

Get Your House in Order: Advocating for the Profession by Advocating for Your Archives

Good morning, everyone. I'd like to start by taking you back in time – back to my pre-archives career. **[SLIDE]** I worked for a number of years in athletic media relations. This means that I was the statistician, the media relations contact, the chief public relations officer, and the person who wrote everything you saw in the newspapers attributed to “the news wire.” In the Spring of 2000, I was working in the athletic department at the University of Texas, and one of my chief goals was to get media attention for our men’s swimming and diving team. Historically, the men’s swimming and diving team was a national force. And 2000 was no exception. The guys won the Big 12 Conference championship and then, on a cold March day in Minnesota, they won the NCAA Championships. They were the top NCAA team in the country! And in an Olympic year nonetheless – the magical time when even non-sports fans pay attention to swimming! So, getting the media to pay attention to this awesome group of national champions – who would go on to include a number of Olympians, including our head coach – should be a breeze, right?

Not so fast. This was Texas. The football team was in the midst of spring practice. Who cares that they had finished the previous season with only a 9-5 record? And the baseball team was looking pretty good, even though it was only the start of the season. That doesn’t leave much room for swimming news, even for national champions.

I think back to this experience a lot now when I’m working with archives – awesome work, awesome collections, and awesome people. But too often, we find that archivists don’t feel “understood” or like they’re getting a sufficient amount of respect or attention for their wonderful collections. They think, “but the things I have are so wonderful and so special!! Why won’t you pay attention to my awesome stuff?!” They talk to administrators and colleagues about the uniqueness of their holdings and the work they do -- how others simply can’t understand their specialized work. But here is the cold, hard truth. While you might be called “special collections,” **[SLIDE]** you’re not special.

You, yourself, you’re wonderful, I’m sure. And there are certain times when focusing on the “specialness” of archives can really impress someone, like a potential donor.

But when you’re working within your institution and trying to grow within your own organization, an argument of “specialness” alone simply doesn’t cut it. You might have the most wonderful collections ever and work with top international scholars – but, in the eyes of your institution, the higher ups who manage the institution’s purse strings as well as your non-archives colleagues, your specialness – how you are different – often isn’t the key to support.

What matters is that you have collections and are doing work that makes a valuable contribution to the bottom line – the overall mission of your institution. You, the archivist, need to know how to gauge, articulate, and publicize this contribution in a way that makes it clear how your archives and your work impact your institution and your colleagues. How do contribute to these bigger, institution-wide goals?

[SLIDE]Of course, the first step in this process is knowing what your administrators see as your institution's mission. Ideally, your parent organization has clearly identified goals and objectives. If it doesn't – and to be honest, even if it does and you just want to know the administration's *real* areas of focus – just look at what areas of your institution are being funded. When budget cuts come down, what tasks are identified as so critical that no one even considers cutting them? Those are the things that your institution sees as its critical functions and should point you towards its overall mission.

[SLIDE]Knowing this, your next step is to critically examine how you might document your contribution toward this overall mission. When you are talking with a resource allocator – particularly one who has no past experience with archives, as is often the case – lofty ideals and notions of identity-building or remembrances of past events often aren't going to cut it when they want to know why they should give you a sliver of the big (but shrinking) money pot. You need concrete evidence of the impact that your repository has in order to ensure that administrators' support continues. You must be sure to assess those aspects of your work that directly impact the institution's overarching goals.

[SLIDE]For example, I work in an academic library as a university archivist. I can track the number of people who come into the archives or the number of boxes or collections circulated. But, in terms of the overall mission of my library, is that really what matters? Is our primary mission to get bodies in and materials out? Not really – and the numbers for the archives will always look paltry next to general library stats. In looking at the Libraries' goals – and thinking about what aspects of the library get the most institutional support –we see “information literacy,” “instructional technologies,” community engagement, and diversity highlighted. These, of course, feed into the overall University's mission and goals. So, in examining the assessment done in University Archives, I want to question the numbers I'm tracking, question the way these numbers are presented, and critically think about how this information demonstrates that I am assisting the Library in reaching its primary objectives.

So, instead of simply tracking the number of students who attend required instructional sessions in the Archives, I would want to develop a means for assessing how my instruction sessions

impacted their information literacy. My plan is to begin incorporating satisfaction-based surveys after instruction sessions, as well as incorporating audience-response or possibly even competency-based assessments that gauge student knowledge pre- and post-session. I'm contributing to their set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information, and I need to be able to clearly articulate this in order to advocate for my archives within a framework that places great emphasis on information literacy. Numbers of students taught – that alone doesn't convey this.

Having this information is important, of course, but the way in which you present it to your institutional leaders is absolutely critical. You must present your value statements in a way that clearly demonstrates your unique contribution to an overarching goal. You want to highlight the awesome stuff you're doing, but do so within the framework of your institution and its overall mission and goals. To do this, you need to once again repeat to yourself **[SLIDE]** "I'm not that special." In talking with your administrators and colleagues, focus on your similarities along with your unique contributions to a larger goal, not on your grand contributions to the scholarly world and your "specialness."

[SLIDE] To do this, you must go outside of the Archives bubble, and talk to other people in your institution. Simply get out and get your finger on the pulse of how your institution operates every day. Learn who is doing what, even if you don't think (for now at least) that that person has anything to do with the work you do in the Archives. Don't assume that you know what folks do.

