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Creating Community: Drawing on Staff Expertise to Break Down Silos in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

A discussion of the strategies and outcomes behind a special collections and metadata collaboration effort at the University of Rochester, River Campus Libraries, to make finding aids more discoverable and interoperable. Through the use of a project charter and specific goals, the project managers sought to create buy-in and build a culture of teamwork amongst the participants, resulting in both improved finding aids and a model for collaborative work across departments.

Keywords

Expertise, Collaboration, Special Collections, Metadata, Finding Aids

From the Field

Creating Community: Drawing on Staff Expertise to Break Down Silos in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

A discussion of the strategies and outcomes behind a special collections and metadata collaboration effort at the University of Rochester, River Campus Libraries, to make finding aids more discoverable and interoperable. Through the use of a project charter and specific goals, the project managers sought to create buy-in and build a culture of teamwork amongst the participants, resulting in both improved finding aids and a model for collaborative work across departments.

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Introduction

The future of archives and special collections departments requires building collaborative partnerships within and outside of the library to foster the discoverability and use of materials in support of research and learning. Without such collaborations, libraries risk eroding efficiencies by duplicating efforts, using inconsistent practices, and working beyond financial means. An ideal partnership consists of two or more entities working together by bringing their distinct expertise to a project to produce a better result together than they can alone. This article explores the impetus, process, and outcomes of one such collaboration between departments at the University of Rochester, River Campus Libraries (RCL), which led to a project to educate, cross-train, and empower staff to work together to improve discoverability of archival collections.

The RCL has a wealth of manuscript collections, which are accessible to researchers through finding aids. Prior to 2013, staff from the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation (RBSCP) created finding aids without using a consistent content standard and published the files using HTML on the RBSCP website. Following a finding aid conversion project which resulted in Encoded Archival Description (EAD)-compliant files, librarians in RBSCP and Metadata Services recognized the need to create a team, with staff from their respective departments, to produce a workflow for editing selected files to facilitate the discoverability and use of the finding aids, as well as to develop local practices for creating future finding aids. What began as an informal conversation over coffee one summer afternoon, resulted



in cross-training, skill development, and re-alignment of work practices for two departments. The ultimate result would be increased discoverability of the Libraries' unique collections.

Project Goals

The goals of the project included:

- Creating a community of descriptive best practices building on industry standards, allowing for consistency and interoperability
- Developing skills to build capacity among catalogers to describe manuscript collections, while drawing on RBSCP's curatorial expertise
- Breaking down silos between library departments through collaborative work and shared spaces
- Updating selected high-research value finding aids using EAD

The project managers sought a collaborative solution in order to make better use of staff expertise and talents and to manage pre-existing time commitments. As catalogers are familiar and comfortable working with standards and using descriptive practices, they were an obvious choice of partner in helping bring structure and meaning to finding aids.

Developing the Initiative

To achieve these goals, the project managers relied on RCL's organizational culture, which promotes, supports, and expects cross-departmental collaboration. The Libraries' strategic plan underscores the importance of raising the profile of special collections through cross-training and collaborative projects. Relying on the top-down structures established by the libraries' administration, the project managers initiated a series of conversations with the libraries' assistant deans to advocate for implementing this project. As those conversations evolved, the project managers drafted a charter

to structure the work. The charter is a tool used to document all initiatives at RCL; before beginning a project, the charter compels staff to think meaningfully about base assumptions, scope, deliverables, resources required, team members, and stakeholders to help ensure success (See appendix A for the charter template).

To make this collaboration successful required the expertise of staff spanning three administrative portfolios: technical services, information technology (IT), and special collections, which necessitated the sign-off of three library assistant deans before moving forward. This administrative process involved several meetings with different administrators to provide much needed feedback about the charter, as well as time to discuss the benefits of the project to ensure administrative support from the beginning. These conversations underscored the importance of sharing information across administrative portfolios to build awareness of current needs and opportunities for collaboration. Thinking through each component of the project charter with the assistant deans provided the project managers with three distinct perspectives not only on the work itself, but also on how such a project would fit within existing departmental priorities and projects. Beginning the project with such a holistic view of library work enabled the project managers to better understand potential constraints and their impact on success.

