The Adaptable Information Professional: Combining Library and Archival Expertise to Serve Diverse Patron and Collection Needs

In an article published earlier this year, Mary Manning and Judy Silva reported that academic archivists with library responsibilities most frequently cite “time” (as in time to complete all of their work) as their biggest professional challenge. On the other side of the coin, this same group of dual archivist/librarians noted that outreach, promotion, and interactions with faculty and main library staff are the most prominent benefits of their hybrid positions.\(^1\) So true are these challenges and benefits to my own experiences, I repeatedly found myself wondering as I read the article if I was one of Manning and Silva’s anonymously quoted survey respondents.

Working as a lone arranger in a small university library, lack of time and a troublesome workload will continually be a hurdle, but I am constantly surprised by the positive results of combining library and archival duties, particularly the opportunities for outreach and interaction this situation provides. Most rewarding is the freedom and flexibility this dual role affords me to apply my skills to the task at hand. A frequent argument for library, archive, and museum collaboration is that users do not care who manages the resources, they just want access to them.\(^2\) My work as a dual archivist/librarian helps me see this broader picture and adapt to diverse patron and collection needs.

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\(^1\) Mary Manning and Judy Silva, “Dual Archivist/Librarians: Balancing the Benefits and Challenges of Diverse Responsibilities,” *College & Research Libraries* 73, no. 3 (March 2012): 171-173, [http://crl.acrl.org/content/73/2/164.abstract](http://crl.acrl.org/content/73/2/164.abstract).

Chartered in 1869 as Pennsylvania Female College, my employer, Chatham University, is one of the oldest women’s colleges in the United States. The majority of the university’s approximately 2,300 students are in coeducational graduate programs, but the undergraduate college remains single-sex. Situated in a largely residential section of urban Pittsburgh, several campus buildings were originally the private homes of prominent individuals. Most notable is the university’s administrative building, which was the estate of Andrew W. Mellon and features landscaping by the renowned Olmsted Brothers firm. The campus also includes the oldest surviving residence from Pittsburgh’s “Millionaire’s Row,” the Howe-Childs Gate House, which was built in the 1860s.

Since 2008, Chatham has also held a second campus north of the city, the 388 acre Eden Hall Farm, which was founded as a retreat for the retired and working women of the H.J. Heinz Company. Chatham is currently developing the Eden Hall Campus into the home of the School of Sustainability and the Environment. This new campus and school will continue Chatham’s commitment to environmental responsibility, women’s leadership, and global understanding, all central to the university’s educational mission.

In late 2005, just a few months after earning my bachelor’s degree, I began my career at Chatham as a paraprofessional. The majority of my early duties were strictly library related—namely interlibrary loan, reference, and collection development. My previous experience was as a work study assistant in an art history slide library and as a volunteer at the Pennsylvania State Archives, so traditional library work was almost completely new to me. All the same, I had moved to the city with the intention of soon entering the Archival Studies MLIS program at the University of Pittsburgh and was happy to find a job that would not only pay the bills while I was in graduate school but also help me build my résumé. As is still the case, Chatham’s library
had only six full-time staff members, but the atmosphere was supportive and collegial. The encouragement of my coworkers, all professional librarians, made it easier to ask questions and learn from their example.

I soon learned that the library’s basement housed the college archives, but as is too often the case at smaller institutions like Chatham, the archives had never been managed by a full-time, professional archivist. Alumnae of the women’s college had been collecting historic materials since at least the 1930s, and a former English professor had worked with the materials from 1987-1993, but in recent years, the task of handling the archives had largely fallen to the library staff. One particularly dedicated reference librarian had attempted to bring some organization to the chaotic storage space but at the unfortunate expense of original order.

There were, however, several positives to the situation in the archives. The library had secured grant money to process collected materials by and about noted environmental writer Rachel Carson, who graduated from the college in 1929, and they had a dedicated website for the Carson Collection finding aid. The archives also benefited from a 2003 Getty Foundation Campus Heritage Grant to conduct a building and landscape stewardship study, which facilitated the organization of the college’s architectural plans. Another positive was the establishment of a small endowment to pay for supplies and special projects in the archives. This endowment

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3 While now 30 years old, Nicholas C. Burke and J. Frank Cook’s 1982 survey of college and university archives in the United States found that more than one-half of the small institutions (defined as having an enrollment of 2,500 FTE or less) had no professional staff and only 7 percent have more than two on the staff. See Burke and Cook, “A Profile of College and University Archives in the United States,” American Archivist 45, no. 4 (1982): 415, http://archivists.metapress.com/content/a77534258450710x/.

4 You can view the Carson Collection finding aid and selected images at http://www.chatham.edu/host/library/carson/index.html.

made possible Chatham’s initial contribution of digitized images to Historic Pittsburgh, a collaborative online resource created by a number of local institutions.⁶

In the three years I worked at Chatham as a paraprofessional librarian, I did some processing and inventoring in the archives but my involvement was minimal. My time at Chatham was primarily spent learning the skills of librarianship, which I was not gaining in my heavily archives-focused course of study at the University of Pittsburgh. In my library work at Chatham, I learned the art of the reference interview, the ins and outs of our subscription database, and the politics of consortial borrowing.⁷ I enjoyed this job and despite my limited formal training, Chatham’s Library Director has commented that she has always seen me as a librarian first and foremost.

