

Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special, and Distinctive Collections in Research Libraries

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	6
Process	7
Approaches And Outputs	8
Themes	8
Topical Areas Of Investigation	10
Convergence of Special Collections and the Research Library	10
Advocating for Archives and Special Collections	12
Next Steps for Born Digital	13
Addressing Audiovisual Collections	15
Evolving Systems Environments	16
Stewardship Responsibilities and Collection Management.....	18
Engaging the Challenges of Diversifying Our Collections	20
Next Steps.....	22
Notes	23

INTRODUCTION

OCLC Research exists to support the library community “in collaboratively designing their future.”¹ This research and learning agenda represents the latest in a long line of OCLC Research efforts on behalf of archives and special collections in research libraries, to discern and respond to current and emerging needs in the community, and to convene colleagues across the profession to collectively move the profession forward. It is practitioner-focused and represents the results of numerous conversations, reading broadly, and thinking carefully about the most pressing needs that face our collective collections and operations. The agenda addresses areas of inquiry and potential research and learning opportunities, building on recent work in the profession.

Beginning in 2008, OCLC Research conducted two large, multi-year surveys that established a wide-scale understanding of problems and opportunities in archives and special collections at that time.^{2,3} Engaging with those issues drove much of the group’s subsequent work in archives and special collections over the ensuing nine years. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and with a motivating clarity about the scale of our hidden collections, much of this work focused on decreasing the costs of caring for collections, while increasing their discoverability and utility.

*Taking Stock and Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment*⁴ encouraged repositories to achieve baseline control and understanding of their collections as a foundation for strategic decision-making and advocacy. Jennifer Schaffner’s influential *The Metadata IS the Interface: Better Description for Better Discovery of Archives and Special Collections, Synthesized from User Studies*⁵ was a clarion call to consider our description as data, in order to leverage and mobilize it in modern discovery environments and connect to contemporary users. *Over, Under, Around, and Through: Getting Around Barriers to EAD Implementation*⁶ gave important practical advice for implementing structured data in the EAD encoding standard, in order to make collections more widely visible and accessible on the web.

The *Demystifying Born Digital* series of publications and activities responded to the growing need to build strategies and tools for dealing with born-digital collections. The Mobilizing Unique Materials stream of work encouraged generous and open approaches to facilitating use of collections. *Capture and Release: Digital Cameras in the Reading Room*⁷ encouraged allowing researchers to take photos of material and gave guidance on how to do so responsibly, and *Rapid Capture: Faster Throughput in Digitization of Special Collections*⁸ offered case studies and lessons to help scale up digitization of various formats of special materials.

While work to reveal hidden assets in strategic and efficient ways continues to be an important focus, this agenda suggests a broader perspective is needed moving forward. It reflects a shift, already underway in the profession, from concentrating solely on the value equation in the internal work of special collections, to giving equal focus to building and articulating the value of archives and special collections via services, collaborations, and engagement with the full range of colleagues, users, and other stakeholders. The value of special collections is in the collections, certainly, but it is also in the skills of the people who work with those collections.

*The Archival Advantage: Integrating Archival Expertise into Management of Born-digital Library Materials*⁹ began a conversation about the skills that archives and special collections professionals can offer the research library proper as it builds capacity to steward digital collections. This agenda extends that conversation across multiple functions and programmatic areas. As area studies, GIS, and data services librarians are building collections of material with many of the same complications and challenges as archival and special collections, and as research libraries are increasingly finding their value in services to support research, teaching, and learning, special collections can continue to extend their traditional modes of operation to the full research library enterprise. This agenda seeks to support archives and special collections as they consider how they communicate their value—and how they are valued—across the research library ecosystem, as well as how they can most effectively position their value within the broader research library.

The agenda is a map with many potential routes by which to get to the desired future. OCLC Research will continue to engage the OCLC Research Library Partnership (RLP), to gauge where there is energy and desire to work on the topics outlined here, and let that knowledge guide where effort is placed and what paths are ultimately taken in addressing those topics. We will also use the agenda as a framework for conversations with allied organizations to identify and facilitate collaborations to further push the work forward.

Process

OCLC Research undertook the creation of this research and learning agenda throughout the first half of 2017. The agenda is designed to respond to current and emerging needs of practitioners in the RLP and broader research library community in the US. It will guide OCLC Research's work in this area over the next several years, and serve as a basis for discussion with partners outside the US to better understand international needs. A transparent, iterative approach was taken to build the agenda, with significant input from the RLP. Chela Scott Weber was contracted to lead the process and to act as primary liaison to the RLP community during the development period. She collaborated closely with Senior Program Officer Merrilee Proffitt and Program Officer Jackie Dooley.

An advisory group of archives and special collections leaders was assembled to offer consultation and advice regularly throughout the process. In addition, colleagues throughout the profession were consulted, in order to identify major areas of challenge and opportunity, define problem spaces, and develop ideas for activities and outputs. Consultations were sought from people representing a cross section of roles, including leaders, administrators, and specialists with expertise in specific areas like audiovisual collections and born-digital records. The goal of this approach was to get a well-rounded sense of how issues play out at different levels of the enterprise, from the overarching view of an administrator to the on-the-ground perspective of the librarians and archivists working closely with collections and researchers.

