-stall restrooms, the process of converting them to gender-inclusive spaces involved more red tape than expected.

Kristin Pekoll (assistant director of ALA-OIF) concluded the program by providing resources for librarians dealing with similar challenging situations. She reminded us of the ALA Code of Ethics provisions requiring us to "distinguish between personal convictions and professional duties." She then reviewed examples of several recent challenges to library programs.

OIF provides confidential resources for implementing intellectual freedom best practices, and Pekoll encouraged attendees to report any challenges they received to www.ala.org/challengereporting.

During the discussion period, attendees asked about outreach, freedom of speech, and working with different affinity groups on campus.—*Laura Bonella, Kansas State University, laurab@ksu.edu* 

(“Capitalizing on short-term collaborative projects,” continues from page 455)

/sites/all/files/Guidelines%20for%20Primary%20Souce%20Literacy_AsApproved062018_1.pdf.

6. Taylor Nadauld, “Moscow Woman’s Sci-fi Collection Becomes UI’s Treasure,” *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, December 14, 2017, http://dnews.com/local/moscow-woman-s-sci-fi-collection-becomes-ui-s-treasure/article_4268bfb0-ae66-5cee-bfa2-2880b7eb3654.html

7. Tamar G. Chute, “Selling the College and University Archives: Current Outreach Perspectives,” *Archival Issues* 25, no. 1-2 (2000): 36-37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41102024>.

8. Leigh Cooper, “U of I Special Collections Chronicles Regional History,” *University of*

Idaho News, March 2018, <https://www.uidaho.edu/news/feature-stories/sci-fi-collection>.

9. Ashlyn Velte, “Richard Dodson Collection on E. E. “Doc” Smith and Science Fiction Finding Aid,” University of Idaho Library Special Collections and Archives, accessed February 18, 2019, <http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv895628/>.

10. Meyer, *Collaborative Librarianship* 114; Melissa Dennis, “Outreach Initiatives in Academic Libraries, 2009-2011,” *Reference Services Review* 40, no. 3 (2012): 369.

11. Meyer, *Collaborative Librarianship*, 114; Dennis, *Reference Services Review*, 369. 