

The Changing Realities of Special Collections and Archives

Facing the Future with Confidence

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This chapter focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the work of special collections and archives. My story and experiences are not universal or representative of all special collections and archives. It is based mostly on my own experiences and perspectives while working at two different institutions: Drew University and Princeton Theological Seminary during 2020 and 2021. Each one of us experienced the pandemic in our own unique way. Large institutions handled things differently from small ones. Geographic and financial influences changed how institutions responded to the pandemic. There is no universal lived experience of this time. My hope is that my own personal experiences and the lessons I learned along the way can provide insights and recommendations for my fellow practitioners in libraries and archives. Throughout this chapter, I highlight some core lessons learned; some of them may be obvious or elementary, but they are things that were

constant and noteworthy during the pandemic and that I might not have otherwise learned.

In many ways, this entire book serves as a post-mortem for the way that we handled the pandemic as a profession. Our responses to the pandemic were made under high-pressure and stressful circumstances. I think we, collectively, did the very best we could with such uncertainty and unsettledness. Through this chapter, I explore the successes and failures of my own work in the field.¹ My criticisms and my commendations are laid out with significant 20/20 hindsight. We are more than three years removed from the start of the pandemic and it is easier now to see where we went wrong and what we did right in response to this global catastrophe. Only by looking backwards can we more properly assess what we did as professionals and how we might change things if we had the chance, or, unfortunately, how we can better prepare for another similar pandemic or emergency in the future.

A Time of Transition

In the years leading up to the pandemic, special collections and archives professionals made great strides towards increased access to materials, reduction of gatekeeping practices, and a significantly increased presence online and in the realm of social media. Even with these considerable shifts to make materials as widely accessible as possible, we were not prepared for what the pandemic wrought. In particular, we were not prepared to be away from our materials. The job of rare book librarians, archivists, curators, conservators, and others in the special collections field is so tied to physical items and our proximity to those items that it was beyond jarring to find ourselves forcibly removed from them.

The pandemic laid bare one key fact about work in special collections and archives: we have a codependent relationship with the materials with which we work. We cannot properly do our jobs without the items in our collection and the items are worthless without us there to serve as their intermediary. Immediately after my institution, Drew University, closed its campus in March 2020 and told everyone to work from home, I was at a loss. I felt as useless as the rare books and archival material that sat in the quiet dark in a locked and silent building. Like those objects, I felt static, helpless, and

completely inaccessible. Just about the only thing I could do was send the same email over and over again to faculty, students, researchers, and others interested in visiting the archives. It was always some variation of the following:

Dear [Name],

Thank you for contacting the Special Collections & University Archives department. Due to the global pandemic, the University has closed our campus and moved all staff to remote work for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, this means that all access to our physical collections and researcher access to the Reading Room is restricted at this time. We are hoping that this closure will be relatively short and are looking to early April as a possible return to campus. I will keep you posted about any changes to in-person access and will let you know as soon as new appointments can be booked for visiting the archives. In the meantime, if you have any additional questions, please let me know. We appreciate your flexibility and understanding during this difficult and tumultuous time.

As is usual for research institutions, we had several visitors planned many months in advance for both long-term research projects and short visits. I reached out to everyone who was planning on visiting between March 2020 and the end of April 2020. By that point, I naively believed, things would be back to “normal” again and we would be in the office and fully operational. Clearly that was a miscalculation, one that most of my fellow librarians, archivists, and curators made. We had no idea of the true impact of this global pandemic.

We did what we could to answer questions from our homes, to meet remotely with colleagues, faculty, and students, and to determine temporary solutions. Tasks that could only be completed in the office were pushed until an unknown future date. Like many other professions, those of us who worked in libraries and archives were a bit at a loss for how to proceed. The most significant question I received from people I supervised in the Special Collections and University Archives department was, “What, exactly, are we supposed to be doing?”

Our colleagues in the main Library, while certainly dealing with their own work-from-home challenges, had access to material and resources from their home offices. They could update existing online research guides, such as LibGuides, or create new ones, highlight and share online databases, and provide virtual instruction based on

online access points that students and faculty could use while they, too, were stuck at home or in the residence halls. This is not to say that the transition for our fellow librarians was any easier than our own, just that they already had resources and materials available in a remote format that more readily helped them adapt to a virtual environment. It seemed evident—very quickly—that the Special Collections and University Archives department was not so equipped and prepared.

