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Rally Help for a Small Archive: Matching Student and Volunteer Needs with Collections Management Priorities

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Rally Help for a Small Archive: Matching Student and Volunteer Needs with Collections Management Priorities

Abstract

This paper explores various ways that students and volunteers have been recruited and matched with rewarding projects in artist and architecture archives at the University of Hawaii's Hamilton Library. In small archives there are so many competing demands for solo archivists that some may shy away from what seems like additional effort to find and direct the work of others. Just a few hours a week can make a huge difference when you have the right people lined up. Consider all the small things that we can never find the time to do, or things that distract from more complex tasks. Having students and volunteers presents more structure to prioritize projects. Assignments that match their skills and interests can reward them with the experience or personal fulfillment that they are seeking, while benefitting the archivist and improving collections stewardship. Visual resource collections are positioned to attract amazing talent.

Keywords

visual resources, preservation, instruction, new professionals, mentoring, training, professional development, supervision, staffing, collection management, archives, academic libraries, students, volunteers, fundraising, interns

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Every archive must struggle to find the resources to process and care for collections. It seems there is never enough time, storage, or archival supplies to accomplish responsible stewardship for long-term preservation and access. It is particularly challenging for solo practitioners, or self-described “lone arrangers,” who must balance the demands of researchers while continuing to collect and address backlogs of materials. I manage the Jean Charlot Collection at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, along with over 20 other prominent local artist and architect archives. The Charlot Collection is by far the largest and most complex; it was the largest gift in kind to the library when the artist archive was established by an agreement that requires a curator working at least half time and a dedicated reading room. The space is used for collection processing, research visits, and class visits. This case study focuses on leveraging support for processing (whether physical arrangement of materials into archival folders and boxes, or describing archives for a finding aid) by using students and volunteers in an academic archive. Although this example focuses on an archive in a university library, the strategies described in this paper can be applied in any small archive. Students and volunteers are paired with projects that fulfill their interests and needs while also moving collections forward in terms of both physical and intellectual access for users.

Paid Help

I am in a tenure track faculty librarian position, which is the only permanent position assigned to the collections I manage. At my institution, one processing archivist is working in a contingent position paid through donor funds to cover up to 12 hours per week. This individual is a seasoned archivist, highly skilled and self-directed to tackle large processing projects. I have the funding for another two years. This is the best possible scenario, given our library’s already dwindling budget pre-pandemic. Our research library has lost many positions across departments over the last several years and there is no illusion of being able to expand staffing for this collection without external funding. The budget for my student assistant – which covered 10 hours a week in 2019 – was reduced to 3 hours a week in 2020. This is a critical position since it is a catch-all for often simple or repetitive tasks such as scanning, making photocopies, rehousing archival materials, and collections data entry from legacy spreadsheets. Because the student position is designed for a graduate student in art history, museum studies, or library science, I add substantive projects to their portfolios that develop their professional skills. Both the processing archivist and student assistant are paid positions, one with donor funds and the other with operating funds. With the reduction in the student budget, I am considering directing additional donor funds to increase hours; more on fundraising later. The student hours are critical since they free my time for the more complex tasks.



Figure 1: Processing Archivist Ellen Chapman, Student Assistant Rachel Greiner, and Museum Studies Service-Learning Students Chase Benbow and Margaret Joyce arranging and describing archives in the Jean Charlot Collection reading room, fall 2019

Service Learning

Our university has a Museum Studies Graduate Certificate program. One of the classes held each fall semester requires students to complete 24 hours of service learning in a campus collection. At the beginning of the semester, the faculty member who teaches Museums & Collections (AMST 684) schedules a visit to the collection and I present a variety of priority collection projects to match student interests. This has been an incredible boost to support small, directed projects. This faculty member does not require high level work for this class, so projects can be as simple as creating professional looking labels for boxes or flat files or as complex as designing and installing an exhibition drawn from the collection. The key is to prioritize what is needed for the collections and match that with the student's goals. This faculty member recognizes that, unlike an internship, these service-learning hours benefit students through initial exposure to working in an archive, no matter what the task.

At least one Museum Studies service-learning student has helped in the collections each fall since I was hired at the end of 2017. This has been a productive and fulfilling experience. Like Library Science, Museum Studies includes a mix of students who are fresh from their undergraduate program and returning students, some of whom have already had a career in another field or are working collections professionals. The first student I had in 2018 researched, wrote, and installed a compact exhibition in two display cases near the main entrance to the library. In fall of 2019, I had three students: a history student researched and wrote short biographical statements to be included in archival finding aids; a librarian arranged a collection and added a collection level description to ArchivesSpace; and a third student entered information from a catalogue raisonné of prints in book form into our PastPerfect database. In 2020, I had a student who flattened architectural drawings, entered information into a spreadsheet for an Omeka image collection of selected drawings, and created a brochure for the collection. When possible, I design a small project that can be completed so students can experience that feeling of accomplishment that comes from leaving a collection better than you found it.

Internships

Designing large projects for student internships can be very rewarding and intensive for both the student and for accomplishing a specific collections initiative. Internships are best as something the student can take from start to finish. Two university programs require internships that are an excellent match for the collections under my care: Library Information Science (LIS) and Museum Studies. Each spring I have participated in an internship orientation for LIS students to make a pitch for working in the archive (the most recent as a short video); alas, this has not yielded any student workers. I still feel this is worthwhile, for two reasons: students and their interests change every year, and the faculty advisor is present for each orientation, and it is usually through building these relationships that potential interns find their match.

