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Please Come In!: Transitioning from No Access to an Open Door in the Special Collections and Archives

Ashley Todd-Diaz
Emporia State University

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After four years of being closed to patrons due to a combination of a mold outbreak, renovation, and transitioning to a new location, the Emporia State University Special Collections and Archives reopened in fall 2012. While the department was closed, staff members worked hard to care for the collections, reply to patron requests, and prepare to open our doors again; however, after all that work we were not prepared for the lack of patrons walking through the doors. This paper shares our successes and lessons learned, as well as offers ideas for implementing innovative outreach strategies that challenge a variety of audiences to reexamine how they perceive and/or utilize a certain resource or service.

Keywords

special collections and archives, outreach

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**Please Come In!: Transitioning from No Access to an Open Door in the
Special Collections and Archives**

ASHLEY TODD-DIAZ
Emporia State University
Emporia, KS
atodddia@emporia.edu

Abstract

After four years of being closed to patrons due to a combination of a mold outbreak, renovation, and transitioning to a new location, the Emporia State University Special Collections and Archives reopened in fall 2012. While the department was closed, staff members worked hard to care for the collections, reply to patron requests, and prepare to open our doors again; however, after all that work we were not prepared for the lack of patrons walking through the doors. This paper shares our successes and lessons learned, as well as offers ideas for implementing innovative outreach strategies that challenge a variety of audiences to reexamine how they perceive and/or utilize a certain resource or service.

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Please Come In!: Transitioning from No Access to an Open Door in the Special Collections and Archives

After four years of being closed to patrons due to a combination of a mold outbreak, renovation, and transitioning to a new location, the Emporia State University (ESU) Special Collections and Archives reopened in fall 2012. While the department was closed, staff members worked hard to care for the collections, reply to patron requests, offer some instruction sessions, and prepare to open our doors again. However, after all that work we were not prepared for the lack of patrons walking through the doors. Four years is a generation for most college students and definitely longer than most projects for the average researcher, and we had effectively fallen off their radar in that span of time. Researchers had stopped requesting materials because the majority of the collections were in storage or contaminated, faculty (including library faculty) had stopped referring students to our reading room or asking to bring their classes down for instruction sessions, and, with a new location out of the typical flow of traffic, students rarely stopped in on a whim. Knowing that we needed to regain our position on campus as an important and valuable resource, we began developing a robust outreach program that included commandeering an exhibit space, installing quarterly exhibits, reaching out to students through social media and face to face contact, building relationships with faculty and staff across campus, inviting community members for events and educational programs, and incorporating new technologies to intersect and engage with students in a familiar, mobile environment.

The ESU Special Collections and Archives serves as the institutional memory for this mid-sized, regional state institution and holds approximately 4,800 linear feet of manuscript collections and institutional archival records. Approximately five years ago, the Special Collections and Archives, which was then located off of the University's main campus in a historic Carnegie library, was struck with a staggering disaster. Although the building was architecturally stunning, it had an outdated HVAC system that was incapable of maintaining a stable preservation environment and a naturally leaky basement. These facts, combined with a series of unfortunate weather events that damaged the structure, eventually led to mold starting to grow within the collection of materials. It became a priority to move the materials out of this hazardous environment and back to campus. The process was a complicated endeavor that required renovations of the campus library, William Allen White Library. At this point, the department was closed to researchers so that the staff could focus on caring for the materials, which was estimated to take approximately 50 years to complete with the chosen method of vacuuming each page and item.

Unfortunately, the misfortune did not end here. Shortly after the move one of the air conditioning units in the temporary storage location malfunctioned and caused a flood. There was enough water on the floor to saturate the palettes the collection was sitting on and wick up the archival boxes. The dampness combined with the humid, un-cooled summer air caused more mold to bloom. The Dean of Libraries and Archives knew that something needed to be done in order to safely, yet swiftly, treat the materials and reopen the Special Collections and Archives to the ESU students and community. When I started at ESU as Curator of Special Collections and Archives in April 2012, less than a year after the second mold bloom, the Libraries and Archives Dean had identified a company that could treat the materials with chlorine dioxide, a selective oxidant used in the treatment of drinking water. This process, previously used at the University of Oklahoma Libraries (Weaver-Meyers, Stolt, & Kowaleski, 1998; Southwell, 2002), was completed over the course of two weekends during the summer of 2012, allowing the department to begin preparing to reopen in the fall semester.

