

Public Services in Special Collections

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Over the past few years there have been a number of surveys examining current practices in Special Collections, as well as discussion about the need for further data gathering activities. Recent surveys of ARL member libraries have addressed topics such as security, preservation, digital projects, and hidden collections. None of these surveys has focused specifically on issues related to reference and patron services in Special Collections. However, the manner in which Special Collections provide access to their holdings is as important as the substance and extent of the holdings they collect. The purpose of this survey was to gather information pertaining to the provision of reference and related public services for both on- and off-site patrons.

The survey focused on public service staffing, reference and public services offered, methods of patron access, types of intellectual access tools used, patron registration, the reference interview process, and public service evaluation and promotion methods. In addition, respondents were asked to comment on significant changes in reference and public services in Special Collections in the last few years, particularly those related to outreach, instruction, and learning.

Special Collections have been defined as library materials that, in addition to supporting research, often are characterized by artifactual and monetary value, by uniqueness or rarity, and by a long-term commitment to preservation and access on the part

of the library. For the purposes of this survey, we also defined Special Collections as the department, unit, or library that collects and manages those materials.

Background

This survey was distributed to the 123 ARL member libraries in March 2006. Seventy-nine libraries (64%) responded to the survey. Thirty-five of the responding libraries (44%) have a single Special Collections unit. Twenty-five of the libraries (32%) have one primary Special Collections unit and additional, smaller special collections in other libraries or branches. Eleven (14%) have multiple Special Collections units dispersed across a number of libraries or branches. Respondents who have dispersed units were asked to base all survey responses on services provided at one primary Special Collections unit.

The large majority of Special Collections in ARL libraries are open on a regular schedule; two are open by appointment only. Most of the libraries with a regular schedule are open 40 to 49 hours per week with an average of 44.6 hours. There is no real difference between the number of hours open to the public and the number of hours that public services are available, indicating that most libraries are not providing services during times when they are closed to the public. Of the respondents who indicated that they provide more hours of public service than hours open to the public, two provide

fifteen additional hours for public service, another provides five additional hours, and one provides 40 hours of public service while being open 20 hours per week. For the two respondents open by appointment only, one provides 37.5 hours of public service and the other provides 42.5 hours. Two libraries reported that they are open to the public longer hours than the number of hours that they offer reference services. One provides 72 hours of public services while being open 74 hours per week and the other provides 39 hours of public service while being open 44 hours per week.

The majority of the respondents (98%) have closed, on-site stacks for holdings storage, but a significant number (65%) have off-site stacks. Staff must provide almost all of the physical access to Special Collections materials by retrieving materials for patrons upon request. The comments indicate that this labor-intensive activity is alleviated somewhat by providing digital surrogates online and by the use of open shelves for reference or heavy-use materials, but not alleviated sufficiently enough to reduce the need for staff to handle physical access.

A majority of the processed materials in Special Collections are cataloged and most catalog records are available in both local and union catalogs. In addition to catalog records, the responses indicate that finding aids are used widely to provide access to materials. There is a significant gap, however, between the availability of print and online finding aids for archival materials in Special Collections. Only eleven institutions reported a higher percentage of processed collections findable through online rather than print finding aids. Traditional card catalogs, electronic databases, and other print tools such as shelf lists continue to be used, but these descriptive tools represent less than half of the processed materials in Special Collections.

Patron Registration

Only three out of 79 respondents indicated that they do not require registration of any type for on-site patrons. Seventy-six require registration prior

to use of materials and 30 of those also require registration prior to receiving reference service. Of the 30 libraries that require registration prior to providing reference service, 25 have a single registration form that covers both reference and use of materials.

For off-site patrons, most respondents do not require any type of registration. Only 26 (40%) require registration prior to use of materials and only two require registration prior to receiving reference service. Despite this, the responses reveal that registration data for off-site patrons is collected routinely at numerous libraries, albeit in a less formal manner. One respondent wrote, "We do not require registration of off-site patrons. However, in answering questions we will gather contact info such as name, phone, and/or e-mail."