The convergence of library staff changes and my graduation from Pitt led to my promotion as Chatham’s solo archivist in late 2008. I felt incredibly lucky to have found a full-time, professional position in an increasingly sour job market, but I was also overwhelmed by what I was facing—a lack of policies and procedures, a tremendous backlog, a largely uncataloged rare book collection, and a steady stream of archives reference questions.

Meanwhile, my promotion had not added any staff hours to the library, and I was still expected to cover several reference desk shifts, pitch in on library instruction, and continue my faculty liaison responsibilities.

Nearly four years later, I still fret over that backlog, but I am also pleased with everything we have accomplished. The relationships I built with my fellow librarians and Chatham’s

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⁶ Historic Pittsburgh is hosted by the University of Pittsburgh’s Digital Research Library. You can view Chatham’s Image Collection at http://digital.library.pitt.edu/images/pittsburgh/chatham.html.

⁷ At institutions throughout the country, much of traditional library work is now performed by staff without a master’s level degree in library science or an equivalent field. See Rory Litwin, “The Library Paraprofessional Movement and the Deprofessionalization of Librarianship,” January 27, 2010, http://www.libraryjuicepress.com/docs/deprofessionalization.pdf. This article is a revised version of an article that appeared in Progressive Librarian no. 33 (Summer/Fall 2009): 43-60.
faculty have created numerous opportunities for collaboration and integration of library and archival services. I work closely with the library’s Head of Technical Services, and he has helped me catalog the rare book collection and get more archival records into the OPAC. We also share our knowledge on A/V conversion and preservation, electronic theses and dissertations, and a planned institutional repository. With his help, the Archives and Special Collections page found a prominent place on the library’s new website.

My collaborations with Chatham’s two reference librarians have also been rewarding. Both are focused on improving information literacy and the effectiveness of library instruction. Early on, the majority of my outreach was to history faculty and the landscape architecture students, who were already using blueprints in the archives. With the librarians’ encouragement, I looked for ways to work with additional departments. I began offering a workshop for faculty on teaching with primary sources and scoured the course schedule for any class that might benefit from archival instruction.

In a 2010 survey of American history faculty, Doris Malkmus found that college teachers often want to use more primary sources in their instruction but frequently lack the time or ability to find these resources. With this in mind, I looked beyond Chatham’s own Archives and Special Collections and marketed myself to my library colleagues as the “expert” on locating primary sources online and in other local repositories. Whenever the reference librarians met with a student who seemed to need help finding primary sources, they would suggest an appointment with me. Frequent referrals of graduate Food Studies students led me to co-teach a session with the librarians and create a food history research guide. I also offered to teach a unit on finding online primary sources to a class in the Education Department for students studying to

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8 Doris Malkmus, “‘Old Stuff’ for New Stuff Teaching Methods: Outreach to History Faculty Teaching with Primary Sources,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 10, no. 4 (October 2010): 419.
become high school history teachers. Generally, I find it easy to wear both my librarian and archivist hats, and I feel comfortable suggesting both primary and secondary sources appropriate to a student’s research.

There have been a number of other benefits to my relationships with Chatham’s librarians, particularly in the areas of outreach and promotion. The archives regularly contributes to the library’s blog, newsletter, and Facebook page, and when I recently presented a small archival exhibition around the 50th anniversary of the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, a librarian created an accompanying display of books by Carson that visitors could check out. Librarians have also helped me advocate for donations and transfers to the archives. When a long-tenured professor recently retired, his positive relationship with his liaison librarian eased the collection of his papers.

My work in Chatham’s Archives and Special Collections has likewise strengthened my own liaison relationships with faculty members. After I helped an English professor find rare books in our collection related to his own research, he became more receptive to my requests for input on new databases and books for the circulating collection. As Tamar Chute has commented in her writing on outreach in college and university archives, a small environment, like Chatham’s, makes it easier to work closely with individual faculty and staff members. My work as a librarian has further improved my ability to make the archives (or at least the archivist) more visible on campus.

“Thinking like a librarian” also keeps me service-oriented and helps me better focus my efforts in the archives. I try to choose processing projects that will see the most immediate

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research use and prioritize prompt access over meticulous description. MPLP is a harried dual archivist/librarian’s best friend.\textsuperscript{10}

Towards the conclusion of their article, Manning and Silva comment on the stress dual archivist/librarians face and ask, “Can these information professionals be successful in fulfilling their institutional missions while juggling so many responsibilities?”\textsuperscript{11} I certainly struggle with this question and am constantly looking for ways to stay sane and make more efficient use of my time. I also try to focus on the positives of this arrangement and relish the variety in my everyday work. As the dual role persists and conceivably grows, I hope we can continue to learn from each other and capably serve our patrons and collections as both archivists and librarians.

\textsuperscript{10} See Colleen McFarland, “Rethinking the Business of Small Archives,” Archival Issues 31, no. 2 (2007): 140-143. McFarland comments that the literature of solo librarians is far more positive and empowering than that of lone arrangers, and she encourages all archivists to embrace the user emphasis of librarianship: “We must dedicate ourselves more earnestly to producing satisfied users rather than collections that primarily satisfy our own professional ideals” (p. 142).

\textsuperscript{11} Manning and Silva, 174.
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