

2009 RBMS PRECONFERENCE SEMINAR
“Public Services and ‘Un-Hidden’ Collections:
What We Know and What We Need to Know”
Introductory remarks

Good morning. I am Alice Schreyer, and I'll be moderating our session, “Public Services and ‘Unhidden’ Collections: What We Know and What We Need to Know.” I'd like to thank Mattie Taormina for partnering to develop this program, Sue Walker for serving as the liaison to the Seminar committee, and Jennifer MacDonald for stepping in as the on-site coordinator for Sue, who wasn't able to attend.

For over five years, there has been extraordinary momentum to streamline archival processing and eliminate processing arrearages. These efforts have been fueled by a variety of factors: the 2003 ARL Special Collections Task Force White Paper, “Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers;” the pre- and post-publication debates around Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's 2005 article, “More Product, Less Process;” the Library of Congress report, “On the Record: Report of The Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control;” and the Council on Library and Information Resources Cataloging Hidden Special Collections awards program.

As a result of these developments, we are making tremendous progress toward the goal of providing some level of online information about all collections. It may seem heretical to ask, at this point, “why are we doing this?” the underlying assumption is that is what researcher want; and conversations with scholars confirms that—at least when given a choice of minimal online description or none at all—they agree that “something is better than nothing.” At the same time, archivists are voicing legitimate concerns about the potential impact on staff charged with the responsibility of administering and providing access to minimally described collections.

This panel emerged from a desire to focus attention on the impact of hidden collections processing on both researchers and staff: what are the “first impressions” and what can we do to enrich anecdotal reports with statistics to guide improvement?

I had a particular reason to probe these questions. Last August, I participated in a Podcast interview with Merilee Proffitt of OCLC RLG Programs in her series, “Things That Keep Me Awake at Night.” Our conversation was entitled, “Picking Up the Pace: Considering the Implications of Accelerated Archival Processing.” The focus of my insomniacal confessions was the issue of sustainability— in particular, what are we doing to get ready for the increasing numbers of students and researcher who will find their way to our doors and reference in-boxes as a result of our success? What about the associated rise in copy and scanning requests, permissions requests, the demand for longer hours and more instruction, strains on front-line staff and security concerns. In my exchange with Merilee, I referred to these as the “un-intended consequences” of hidden collections processing. And while we welcome them, they are also usually unfunded.

This was a timely topic for me. Because we had just completed the second year of the University of Chicago Library's locally developed “tiered processing program: and a Mellon-funded project that became one of the prototypes for the CLIR awards, also funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. We were beginning to see the effect on staff and wondered about the effect on users.

Between July 1, 2007, and June 30, 2008, 30% of the newly processed collections were used for either research or teaching. During that same period we answered 1560 email questions, in comparison with the science library's 455 (8 librarians), the law library's 422 (5 librarians) and the general reference

department's 1476 (11 librarians). Not surprisingly many other aspects of public services were also seeing dramatic increases.

In an effort to begin to understand the impact of online finding aids on researchers, we conducted a two-month survey last summer. We learned that 86% of remote inquiries came from researchers who had used our online finding aids. And that 50% of them found the finding aids in a Google search. The results were the reverse with onsite users, only 40% of whom had used the finding aids database before arriving at our reference desk. We were frustrated by the lack of insight into whether increased availability of online finding aids was translating into increased onsite use (as opposed to our other outreach efforts); but the survey accomplished our chief goal of establishing a baseline against which to gauge future results.

The special collections community is expending tremendous energy and creativity to make our collections more accessible online. Today's panelists believe that we need to invest comparable effort into analyzing the impact on both staff and researchers and preparing ourselves to make needed changes. It is highly unlikely that the size of special collections public services staff will increase in the near term. The priority is on processing staff, due to external funding opportunities and the interest of library directors in promoting their libraries distinctive collections. (Not that this is at all a bad thing—who knew that archival processing would ever become sexy?) Should we be reallocating staff? Will enlisting researchers in the iterative task of enhancing collection description give them more of what they need and at the same time alleviate the burden on staff? How can we make public services sexy too?

This morning's speakers bring a broad range of experiences and perspectives to the questions, "what we know" and "what we need to know" in order to assess the relationship between public services and un-hidden collections. Their remarks will provide context for what I expect will be a lively discussion. I will introduce our presenters in the order in which they will speak.

Shannon Bowen Maier began her archival career in the processing department of the University of Wyoming-American Heritage Center in 2002. After a year and a half of arranging and describing the Center's environmental history related-holdings, she transferred into the reference department where she has worked ever since. Shannon is a member of the steering committee for the Reference, Access, and Outreach section of the Society of American Archivists and serves as Archives Month Coordinator for the Society of Rocky Mountain Archivists. Her research interests included reference metrics and the access implications of basic processing.

Jennifer Schaffner is a program officer with OCLC Research. She works with the RLG Partnership on projects concerning special collections, support for scholarly research, data curation, and collaboration among libraries, archives and museums. She organized a webinar on statistics in special collections and is the author of the just-published report, "The Metadata Is the Interface: Better Description for Better Discovery of Archives and Special Collections." Jennifer has master's degrees in library studies and history from the University of Alberta and UC Irvine, respectively. Jennifer has worked in libraries for over 20 years, at UCLA, the California Historical Society, the Institute for Advanced Study, New York Public Library, and Stanford.

Victoria Steele became the Brooke Russell Astor Director of Collections Strategy for the New York Public Library in April of this year. In this capacity, she is responsible for NYPL's numerous special collections and archives as well as circulating collections in more than 90 locations. Formerly, she headed the UCLA Library's Department of Special Collections, where she also served as founding director of its Center for Primary Research and Training. Under Vicki's leadership, UCLA also received a Mellon pre-CLIR award; she reported the results in a June 2008 article in *College & Research Libraries News*, "Exposing Hidden Collections: The UCLA Experience."