A Whole Lot of Holes

Like many special collections departments at smaller, liberal arts institutions, the one at Drew University was run by a small staff of professionals and a great group of student workers. Drew University, located in Madison, NJ, was established as a Methodist Seminary in 1867, adding undergraduate programs in the 1930s. It has three schools—undergraduate, graduate, and theological—with distinctive student populations that all interact with the Special Collections Department in different ways. I began working in Drew’s Special Collections as a Student Assistant in 2013 when I joined the school’s History & Culture PhD program. During the next seven years, the Department became more proactive and focused on outreach and increased interactions with our faculty and students. In the five years that preceded the pandemic, we saw an incredible increase in the number of visitors to the Archives, particularly in terms of special events, tours, and class visits. This increase was most noticeable in interactions with faculty members who brought their classes into the archives for hands-on sessions with our materials. During the 2015-2016 academic year, we hosted 20 classes in the Archives. When I became Head of Special Collections & University Archives and Methodist Librarian in 2017, I pushed for even more class interactions. This focused effort resulted in an increase to 70 class visits during the 2018-2019 academic year. When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, we were on pace for 100 class visits for the 2019-2020 year, with 60 in the fall semester alone!

This five-year period was marked by a concerted effort by all staff to increase our presence on campus, engage more directly with students and faculty through hands-on instruction, and encourage participation in department-led events. Our aim was to become an

active and actively sought-after resource on campus, one that went beyond “the building where they have old stuff.” These efforts paid off significantly; beyond increased class visits, we hosted events such as ghost stories on Halloween and a performance from a local drag queen to help kick off our fashion history exhibition. These events brought hundreds of people into the building, many of whom had never visited before.

With a staff of only four full-time professionals, these efforts meant that other aspects of our work were less of a focus for our team. As Head of the Department, I made the choice to focus our work on outreach and in-person activities at the expense of things like digitization and the development of online resources. My predecessors in the position had done a great job of establishing a more active archives space, and I did not want to lose that energetic push towards increased activity. It was a path to success for our staff, one that cemented the Department as an essential part of the larger pedagogical mission of the University.

The downside of this approach was that some work was deprioritized, including our work in the digital realm. Prior to the pandemic, we focused more on physical exhibits than digital ones, hands-on instruction rather than online lectures, in-person events and tours instead of behind-the-scenes videos and tutorials. The plan was to embrace the face-to-face contact points first and then follow up with digital platform delivery and an increased online presence. Our plans were well underway, reaping benefits for the whole campus community, as well as our department.

While this increased focus on in-person engagement was happening, the digital realm was not left entirely ignored. We had a small group of student workers who assisted in the digitization of rare books, manuscripts, photographs, and artifacts. This effort included a priority list of dozens of rare and unique items that were otherwise not available in any digital format. We supported these efforts while still focusing on outreach and growth, though they were smaller projects compared to our large-scale program of hands-on interactions. The idea was simple: we would slowly chip away at the digitization backlog in the short term, with the aim of making it a more major focus in the future when we had more time and energy to devote to large-scale digitization projects.

A Necessary Pivot

With the onset of the pandemic, our focus on in-person interactions needed to adjust. Like most institutions, we first had the naïve expectation that the pandemic interruption would last a few weeks or a month at the longest. The directive from University administration was that we would be working remotely for three to four weeks and then return to regular operations. As time progressed, the uncertainty and confusion of March turned into the new reality of April: this was not a short-term problem. Fairly soon after the initial shutdown, the University extended the remote environment from mid-April until at least the end of June 2020.

Once this new timeline was apparent, the first priority was to work with visiting researchers to cancel or indefinitely postpone their visits to the Archives. For most researchers, this interruption in their work was not unexpected. The whole world was in shutdown and quarantine mode, so it did not come as a surprise that our institution was also closed. For some, however, the interruption was both jarring and significantly impactful. These reactions were especially true among those working on dissertations and theses. By remaining closed, we were preventing those researchers from continuing and completing their necessary research. While we certainly sympathized with these patrons, we were at the mercy of administrative decisions based on the global health crisis. There were, however, a few things we could do to help these researchers. In order to help, we needed to be more accommodating and flexible than ever before. Our researchers may not have had the flexibility to adjust to the pandemic, so we needed to change our ways of working to best support their work.

Core Lesson: Flexibility in the face of adversity and the unknown is essential; without it, there is no chance of success

One of the best, and most forward-thinking, decisions that the University administration made early in the pandemic was to allow a select few people on campus for specific on-site work. This decision greatly impacted the work of the main Library and the Archives, by allowing a few of us to have access to materials within our collections. For the Archives, the selected people were myself, representing Drew's Special Collections, and Mark Shenise, representing the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church. With Mark having access

to Methodist archival materials and myself having access to Drew's rare book and archival collections, we were able to access material for urgent and time-sensitive requests. High in priority among these requests was the digitization of select material for use by outside researchers, including those working on theses and dissertations. In the main Library, another member of the Special Collections & University Archives department, Conservator Masato Okinaka, was one of the people tasked with providing scans from the circulating collection.