Drafts of the research agenda were shared with the RLP community for comment and iterative improvement in several stages. An early-stage draft was shared to elicit written feedback from those who participated in early discussions. At the June 2017 RBMS Conference in Iowa City, Iowa, it was work shopped at an invitational working meeting with a small group of leaders from RLP institutions. A later-stage draft was work shopped with an invited group of archives leaders and practitioners from RLP institutions in July at the 2017 Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon. Broad community feedback was sought throughout August 2017, when the document and request for comments were posted online and shared via professional email lists, the OCLC Research blog *Hanging Together*, and OCLC social media channels. Community feedback was considered and incorporated into progressive drafts of the work. The agenda that follows is the outcome of the process and reflects the views of the community.

Approaches and Outputs

The types of work to be undertaken vary across the agenda, as appropriate to the current understanding of each problem space and level of community interest. Some issues are in need of in-depth exploration before further work can be identified, while others are already well defined and will be best addressed by practical guidance. Three basic types of work are recommended:

- **In-Depth Research:** work that helps establish or define current status, or illuminate an ill-defined area of need, such as surveys or other intensive data gathering activities, with analysis and synthesis of that data. Example: *Taking Our Pulse: The OCLC Research Survey of Special Collections and Archives*.
- **Community Exploration:** work that brings the community together to better understand a preliminarily defined area of need, such as convening working groups to explore specific issues, facilitating an ongoing discussion group to connect practitioners around an emerging or evolving area of work, or gathering case studies that can point to shared issues or best practices. Examples: Web Archiving Metadata Best Practices Working Group; *Mobilizing Unique Materials* series of papers and case studies.
- **Practical Advice:** work that addresses well-defined needs by articulating shared learning from other initiatives, with practical guidance for on-the-ground practice, or that highlights current projects employing smart tactics. Examples: *Demystifying Born Digital* series; Works in Progress webinar series.

Just as an iterative approach was employed in shaping the agenda, the resulting work will be iterative. A great strength of the RLP is its collaborative nature, and OCLC Research program officers will work to maximize the benefits of these collaborations. They will listen and synthesize across areas of inquiry and ensure that what is learned can feed back into the loop of research, community exploration, and practical guidance.

Diversity, inclusion, equity, and accessibility must be a dimension in all aspects of the work. Because oppression of diverse voices and people is a systemic issue, all work undertaken as part of the research agenda has potential to move the cause of diversity and inclusion forward or to further impede it. OCLC should develop a tool for use when planning and implementing all research and learning activities related to the agenda, such as a matrix of questions to ask in order to help recognize systemic bias and identify diversity implications in all efforts.

Themes

In identifying areas of inquiry, a number of themes emerged, where common factors or concerns repeatedly surfaced across multiple areas of work. These themes can help contextualize any research work undertaken and inform appropriate approaches.

Structural and Organizational Positioning: The last decade has seen important shifts in the way that archives and special collections are organized and positioned within the research library. Individual repositories within the same organization have merged to achieve operational efficiencies, and special collections are increasingly coming under a distinctive collections umbrella in recognition of an alignment of interests and needs with area studies or other specialized collections. Issues throughout the agenda

point to possible further evolution of organizational structures, such as including special collections staff on library leadership teams to better facilitate alignment with the core goals of the organization, rethinking structures within special collections to distribute responsibility for born-digital, or creating formalized cohorts across the library with shared interests and complementary skills in areas where there is strong mission alignment such as instruction, collection development, or digital collections.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility: Increased awareness of and interest in issues of equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion encourages re-examination of practice across the enterprise. There is significant interest in working ethically and respectfully with community archives and rethinking traditional frameworks for collection ownership to facilitate this work. Our backlogs invite questions about how our collection management decisions can serve to further bury or to illuminate the histories of marginalized people. There is a desire for broader critical engagement with our technological tools and systems—and their underlying value assumptions. Nearly every aspect of our work can better serve the goals of building an equitable, inclusive, and diverse profession and collections that are broadly representative and accessible.

Appraisal: The core function of appraisal runs through almost all of our suggested areas of investigation. Tom Hyry recently framed the central role of appraisal in the archival endeavor by acknowledging that “the theory and practice of archives are not about saving records as much as they are about acknowledging and managing loss.”¹⁰ With an ever-expanding universe of information to steward and sizable existing backlogs, it is time to re-emphasize the importance of appraisal. Born-digital and audiovisual formats require new tools and frameworks for appraisal practice. Our continued backlogs and resource challenges require a renewed energy be put toward appraisal *and reappraisal* as part of comprehensive strategies to fulfill our stewardship obligations. The evolving nature of the scholarly record¹¹ and research library interest in collecting outside traditional acquisition channels means that archivists’ appraisal knowledge can also benefit work outside of the archives.