The comments indicate that many respondents equate registration primarily or solely with security, as opposed, for example, to using registration as a means to compile information on who is using materials and for what purposes. Many respondents addressed this directly, stating that off-site patrons do not have to register because they are not physically using the materials. Many comments, however, reveal that some libraries do track these transactions using other methods. It is interesting to note that some libraries require additional registration forms when using archival or manuscript materials, probably due to concerns related to security, privacy, or copyright.

A majority of the responding libraries collect typical patron registration information such as name, status and/or institutional affiliation, mailing address, telephone number, and e-mail address. Slightly more than half of the respondents record an identification number, such as a driver's license or student ID number. Several libraries also ask the patron to indicate the purpose of their visit to Special Collections. Only 17 of 74 libraries collect a photograph or reproduction of a photograph of the patron, which is interesting considering that numerous respondents so closely relate the registration process to collection security.

Clearly, there is no consensus among respondents regarding how frequently patrons are required to register. Almost an equal number of libraries fall into one of two extremes—requiring registration annually or requiring registration at each visit. Twenty-five respondents (33%) require on-site patrons using materials to register annually, while 23 respondents (36%) require the same registration to be completed at each visit. Another twelve libraries require registration for on-site patrons using materials to be completed one time only, at their initial visit to Special Collections. A smaller number of respondents require new registration each semester, term, quarter, month, or week. Approximately 88% of the libraries (65) store registration records primarily as paper only and 34% (25) store this information in a database.

Public Service Staffing

Forty-three of the responding libraries (55%) have staff members employed primarily to provide reference services. Those staff members tend to be librarians (an average of 2.8 FTE) and support staff (an average of 2.3 FTE). Archivists have primary reference responsibility at only 15 institutions. Many of the respondents identified staff positions with titles such as Public Services Coordinator, Reading Room Coordinator, Reader's Liaison, and Research Services Archivist. The comments indicate that although libraries are hiring staff members primarily to provide public service, a large number of the libraries continue to divide reference duties among most or all of the staff. A typical comment read, "One librarian position, the Public Services Coordinator, exists primarily to do reference/public service. All other permanent staff assist with public services, however."

Reference/Public Services

Respondents were asked to briefly describe the reference interview process in Special Collections. An analysis of respondents' comments reveals that there are two primary approaches to the typical reference interview. The triage approach involves

patrons interacting first with support staff, student assistants, or reading room coordinators. If the needs of the patrons cannot be satisfied at this initial point of contact, the patrons are directed to subject specialists or other professionals who can provide greater in-depth assistance. Approximately 46 of the 76 respondents (61%) use a triage reference interview process. Comments from multiple respondents indicate that this approach also frequently includes the use of a reception desk that is separated physically from the reference area.

The second major approach described by respondents is a less-formal random reference approach. Several staff members share the responsibility of serving at the reference desk, often in rotating shifts, and patrons simply interact with whomever happens to be at the desk at any given time. This approach doesn't preclude the possibility that a patron may be referred to another staff member for more in-depth reference assistance, but it is far less structured than the triage approach. The patron may interact initially with a student assistant, or they may encounter the head of the department, or the very subject specialist that may be of most help to them. Approximately 22 of the respondents (28%) use the random reference interview process. It is interesting to note that another six of the responding libraries (8%) have a reference interview process in which patrons interact solely with professional members of the staff.

All but a few of the libraries receive and respond to patron reference questions in person, by phone, via e-mail, by fax, or by regular mail. Other means of communication and delivery, such as online forms and express mail services, are used to a lesser degree. Nine pioneering respondents use online chat/instant messaging to interact with patrons.