By the time the doors re-opened in August 2013, the Special Collections and Archives had been closed to patrons for four years. Consider that four years is the equivalent of the time it takes for children to learn basic developmental skills, the time between Olympic Games, the average span of a college career, much longer than most research projects, and long enough for most syllabi to evolve. Knowing that patrons had most likely been forced to locate alternative resources and create new workflows that did not include the Special Collections and Archives, the staff knew they were facing a challenge to regain their position as an important and valuable resource on campus. One of the first tasks was to develop a welcoming and overt presence. Since we were in a new space, far at the end of a long hallway on the lower level of the library, making sure patrons knew where to locate us was a priority. As a first step, we posted directional signs throughout the library building leading the way to our door. While the signage increased the chances that patrons would find us, it stopped short of informing them of what we had to offer.

We knew that the long (approximately 50'), blank hallway separating us from the rest of the library was a potential deterrent to enticing new patrons; however, by re-envisioning the space as a gallery we put the space to work for us. Since the hallway is more than 12' wide, we were safely able to hang items on the walls, place exhibit cases in the middle, and still having enough room on either side to satisfy fire codes. By commandeering this gallery space for our exhibit purposes, we effectively expanded our reach down the hallway to the primary research area on the lower level. Students were now much more likely to wander down the hallway, see a variety of materials and artifacts, and walk through our door. This gallery space allowed us not only to share materials with visitors, but also to plan exhibits and host events that welcomed visitors to learn more about the department. To raise awareness, we sent out campus-wide emails, contacted the ESU newspaper to invite student reporters to explore the exhibits, established social media accounts to begin spreading the word, placed a teaser exhibit in a high-traffic area near the circulation desk, and offered food incentives to attend the openings.

Although exhibits and events helped general awareness, we were still very interested in being recognized as a valuable educational resource. To reestablish connections with faculty and reinforce this message, we sent personalized invitations to faculty members to attend an open house event. The open house allowed professors to see our new facilities, meet the new Curator, and open discussions about how we could use the archival and manuscript materials in their courses to introduce primary sources and new literacies, including archival, artifactual, and visual. We emphasized that archival and manuscript materials are not only relevant to history courses, but can also be adapted to any discipline through the outlet of critical thinking opportunities. Additionally, we collaborated with the Learning Technologies department on a faculty workshops project and offered an hour-long session on the benefits of incorporating primary sources and archival materials into courses.

At the close of our first semester, we reviewed our visitor statistics to get a firm grasp on who we had reached. In all we welcomed 315 on-site visitors, including 49 newly-registered patrons and 212 visitors for tours events (including 39 elementary students, 14 high school students, 20 community members, and 139 members of the ESU community). Although those numbers were a breath of fresh air after being closed for so long, none of the 315 visitors were ESU students visiting for an education-related reason. This let us know that our primary audience, the immediate community of students who we have the best opportunity to serve as a research resource, was not finding their way to our door. Moving into the spring 2014 semester, we became dedicated to identifying new ways to reach more students.

As in the fall, we continued to publicize our resources, exhibits, and events to the ESU community with a focus on students and faculty. Persistence began to pay off as faculty members began to contact me to inquire about the archival and manuscript collections and how they could be worked into their courses. In particular, I began scheduling instruction sessions with faculty in the History Department to learn about archival processes and oral histories; a professor in the Elementary Education department to share some of the 3,300 original children's book illustrations we have in the May Masee Collection with Children's Literature classes; University Libraries and Archives faculty regarding primary sources and archival literacy; and Art faculty to learn about the process of printing books and the fine art within the manuscript materials. Additionally, we reached beyond the University to expand an educational program focusing on Caldecott-winning artwork from the May Masee Collection that we had been offering to one elementary school while we had been closed (Todd-Diaz, Summey, Scribner, & Franklin, forthcoming). Now that we were able to utilize the complete physical space of Special Collections and Archives, we invited the other Emporia elementary schools to attend the program and learn more about primary sources and the creative process of writers and illustrators.