Access to Collections: Our evolving collections, as well as increasingly sophisticated users and research methodologies, necessitate rethinking the goals and scope of our access and discovery systems. Many repositories now hold large bodies of digitized surrogates of analog collections that they want to deliver online, alongside digital audio and moving image files, and a wide variety of born-digital materials ranging from web archives to email caches to word processing documents. The growing interest in collections as data means we must collaborate with colleagues in scholarly communications, data services, and elsewhere across the library to grapple with what computational access to our collections might look like. Similarly, off-site storage and online request management systems are impacting access to analog collections, requiring rethinking of processes as well as assumptions about how best to serve these collections to our researchers. The continued presence of significant backlogs of undescribed and under-described collections also necessitates further development of access-centered approaches to technical and public services work.

Data and Systems: An increasingly digital environment is shaping our practice, revealing new problems and possibilities. Digital tools and needs for additional digital tools are omnipresent: in building out our electronic records programs; in the array of systems we now use to manage collections, track workflows, and provide access; and in an increased desire for data analysis to support planning and decision-making throughout the enterprise. Evolving user expectations for discovery system functionality are causing us to examine our descriptive metadata practices to ensure they support user needs. The need for metadata to interact with, flow through, and support multiple systems and functionalities calls for increased data quality, and intentional practice around data collection and flow is needed in all areas of our programs.

Topical Areas of Investigation

CONVERGENCE OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND THE RESEARCH LIBRARY

Research libraries are increasingly recognizing a convergence of collections, services, goals, and skill sets across both general and special collections. In the last several years, the intersection of the growth of computational scholarly research methodologies and outputs, growing collections of research data sets, and an increased interest in collecting ephemeral and grey literature, have shifted collecting such that many recent additions to library collections look much more like special collections. They are often contextually situated objects coming in through nontraditional channels or in digital formats that have urgent preservation needs.

The growing interest in computational research methodologies in the humanities and social sciences means that more and more researchers are seeking data sets for their research. Archival and special collections offer opportunities for research access and methodologies we can't offer with licensed, vendor-supplied materials, though we are still far from being able to fully release the potential of special collections as data.

Publication of the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*¹² in 2015 codified a shift of emphasis in library instruction, toward information literacy and threshold concepts, as well as the collaborative relationships between faculty and librarians. Instruction in archives and special collections has followed a similar trajectory, shifting away from show-and-tell of treasures to a pedagogical approach that leverages primary source materials to engage students in the critical thinking and information evaluation skills in which the Framework is grounded. This realignment has been supported by several recent publications offering methods and strategies for teaching with primary sources,¹³ and in the newly adopted *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*.¹⁴

These convergences present both great opportunity and challenge. Archives and special collections have, in many cases, operated outside the main structures of the larger libraries of which they are a part. Archives and special collections professionals' skills in donor relations, appraisal, digital preservation, and instruction can benefit work across the library, and they can learn from excellent collaborators throughout the organization. Important conversations have already begun about better integrating special collections with the rest of the research library.¹⁵ While good examples exist of productive collaborations¹⁶ that push past siloed organizational structures and professional identities, more progress in this area is needed. Future work should focus on aligning special collections with the goals of the library and its parent institution, building allies across the organization, broadly sharing the important knowledge special collections professionals possess, and identifying opportunities to reach much larger audiences and make collections used and useful to a broader cross-section of stakeholders.

POTENTIAL RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

Serving the Core Teaching Mission

The recent re-conceptualization of the goals and approaches to instruction—and significant accompanying work about how to use primary source materials to support this pedagogical approach—point to an opportunity for special collections to play an important role in the library's programmatic vision for teaching and learning.

Activity: Convene a working group to identify examples of collaboration between archivists, instruction librarians, and teaching faculty that integrate special collections into required courses and curricula, include meaningful assessment strategies, or otherwise provide examples of working at a high level to align special collections with programmatic instructional goals and vision. Share case studies and overall principles and themes in a subsequent publication.

Scaling Up Instruction

One of the key challenges of teaching with special collections is scalability. High-quality instruction interactions are powerful learning experiences, but many are bespoke, one-off classes that require much preparation and planning, and most often take place in-person. In order for archives and special collections programs to increase their impact, they must figure out ways of delivering collections-based instruction to larger numbers of students, both in person and online, without an influx of additional resources.

Activity: Conduct an environmental scan of large-scale instructional initiatives, both in special collections and archives and in general library undergraduate instruction, and compile lessons and guidance for program building. Consider both in-person and online instruction environments.

Rights Toolkit for Special Collections

Decisions throughout the stewardship process can serve to support or impede open access to our collections. In order to make the broadest portion of our archives and special collections accessible online in both traditional ways and for emerging computational methodologies, intentional practice in our legal agreements is key to privileging access whenever feasible. Advice is needed for deeds of gift and other agreements when material is acquired. And, as publishers show an increased interest in packaging and licensing primary source content, repositories that wish to enter into such digitization and licensing agreements need advice on how best to balance access priorities.

Activity: Convene a working group to examine models for including use-centered options and language in contracts and legal agreements with donors, vendors, and others. Generate samples and practical advice for emphasizing open access and use through documents such as deeds of gift; additional clauses regarding born digital materials for existing deeds of gift; permission to use name, voice, etc. in lecture or event recording agreements; oral history agreements; and agreements to digitize special collections and archives with vendors.