Beginning the third week of March, those of us who were designated as "Modified Virtual" staff began to return to campus. Transitioning back to campus necessitated some significant restrictions. These restrictions included limiting staff access to certain buildings only on certain days. By alternating days, we prevented overlap of people in a building at the same time, reducing the chances of person-to-person interaction and therefore virus transmission. This approach was made very clear in official communications from the campus and Library administration:

All classes will be delivered remotely, with additional university services and business operations supported remotely to the extent possible. Employees have been assigned to one of the following categories for this period

- Virtual: all work can be conducted remotely
- Modified Virtual: **some** work may require occasional onsite presence
- Onsite: all work required onsite presence.

To minimize potential exposure to the coronavirus, as many individuals as possible are assigned to the All-Virtual category, with Modified Virtual and Onsite kept to the ***absolute minimum***. All building access will be logged on a registry to allow follow-up in the event someone is exposed. (University Librarian Andrew Bonamici, email correspondence to library staff, March 15, 2020)

This staffing model resulted in Mark and me each visiting the archives building two days per week for short periods of on-campus work, allowing the building to be accessed a total of four days each week.

Working from home was somewhat strange and required making some adjustments, but working in an entirely empty building on an empty campus was a different kind of surreal. Previously, our

work required a lot of personal interaction with both materials and people, especially as we increased in-person activities over the past few years. Working in a quiet, empty building was nowhere near the norm. It took some adjustment on my part to learn how to work in such an environment and to make the most out of my limited time on campus.

The focus was on essential work that could only be done on-site. This work included answering reference questions related to our rare book and archival collections, ensuring the physical safety and security of these materials, and creating digital surrogates of select materials. The first of these tasks, reference queries, was essentially the same as pre-pandemic times. The department regularly received queries from internal and external patrons who needed information about a particular item or collection. Being on-site a few days a week to answer these questions was extremely helpful. I collected reference queries from other members of the Department and the Library staff at large and worked on those while in the building. Though response times were longer than usual, we were still able to answer patrons relatively quickly. Supporting internal constituents was the highest priority. With all the changes that accompanied remote learning, coupled with limited access to campus resources, we prioritized our own students and faculty over those outside the institution.

Initially, the safety and security of our material was an important part of my on-campus working days. First and foremost was basic reshelving of materials. The pandemic closure came so quickly that we did not have a chance to shelve everything in their permanent locations. While all items were locked up in our vaults and closed stacks, not everything was where it was supposed to go. Numerous carts of material that were being worked on by both staff and visiting researchers needed to be unloaded and properly shelved. Class materials that had been pulled for visits a few days before and after the closure were in limbo in the closed stacks and decisions needed to be made about what to do with the material. Do we keep these items set aside in the hope that we might be able to return to teaching in-person classes soon? Or do we shelve everything, assuming the classes would not be coming? These materials were the last to be reshelved when I went into the office in the hopes that we might be back on campus before too long. In the end, not shelving some of these carts proved very useful for virtual instruction that was held later in the semester.

The third priority for my limited time on campus, one that directly supported virtual learning, was scanning and digitizing. Digitization soon became the highest priority task that I completed during my campus visits. As it became clear that this closure was not a short-term solution, the number of requests for scanned material increased significantly. These requests came not only from outside researchers, who we expected to ask for digitization, but also from our on-campus patrons.

It became evident across campus that University staff needed to change the way we worked to accommodate the new remote learning environment in which we found ourselves. Our campus technology team quickly increased access to online learning tools and meeting platforms such as Zoom. They also expanded a program for loaning laptop computers and webcams to faculty, staff, and students who did not have access to that equipment in their homes. The Library also pivoted fully towards supporting remote learning by expanding services that could be done virtually.

