

The Case of a Scrapbook Collection that Tripled in Size: The Benefits and Unforeseen Consequences of Digitizing a Hidden Collection

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Abstract:

This paper will examine the benefits of a cross departmental approach (Special Collections and University Archives, Cataloging, and Digital Projects) to manage a digital project and discuss the practical steps of devising a work plan that encompasses the processing, rehousing, preserving, and digitizing of a collection. This paper will argue that by incorporating these varied tasks together into one project, accelerates and improves the process of making “hidden collections” more accessible and visible. Along with documenting the benefits of this integrated approach to processing and digitization, this paper will also examine some of the unforeseen benefits of this project from the leveraging of library staff’s expertise in the creation of metadata to the unexpected growth of a collection.

Keywords: Archives | Special Collections | Digitization | Preservation

Article:

Responding to the Association of Research Libraries’ call for Special Collection librarians to make their “hidden collections” more visible, the Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) surveyed its “hidden collections” as it prepared for a move of its holdings to a new location and set processing, preservation, and digitization priorities.¹ Recognizing the growing research interest in documents that reveal the cultural and social life of students and faculty, the department identified a poorly housed and partially cataloged scrapbook collection for a digitization project. While seeking to impose intellectual control over this neglected collection and increase its visibility, the department also realized that this digitization project could be used to establish a collaborative and flexible prototype, for streamlining and expediting the arrangement and description of hidden collections. This paper will examine the benefits of a cross departmental

approach (Special Collections and University Archives, Cataloging, and Digital Projects) to manage a digital project and discuss the practical steps of devising a work plan that encompasses the processing, rehousing, preserving, and digitizing of a collection. This paper will argue that by incorporating these varied tasks together into one project, accelerates and improves the process of making “hidden collections” more accessible and visible. Along with documenting the benefits of this integrated approach to processing and digitization, this paper will also examine some of the unforeseen benefits of this project from the leveraging of library staff’s expertise in the creation of metadata to the unexpected growth of a collection.

UNCG Scrapbook Collection: Accessibility and Historic Value

At the time of the 2011 survey, Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) identified eighty-two scrapbooks; the majority of them were stored on open shelving, vulnerable to light damage and accidents. The scrapbook collection was made up of a wide range of sizes. Many of them contained newspaper clippings, photographs, correspondence, printed material, handmade paper, and assorted ephemera (flowers, matches, sugar packets, chewing gum, cigarette butts, etc.). The items found in the scrapbooks were attached to pulp paper by glue, tape, and other adhesives. There were significant preservation challenges that ranged from discoloration, paper tears, loose bindings, brittle paper, and unstable color photographs. Other scrapbooks employed a sticky plastic sheet as a holder of materials and this posed its own distinctive preservation issues. Staff found that little effort had been directed to stabilizing these scrapbooks. Due to their fragile state, the collection was not publicized nor was it widely used by staff members.

While the school’s University Archive was founded in 1942, the cataloging of these items was uneven and their historical value never fully recognized or appreciated. Yet, these scrapbooks are important sources in the documentation of the intellectual, social, and cultural life of students at the school from 1906 through 2002. Within that date range, there were specific “runs” of scrapbooks that documented the evolution of the institution. Many of the scrapbooks reflected individual dormitories, student organizations and clubs, unique events, and specific graduating classes at the University. They also documented social change (desegregation, coeducation), new academic programs, national, state, and local events, as well as cultural trends. Often, the scrapbooks were the sole resource for unique campus traditions. SCUA staff identified this collection for digitization since it believed that these items could be used by faculty and students in the study of American education, women’s education, and the history of the University and North Carolina. So, in addition to digitizing these items, the project was intended to fully process the scrapbooks, rehouse the items in archival boxes, write metadata, and create an EAD finding aid.