Collection Development Across the Library

Collaborations across functional departments can bring together complementary skill sets and interests, in service of collection development initiatives and goals throughout the library. Area studies librarians may be best situated to engage their communities to initiate new archival collecting initiatives that could help diversify holdings. Archivists' skills in appraisal and collecting contextually situated materials may be of use to data services, GIS, and social science librarians as they build data set collections, or to traditional bibliographers as they look to bring in ephemeral materials through non-traditional channels.

Activity: Convene a symposium or other method of conversation, bringing together specialists from area studies, science and social science data, GIS, archives, and special collections to discuss current emphases and challenges in their respective collection development work. Identify points of collaboration and issue findings.

Explore Collections as Data

Current interest in collections as data¹⁷ and a desire for computational access to collections are pushing the boundaries of what archives think of as access—and of what an object of research might be. A better understanding of issues is needed to guide further work in this emergent area.

Activity: Convene a collaborative working group with data services librarians, archivists, and other digital scholarship colleagues, to identify and interview researchers about their computational research methodologies and goals, in order to better understand developing collections-as-data needs.

ADVOCATING FOR ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

At the same time that we work on reconceptualizing our value in the research library and broader community, we need to increase our capacity to communicate that value and advocate for the resources to support our programs. *Taking Our Pulse* indicated that use was up, staffing was down, and backlogs were growing in our archives. If these patterns have held true, we have a real need to effectively advocate for support of our archives and special collections programs.

Much has been written about the value of special collections in distinguishing the research library,¹⁸ but it is unclear whether research libraries are allocating adequate resources to special collections. Most archives and special collections rely heavily on external, soft-money to accomplish both core responsibilities and to explore and launch new projects. Both internal and external resource allocators are increasingly relying on data to drive decision-making, and statistics are desired to back up any statements of impact or need. Understanding the full landscape of how special collections and archives staffing is funded, gaining skills in how to advocate for needed funds, and having the tools to back up that advocacy are key to ensuring the longevity and richness of our programs.

POTENTIAL RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

Building a Cross-Institutional Data Set

A large and standardized body of data about research libraries has been collected by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) for many years, and many research library directors rely on it for programmatic and resource allocation decision making. Although ARL has enabled submission of supplementary data about special collections since 2011, member libraries do not consistently provide it. The main bodies of data about archival and special collections programs come from a 1998 ARL survey and a 2009 OCLC Research survey. Cross-institutional and longitudinal data about special collections staffing, budgets, programs, collections, and use are key to informed advocacy, decision-making, and resource allocation.

Activity: Convene a working group to examine existing measurement and assessment models and tools in archives and special collections, make recommendations for the set of data that is most needed, identify a potential set of stakeholders for a programmatic data collection process, and give an actionable set of recommendations for building an ongoing data gathering process.

State of Resource Allocation

Many leaders in archives and special collections are administratively removed from resource allocation decisions across the research library. They cannot effectively advocate for resources without understanding the full resourcing landscape in their institutions and how special collections fit in. A clear understanding of the landscape of staffing and resources for archives and special collections, and how it relates to the larger library, is necessary in order to try to influence it.

Activity: Conduct a data-gathering activity to determine the current state of resource allocation to special collections in research libraries.

Skill Gap in Advocating for Special Collections

Leaders and administrators in archives and special collections have expressed a desire for guidance to increase their effectiveness in measuring and communicating value, and advocating for special collections among both external and internal stakeholders.

Activity: Convene a working group to put out practical advice about defining audiences, determining value arguments for those audiences, and gathering data and stories that can inform and support those value statements.

Long-Term Effects of Term Labor

Due to reliance on soft funding, term positions have been a major part of the employment landscape in the archives and special collections field for decades, and workers in term positions accomplish important work in our programs. There is growing concern regarding ways in which insecure employment affects both the diversity of the profession and the cadre of early career professionals who often fill term roles, as well as how forced turnover, fluctuating staff resources, and the short-term frameworks inherent to project-based work affect our programs in the long term. It is unclear if soft-money positions have replaced or supplemented permanent line positions or if they are more prevalent in special collections than in other parts of the library. These discussions are currently based only on anecdotal evidence; there is no longitudinal data about term employment in research libraries. Such data is needed in order to facilitate an informed discussion and investigation of impacts.

Activity: Conduct a data-gathering activity to document the current state of term employment versus ongoing employment in special collections in research libraries. If possible, gather retrospective data as well.

NEXT STEPS FOR BORN DIGITAL

Born-digital archival collections have grown exponentially since the *Taking Our Pulse* survey was completed in 2009. What was an emerging need less than a decade ago is a vital and varied need now, with both nascent and mature programs puzzling through how best to collect, preserve, and make accessible born-digital archival records.