Continuing to ponder how we could improve the reach and success of our exhibits, I began to consider how we could share information about the items in an exhibit in a new and interesting way that would engage students. Having attended a workshop that discussed the potential for augmented reality (AR) in the educational setting, I saw the opportunity to use AR to bring visitors into the exhibit cases to learn more about the materials in an interactive way that would not require reading a static display label. AR has many definitions, but the one we worked from is "a computer-generated component that is added to the real environment" (Pence, 2013, p. 137). I approached a colleague in the University Libraries and Archives' Technical Services department, Earl Givens, to see about making this idea into a reality. Using free mobile apps, we offered visitors the opportunity to interact with the materials on display in a number of ways (Todd-Diaz & Givens, 2013). For example, rather than merely seeing one view of a three-dimensional object, AR allowed us to take the visitor into the display case for a tour of the item. We were able to point out unique details of the item and bring in related items, which essentially created a mini-exhibit out of one item. Alternatively, AR allowed a music score, which would otherwise remain silent unless the visitor could read musical notation, to come to life and allow the visitor to hear what it sounds like. By embracing the fact that the majority of our primary audience of ESU students owns or has access to a mobile device, we hoped to connect with this audience on a familiar platform. A study that compared the engagement level of participants with a traditional exhibit to AR-enhanced exhibit revealed that participants found the AR-enhanced exhibit to be more engaging and compelled them to spend 58% more time enjoying the exhibit (Todd-Diaz & Givens, 2013). The additional level of familiarity added to the exhibit through the inclusion of mobile technology, as well as the heightened level of interactivity, caused participants to respond positively to the AR and the exhibit as a whole. In addition to these activities, we focused specifically upon the coordination of exhibits with other events and celebrations on campus such as Homecoming and Black History Month. This heightened exposure allowed us to benefit from the increased numbers of visitors on campus and garner more awareness of and support for our exhibits and the department as a whole.

A challenge that became increasingly apparent to us as we were thinking of new exhibit topics and deciding which documents and artifacts to feature was the general paucity of student manuscripts within the Special Collections and Archives' holdings. While the department had done a good job over the years of collecting records from offices and departments each year and inviting faculty,

staff, and distinguished alumni to entrust their papers to the holdings, there had never been a directed effort to collect student papers and memorabilia. Although we have a number of alumni collections, most of these were the result of family members cleaning out basements and attics rather than organized collection development and none of them are contemporary. We decided in spring 2014 to reach out to the Associated Student Government for their support. With that backing, we reserved a table on the “Main Street” of the ESU Memorial Union, for an event we called “Leave Your Legacy Week” to raise the visibility of the Special Collections and Archives and to promote the importance of including an active student presence in the holdings. After spending three afternoons in the Union, we spoke to countless students and accessioned manuscript and archival materials from 19 individuals and student organizations. Based on its success, we will hold “Leave Your Legacy Week” in the spring of 2015 and hope this process will be increasingly successful as we draw on volunteers from the newly formed ESU Student Chapter of the Society of American Archivists.

At this writing, it has been two years since the Special Collections and Archives’ doors were physically and metaphorically opened again. We have successfully welcomed 833 visitors, including 215 on-site researchers from our roster of 253 registered patrons, 349 visitors for tours and events, and 587 students attending instruction sessions – including 385 K-12 students and 202 college students from a variety of majors. A considerable factor in the advancement of our visibility and value on campus is our dedication to initiating new and innovative outreach methods and maintaining a focus on assessing and adapting them as necessary to better reach our intended audience. We learned that just because we were making outreach efforts did not mean they were going to be effective or well received. By modifying where we display our exhibits, what topics we build exhibits around, how visitors can interact with the exhibit items, and how we promote and communicate our resources and events, we increased the campus community’s awareness and use of the manuscript and archival materials. Additionally, by promoting the Special Collections and Archives as something that belongs to students rather than something locked away and off-limits, we have been able to engage them in contributing to our collection development efforts. At this point we have added 19 contemporary student collections to our holdings and have gained the support of 22 archives students to expand this endeavor in the future. Over the last two years we have learned that while initiative and innovation is important to stay current, assessment and reflection are just as important to stay relevant and effective.

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