

RBMS Curators and Conservators Discussion Group

ALA Annual Conference 2009

Chicago, Illinois

Saturday, July 11, 2009

MINUTES

Present: Beth Kilmarx (co-chair), Nicolette Dobrowolski (discussion leader), Prudence Doherty, Carole Dyal, Atalanta Grant-Suttie, Will LaMoy, Kenneth Lavender (co-chair), Jeffrey Makala, Arelene Shaner, Peggy Skotnicki, Gerard Ward.

The Discussion: The discussion group was called to order at 8:08 am by Kenneth Lavender.

After brief introductions of members present, Nicolette Dobrowolski, Director of Public Services, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, began the discussion of public services as a place where conservators and curators must cooperate. The discussion centered on five different points:

1) Different public service components to Curatorship, Conservation, Cataloguing/Processing/Other.

In Special Collections departments and archives, there are different types of professionals, e.g. curators, conservators, catalogers, and collection processors who work more or less behind the scenes, and the reference librarians who work out in the open providing public service. In general, the degree and level that these different professionals contribute to the public services aspect of their department depend on their professional expectations and needs. For example, a preservation librarian/conservator may determine that a book requires just a Mylar/Melinex cover in order to protect it. However, when the book is brought to the Reading Room for use by a patron, Public Services librarian might consider the item needs something more than a cover in order for the patron to use it. In this instance, these two sets of professionals are approaching Public Services from different aspects. These different approaches contribute to a disconnect between the Public Service staff and curators and conservators.

2) Most everything conservators/curators do in their everyday work affects public services (collection development/ level of conservation).

There is also a disconnect with the issue of backlogs. Most libraries have backlogs. In the past, institutions obtained collections with little concern on how and when the materials would be processed and when such collection information would be made available to the public. As a result of these backlogs, little or no information is usually provided to the public about an institution's hidden collections. Often in these instances, a select few are aware of materials in some of these uncatalogued collections, and often the Public Services staff are not privy to such information. Thus, people will contact the Special Collections department asking about materials in a certain collection of which the curators are well aware. However, the staff in the public services areas are often not aware of such materials because they have not been catalogued, nor is a MARC record available for it. The example used here to illustrate this point was a collection at Syracuse University.

As serious backlogs prevent collections from being processed, cataloged, and information about them from being disseminated to researchers, the question remains: why should institutions continue to collect various sized collections if they are unable to process them and make them available for use? With budget cuts, it is getting harder, if not impossible, to hire staff and process collections. The effects of library budget cuts and their impact on Special Collections was a major point in the recent ALA webcast on hidden collections, and was discussed during the recent ALA webcast on hidden collections. As a result of the reduced or no-growth budgets, everyone is being asked to do more with less on a daily basis.

3) Changes in field are blurring the lines – we all have public service responsibilities now.

For various reasons, largely due to budget issues, all Special Collections staff members are becoming more involved in providing Public Services. There has been a push by university administrators (such as those at Syracuse University) for Special Collections materials to be used more by faculty and students, particularly without staff members being there to assist in the research or teaching rooms. There is also a push to use materials outside of the department. Examples of use of materials outside a Special Collections department include: travelling exhibits, distant learning collections, or simply providing items for use in classrooms. University administrators and

development offices are also seeing the potential of Special Collections materials and are using copies of such materials when approaching possible donors.

4) Collecting/Conserving “born digital” collection material.

Everyone recognizes the need to preserve “born digital” materials, but very few institutions are able to do so. There are no established procedures or protocols to be used as guidelines to help with the preservation of born digital collections. Most institutions do not have the staff and funding for this type of preservation, even for their own in-house publications or digital archives.

5) Do you take into account public service circulation statistics for possible collection development/conservation decisions?

There are different practices for each institution. Some are using these statistics for preservation planning and/or treatment, some are not. Other questions raised here include: Does your institution promote outreach to students/faculty to use collections? How does increased use affect conservation? Do you teach “outside” Special Collections with your material? The answers varied according to the institution, but most did promote outreach, most libraries found that use did affect or underline the need for conservation of the materials, but few, if any, did actually “teach” with materials outside Special Collections.

After the formal discussion, the group talked about possible topics for the next meeting. There was no consensus on a topic; the discussion leader and participants were asked to send their suggestions to Ken Lavender.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:58 am.

Submitted by Beth Turcy Kilmarx, July 23, 2009