



ARL Collections Program Special Collections

ARL Special Collections Task Force Invitational Meeting on Archival Issues October 25, 2004 Washington D.C.

Meeting Summary

Present: Jaia Barrett, ARL; Mark Greene, University of Wyoming; Nancy Gwinn, Smithsonian Institution; Dawn Hale, Johns Hopkins University; Steve Hensen, Duke University; Joe Hewitt (Chair) University of North Carolina (Emeritus); Tom Hyry, Yale University; Mary Jackson, ARL; Barbara Jones, Wesleyan University; Bill Joyce, Pennsylvania State University (by telephone); Kris Kiesling, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas; Bill Maher, University of Illinois--Urbana Champaign; Judy Panitch, University of North Carolina and ARL; and Beth Yakel, University of Michigan School of Information.

Joe Hewitt welcomed meeting participants and provided information about the background and projects of the ARL Special Collections Task Force. The structure for this meeting was developed around the activities being addressed by the Task Force. Early discussions about special collections had taken place in ARL's Research Collections Committee beginning in 1997; the Task Force was formed following the 2001 conference on special collections at Brown University. Bill Joyce has been the principal archival voice on the Task Force and he played a key role in convening this meeting in order to get more focused input from members of the archival community. The Task Force seeks feedback about its work and information about projects and initiatives that are underway. Joe expressed his hope that the discussion will be open and would help the Task Force learn more about the concerns of the archival community.

Education and Training for Special Collections

At the Brown conference, concern was expressed about education for future special collections librarians and managers. Administrators reported on failed searches for curators and there was concern that traditional humanities Ph.D.s were not being drawn to special collections. Alice Schreyer of the Task Force drafted a white paper that has been broadly circulated and is being finalized on the basis of the most recent Task Force meeting. At that meeting, the Task Force also expressed interest in bringing together groups such as SAA and RBMS to help articulate competencies for special collections careers, which was seen as an important first step toward

subsequent action.

A*CENSUS

Beth Yakel reported on A*CENSUS; she serves on the working group overseeing the project. A*CENSUS is a national census looking at archivists, broadly defined. Some 12,000 people were contacted and approximately 5,600 responses were received. Survey topics included questions about pathways taken into the profession and desired opportunities for continuing education. One of the primary project goals is to help chart a course for continuing education programs for archivists.

Competencies

Participants warned that articulating competencies for archivists is complicated by the existence of two main streams within the profession. Manuscript curatorship has traditionally had a stronger link to special collections and has emphasized subject expertise along with careful attention to individual items; the public records tradition has emphasized an understanding of how to manage materials, frequently in great quantities and regardless of content, so that researchers can get what they need. Meeting participants generally agreed that the difference between the two traditions is blurring as the press of business demands a more streamlined approach to the processing of all collections, but this is not a universally accepted assessment. Members of the general public do not care about such distinctions as long as the materials they need are available. The need for subject expertise remains open to discussion. SAA has taken the position that learning to be an archivist is more important than having a subject specialization. Many library directors, on the other hand, value subject expertise because faculty expect it and because when curators don't have subject expertise, it falls to others to talk about the collections with donors and others. While there has been much discussion--including in the Task Force white paper--about training historians to become archivists, relatively little attention has been paid to creating formal opportunities for archivists to acquire subject expertise.

Meeting participants were enthusiastic about the idea of a meeting or other event, but recommended careful attention to setting the stage. It will be important to draw out the distinctive points of view of administrators, practitioners, and educators, and to identify what each group sees as major challenges. Colleagues from the museum world also ought to be part of this conversation since they are dealing with many of the same concerns. It may be premature to structure a meeting around the articulation of specific competencies since there is still such a lack of clarity regarding needs and roles. A meeting might begin by addressing whether there are enough common themes even to articulate something that can be called "special collections education." The group additionally noted that the term "special collections" is not always well defined or commonly understood to mean the same thing by different communities and that this lack of clarity can lead to misunderstandings.

Research on Educational Opportunities

Beth Yakel shared her recent research into archival educational opportunities in the United States. Although she and Jeannette Bastian (Simmons College) identified numerous training opportunities, primarily in LIS and history programs, there are very few that could be considered in-depth and comprehensive. Her data, to be published next year by SAA, complement the information compiled by Deirdre Stam regarding rare books education in LIS programs. Together, they could form background for a conference. Beth also raised concerns about succession in the educational environment. Many courses are being taught by adjuncts and it is not clear who will be teaching them in the future.

Hidden Collections

Barbara Jones provided background about Task Force activity in this area. At the Brown Conference, uncataloged backlogs emerged as the leading concern. In response, Barbara coordinated and wrote a white paper (to be published soon in *RBM*). In the process, she discovered a great deal of common ground between archivists and librarians, who face similar pressures and who agree on the desirability of cataloging more materials in a simpler way. The LC conference resulted in action items, including two taken up by the Task Force. Winston Tabb designed a survey for institutions to share information about their unprocessed and underprocessed collections in specified areas that might appeal to granting agencies; respondents were presumed--though not obligated--to be interested in collaborative projects. A working group under the aegis of the Task Force is developing a "preliminary record" format as an option for describing collections. There is a great deal of eagerness to move forward with projects.