With few exceptions, the responding libraries provide basic services such as helping patrons identify useful materials and reproducing materials by photocopy or digitization for both on- and off-site patrons. Sixty-five respondents will create a CD or DVD for either on- or off-site patrons and

25 of these, plus a few others, will microfilm materials for patrons. Seventy-five provide instruction or presentations either in Special Collections or in the classroom for on-site patrons; 30 of these report also providing instruction to off-site patrons. A high number (56 or 72%) provide materials to patrons of other libraries via ILL, but only 16 make ILL requests for their own patrons. Forty-eight respondents (62%) conduct research for off-site patrons, which is somewhat higher than expected, but only 26 of these conduct research for on-site patrons. Two others conduct research for on-site patrons but not off-site patrons. Slightly fewer than half of the respondents (37 or 47%) contact patrons to alert them about acquisitions that might satisfy their needs or interests. A few libraries also report that they provide other services, including in-house and online exhibits, referring patrons to other libraries and researchers who can assist with their research, and making presentations to community or school groups.

Fees for on- and off-site patrons are approximately the same for each type of service provided, indicating that most libraries typically do not distinguish between the two types of patrons. A majority of the service fees, such as fees for digital reproductions or microfilm, tend to be the same regardless of whether the patron is on-site or off-site. Fees for photocopying services do vary between on-site and off-site patrons, though, costing almost \$0.50 more per page for off-site patrons. Respondents' comments also reveal that multiple libraries charge a minimum fee in addition to the per-page cost for off-site photocopying requests. The difference in photocopying fees probably can be attributed to the difference between self-service copying for on-site patrons and copying completed by staff members for off-site patrons. It is interesting to note that 21 respondents charge for staff time in conducting research or creating reproductions for both on- and off-site patrons and three others charge for staff time only when assisting off-site patrons.

Reproductions of Special Collections holdings are delivered to patrons using a variety of meth-

ods. Traditional methods, such as having patrons pick up reproductions at the service desk or delivering to patrons via regular mail, are two of the most popular methods. Delivery via e-mail is comparable to delivery via regular mail, with 72 respondents using e-mail and 77 respondents using regular mail.

Sixty-five respondents (82%) have reference/public service policies for Special Collections. These documents include general policy and procedural manuals, registration policies, copyright statement and reprographics policies, retrieving/reshelving policies, and access policies. The other 14 respondents (18%) do not have these policies, though one states they generally follow the policies of the reference department.

Public Service Transaction Tracking

Only four of the 75 respondents (5%) do not track the number of public service transactions. Over 90% of the libraries track the number of reference questions and instruction sessions/presentations given in Special Collections. Between 75% and 77% of the libraries track the number of items retrieved from the stacks and the number of instruction sessions/presentations given in the classroom. Over 60% of the respondents also track the number of items reproduced and the number of directional/information questions received.

Fewer than half of the respondents record public service transactions according to patron status or category (e.g., faculty, student, staff, etc.), but rather simply record the total number of transactions regardless of patron categories. For those libraries that do track transactions by patron category, most patrons are visiting researchers, graduate and undergraduate students (including both individual students and students visiting as part of classes), and members of the local community.

It is no surprise that of the twenty libraries with the highest service transaction statistics, twelve are among those libraries with the highest staffing levels. In particular, libraries with high transaction totals also have a higher number of FTEs for librar-

ians, archivists, student assistants, and support staff. For example, a library with one of the highest annual on-site patron counts (over 7,000) has 12 librarian FTEs (the second highest for that staff category), 8 archivist FTEs (third highest for that staff category), 8 other professional FTEs, 35 support staff FTEs (the second highest for that staff category), 8 graduate student assistant FTEs (the second highest for that staff category), 39 undergraduate student FTEs (the highest for that staff category), and 6 other staff member FTEs (the second highest for that staff category). Another respondent has one of the highest combined on- and off-site patron counts (over 8,000), and has 7.5 librarian FTEs, 5.6 archivist FTEs, and 7.25 support staff FTEs.