An array of challenges exists when building sustainable born-digital archives programs, which variously require critical examination, structural analysis, and practical advice. Much work thus far has concentrated on capture of files from physical media and the actions necessary to ensure their authenticity and preservation. Work is needed now on all of the activities that come before and after the capture process, from appraisal and donor relations to reading room access. Similarly, much focus in building digital archives programs has been on creating a Digital Archivist position, whether on a term appointment, project funding, or a permanent line. However, one person cannot be entirely responsible for a robust and responsible electronic records program.¹⁹ It must become a distributed responsibility, and all aspects of the archival enterprise must be reconsidered to account for this.

POTENTIAL RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

Frameworks for Distributed Responsibility

If responsibility for born-digital collections is to be truly and appropriately distributed across our programs, it is important to consider what skills and roles might be needed to operationalize shared responsibility, how to create networks and support systems for positions expected to be change-agents, and what ongoing leadership support is required to effect programmatic change.

Activity: Convene a small working group to design a “greenfield” organizational framework for supporting born-digital collections across the research library, considering issues such as labor distribution and the types of skills and knowledge needed in different roles, how special collections would interoperate with the rest of the research library, and how this might play out in small, medium, and large institutions. Identify change management considerations for enabling such a shift.

Skill Gap in the Digital Environment

Building a born-digital records program also means building new skills sets. While SAA’s Digital Archives Specialist program has done important work in providing continuing education to address this need, there are still gaps in our collective skill sets, and the needs are continually evolving. Additionally, costly workshops are not an accessible professional development model for many in the profession, and other training approaches should be explored.

Activity: Convene a working group to identify the skills needed across an organization with distributed responsibility for born-digital records, perform a corresponding gap analysis of current training opportunities for those skills, and analyze costs for such training.

Explore Appropriate Risk Tolerance

New possibilities for online access, sheer volume of records to be reviewed, and general uncertainty about providing access to born-digital collections have produced wide-spread anxiety about rights and privacy issues as they relate to born-digital collections. Similar anxiety around issues of copyright in the past has led to unnecessary risk aversion, with attendant ramifications for collections access. An intentional examination and clear articulation of relevant issues is needed to avoid repeating this pattern, and to allow us to move forward with responsible and informed practice.

Activity: Convene a working group to examine rights and privacy issues specific to born-digital records, and issue findings and guidance.

Understand Access Needs

Access systems for born-digital records are in their infancy, and many practitioners feel overwhelmed by both the needs and possibilities of such systems. Complex born-digital objects with many software dependencies might require emulation environments to be fully understood as research objects, while word processing documents may be best served in a similar way to digital surrogates. Access systems should prioritize functionality that supports researcher need.

Activity: Undertake a series of researcher interviews to assess their access needs and priorities.

Build Appraisal Tools and Frameworks

Appraisal is a core and complicated archival function, made more challenging in the digital environment.

Curators and donors are challenged to do appraisal work before a collection comes in, and archivists and curators are struggling with how to appraise after a collection has been received. Digital archivists with no donor relations experience are being asked to step into informal curatorial roles for digital materials and are feeling ill-equipped to do so.

Activity: Convene a working group to identify the range of issues and best areas for action.

Critical Examination of Digital Forensics

Tools Forensics-focused workflows for born-digital archival records are being used in many programs, but forensics-first approaches are not always appropriate for all types of records. Additionally, many of the tools we use in digital forensics work originate in the law enforcement and surveillance industries, and have specific values and worldviews built into them, which don't always align with those of libraries and archives. An examination is needed of the appropriateness and usefulness of forensics tools to our actual needs in dealing with born-digital records.

Activity: Convene a working group to conduct a critical examination of forensics tools and workflows, and how they address the needs of arranging, describing, and managing different types of born-digital records. Provide guidance about when forensics approaches are and are not appropriate.

ADDRESSING AUDIOVISUAL COLLECTIONS

Recorded sound and moving image, or audiovisual (A/V), holdings continue to be a top concern for archival repositories, where they are found throughout modern collections. Changes in scholarship have led to increased interest in the content documented in A/V collections, and preservation concerns about A/V formats push them further up the priority list. Important work in assessing the state and scale of A/V collections and their preservation needs, and identifying ways to address those needs, has been done by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation,²⁰ Council on Library and Information Resources and Library of Congress,²¹ and others.

A 2014 study found that there are 537 million sound recordings in collection-holding organizations across the US, and that 57% of those holdings are rare or unique.²² These numbers account only for recorded sound, and do not include equally at-risk moving image holdings. The profession has recognized for some time that there is a finite window of time in which magnetic media will remain viable, and therefore preservation reformatting must be a high priority. While preservation reformatting deserves energy and resourcing, the volume of A/V in our collections is such that reformatting alone cannot address the need, and reformatting all of our holdings is not realistic. Holistic programs to assess, prioritize, and take action to deal with these materials are needed.

For decades, A/V materials in our collections were largely either separated from related manuscript material (often shunted away to be dealt with at a later date) or treated at the item level. Both have served to create sizable backlogs of un-quantified and un-described A/V materials. To address these backlogs, we must look at all points in the archival enterprise for ways to address and integrate A/V holdings.

