

Special Collections Engagement

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Outreach—defined as activities provided by special collections and archives that foster use of materials and resources to enhance both education and research—is increasingly becoming a core component of special collections activities. Special collections and archives have been actively seeking out and building relevant primary-source collections for years, and they have devoted significant staff time to the processing (arrangement and description) of these items, helping to make these resources coherent and accessible. The implementation of encoded archival description has allowed collection guides/finding aids to be displayed on the Web, and this step has brought special collections holdings to a wider exposure than ever before—both at the local institution and beyond. Nonetheless, students, faculty, and other scholars/researchers affiliated with the institution may be unaware of available special collections resources and the potential benefits of these resources for supporting education and research at all levels of the curriculum. The next logical step in the outreach process for special collections is targeted engagement.

This survey examines those aspects of outreach that are specific to the use of special collections for education and research by students, faculty, and other scholars/researchers affiliated with the institution. Although the survey focused on these three groups, we recognize that many special collections target audiences outside their institutions. While we briefly touch upon scholars/researchers not affiliated with the institution, a future survey will be needed to explore outreach activities directed to external constituencies in more depth.

The survey was conducted between 8 February and 18 March 2010. Seventy-nine of the 124 ARL member institutions completed the survey for a response rate of 64%.

Exhibits

Exhibits are ubiquitous as a form of outreach, with all but one of 79 respondents reporting that they create exhibits based on their collections. However, of those 78 respondents, only 15 (19%) have a person or position charged with primary responsibility for exhibits. The majority of respondents (51%) say that responsibility varies depending on the exhibit. Comments suggest that the format (i.e., rare books, archives, manuscripts) and/or the subject of the exhibit determine the involvement of appropriate specialist(s). In several institutions special collections are distributed throughout multiple departments or programs, and responsibilities for coordination of exhibits in these cases tend to fall to a team or committee. As noted at one institution, “Special Collections are in four different locations and consist of 9 separate programs. There is an Exhibits Committee that manages and coordinates exhibits at our principle library.”

The data suggest that all respondents are creating physical and online exhibits. For both physical exhibits and online exhibits, institutions evenly target undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty as primary audiences, with somewhat less emphasis on other scholars/researchers affiliated with the institution.

Given this widespread emphasis on exhibits, it is not surprising that the majority of respondents have a physical space within the library designated for this

activity; 18 of 78 (23%) also have a space beyond the library buildings. These include student spaces, alumni centers, and collaborations with museums, most notably the National Museum of American History. Libraries are using a wide variety of approaches to promote their exhibits, with library and university Web sites emerging as the most popular and successful method. Respondents are also promoting exhibits through social networking sites and blogs, but they are not convinced that these methods are very successful.

Approximately half of 70 respondents attempt to evaluate the success of their exhibits, primarily through some type of count (door counts, Web statistics, and attendance numbers). Less frequently used assessment methods include surveys, e-mails, and anecdotal user feedback. Respondents have reported changes such as increased collaboration with faculty, extending hours, standardization of design, increase in the number of exhibits, and a more focused approach to promotion as a result of these assessment measures.

Events

As with exhibits, events are nearly universal among ARL special collections departments as an approach to outreach; seventy-five (96%) participate in and host events such as lectures, open houses, and symposia to highlight their collections. Graduate students and faculty are slightly more likely to be primary target audiences than undergraduates or other scholars/researchers affiliated with the institution.

Again, for the majority of respondents (44 or 56%), primary responsibility for coordinating special collections events varies depending on the event. This can be due to a number of reasons: expertise related to the highlighted collection, knowledge of the audience, origination of the idea for the event, personal or professional relationship with the donor, event location, department/library organizational structure, staff work schedules, and, simply, who has the most interest in hosting or participating in the event. For the 25 respondents indicating that primary responsibility falls to one individual or one individual leading a team of staff, this position is most often the head or director of special collections. Planning and hosting

events may be collaborative at a broader institutional level, involving members of the campus community or library-wide support and planning for a significant or important intended audience.

As might be expected given the emphasis on events, 56 of the respondents (73%) say that special collections has a space within library buildings, other than a reading room, designated for events. These spaces include lecture halls, lobbies or atriums, classrooms, conference rooms, event halls, and spaces that have been re-purposed for a special collections event. Seventeen respondents have a designated space beyond library buildings for events, consisting of auditoriums, campus museums, and galleries and classrooms in other buildings. One respondent notes that the choice of venue depends on the constituencies they are trying to reach. An event featuring football films, for example, might be hosted in the football center.