Going back to the information literacy example, don't assume that none of the reference librarians have valuable advice on how to conduct your instructional sessions. They might not understand archives, but they likely have a strong understanding of information literacy in a general sense as well as a strong understanding of how your particular institution's leaders prefer for information literacy to be conducted or measured. They can give you some valuable insight on what is considered "success" in information literacy at your institution.

[SLIDE] For example, in chatting with our instruction librarian, I was told about the emphasis that the reference librarians place on assessing student learning objectives. These SLOs had been defined by the University and reflect the UNC System's key learning objectives. This proves absolutely critical in reporting out to campus administrators. Knowing this, I can align my assessment of archival instruction – along with my presentation of that assessment to others in the Library and around campus. I can use that guidance to better frame my articulation of how the archives works to address this institutional goal. This allows you to focus on similarities, not differences. To show that we're making a contribution to the overall goal. It allows me to

emphasize that we're an integral part of the whole – [SLIDE]the pie filling as opposed to the cherry on top.

[SLIDE]Getting out and meeting and learning from colleagues also helps break stereotypes or misconceptions that folks might have had about you and the archives. Don't assume that these folks feel as strongly about the archives and its importance to the institution's mission as you do! Take the lead whenever you see an opportunity for mutual benefit, and use collaborations as a way of educating others on the archives' role and what the archives and archivist can contribute to a larger goal. When you educate others on what you do and what you **can** do, you are building a *team* of advocates – [SLIDE] a cadre of folks who can speak on your behalf when called for.

When you work in a particularly hierarchical bureaucracy (and who doesn't these days?), you can't be at the table for every discussion that might impact or potentially be impacted by the work of the archives. Proactive outreach and education coupled with a successful history of building mutually-beneficial partnerships mean that you have a team of non-archivists across your institution who understand your contributions and can speak on your behalf. You're not seen as an "other." You're not alienating folks with your "specialness." But you're building a reputation as a vital component of your institution and its efforts.

Another example from my university archives – in fact, one that we're still trying to reign in. Last academic year, we hired a new leader for our campus development efforts. She's highly interested in using university history to connect with former students/potential donors. The perfect situation for the university archives, right? Well, not quite. She also came with some pretty ingrained stereotypes and preconceived ideas about archives. To her, the Archives was where stuff went and never left. The university's history was stored up and socked away for [SLIDE] "THE FUTURE." She was interested in leveraging University history, but her vision didn't include the archives. We needed an educational opportunity to help her understand that we **wanted** our materials to be used, that we **wanted** our materials to find a place in the world of development – and that we've been doing that for years.

[SLIDE]So, we brought her to the Archives and talked about how we've historically engaged with development and how we've worked with faculty and staff across the campus on similar engagement programs to help them connect with their students or alumni. We gave specific examples of events and activities that we engage in that directly impact her development officers and their outreach to alumni. For instance, we demoed our digitized yearbooks, which often help

with the initial ice-breaking as the development officers talk with the potential donor about their time at UNCG.

How this will ultimately play out remains to be seen. But, hopefully, by focusing our conversations with her on the ways in which we reach out to alumni and proactively engage with development staff, we can focus the conversations on what we can do for her. And, in turn, hopefully the archives will benefit with greater exposure, more campus advocates, and possibly even more financial support.

So, obviously the exact ways in which you go about advocating for your archives will depend on your institution and whatever it is that you are trying to promote or build support for. In some cases, particularly in some donor relations cases, the “specialness” argument might be the most effective approach. There *is* a time and place for emphasizing your uniqueness.

[SLIDE]But overall, there are two key things to keep in mind that will help create an environment at your institution in which your advocacy efforts can be more fruitful. First, align with your institutional mission. Be sure that you can clearly articulate and demonstrate how you fit in with the larger whole, and, in talking with colleagues and administrators, stop placing the bulk of your focus on how special and different you are. **[SLIDE]**And second, build your army of advocates by getting out of the archives. Learn what your colleagues across your institution do, and talk to them about how you can work with them. Don’t assume you know them any more than they know you. And be sure that they are aware of how your work meshes with theirs.

[SLIDE]Back to my time with the Texas swimmers. What did I finally do to get some media attention for these awesome swimmers who just won a national title and were on their way to earning Olympic medals? I finally got a feature article on one of my swimmers by essentially pitching the story that he had been childhood friends with one of the guys who was currently on the football team. They grew up together, used to compete together, went to college together, and *that* is the angle that finally won him – a guy who actually would go on to win an Olympic gold as a member of one of the American relay teams – a feature article. I basically had to piggy back off of the primary focal point of my institution – football. Only then I was finally able to gain some leverage and publicity.

So, when you return to your archives and start thinking about how you can gain more visibility or support within your institution, just remember: You bring unique qualities to the table – awesome historical collections, in-depth knowledge of organization and description, experience working with various types of donors or researchers, etc. – but your uniqueness isn’t the key to

your importance to your organization. When you can clearly articulate how you can advance your institution's mission and your colleagues' work, you can move beyond a reliance on being "special" and gain supporters and attention that will aid in current and future advocacy efforts for your archives. **[SLIDE]**