POTENTIAL RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

Appraisal Frameworks for A/V

The scale of A/V materials in our collection demands informed prioritization of what is to receive preservation, processing, and other attention, as well as what is and isn't worthy of long-term retention. Appraisal of A/V presents specific challenges, different from other record types.

Activity: Convene a working group of curators, audio/visual archivists, and others to review existing literature, identify and address gaps, and establish practical guidance for the appraisal of A/V materials within an archival program.

Operationalizing A/V

Audiovisual materials have often been treated separately from the rest of the materials in archival collections, either removed to be dealt with later, or tracked and described in entirely different systems. This inefficient practice has led to loss of contextual information important to understanding these materials, and to large backlogs of A/V holdings. Incorporating A/V materials into overarching accessioning, arrangement, and descriptive practice so that they are managed and described archivally alongside other record formats would make a significant impact in reducing backlogs and improving access, as well maintaining important contextual understanding.

Activity: Convene a working group to identify integration points for A/V materials into processing prioritization workflows, as well as into archival processing work itself. Identify points of need specific to A/V materials, and make recommendations for how to address them within the context of an archival approach to their management.

Vendor Guidelines

Few research libraries have the capacity and means to deal with all necessary preservation reformatting in-house. Vendors can and should be a part of the solution.

Activity: Convene a working group to establish guidance for working with vendors for A/V preservation and digitization projects.

ACCESS NEEDS

Audiovisual materials pose format-specific questions about researcher access needs that have impact on discovery and access systems, public service programs, and descriptive practice. We need to better understand how A/V resources are being used as research objects in order to develop strategies to optimize their access and use.

Activity: Undertake a series of researcher interviews about search strategies and research methodologies related to A/V materials, to better understand access needs.

Section 508 Compliance

Institutions that receive federal funding are required to comply with the rules of Section 508 of the Federal Acquisition Regulation, which addresses access for people with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities to information and electronic technologies. Research libraries are in the early days of determining what constitutes compliance with Section 508 for archives and special collections, and how it might impact online streaming of primary source content. Captioning audio and video presented on the web would be a major step toward equitable access to our collections for people with hearing loss, but would also significantly impact preservation reformatting programs and resources at a time when the need for preservation reformatting is already at a crisis point.

Activity: Convene a working group to define different options for compliance, and quantify labor and other cost impacts for each option.

EVOLVING SYSTEMS ENVIRONMENTS

A proliferation of systems are available to manage our collections and facilitate their use. A number of factors are pushing the profession to become increasingly reliant on and fluent in dealing with

technological systems to perform and support a broad range of functions in special collections. Collection management systems such as Archivists' Toolkit, Archon, and ArchivesSpace have become central to producing descriptive data and managing an increasing array of functions. Collecting born-digital materials necessitates an additional suite of tools for appraisal, acquisition, processing, and providing access. The creation, management, and delivery of digital surrogates brings still more systems into the mix. Digital preservation tools such as Archivematica and BitCurator are needed for both born-digital collections and digital surrogates, and must interact with our digital repositories. As collection sizes grow and secondary storage facilities are used, systems are increasingly employed to manage locations and circulation, and tools like Aeon allow us to manage reading room registration, requests, and workflow. Evolving user expectations dictate not only that all collections be *discoverable* via web-based tools, but that they be *viewable* online as well.

We need our descriptive, administrative, and other data to move into, out of, and across a growing ecosystem of tools that support the full range of collection management, preservation, discovery and display, and public service functions. Inconsistent and under-documented description and encoding practice becomes a problem not just for discovery but also for movement of data across systems. As these tools become more sophisticated, we are asking our data to support an increasing array of functionality, and we expect our archivists to be increasingly data fluent. These systems bring the opportunity to collect data about our collections, activities, and impact, but data must be gathered and systems configured with reporting in mind in order to exploit this opportunity.

Systems integration and interaction is important, because no one system can provide an end-to-end workflow for capture, ingest, processing, describing, and providing access, nor should we look for one monolithic solution. Recent major projects have addressed systems integration and multi-system workflows,²³ but more work is needed.

POTENTIAL RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

Data Literacy

As our work becomes more systems-dependent and relies on a range of systems in which our data must interact, the issues of data quality and data literacy becomes crucial. Though different roles necessitate a range of levels of comfort with and knowledge about working with data, it is important that all involved in our programs have some baseline literacy.

Activity: Convene a working group to define data literacy skills for different levels of mastery and different functional roles.

Data Collection Strategies for Reporting and Assessment

The systems ecosystem offers opportunities to collect data, often in automated or low-barrier ways about our collections and their use. Structured data has great potential to help us better understand our collections and our users, and to assess, address, and advocate their needs. Data about collection content, condition, and use are gathered in a number of systems, and when combined and analyzed, can give us new understandings and insights. In order to do this, reporting needs must be articulated clearly, and data collection must be approached intentionally to serve those needs as well as responsibly balance privacy and other ethical considerations. While there is already a growing culture of assessment in research libraries, there is not yet a coherent vision for what meaningful assessment looks like in archives and special collections.

Activity: Convene a working group to identify major decision points throughout the archival and special collections enterprise, determine what data could inform those decisions, and identify what kinds of systems and standards exist for gathering that data.