Press releases and direct mailings are the most popular and successful methods for promoting events. Interestingly, one-on-one contact is the most reported form of event promotion; while used by 70 respondents (92%), only 18 (24%) consider it to be most successful approach. Social networking sites are being used by 27 respondents (36%), but only four of those rate this as the most successful promotional method. Additionally, several respondents utilize campus and local media to promote events. The titles of recently held events supplied by respondents show that events are closely related to collections. The list also reflects the diversity and uniqueness of holdings throughout ARL member institutions.

About a third of all respondents have no formal measures in place to evaluate events. The rest of the respondents overwhelmingly report using attendance to gauge an event's success, followed by anecdotal feedback as the second most commonly reported measure. Surveys, course evaluations, and increases in reference queries are other evaluative indicators of the success of an event. Of the 53 respondents who attempt to evaluate events, 21 (40%) report making changes based on what they have learned. Examples include changes in the areas of publicity, scheduling, and target audiences.

Curricular Engagement

Engaging university students in using special collections is also an important activity; all of the academic library respondents pursue this avenue of outreach. Slightly more is being done to engage undergraduate students than graduate students through curriculum, and 80% of respondents have undertaken at least some of the following activities: worked with faculty to develop courses or assignments that use special collections materials, consulted with students one-on-one as they use collections for coursework, conducted in-person instruction for classes in special collections spaces, and/or consulted with students in groups as they use collections for coursework. Departments are reaching out through in-person instruction in regular classrooms, creating course-related Web pages/subject guides/LibGuides of special collections materials, and working with students to create physical exhibits using special collections materials. Staff members are attempting to engage students in innovative ways, such as developing instructional videos about collection use, offering research fellowships and internships, and reaching out to students at the pre-college level.

Special collections departments tend not to have a designated staff person responsible for outreach through curricular engagement. They rely instead on their staff members who have expertise in the area of interest, or who have already established a relationship with an academic department, faculty member, or student. When special collections are decentralized, the responsibility typically rests with those who work most closely with the materials of interest. Staff members often collaborate on this work, and a wide variety of positions are involved in this activity. This is a case where goals may exceed staff capacity, since many of the comments emphasize that special collections would like to be able to focus more time and effort on curricular engagement.

As with collections and departmental structures, variety is evident in the types of spaces designated for faculty and/or student collaborations. Almost 70% of the responding institutions have collaborative space within library buildings, and just 7% maintain space beyond the library. For many, this collaboration occurs in dedicated classrooms, conference rooms, donor rooms, or group study areas near special collections,

while others meet in seminar rooms, lecture halls, and spaces that are shared with other library departments. Art museums, learning centers, and research centers are among the collaborative areas that are used outside of the library.

In promoting curricular use of collections to both students and faculty, respondents cite one-on-one contact as both the most used and the most successful method. The library Web site is the second most used tool for promoting curricular collections to both faculty and students, but less than a third of respondents classify it as a successful method. Listserv/group e-mails are perceived as being more successful in reaching faculty than students. Respondents have tried posters, flyers, bookmarks, direct mail (either electronic or paper), blogs, and campus newsletters. Those few who have used social networking for this purpose do not find it successful in reaching faculty.

Open-ended responses to “Other methods” elicited several creative and enthusiastic comments. One institution has been able to tap into course enhancement grants directed towards faculty to help them implement new instructional techniques. “[Course enhancement grants] encourage and reward faculty for partnering with librarians. Curators of special collections have been successful in using the grants to incorporate special collections.” Another respondent describes promoting their collections to faculty by building relationships with graduate students. “We are particularly successful with graduate students teaching their first course. They are grateful for the help to fill the syllabus and we believe we are training them to see the value of special collections as they move into their own faculty position.” One department has recently created an Outreach Coordinator position, and they are “hoping to see more use of Web 2.0 to promote to students.” Another respondent gives two monetary awards (\$750 each) in recognition of excellence in undergraduate research projects “that make original and extensive use of the University Library’s collections.”

Special collections are tracking curricular engagement through a variety of use counts: 88% keep track of how many classes use materials during the year, 55% track the number of students using materials (outside of an instruction session), and others track

general collection usage. Of the 61 respondents who answered the evaluation section, 20 do not evaluate student use of materials. Eighteen respondents rely on anecdotal feedback, and fourteen use surveys. A few respondents use circulation statistics for their collections, track how many registered patrons are students, or review the number of citations of special collections materials in student papers. In general, comments on this section reflect a desire for methods that go beyond use counts to help assess curricular outreach outcomes more effectively.

About a third of the respondents commented on the ways in which they are including unique materials in student research projects—working with faculty to hold classes in special collection spaces, crafting class assignments that utilize primary sources, involving subject librarians and teaching faculty, collaborating with faculty on assignment design, selecting materials for student use, and creating a special student exhibit curator opportunity. One respondent outlined a program assigning honors freshman an original document, rare book, or piece of artwork for a semester-long research project. The success of this initiative “has led to discussions of the creation of an Undergraduate Research Center to be based in the Library.”

