Beyond the Horizon
University of Iowa Libraries – Preservation & Conservation
December 2020

The University of Iowa Libraries’ Preservation & Conservation Department cares for and protects the largest library collection in the state of Iowa, a comprehensive research collection with more than 5.7 million volumes, thousands of electronic resources, a million digital files, a quarter million rare books, and 4.7 miles of manuscripts. The department’s primary role is to ensure that this collection, a capital asset of the university replete with irreplaceable cultural artifacts, can be fully enjoyed by scholars today, while mitigating against foreseeable risks that might harm future access by scholars in the 22nd Century.

This document highlights some of the challenges and opportunities that the incoming leadership will need to address in each of the department’s five functional areas: collections care, Conservation Lab, digitization, digital preservation, and materials processing.

Collections care
Collections care is the department’s bread and butter. The Libraries’ collection, in toto, contains millions of physical objects worth an est. $375,000,000. Materials are stored in multiple locations with varying security and under a range of environmental conditions. Roughly two-thirds are in open areas accessible to the public (“open stacks”) with the remainder behind closed doors. For the most part, books and other printed matter can be used unaided, while audiovisual materials are useless without the aid of often obsolete technology. Fully 80% of the collection can be loaned to qualified individuals (primarily UI students and faculty) without limitation, while other items have restrictions before they are allowed outside our custody, if at all. The collections care program is thus far-reaching, with many competing needs for limited resources. Good stewardship requires applying professional best practices within institutional constraints.

Challenges and opportunities: While the growth of the print collection has slowed, our gross footprint continues to increase. Our collection of bound periodicals is an exception, due to shared print repositories and confidence in perpetual access to e-journals. Our use of commercial bindery services has and will continue to shrink, but binding will remain one of several intervention strategies and may often be the most prudent and cost-effective way to store loose items securely. Cutting corners or foregoing treatments is akin to deferred maintenance, a sometimes-necessary strategy that should be used with caution. Arcane copyright law forces some continued warehousing of print in order to access the digital, due to the doctrine of first sale. Vigilance in monitoring is key. Committed to the BIG Collection, the library will work closely with its Big Ten counterparts toward managing our collective collections as if they were one, which will have significant impact on collections care decisions going forward.

Questions to consider include: 1) Does our level of preservation activity match our institution’s risk tolerance, our fiduciary and ethical responsibilities, and our contractual obligations? 2) Do our interventions reflect the current storage environment and our users’ behaviors? 3) Should replacement cost and/or continued research value be factored into treatment decisions? (For example, if an in-copyright out-of-print book is in HathiTrust and our copy of the physical book becomes damaged, is access to the e-book under Section 108 a suitable substitute in lieu of book repair? Should the number of academic libraries that hold a title influence preservation treatment? Should we be concerned that irreplaceable treasures are given short shrift while items of lesser value are cared for excessively?)
Conservation Lab
The Conservation unit provides physical treatment and advises on issues of collection storage and use. Damaged rare books, manuscripts and maps are cleaned, stabilized, mended and provided with custom protective enclosures in-house by highly trained specialists operating from a 1484 sq. ft. laboratory within the Main Library. Founded in 1984 by renowned conservator Bill Anthony, the University of Iowa’s Conservation Lab is one of the oldest and finest in the nation.

Challenges and opportunities: The Conservation Lab is one of the Libraries’ crown jewels. Its history is closely connected to the UI’s Center for the Book, and, as a teaching lab, it is a locus of training for individuals interested in the arts, crafts, and research fields of the book. Our need for routine collections care (e.g., book repair) offers introductory learning opportunities for future conservators. Conservation work is often performed in tandem with digitization workflows so that rare items are stabilized and protected when pulled for photographing. In addition, the Conservation Lab services other university departments including other campus libraries, galleries, archives, and museums. The disastrous 2008 floods presented an opportunity for the Conservation Lab to demonstrate its potential as a regional center for restoration work performed on a cost-recovery basis.

Questions to consider include: 1) How do we balance being a resource to the institution and to the state without absorbing unfunded pro bono work? Should we increase our fee-for service work and explore ways to leverage our skills and expertise as a way to diversify our revenue portfolio as well as provide more hands-on training experiences? If so, how do we protect against siphoning funds away from in-house needs? 2) Are we connected appropriately to the academic arm of the institution for teaching book conservation? 3) To what extent can philanthropy provide a sustainable source of operational funding for the Conservation Lab?

