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A Blessing In Disguise: Reorganization Opens New Doors For Special Collections

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Abstract

Part of "Betting on Archival Futures: What's in Your Restructuring Wallet?" Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, August 4, 2016.

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By Greta Reisel Browning, Appalachian State University

Thank you, Tamara, for getting us started. Tamara notes that decisions behind reporting structures in academic libraries and archives are not often documented.

On that theme, what I hope to provide is some insight into my own organization’s very recent changes, why they have happened, and some of the early results.

I am at a regional university, where my Special Collections department, which includes the University Archives, is part of the Library. Since I am not an archives director or department head, but instead involved in reference and outreach, I offer a different perspective.

So, what happens to archives and special collections departments when you have a change in library leadership? In 2013, a new Library dean started at Belk Library and Information Commons at Appalachian State University. Fortunately, two archivists were members of the University search committee, and Library faculty and staff were able to interact with the candidates during their campus visits and provide feedback.

Like all of us in Special Collections, I advocated for a librarian who understood archives and special collections, donors, and who allowed us to do our own work, as we were the specialists. We were fortunate enough to hire a Dean who had a record of actively supporting Special Collections over her career.

She waited about a year before she started to make changes in the organizational structure. While she was committed to preserving and making accessible the past in special collections, she also was keenly interested in new trends in digital scholarship.

The genesis of the organizational change that I am going to talk about today started with her idea to investigate how our Library could assist the campus in digital scholarship and digital projects. Some would say that she strives for a “21st-century library.” She appointed the Special Collections’ digitization archivist as a special assistant to the Dean to lead the investigation. Together, they formed a task force to make recommendations about how to address digital scholarship needs in the Library and on campus.

Already, you can see that at least one archivist was well-placed in the pre-reorganization period to have significant influence on the result. Additionally, two other members of Special Collections, including the University Archivist, were members of the task force. The outcome of the task force’s work was to create a new team in the Library (we have teams instead of departments) focused on providing digital services and support for digital projects both on campus and in the community. The team is called Digital Scholarship and Initiatives (which we call DSI for short), and they started their activities just one year ago, in July.

The new team consisted of five members, and three of them came out of Special Collections: the digitization archivist, who became the team’s coordinator; the digital imaging technician, who scanned images and text; and the AV technician, who converted audiovisual formats, and also managed electronic records and digital assets.

At one point in the negotiations, the coordinator of Special Collections (who is also the University Archivist) argued to keep the AV technician in Special Collections, especially due to his duties in records management and electronic records, but ultimately, he was still moved to the DSI team.

As I prepared for this presentation, the University Archivist commented to me that I should be sure to mention what an emotional blow it was to have three people taken from our team, all of whom shared Special Collections duties that were now left undone. I asked her if she, or anyone, had considered the ramifications of taking three people out of our team, and she said that she had most definitely considered this. It was then that I learned that at one point she was interested in only two of the three staff to moving to the new team. During the course of negotiations over staff, though, the University Archivist agreed to let the AV technician be part of the DSI team if they also took over the management of University Archives' electronic records. The Dean was also supportive of electronic records being managed by DSI. As she said, in some cases, born-digital university records are handled by campus IT departments. At least the management of the University's born-digital records would remain in the Library, she reasoned, and managed by a team with which Special Collections already worked closely. The AV technician, whose new position is being upgraded to the title of Electronic Records and Digital Asset Manager, is in reality a shared position between the two teams. He will work closely with the University Archivist to implement the North Carolina records management guidelines for born-digital content, as well as maintain digital records for the long term. He will not arrange or describe digital materials, which

will be done in Special Collections. Whether or not this is a positive outcome remains to be seen. We are only one year into this new relationship.

I can see some good results from this reorganization that stem from archival advocacy and outreach. After interviewing a few of the key players in our reorganization, though, I am not certain that anyone was aware of the benefits that I see (or hope to see).

The obvious benefit to Special Collections is that the coordinator of the DSI team is an archivist and two of her staff members have worked extensively with archival and rare materials--image scanning and AV management--so we know that they will handle our materials properly and understand our procedures. Additionally, the coordinator of DSI adds a second archivist at library leadership meetings, in addition to the coordinator of Special Collections. So, archives broadens its representation in the Library. While I see this as a clear win for archival advocacy, the downside, for some in the Library, is that they see DSI as an extension of Special Collections. Which it is not. But, that's not a problem for us.

Another benefit is that we can now get help with digital projects in Special Collections.

For years, we have struggled to get the appropriate technical support from our Library IT department--whether for digital exhibits or help with Archivists' Toolkit or help upgrading our digital platform, Omeka. Now this new team will focus on helping with these projects because it is part of their mission. DSI also intends to hire a programmer, and we look forward to benefitting from this person's skills as well.

Additionally, DSI can serve as sort of a matchmaking service between campus and community users and Special Collections. For example, early in the new team's existence, I was invited to a meeting between representatives of our campus TV station, DSI, and Special Collections regarding shows that the TV station wanted to produce using local film and video footage from our collections. I don't think that the TV folks would have found us if it had not been for knowledge that the DSI coordinator had about our collections.

Finally, as I have observed our team working without DSI team members in the room, I noticed that Special Collections can now really assess our digital collections more objectively: the quality and presentation of the metadata, which items have been digitized, and the need for a more user-friendly infrastructure. In the past, I had called the digitization archivist's attention to several user-related issues, but due to lack of technical staffing and know-how, they were rarely addressed. Now, with more focus on service and technology, DSI can hopefully tackle our issues in a timely manner.

So, new leadership in our Library has affected Special Collections in ways that look beneficial to us. We were lucky enough to hire a dean who had had years of other archivists educating her and she had even been in charge of a small university archives at one time. But I offer just one positive scenario. My question to you is what does new leadership mean for archives? What are the characteristics and skills of a new leader that make for successful archives or special collections operations?