Public Service Evaluation

The methods used to measure Special Collections public service quality and/or effectiveness are primarily informal. Informal feedback is used by 96% of the respondents and 66% rely on direct observation of service transactions. Only 36% collect data from comment/suggestion forms and only 30% conduct patron surveys. Although exit interviews are conducted by 19% of the libraries, more formal evaluation methods such as focus groups or advisory groups are used by only 3% of the institutions.

One respondent stated that additional research needs to be conducted to assess the impact of Special Collections services on educational outcomes, such as faculty and student conference presentations, publications, faculty lectures, etc. "Often the resulting use of our materials is not reported back to us," the respondent wrote, "[making it] difficult to get accurate measures."

Public Services Promotion

Special Collections public services are promoted and advertised primarily by Web site, word of mouth, open houses, and flyers or brochures. Several libraries hold special events, offer lectures, and create exhibitions and displays to attract visitors. Respondents' comments also reveal the im-

portance of collaborating with faculty in the classroom. Multiple respondents make presentations to classes and/or prepare descriptions of holdings that can be used with class syllabi. Not surprisingly, those libraries employing the greatest variety of promotional methods tend to be the libraries with higher staff levels, particularly those libraries with more staff members who primarily provide public services.

Changes in Public Services

The survey asked respondents to briefly describe any significant changes in reference/public services in the previous few years. Responses indicate an ongoing and increasing emphasis on curricular support, including teaching, working with faculty to incorporate Special Collections into course syllabi, building class assignments around Special Collections resources, and providing access to those resources physically and/or digitally. Several libraries reported the hiring of new staff members or the reassignment of existing staff members to handle these activities. Approximately 22 respondents pointed to a significant increase in teaching both BI sessions and for-credit courses. One respondent, for example, reported sixteen classes scheduled during just one week. A few libraries also have created new seminar/class rooms with full technological capabilities for teaching activities.

A significant number of the respondents, approximately 35 out of 67, discussed an increase in public programming and outreach activities, including exhibitions, tours, and open house events. Several libraries are concentrating on encouraging greater use of materials by undergraduate students and K-12 students, with the expectation that if they engage the students early on it will lead to repeat visits throughout their academic careers. For example, multiple libraries participate in annual history fairs such as those associated with National History Day. Multiple libraries also emphasized outreach to first-year students. Some of these libraries have witnessed an increase in usage as a result of increased outreach activities to undergraduate and

K-12 students, as well as to community groups. A few respondents, however, pointed out that the increase in public services and outreach has led to a decrease in other activities, such as the processing of materials. They expressed concern that staff members are becoming overworked and stretched thin as Special Collections units increasingly focus on labor-intensive, public services responsibilities.

Not surprisingly, numerous respondents discussed the impact of technology and digitization. The general consensus was that digitization efforts have been increasing steadily in recent years and will only continue to increase. Approximately 17 respondents mentioned an increase in the number of e-mail and online inquiries and several respondents described increased patron transactions as a result of improved intellectual access tools. One respondent proposed that the increase in online resources would lead to a decrease in on-site usage. Approximately ten respondents discussed how digital reproduction technologies are replacing photocopying and other reproduction methods; some libraries are providing digital reproduction equipment such as scanners and cameras to patrons. One respondent wrote, "As more... materials go online, the nature of the questions reference staff handle has changed and the visibility of the collections has grown." Reference questions can be more complex, with a higher level of specificity, and patrons have increased expectations regarding turnaround time for responses. Multiple respondents pointed to the need for flexibility in staff workloads, training to provide skills that have been lacking, as well as greater cross-training between Special Collections staff and staff in other library units.

Conclusions

The data gathered by this survey are useful in that they provide a general overview of the current state of reference and public services in Special Collections, but the comments provided by respondents are particularly useful because they reveal future directions and trends. For example, one of the most interesting items revealed by the survey

is that several research libraries are attempting to reach out to younger students, specifically K-12 students and college and university freshmen. These libraries hope that by attracting young students early in their academic careers they may be able to instill in them an awareness of, and appreciation for, Special Collections holdings and services. This may be a significant change for those libraries that traditionally have tailored their services towards principal users such as faculty, visiting researchers, and graduate students.