Dawn Hale gave more detailed description about the preliminary record format and circulated notes from Bill Garrison, the working group chair. At its last meeting, the Task Force recommended conducting preliminary time-motion studies since it wasn't clear what level of preparatory processing would be needed in order for an institution to produce an accession level preliminary record for unprocessed collections, and such information strengthen a grant proposal. Meeting participants drew attention to several key developments. SAA recently published *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*; information about minimum records is included as a direct result of Kris Kiesling's discussions with Bill Garrison at the LC conference. A number of repositories, including many represented at the table, already create preliminary records for unprocessed archival collections in a manner similar to that proposed by the Task Force. The *Descriptive Cataloging for Rare Books* is also being revised with an eye to simplification of standards.

Participants were enthusiastic about the prospect of a grant, but urged refinement of its nature and purpose. Time/motion studies might not be necessary and are especially difficult for archival and manuscript collections, where factors such as size, available information, and the donor's organization of the collection have a huge impact on processing times. The grant itself could be based on some educated estimates and then used in part to help refine those estimates. Duke, Wyoming, and Yale are already processing some collections by creating accession level preliminary MARC records and share these records with the bibliographic utilities so that

researchers are aware of these unprocessed archival collections until resources are available for complete processing. Steve Hensen would be willing to share documentation created at Duke. One possible solution is to hire somebody centrally to create the preliminary level MARC records which, in some cases, could even be done on the basis of the information submitted for the Tabb survey. The problem is urgent enough and the result--the creation of an enormous number of records--is compelling enough that it's not worth getting held up in order to do more research, although more collections would need to be identified to sustain such a project. Just convincing practitioners to make available a simplified accession level record prior to full processing of a collection will be the biggest battle. Participants generally agreed that when making an unprocessed collection available to researchers, the loss rate wasn't a significant concern and that providing access to unprocessed collections was worth taking this calculated risk. They suggested that the error is in relying upon full processing, description and cataloging in order to provide security for a collection, rather than providing reading room security so that researchers could have access to unprocessed collections. They added that this is a contentious question in the profession. In addition, many libraries also have sizeable backlogs of rare books that are uncataloged for reasons such as lack of local language expertise; it is equally critical to provide access to these materials.

Mark Greene/Dennis Meissner Study

Mark Greene summarized the research he and Dennis Meissner have recently done under an NHPRC grant to examine factors that contribute to backlogs of unprocessed collections and to propose measures that would address them. Based on their findings, Greene and Meissner recommend taking an approach that combines the creation of minimal cataloging records and streamlined processing measures, including the elimination of most item-level conservation and arrangement work which they found to consume the bulk of processing time. Their recommendations all have precedent in the literature and in practice. They focus on shifting the archival mindset from one that emphasizes taking care of all collections to the fullest extent possible, to one that maximizes providing access to users; other steps would then fall into place naturally. Participants were very much in agreement with this assessment, but cautioned that gaining broad acceptance and buy-in is likely to be difficult. They were also concerned about implications for preservation. Many participants, however, were uncomfortable with describing the situation in either/or terms (caring for materials vs. making them available) and urged broader discussion leading to a reframing of the issue. Many of the proposed changes do, in fact, mesh with the preservation management agenda, and the increased use that would arise from better access can allow institutions to target their preservation activities more effectively. It was agreed that the Greene/Meissner study probably provided enough relevant information that the Task Force could dispense with plans for a time/motion study and that a grant might be viewed as a test of Mark Greene's proposal. The issue of evaluation will be extremely important in a grant. It would be valuable for similar studies to be conducted for other typical special collections formats.

Archivist's Toolkit

Beth Yakel shared information about the Archivist's Toolkit project, for which she is an

Advisory Committee member. The Mellon-funded project seeks to create prototype tools that will help small and medium-sized repositories create and manage information about their collections. This project was not viewed as having an immediate direct impact on the work of the Task Force, but it would be valuable to extend the conversation with them and to keep apprised of the project. It could be especially beneficial if the Toolkit were developed in a way that accommodates the preliminary record being developed by the Task Force.

Measurement and Assessment

Judy Panitch described plans to proceed with development of a measurement and assessment effort for special collections that follows up on the 1998 survey, though in a much simplified form. ARL directors have expressed strong interest in the activity, as long as it produces meaningful information that is not replicated elsewhere and that can be used by both directors and special collections managers in local and comparative contexts. This initiative had been deferred for a variety of reasons, but that has proved an advantage as certain activities, such as the hidden collections agenda, have emerged as priorities that ought to be tracked. The effort to develop an instrument is just beginning, with an initial emphasis on measurement rather than assessment, and Judy sought suggestions from the group about possible directions to consider.

Beth Yakel shared research that she, Wendy Duff (Toronto), and Helen Tibbo (North Carolina) have been conducting regarding archival metrics. Based on their preliminary work, they plan to ask Mellon for funding to develop and validate a suite of evaluation tools that individual repositories can then use, with a focus on archives in academic settings. They are interested in developing a sustainable project and identifying a home for the data warehouse. They would be particularly interested in partnering with an organization such as ARL that could maintain the statistics and the various modules or tools. Task Force members and ARL staff in attendance agreed that follow-up discussions would be of interest.

Joe Hewitt concluded the meeting by thanking everyone for their contributions and willingness to attend this meeting.

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