Project Partners and Evolving Responsibilities

At UNCG, proposed digital projects are prioritized and vetted by a digital projects committee. Once a project is approved, a project team is formed by drawing members from departments that

have the expertise to support the specific project. In the case of the scrapbook project, the original plan was for the Library's Digital Projects unit to scan the scrapbooks and upload them into CONTENTdm; the Cataloging department was to update any existing catalog records and provide the needed expertise regarding the creation of metadata and the use of controlled language; and, the Special Collections and University Archives department was to create the metadata and carry out basic preservation work. The SCUA staff was also responsible for assigning an identification number to each scrapbook and matching that number to the scanned items in CONTENTdm and the future finding aid. A work plan was devised that matched team member's skills with their specific project responsibilities. There was no discussion of cross-training staff or the broadening of staff responsibilities within the project. To ensure clear project communication, shared Google Doc workflow charts were used to track the processing, scanning, and metadata creation. An additional form was produced to capture information from each scrapbook including the call number, title, alternative title, year range, creator, physical description, and unique content information. This form was kept with the scrapbook at all times and was progressively used by the three departments involved, as it worked its way through each phase of the project. The Project Team had anticipated that the scanning of these scrapbooks would be slow going due to the use of flat-bed scanners, varying formats, preservation issues, and the challenge of scanning foldouts and inserts. Team members hoped that the crafting of metadata might keep pace with the scanning operation. But, all parties recognized that the project's workflows would have to be refined after the scan of a sample set of scrapbooks.

With the scanning of the first batch of scrapbooks, it was determined that the scanning team was exceeding its estimated rate and that the metadata team was overwhelmed. The metadata team struggled with mastering cataloging terms and format, researching the historical context of specific scrapbooks, and the writing and editing of short metadata entries all while trying to match the rate of the scanning team. These project archivists were not skilled in original cataloging. The disparity in rates as well as the news that the survey of other hidden collections had revealed over one hundred sixty unaccounted scrapbooks led to some internal team frustration. Many of these newly discovered items had been misfiled, mislabeled, or simply had never been accessioned. What had been a manageable processing and digital project of 82 scrapbooks and roughly 3500 scanned pages was evolving into a large scale project of 244 scrapbooks and some 15,000 scanned pages. The original work plan had not taken into consideration any possible "project creep."

To address the growing tension within the team, a project meeting was convened to consider each team's expectations and department goals. This facilitated discussion helped to highlight differences in expectations regarding workflows. Project members acknowledged that the scanning of items was a very different task than researching a scrapbook and describing its historic value. Members also acknowledged that metadata creation was time intensive. The group concluded that the various team's expectations had to align with the project's central goals.

To better streamline the processing and digitization of this growing scrapbook project, the project team reconsidered project responsibilities to better support the creation of metadata. For example, the scanning team was now asked to both scan the items and assign basic descriptive metadata such as the measurements and page count of each scrapbook. The scanning team was also asked to input all of this information into CONTENTdm. The cataloging team was no longer expected to serve in a consultative role; they were now being asked to supply a list of applicable subject headings and edit metadata entries. The metadata team (made of archivists) was now focusing its energy on applying its subject expertise to the research and description of these items. The team wrote metadata copy that was then reviewed and edited by catalogers. The catalogers, in turn, imported the clean metadata copy into CONTENTdm.

With the refining of project responsibilities and the realignment of team goals, the overall production rate of metadata began to rise. The working teams no longer “siloeed” their responsibilities; instead, archivists and librarians were now leveraging their skills in new ways to support this large scale digitization project. The project team was also applying a more holistic approach to making a “hidden collection” visible and accessible. Instead of developing multiple work plans that moved a collection through distinctive stages of processing that might involve coordinating different department workflows and priorities, the project team streamlined workflows, clarified a shared project vision, and stressed open communication.