In January 2020, my first Museum Studies internship got underway. The student had an interest in architecture and preservation, and I had just been awarded a preservation and access grant for a large architecture archive. It was a perfect match! We had two months of hands-on processing in the architectural collection when the library closed due to the pandemic following spring break. Fortunately, there were other architecture collections being transferred to me in the library and I was able to direct him to complete the internship remotely by researching and writing biographical statements for use in ArchivesSpace finding aids. One student who had completed service learning in the collections began volunteering in early 2020. She had also enrolled in the LIS program, and I pitched the idea of applying for a Visual Resources Association Foundation (VRAF) Internship so that she could be compensated. The project design was to create an online catalogue raisonné in an Omeka image gallery using scans of the artist's recently donated file cards, supplemented with images of the actual artwork whenever possible. The artist is one of our state's most beloved women artists of the 20th century whose legacy deserves to be promoted more broadly. The timing was good – the donor of the file cards wanted to see them scanned and placed online and I had a PhD candidate writing a biography of the artist based on the archive at our library. The VRAF awarded the internship in August 2020 and work was completed during the pandemic, through in-person and remote work.



Figure 2: VRAF 2020 Internship Awardee, Miriam Diane Sappington, selecting photographs for the Juliette May Fraser catalogue raisonné project

Volunteers

Prior to the pandemic I had two amazing volunteers who have extensive collection conservation experience and are practicing artists. As they are not interested in computer work, their projects are hands-on since I can trust them to

handle the most fragile works. Because most of the collections I manage include visual resources (drawings, prints, photographs, or small artifacts), there are seemingly endless projects that benefit

from their expertise. They helped with all sorts of skilled collections work such as custom storage in divided trays for small artifacts and applying accession numbers to works on paper and rare book jackets. Unfortunately, our library collections closed and we were directed to discontinue volunteer services to protect them and reduce the number of people working in the building. We have not been able to bring volunteers back yet, and it is unknown whether they will feel safe to return. I am keeping my fingers crossed! I believe those of us that work with rich visual resource collections are uniquely positioned to attract these types of highly skilled, detail oriented, careful volunteers.



Figure 3:
Volunteers
Sanit
Khewhok and
Hiroko
Sakurai
calculated
supplies to
order and
carefully
transferred
Mexican folk
art miniatures
from egg
cartons to
archival trays
and boxes

Finding Help

Academic libraries, archives, and museums do have an advantage when it comes to student support. Ideally, the institution will have a line item in the budget for paid positions or internships. There is usually a student employment office set up to help with the processes of hiring and payroll. There are also built-in relationships; campus units such as museum studies, art, and library science may seek out opportunities for their students. This should not deter those working in small non-profit or entirely volunteer-run collections. Students may be looking for experience in a particular kind of collection or a location convenient to their place of residence. The best way to make these connections happen is to reach out to faculty at nearby educational institutions to let them know about opportunities for directed work in your collections.

Our campus places students at a variety of local archives and museums. What the university programs need is someone who is qualified through education or experience and able to guide students through a beneficial learning project. At our university, the LIS program has a structured internship program (LIS 690) with approved sites listed on the course website (after a site visit and interview with the internship supervisor who must have a MLIS or equivalent degree). The expectations of the supervisor are “to provide professional training, guidance and supervision.” Internship supervisors evaluate students and vice-versa; a weak review of the supervisor may result in loss of future opportunities to host an intern. The Museum Studies and Historic Preservation Graduate Certificate Programs both require a practicum. The process for these opportunities is much more flexible, including the qualifications of the supervisor. The bottom line is to find out

what programs in your area are seeking to place students for work experience or credit and build relationships with those professors or instructors.

Fundraising

Advocating for the importance of your collections to your administration is the traditional way of securing funds for additional staff and student help. Unfortunately, most organizations were already strapped for cash before the pandemic and budgets have been flat or trending downwards for many of us. Rather than giving up, it is worthwhile to think creatively about how to leverage exciting projects to entice financial support through scholarships, direct donations, or grants. Although internships are critically important to gaining experience and building relationships while pursuing a degree, I feel it is a big ask to have students pay for a class and volunteer their labor at the same time. The first opportunity that comes to mind is the annual VRAF Internship Award: design an outstanding project for your collection and submit your collection as a host site for an internship. The VRAF pays \$3,000 directly to the student for a minimum of 200 hours dedicated to the project, plus another \$1,000 for the intern's professional development. As far as grants, it is best to start small and build on success to develop a track record. Great places to look include your local art, humanities, and community foundations. Once you are comfortable, look to the large private funders such as the Kress Foundation or federal grant programs like the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Institute for Museums and Library Services. Do not forget that direct donations from your constituencies can be really rewarding; they get to see direct impact and you get to write a thank you letter instead of a grant application and final report.

Conclusion

When faced with the often-overwhelming amount of work to be done in collections, it can be hard to find the time to recruit help from students and volunteers, and even harder to go out and secure funding to pay for additional help. However, it is worth the effort. There are great people out there who would jump at the opportunity to work in collections, paid or unpaid. There may never be enough time or money to do everything we wish and hope for our collections, but a little help can go a long way for both the student to gain practical experience and for the collections to be left in a better place than when you started.