While everyone embraces the concept of curricular outreach, a few recurring problems surfaced in the comments. The demand for instruction is growing, while the staff is shrinking. The lack of a single person designated as coordinator can impede progress in developing a program. Staff members are dealing with multiple priorities; one respondent observed that although one-on-one contact seems to be the most effective way of reaching faculty and students, it is also the most time-consuming. The observation that the best collaborations occur when faculty approach special collections staff suggests that the balance between being responsive and being proactive may not always be easy to achieve.

Faculty and Scholars/Researchers Affiliated with the Institution

Most respondents (72 or 95%) target research faculty and other affiliated scholars/researchers in their outreach efforts and do so using a variety of approaches.

Scheduling one-on-one visits within the special collections/library space is the most common way to engage these scholars/researchers, followed by holding orientations in special collections and creating Web pages with content specifically directed toward this audience. Respondents rate these three methods as being more effective than all other methods, including visiting scholars/researchers in their offices or holding orientations outside of the special collections/library space.

The primary responsibility for conducting outreach to affiliated scholars/researchers is spread out among staff. Of 72 institutions that responded, only 16 indicate that this responsibility falls primarily to one person. For the remainder of respondents, responsibility is shared among several members within special collections or extends beyond special collections to staff in other library units with applicable subject knowledge in the area of the researchers' interests.

To promote special collections materials to faculty and scholars/researchers, a variety of methods have been used. In order of preference, modes of communication for reaching affiliated scholars/researchers include direct one-on-one contact, library or university Web pages, library newsletters, press releases, campus newspapers, and other types of physical advertisement (posters, fliers, bookmarks, etc.). Interestingly, outside of placing information about special collections materials on library/university Web pages, respondents have rarely turned to other methods of Web communication to reach affiliated scholars/researchers. Fewer than ten institutions report methods such as blogs, listservs, and social networking Web sites as being effective methods of providing outreach to affiliated scholars/researchers.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of outreach efforts directed to affiliated scholars/researchers is relatively limited. Of the 49 institutions responding to the questions about evaluation, 27 report not doing any type of evaluation. The other 22 institutions are using methods such as tracking usage statistics, interpreting anecdotal feedback from patrons, and conducting formal surveys. Based on results of evaluations, eight of these institutions have made changes in their practices; in all cases, they have increased their efforts to contact affiliated scholars/researchers.

Scholars/Researchers Not Affiliated with the Institution

Institutions approach outreach to unaffiliated scholars/researchers in much the same way as they approach outreach to affiliated scholars/researchers, and many of the same methods are judged to be successful. Exhibits, events, and instruction are important components of outreach to unaffiliated scholars/researchers. In addition, some institutions are using activities such as participation in conferences, social networking, and travel grants to bring researchers to the collection.

While respondents considered one-on-one contact to be the most successful method for engaging affiliated scholars/researchers, they rated online promotion as the most successful for unaffiliated scholars/researchers. This is entirely logical, given the fact that unaffiliated scholars/researchers are less likely to have a physical presence on the campus.

Outreach and Engagement Policy

The majority of respondents (66 or 87%) have no formal plan or policy document addressing outreach and engagement. Two respondents commented that they are in the process of drawing up plans, one respondent has incorporated outreach parameters into their mission statement, and another respondent includes outreach in annual goals and initiative documents.

Certain topics are covered by most of the ten institutions that do have formal engagement plans: instruction (90%), events (80%), exhibits (70%), and targeted user groups (70%). Other policy components in these plans include the distribution of outreach personnel responsibilities, promotion, and assessment. One policy includes use of space, digital initiatives, collection management, training, and processing.

Engagement Barriers

Most of the respondents (51 or 67%) have encountered barriers in providing effective outreach to faculty, students, and other scholars/researchers affiliated with their institutions. Of these, about half cite insufficient staffing as a major impediment, in particular the lack of dedicated outreach staff. "Although we have an active public relations department in the library, we would greatly benefit from an exhibits and

publications coordinator." In some cases the lack of institutional support for outreach is perceived as a problem. "Library support for outreach is limited. Staff are few and occupied with priorities other than promotion or publicity for a specific special collections exhibit or event." Multiple respondents expressed the desire to have a single individual responsible for coordinating outreach efforts.

Funding, limited hours, and space are often noted together as impediments to outreach efforts. "Due to the departure of staff, budget cuts, and a hiring freeze, we have a limited number of staff. The limited hours and staffing are barriers to providing effective outreach." For others, the decentralized environment of a large university campus or a special collections location that is remote from the main library can be a significant barrier.