Mapping the Systems Ecosystem

A need exists for understanding and articulating expectations for data within systems, and functionalities across system boundaries. Archivists and administrators must demystify how core systems interoperate and understand how data flows across those systems. Practical advice for considerations and approaches to system selection and integration is needed to help both administrators and practitioners make good choices and build effective and efficient networks of systems.

Activity: Develop practical guidance for mapping business processes and developing systems architectures for needs within modern special collections, adapting the guidance for small, medium, and large units. Analyze limitations and opportunities for reuse of data across functions and systems within special collections, and consider the inevitable phasing out and replacing of systems.

Open Source Software Communities

A number of important tools and systems in wide use in archives and special collections are open source software projects, providing the community an opportunity to build tools that are aligned with our professional values and address our true needs. Archivists and librarians can contribute to open source projects in a variety of ways, including writing specifications, conducting user research and usability testing, writing documentation, and participating in collective governance activities. Existing administrative structures and mindsets may not take into account total cost of ownership for using open source systems, which will hinder the profession in building vibrant and sustainable open source communities and tools. Skill gaps may prevent archivists and librarians from participating usefully and effectively in these projects.

Activity: Develop practical guidance about roles that archivists and librarians can fill in open source projects, and the associated skills and competencies needed to succeed in those roles. Articulate models that identify business owner roles for archivists, as well as technical roles needed to manage the systems within the larger IT departments serving special collections.

STEWARDSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES AND COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

Addressing backlogs of hidden collections has been a major focus of time and energy across the profession in the last two decades. *Taking Our Pulse* indicated that hidden collections actually increased in size in ARL libraries between 1998 and 2009. While good work has been done to build extensible processing programs and develop survey models to assess and address backlog, this kind of modern collection management practice has not taken hold across the profession. Further work is needed in this area to better understand the problem space and to push forward practice that truly addresses the problem.

In addition, larger issues of collection management have been obscured in hidden collections. Survey projects to get basic control of backlogs are revealing a spectrum of collection needs that are more nuanced than just being unprocessed, including a need for accurate location management and data about collection size and condition; clear understanding of provenance, custodial history, rights, and ownership status; and identifying and quantifying A/V and digital media held in collections. In many cases, surveys framed as minimal processing projects should instead be understood as retrospective accessioning projects. Many institutions do not have baseline administrative, legal, and physical control, in addition to lacking minimal descriptive control. This makes clear that backlogs are not just an issue of impeded

access, they also prevent strategic collections management decisions, hinder informed collection development work, and complicate our ability to deal with increasing space constraints. Baseline control of collections and the data created while gaining that control are key to understanding, responsibly managing, and advocating our collections.

POTENTIAL RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

Define the State of Backlogs

The profession is nowhere near done alleviating backlogs in our archives and special collections units. An understanding of the current state of backlogs is important in order to know where to focus further energies and resources to confront them.

Activity: Conduct an assessment of the state of backlogs, in such a way that allows us to better define the nature of that collective backlog. Backlog measurements should include rare book, special collection, and archival material.

Appraisal

A renewed emphasis on appraisal and reappraisal must be part of addressing collection management needs and considering collecting obligations both prospectively and retrospectively. There is a large body of professional literature on appraisal, and SAA put out best practices for reappraisal and deaccessioning in 2011,²⁴ with the goal of normalizing responsible practice and making the profession more comfortable with deaccessioning. However, appraisal continues to be an area of discomfort for many archivists. It is unclear what is needed in this arena, whether it is more appraisal theory, frameworks for applying that theory, or just more practice and action.

Activity: Perform an interview-based research activity with librarians and archivists in curatorial, collection management, processing, and public service roles about how appraisal relates to and impacts their responsibilities in the organization, and where they see need. Generate a state of appraisal report identifying areas for further learning or support.

Articulating Accessioning

The professional literature about the process of accessioning is scant. The most comprehensive work is fairly recent and focused on electronic records, where accessioning has had to be rethought and clearly articulated for the born-digital context. In light of the lack of baseline physical, intellectual, and administrative control in our backlogs, a clear reconceptualization of goals for and approach to accessioning is in order.

Activity: Convene a working group to create accessioning goals and frameworks, and provide practical advice about implementing robust accessioning programs and discussion of access to collections post-accessioning.

Promote Modern Processing Programs

While survey methodologies and extensible processing approaches have been developed and disseminated,²⁵ they have not translated into holistic collections management and processing programs.

Activity: Organize a series of webinars to highlight further holistic, extensible approaches to arrangement and description programs, in order to further learning and adoption, combat backlogs, and increase access to collections.

Off-site Storage

Space constraints were identified as a key issue in the Taking Our Pulse survey. Many repositories are now using off-site storage facilities for a portion of their archival and special collections, bringing both new challenges and opportunities. This is a relatively under-examined area of our operations, but preliminary research has identified a need for further exploration of the impacts of off-site storage on public services, technical services, preservation, and researchers.²⁶

Activity: Convene discussion groups to explore emerging issues, opportunities, and concerns as off-site storage becomes commonplace, in order to better define needs for future work. Groups should include representation from administrative, technical services, public services, curatorial, and preservation functions.