Preservation: Rehousing the Collection and the Use of Digital Surrogates

The scrapbook project plan also sought to address the collection’s long-term preservation needs. Due to the scrapbooks open shelved storage, the collection was at great risk. To be sure, the project team believed that the creation of digital surrogates would help in the overall preservation effort by encouraging patrons to examine scanned scrapbooks online and thus minimize the wear and tear caused by the handling of these fragile items. Nevertheless, the creation of digital surrogates did not address the immediate need to stabilize the collection. With the initial surveying of the collection, SCUA staff also analyzed the preservation and storage needs of these items. The staff determined that the interleaving of acid-free paper between the pages would offer some minimal intervention and help address such preservation concerns as: newsprint, photograph to photograph contact, as well as the acidification of pulp paper. Along with interleaving, staff purchased flat archival boxes to store scrapbooks in a more protective and stable setting. Many of the scrapbooks had damaged bindings and loose paper inserts. Finally, staff also secured new over-sized shelving to hold a wide range of different sized storage boxes.

The Incredible Growing Collection

The department’s original survey of its “hidden collections” helped to spark an internal discussion of processing and digitization projects. This moderate-sized collection was seen as a good test case for piloting a new approach in combining all aspects of the processing and digitizing of collections from start to finish. At the same time, Special Collections and University

Archives was also preparing for the relocation of its collections to a newly renovated space. Preliminary planning for the construction of staff offices, researcher room, HVAC system, and stacks area began in 2006. In 2010, bids were submitted and construction began in 2011. The project was completed in 2012. Throughout this six year project, Special Collections and University Archives considered the issues of improving access to collections, reviewing collecting priorities, planning for collection growth, and gaining intellectual control over all existing collections. They also had to prepare collections to be physically moved; therefore, all collections had to be boxed and labeled. All collections (processed and unprocessed) had to be surveyed.

By chance, the scrapbook digitization project began roughly at the same time as a general review of all department collections was being carried out. Staff surveyed various unprocessed “hidden collections” and discovered scrapbooks that had been mislabeled or tucked in with non-related items. For example, one unprocessed collection had a boxed labeled “binders” that contained scrapbooks. Staff also found scrapbooks in processed collections that did not have a record of a scrapbook in the collection’s finding aid. As the pace of the surveying and rehousing of collections increased, the number of scrapbooks “found” also increased.

In addition to discoveries within the department’s existing collections, Special Collections and University Archives was promoting increased outreach to the University community through faculty engagement and records management initiatives. In speaking to faculty and department heads, staff emphasized the department’s mission, its distinctive service and research support, as well as its unique collections. Staff also spoke about its online collections and current digitization projects. Hearing of the scrapbook digitization project, several academic chairs donated departmental scrapbooks to the project. SCUA’s surveying of its collections as well as its outreach efforts to the University community contributed to the scrapbook collection tripling in size and extending the project’s completion due date by several months.

Conclusion

With the processing and digitization of the scrapbook collection of University history, Special Collections and University Archives has been able to promote both the collection’s rich content as well as its online access. SCUA staff have spoken to faculty about ways to incorporate this collection into course assignments and lectures. The staff have themselves considered how this collection can be integrated into campus walking tours, information literacy classes, exhibits, class demonstrations, as well as for a proposed mobile app for a self-guided walking tour. The scrapbook digitization project also produced an effective prototype for processing and digitizing hidden collections. Indeed, Special Collections and University Archives will be using this model for the processing and digitization of another scrapbook collection (found in its manuscript holdings). The manuscript archivist has identified 70 scrapbooks and is excited about applying the lessons learned on the previous scrapbook project to help expedite the efforts to increase the use and visibility of this collection. A great deal of attention will be directed towards cross-

training project staff and the managing of team member's expectations. The leadership of the University Library is excited about ongoing efforts to improve the management of cross department projects and the arising opportunities to leverage the expertise of non-SCUA staff members to assist in future digital projects.

¹ Barbara M. Jones, "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in America's Research Libraries," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 5:2, (Fall 2004), 88-105.

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