Digitization
Although digitization is only part of the overall process of putting a physical collection online, creating faithful digital reproductions requires specialized equipment and skilled operators. Choosing collections ripe for digitizing based on content is outside the scope of the department, but a host of issues related to both the physical artifacts and the mechanics of hi-res digital reproductions often are the determining factors for whether a digitization project is possible or feasible. Our common practice is to use on-site staff and equipment to photograph print materials, while turning to third-party vendors for audiovisual and mass digitization projects. We follow a “but-for Iowa” approach: if another organization can or will someday digitize something, we are inclined to pass, thus reserving our scarce resources for collections that only we can do. Securing funds through grants and gifts is highly effective, but generally follows only after internal investment to demonstrate project viability and the potential for impact.

Challenges and opportunities: Over the years we have tried a variety of approaches to solicit input and set priorities on collections to digitize, none of which have seemed particularly satisfying. This may be due in part to the fact that resources for digitizing generally compete against other uses for collections funds (including collections care). A digital reproduction of an item we already own does not grow the collection, per se, but it can make an otherwise limited access or at-risk item usable. Since digitizing inevitably increases an object’s discoverability and frequency of use, reliance on usage metrics for making digitization decisions can be misleading.

Questions to consider include: 1) Has digitization historically been too closely tied to openly accessible, or do we have a role (or even an expectation) for digital backups of select irreplaceable materials as a loss prevention (e.g., in case of fire)? 2) Do we have adequate controls against perpetuating collection bias, promoting diversity and being anti-racist in our digitization priorities while guarding against appropriation and being exploitative? 3) How might we develop and selectively implement a model of “digitization upon accession?”
Digital preservation

Digital preservation – the active management of long-lived digital files – is key to maintaining our extensive digitized and born-digital collections. Although the principles of digital preservation are similar to those for physical artifacts, the reproducibility of digital copies means that the tools and techniques, and even some of the underlying assumptions, are quite distinct. For instance, the digital preservation of “circulating material” (e.g., runs of licensed electronic journals) can usually be obtained most cost effectively through a subscription service such as Portico, requiring no localized preservation expertise.

Digital preservation requires systems and procedures to maximize the availability of files for undetermined uses in undetermined formats. Good stewardship calls for maintaining multiple copies on independently managed platforms using dissimilar hardware and software to try to eliminate dependencies on any one technology that might become a single point of failure. With forward migration, active digital preservation can also help solve the problem of technology obsolescence.

We will increasingly accession digital-only intangibles that will challenge our well-understood assumptions about ownership and uniqueness. Careful consideration needs to be given to identify those digital artifacts for which we are explicitly or implicitly responsible as the custodian of record and where forensic issues like fidelity and chain of custody may be paramount, as opposed to files that we could pull from one of our own backups or perhaps duplicate from another trusted repository.

Challenges and opportunities: Our ability to fund and sustain digital preservation activities at scale is ambiguous at best, although we are mildly comforted not to be alone here, since many of our peers face a similar challenge. No new funding sources have emerged, but at the same time neither have we been charged with a clear unfunded mandate for the library to satisfy the university’s seemingly endless appetite for file storage through reallocation of existing library resources.

Questions to consider include: 1) Should we formalize what has become our de facto tiered approach toward digital preservation and accept that we will continue to lack resources for preserving everything to the same degree? 2) What should be our approach to interinstitutional cooperative efforts in digital preservation? To what extent would partnering with in-state institutions impede our ability to meet our own institutional needs and/or limit our full participation in Big Ten joint initiatives? 3) Recognizing that digital assets need active curation early in their lifecycle, generally prior to ascertaining the potential enduring value, should we adopt a two-step accessioning model (e.g., with respect to preserving research data)?

Materials processing

Materials processing includes (although is not necessarily limited to) marking and tattle-taping new acquisitions as part of shelf preparation. This work is largely, although not entirely, performed within the Preservation & Conservation department. There may be overall library efficiencies to be gained by rethinking our materials processing flow from beginning to end.

Challenges and opportunities: Materials processing remains necessary so long as we keep receiving new items in print. The activity should be disposed of as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Performing the work in Preservation & Conservation arguably yields some nominal benefits like error checking and quality control (e.g., a wrong call number that could mean the book is lost forever) and provides an opportunity for visual inspection to identify items where preventative intervention would be prudent while the item is in hand, although there may be other ways to achieve these same ends.

Questions to consider include: 1) Would a LEAN process or similar operational efficiency study reveal a more efficient way to process items? Is the return on investment, esp. for tattle-taping, worth it? 2) Should all new acquisitions be given the same careful treatment, or do we prize certain print collections (e.g., art, music, and language & literature) more than others such that a tiered approach is warranted? 3) Are there lessons to be learned from our response to the pandemic? Are there any changes that were instigated or hastened by the need to adapt quickly for COVID-19 that we wish to sustain?