Survey responses indicate that data collection practices vary widely among Special Collections units in ARL Libraries. Patron registration and transaction tracking, in particular, seem to be two areas where practices differ greatly. Libraries use different definitions and procedures to identify and track patrons, making it difficult to determine which patrons are registered and/or counted, how frequently registration occurs, and how the patrons are categorized, if they are categorized at all. It is clear that public services are being measured differently at various libraries and the lack of standardization makes it difficult to arrive at conclusions based on comparison of the responses. A collaborative, comprehensive approach towards the standardization of public services procedures and the manner in which libraries measure those services is needed.

Libraries are systematically gathering quantitative data to measure services, but relatively few libraries are actively assessing the quality and effectiveness of their public services. Fewer than half of the libraries collect evaluative data from comment/suggestion forms, patron surveys, exit interviews, focus groups, or advisory groups. Informal feedback and direct observation of service transactions are the primary means by which libraries collect information that can be used to assess quality of services. This is a source of concern given the passive nature of these evaluative techniques and the fact that Special Collections units are actively developing new strategies for providing services to patrons.

A majority of the responding libraries reported on the impact that technology has had on public services in Special Collections. The availability of descriptive information for large percentages of processed materials clearly impacts reference and public service activities. Information about holdings can be disseminated to a wider audience and researchers can discover this information more easily. As some respondents commented, the number of online reference requests has increased and the nature of the requests has changed. Patron expectations regarding how and when services should be provided electronically also have changed. Requests have become more specific because patrons have access to detailed descriptive information prior to interacting with reference staff. In addition, the availability of digital objects online makes it possible for users to gain access to holdings without visiting the library and without interacting with staff.

Technology also has affected how Special Collections staff conduct outreach, instruction, and other public programming. Libraries are working with faculty and scholars to create digital content for use in lectures and exhibits. Some libraries report that online exhibitions have enhanced visibility and led to increased requests for information.

The increase in the number of off-site patrons apparently has not affected the manner in which Special Collections provide public services. Survey responses reveal that libraries tend to serve off-site patrons in the same manner that they serve on-site patrons. The types of services offered and the fees charged for those services tend to be about the same for both types of users. Patron registration is the one area in which libraries significantly treat off-site researchers differently than on-site researchers. Comments indicate that libraries do track off-site public service transactions, but that a majority of the libraries do not require formal registration for off-site patrons.

It is understandable that libraries would not register every patron accessing digital surrogates online. However, for those patrons requesting reference services for holdings that are unavailable digitally, it is somewhat surprising that the libraries would not routinely collect information about the nature of their requests. If the registration form is intended solely as a security measure to track physical use of holdings, then there is plausible justification for this discrepancy. It is obvious, however, that many libraries intend for the registration process to be much more than a security measure. For example, some libraries require in-house patrons to sign the registration form stating that they have read and understand certain policies of the library, such as reproduction and use policies. It is clear that many libraries need to examine their registration procedures to determine if off-site patrons should be treated in the same manner as on-site patrons.

The results of this survey demonstrate an increasing emphasis on public services in Special Collections. Many respondents commented directly on this, stating that staff and other resources have been focused on public services. Several libraries commented on staffing, specifically pointing to the creation of new positions dedicated primarily to public services. Many also commented on the need for existing staff to be trained so that there is greater flexibility and adaptability to change. It remains to be seen whether this focus on public services will adversely affect other activities, such as collecting and processing, and some respondents are anxious that this may be the case. However, it is obvious that Special Collections staff are taking advantage of a variety of opportunities, or creating new opportunities, to deliver public services. For their part, researchers are thinking creatively about new ways to use Special Collections resources and this certainly will have an impact on the delivery of public services.