ENGAGING THE CHALLENGES OF DIVERSIFYING OUR COLLECTIONS

There is significant interest in ensuring that our collections broadly and equitably document human experience and empower a wide public to see themselves as part of the historical record. This has been driven by changes in cultural and historical scholarship, alongside a growing awareness of the many negative social and scholarly impacts of our asymmetrical historical record. There is also an increasing recognition that documentation is being produced and collected outside of traditional institutions, resulting in a desire to collaborate with community archives groups working to preserve their own histories as one way to address the gaping representative holes in our collections.

In order to respectfully and responsibly work with marginalized communities and those who have been working to document their own histories outside of institutional structures, we need to examine and reconsider institutional and interpersonal relationships. This work should include recognition of power dynamics and identify methods of working that acknowledge and mitigate power imbalances. Many institutions have histories of harm to and conflict with marginalized communities and peoples. Institutions may need to reckon with these incidents and patterns of harm if they wish to build the trust necessary to build archival collections collaboratively.

Similarly, it is necessary to move from a framework of stewardship to one of partnership, with a willingness to explore collaborative, consortial approaches to collection building. This will require examination and renegotiation of our professional identities, policies, and procedures and their attendant assumptions about expertise, authority, and ownership, as well as how certain forms of recordkeeping are privileged within our current models.

POTENTIAL RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

Examine New Models for Partnership

Collaborating with community archives requires a paradigm shift and adoption of more shared and fluid approaches to collection building, ownership, description, and collection management.

Activity: Convene a working group to investigate what rights or other structures institutions need to manage collections long-term, and how this might inform flexibility in existing models, or development of shared responsibility models for deed of gift, collection development, description, and other functions.

Post-Custodial Collecting Models

Several institutions have been working for a number of years on building post-custodial collecting programs, as an alternative to traditional models of ownership, roles, and relationships in archival collecting. A post-custodial approach to archives is defined as “the idea that archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but that they will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators.”²⁷ The knowledge they have gained can be widely valuable to the profession.

Activity: Convene a group to disseminate knowledge acquired and lessons learned from existing work in this area. Discuss instructive challenges and failures, and explore successful practices in working with post-custodial approaches and relationships. Articulate the value of these relationships and suggestions for advocating post-custodial collecting in our institutions, and what changes would need to take place in order to operationalize these models.

Archives as a Site of Historical Reckoning

Since roughly 2001, a number of universities founded in the colonial and antebellum periods have confronted their ties to, complicity in, and enrichment from, the systems of slavery of African peoples and killing and displacement of Indigenous peoples.²⁸ Archivists have played a central role in the difficult but necessary work of identifying and acknowledging these historical harms and their continued legacies.²⁹ The experiences of archivists and librarians engaged in this work can offer important insight into how archives and special collections can support institutional efforts at redress specific to harms done throughout the histories of our own institutions. This could also improve our own relationships with communities we now seek to represent in the archive.

Activity: Convene a working group of archivists, students, and scholars from institutions that have used their institutional archive to grapple with their institutional relationship to slavery. Ask them to reflect on their experiences and share advice to those wishing to do similar work at other institutions, related not only to centuries old wrongs, but to any conflict, pain, or harm in their communities and histories.

Imagining Inclusive Approaches to Collecting

Jillian Cuellar recently framed traditional collecting models as assimilationist, with people’s stories only entering the archive once they have assimilated to our traditional notions of record keeping, and challenged the profession to imagine new, flexible, inclusive models for collecting, that “allow individuals or communities to tell their own stories with complexity and nuance.”³⁰ The profession must intentionally work to envision models for addressing the silences in our collections, embracing a variety of storytelling and recordkeeping traditions to move beyond the types of records that currently make up the bulk of our archives.

Activity: Convene a series of working meetings that combine presentations of recent work in archives, oral history, area studies, and other disciplines that are working toward inclusive collecting with facilitated discussions about how these projects may or may not serve as models, can be elaborated on, or may spark new ideas for inclusive collecting. Share outcomes from the meetings and ideas for further work.

Next Steps

We see this agenda as an articulation of the current landscape in archives, special, and distinctive collections. Though OCLC Research only has the capacity to take on a handful of projects at any one time, we hope that presenting the agenda as a whole and sharing it broadly will help frame a conversation and be a guide for future work beyond just one organization. We hope that other people and organizations will also engage with the agenda in accord with their audiences and strengths, and believe there is great benefit from moving forward as a community.

Over the next several months, OCLC Research will be taking steps to gauge where best to put its organizational capacity and energy. We will consider where work is already being done in the profession, how OCLC can best leverage its strengths and resources to make most impact, and where there is interest and energy across the RLP community, in order to discern where it makes most sense for OCLC to focus its efforts. The agenda is US-centric in focus and development; we acknowledge this and plan to use it to engage our non-US partners for their thoughts and ideas over the next year to better understand how it represents or diverges from international needs.

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