After receiving administrative approval to begin the project, the project managers scheduled and planned a workshop intended to provide training for catalogers and curators alike in the description and encoding standards used in the project. The initial team included two curators from RBSCP, three catalogers, and one IT programmer. During the workshop the project managers reviewed the charter with the team and provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions and discuss expectations related to the project goals. A project archivist in RBSCP

then gave an introduction to the standards based on her own work. The project managers led participants through several activities designed to have them apply the description theory they learned. After the activities, the team came back together to talk through the challenges they experienced. The final part of the workshop involved the curators and catalogers partnering up to begin their work. In pairing a curator with a cataloger, the project managers recognized the expertise each team member would bring to the work; the curator has subject knowledge related to the collection or general topic area, and the cataloger has experience applying standards to library resources. Kicking off the project using a workshop approach encouraged participants to see themselves as part of a team from the beginning. Recognizing the project work would be challenging – as it was new work to all of the participants – the project managers fostered a team identity and culture by emphasizing the experimental aspects of the project, and how the team would stumble and learn together.

The project managers developed formal and informal opportunities to solicit feedback from the participants, troubleshoot as a team, and provide support for one another as the project continued. Understanding that time management would be a challenge for this project, each pair scheduled time together every week when the cataloger would work in RBSCP and the curator would be available to answer questions about the collection or to page materials from the collection, as the need arose. RBSCP set up a dedicated workstation in its staff space to facilitate the partnership. Setting up a weekly schedule helped to ensure the pairs remained on task to complete their deliverables. In addition, a weekly team meeting amongst all project participants helped to ensure accountability, maintain consistency amongst evolving description decisions, and provide support as the project continued.

Information sharing is a critical component of a successful collaboration. When working across departments - even within one organization - tracking progress and having access to relevant files can be challenging. Recognizing the need to keep project documents in a centralized place, the team used the catalogers' department wiki to document their work. The wiki allowed them to track their progress and manage the decisions made throughout the project. The project managers then used Box, the library-wide file sharing platform, to create report documents required by the charter. These documents were then circulated to the team for review and feedback before being submitted to the Libraries' senior leadership team. Both the informal check-ins among partners, and the formal, weekly meetings and information sharing strategies bolstered the team dynamic, and blurred the lines between the two departments to focus on the work.

Library Stakeholders

As a collaborative project evolves, the expertise needed to complete the work may change. In addition to identifying the staff in RBSCP, the IT programmer, and the administration as stakeholders, it soon became clear that the University Archives Assistant should have an active role in the project. While this work continued, the archives assistant was experimenting with creating finding aids using a content management system called ArchivesSpace. Her workflows and output would impact the eventual publishing of the findings aids on the department's website. To facilitate this change, and incorporate the archives assistant's expertise and perspective, she joined the team for their weekly meetings and provided updates about her description work to contribute to the best practices guide that the team was writing. Adding a new member to the team infused the group with fresh energy - much appreciated given the detail-oriented nature of the work - and new ideas to ensure a better final result. Although adding

too many people to a project team can lead to project creep, in this case, the scope remained the same and the team benefited from the assistant's new perspective.

Early Challenges

The project managers anticipated two major barriers while planning the work: time and expertise. Being explicit from the outset of the new project with both participants and administrators about the expected time commitment helped to ensure buy-in and support for the project. By allowing catalogers dedicated time each week to train for and work on the project, and allowing curators time to address collection-related questions that emerged during the editing process, the project managers addressed the time-related barriers by consulting with the necessary supervisors. Each cataloger worked approximately four hours per week on the project, and an additional one hour participating in the weekly team meetings. The curators' time commitment varied based on the need to consult on difficulties encountered during the catalogers' work.

Drawing on the Libraries' culture of experimentation and risk taking, the project managers could provide a supportive environment through which participants could develop and apply new skills. Expertise was a significant barrier to overcome as most participants had limited hands-on EAD editing skills and needed to learn the Oxygen editing software, the basics of the EAD XML standard, and to think critically about how the EAD would be used and displayed on the Libraries' website in order to make recommendations for best practices. As the work continued, the managers framed the project as a cross-departmental learning experience, where mistakes would be made, and the result would be improved local practices.

Early Wins

One short-term win was the opportunity for catalogers to have real hands-on EAD learning opportunities. While there was (and is) a lot to learn about EAD, catalogers quickly began to pick up on which tags seemed most useful and have fruitful conversations about standardizing procedures because they regularly worked with the files. Another short-term win was the feeling that the group was collectively moving this process forward; while it was understood that the best practices would evolve as the group gained additional knowledge, the work was motivated by the fact the group would do it together and in a transparent manner. The IT programmer shared his progress transforming the finding aids to be rendered on the department's website, and sought feedback through an iterative design process. The project managers also highlighted the team's work in an all-library staff meeting, which raised the importance of making the libraries' unique collections more discoverable and interoperable.