Several respondents mention faculty awareness and disinterest as issues. "The biggest barrier we face is engaging with our faculty. If they tend not to be interested in what we have or don't know about us, they tend not to emphasize our resources to their students." The sheer number of activities on campus can be a barrier, although one respondent is attempting to mitigate this by reaching out to other departments to reduce scheduling conflicts.

Additional Comments

Twenty-nine institutions included additional comments to explain further their local situations or to offer general thoughts about the topic of outreach in special collections. The major themes that emerged in this section reflect realities inherent to special collections departments from coast to coast. A predominant concern is the lack of personnel to carry out all of the desired outreach activities of the department. Several institutions report that positions involved in outreach have been recently cut or otherwise lost, and other comments focus on the general overall shortage of staff to pursue these efforts. A few institutions have considered or are starting to use social networking and other Web 2.0 technologies to compensate for the lack of staff, but at this point none can confirm whether this strategy is having the desired effect.

Several institutions note that their special collections units are physically dispersed and that their

responses reflect only a portion of that institution's special collections structure. In addition, some respondents emphasized that they try to reach as wide an audience as possible, including the non-university community around them. A few institutions are focusing some of their engagement efforts on students at local high schools.

Conclusions

This survey focuses primarily on outreach efforts to on-campus constituencies (including students, faculty, and other researchers affiliated with the institution), while recognizing that a majority of respondents (82%) also direct outreach efforts to non-affiliated researchers. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the results of this survey largely do not address outreach efforts directed to off-campus audiences, and a future survey will be needed to explore efforts targeted to external constituencies in more depth.

A genuine commitment to outreach activities in special collections is evident throughout the responses to this survey. Over 95% of respondents are staging exhibits, holding events, and engaging students and faculty in the use of collections; most institutions are participating in all of these activities, as well as in many others not specifically addressed in the survey. At the heart of all outreach activities are the collections. Libraries are going to great lengths to promote their unique and specialized collection strengths, employing many creative outreach and engagement approaches. While the traditional methods of exhibits, events, and curricular instruction continue to be the emphasis of special collections' outreach programs, institutions are also embracing opportunities to be active physically beyond the borders of their campuses and virtually through blogs, social networking sites, and other Web 2.0 technologies.

The involvement of staff members in outreach activities is more often determined by a subject knowledge, background, or specialty than by position titles. Responses also show that special collections are organized in a variety of structures, both within the department and as members of their larger institutions, furthering the reality that outreach activities are rarely the responsibility of a single staff member.

Because the responsibilities for outreach are frequently distributed among a number of staff members, it can be difficult for institutions to approach their outreach programming in a cohesive and coordinated manner. Activities such as exhibits and events are often handled by a committee with a finite deadline, making them easier to manage; curricular engagement is an ongoing effort that is likely to be assigned to the staff persons whose backgrounds are topically applicable, decreasing the likelihood of special collections having a structured approach and a single staff member responsible for coordinating this activity. One-on-one approaches to curricular engagement are largely reported as being the most successful, but this method can strain departments that are already short staffed. In general, most institutions report that a gap exists between the number of staff they have available to conduct outreach activities and the number they would like to have.

Another theme shared by responding institutions is the lack of formal plans or documentation related to outreach activities. Many respondents noted that they would like to have documentation in place (and some were in the process of assembling these documents at the time of answering the survey), but most special collections continue to engage in outreach activities without having formal documentation of their program.

Lack of a formal outreach plan contributes to unstructured assessment, another theme of the survey results. Most institutions rely on patron or item counts and anecdotal feedback to assess the effectiveness of their outreach. Respondents, however, clearly expressed a desire to move beyond this to a more systematic approach. Due to the wide variety of outreach activities in which special collections are involved, a pertinent question naturally arises: what is the best way to approach outreach assessment? This uncertainty underscores a general caveat that applies to all outreach activities. Assessment is rarely easy, and the varied activities and staff shortages in the area of outreach exacerbate the situation. Institutions feel they are not able to quantify the success of their efforts, and this in turn limits the ability to compare activities within the institution or across institutions, to plan

further outreach effectively, or to communicate the results of those outreach activities to the larger special collections community.

However, despite these roadblocks, the responses to this survey indicate widespread enthusiasm for outreach activities among special collections. Many respondents emphasized a need and desire to build on their current efforts and to do more in the future. A challenge for the future, therefore, will be to articulate goals and objectives for special collections outreach and to bring staffing resources in line with those goals

and objectives—especially regarding curricular engagement. All of these desires reflect a climate of maturing special collections initiatives and programs, and the emphasis on exposing hidden collections and integrating special collections with the broader library community. As special collections continue to develop, expand, and better structure their outreach programs, exposure to the unique and important materials in their holdings will reach a broader audience, benefitting everyone involved.