Sustainability

The work of the collaborative EAD editing project provided a much-needed starting place for generating a framework and momentum for cross-training and re-aligning library work among these two departments. Part of the work involved shifting away from the decisions the team made during the project in response to challenges that arose, and toward a set of best practices. The resulting document connected the industry standards with local examples to guide future work. Such a document ensures long-term sustainability of collaborative projects as team members – and in some cases, the work itself – changes.

A major change has truly been the collaborative effort behind these departments coming together to work on materials that had formerly been maintained within a single department. By systematically editing the EAD finding aids and meeting regularly to discuss issues and make



decisions, the group began a process of making small changes which led to building more complex workflows and processes. This project underscored the benefits to both the organization and end users as the process of doing work becomes reimagined to take advantage of individual skills and align with organizational priorities.

Many personnel changes have occurred since the project's inception, including the revision of one project manager's job description to include a significant amount of time dedicated to finding aid description and EAD. The RBSCP project manager left the university the spring after the project began for a new position. New staff members have been trained to work within the culture this project has developed and catalogers continue to provide EAD editing support while RBSCP curators help make intellectual decisions about the collection content. The specifics of the local practices continue to evolve as staff learn more about EAD and its application in internal and external systems. Support from library administration, particularly relevant department heads, helps to keep this culture in place.

Lessons Learned

Important to incorporate in any collaborative project, the project managers reflected often throughout the course of the work about the challenges they faced and what they had learned about spearheading such an initiative.

1. *Educating up*: it's empowering to work in an organizational culture which supports bottom-up collaborations. A critical part of the success of any project then becomes the process of advocating for the importance of doing the work, or educating up. The project managers took for granted how much background knowledge their administrators had about describing manuscript collections. In response to concerns that administrators ex-

pressed about scope creep, the project managers presented context for the work and explained why the collaborative approach was the most viable way forward in establishing best practices. Providing regular updates to administrators is critically important as it helps ensure long-term support for a project.

2. *Stuff takes time*: while this may sound obvious, when scoping a project, managers must carefully consider the amount of time required to finish the work. Institutional priorities may change, staff may turn over, and participants may lose interest. The goal of updating a selection of high-research value finding aids within a given period of time fell short due to the length, varying degrees of complexity, and inconsistencies in the selected finding aids. Since no catalogers had previously worked with EAD and some were new to working with XML in Oxygen, there was a warm-up period before participants started to gain familiarity with the standards and the tools.
3. *One person doesn't equal a culture change*: For a project rooted in change management, the culture shift cannot rest with only one champion. While the cataloging department continued to have the support of their project manager, once the RBSCP manager left the organization, the curatorial team was left with only one person participating. Long-term culture change remains a challenge, which staff turn-over exposes and complicates. Understanding momentum and interest in an initiative ebbs and flows over time, so to ensure success, change agents must find new cheerleaders to renew the team's energy and complete the work.

Conclusion

So why develop a collaborative project between two departments? It is only through these creative, bottom-up opportunities that academic libraries can successfully break down silos without top-down changes driven by administrators. These projects encourage participants to think in new ways about their spaces, the work they do,

and how they do it. Team-based approaches foster new perspectives on traditional workflows and departmental practices, which are greatly needed in the quickly changing environment of higher education. Collaborative projects acknowledge individuals' expertise, while celebrating an experimental process, where each participant learns something new, needed to sustain a learning organization.

Appendix: Project Charter Template

Project:		Date & version:
Project Sponsor:	Project Managers:	

Base Assumptions:

Project deliverable(s): *What will be in place at the end of the project that is not in place today? Include opportunities.*

Driving forces:

Restraining forces:

Critical Success Factors: *(what must be in place for this project to be successful?)*

Scope: *What is the scope – or what will be specifically included? And what will not be included?*

In Scope	Out of Scope



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Project Milestones: <i>At a high level, what steps will the project take?</i>	Target Timing	
Step	Start Date	End Date

Risks: <i>What risks have been identified as unique and significant to this project? How will they be managed?</i>		
Stakeholders: <i>List the major identifiable groups of people affected by or gaining benefit from this project's deliverables. A stakeholder is a person or group who will be affected by the project on an on-going basis (e.g., will operate the resulting deliverable).</i>		
Stakeholder Group	Project Impact: How they are affected	Involvement: Awareness, provides input, or on the team

Project Team Roles & Responsibilities: <i>List the individuals with roles and responsibilities on the project team.</i>		
Role	Name	Responsibilities