This approach extended to the Special Collections & University Archives Department. Working together with colleagues in the main Library, the Department staff developed a group of digitized resources that faculty and students could use for class projects and research. Unlike our initial outreach to patrons, which suggested that the pandemic interruption would only last a few weeks, this new approach was steeped in the reality of our circumstances. In our revised communications with patrons, we no longer qualified the closure of the Archives building or suggested when it might reopen. Rather, we embraced the new landscape of virtual services and set up a variety of avenues for faculty and students to access digital resources. Our Library website provided a platform to share messages with faculty and students about our new services:

Remote Services from Special Collections & University Archives

During Drew's move to virtual business operations, the Methodist Archives building and Wilson Reading Room will be closed to the public. Remote services are available to faculty, students, and researchers during this time. This includes scanning of items from Special Collections, University Archives, and the Methodist Library as well as research assistance via email. You can also set up a virtual consultation to integrate archival and primary source content into remote courses, schedule an instruction session for your remote class, and plan assignments or research projects for remote learners. Drew

also has a number of online primary source databases that are available to all students and faculty; download a list of these sources here [link to list of resources]. If you have any queries, questions, or needs please email the Special Collections Department at speccol@drew.edu or University Archives at archives@drew.edu. (Remote services website text for Special Collections & University Archives, March 16, 2020.)

The resources referenced in the above announcement included both digitized material from our own collections as well as access to primary source materials from other institutions. The latter included digitized books through HathiTrust, primary source databases from Adam-Matthew Digital and Routledge Historical Resources, and digitized archival materials through Atla's digital resources library and the Digital Public Library of America. Some of these resources were added specifically to the Library holdings because of the pandemic and the move to virtual learning, but we were surprised by how many resources already existed in the virtual environment. It became clear that we had been under-utilizing existing digital resources prior to the pandemic.

It is easy to overlook or forget the many resources we acquired as an institution. Working closely with the main Library staff afforded not only the opportunity to suggest new databases and online resources to trial or acquire, but it also prompted me to learn just how many existing resources were already available that could support remote

Core Lesson: Do a better job of understanding the resources that are at our disposal; there is more available than you realize.

archival research. This discovery was an important lesson to learn early in the pandemic, as it enabled our Department to better take advantage of the resources at our disposal. It also helped us avoid duplicating work that was already done by other institutions and organizations.

Why re-scan something that is available on HathiTrust? Why not point people to Atla's expansive digital resources rather than trying to cobble together something less robust on our own?

Through a combination of digital platforms and online resources, we were able to share a wide selection of digitized items with our students and faculty that supported the work and research they needed to complete remotely. In addition to curating this list of online resources, we needed to pivot our personal interactions with students and faculty from in-person to online. That change took creative

thinking and some trial-and-error that resulted in entirely new ways of working with our materials and patrons.

A New Way of Working

The Virtual Classroom

As we developed the lists of online resources and increased access to digital platforms and archival databases, most of the Library and Archives staff were working entirely remotely. Everyone became familiar with the world of Zoom meetings, virtual workspaces, and distance-learning support. Students and faculty moved to fully remote classes on Zoom and within our online learning platform, Moodle. Class visits that had been scheduled for the second half of spring 2020 either needed to be canceled or an alternate method of delivery devised.

The Special Collections and University Archives Department met via Zoom to discuss how to approach class interactions in a virtual environment. Our usual method of teaching with rare books and archival materials was not possible. We could not curate the normal showcase of materials and have students interact with items in a hands-on manner. Our Archives classroom was no longer the place for these interactions, so we had to determine how to replicate these visits in the virtual realm.

The first idea we thought of was digitizing classroom materials. We started by looking at our current scanning equipment to see what options we had:

- ScanPro 3000 Digital Microfilm Reader
- ScanSnap SV600 Overhead Scanner
- Photography Studio with Canon EOS Rebel T5 Camera
- Epson Expression 12000XL Flatbed Scanner
- Atiz Bookdrive Mark 2 Book Scanner

The equipment on hand in March 2020 was relatively minimal, but did provide us with a variety of formats and functions. It was all relatively new, having been purchased over the previous 3-5 years. We had been using this equipment with increased regularity as the number of scan requests we received increased each year. While we

did not push for major digitization projects (as discussed above) we digitized a steady flow of material for a variety of purposes during the previous few years. It was a good starting point for virtual class visits.

We had four classes scheduled in the two weeks immediately after the campus shutdown in March 2020. Two were art history classes, one was a class on the history of advertising, and the third was a digital sociology class. All four lent themselves nicely to a virtual format. With only a little bit of preparation (and scanning) time, we were able to gather enough resources to share with the students.

Admittedly, these first virtual presentations were not as dynamic or exciting as a hands-on lesson in the Archives. With a quick turnaround time, we were basically reduced to creating simple PowerPoint presentations for a lecture-style delivery. But with only a few days preparation time, it was a successful venture. The digital sociology class, in particular, proved very successful. Connecting the class visit with their lesson on memes, the students used scanned images from a variety of special collections material to create their own memes about the pandemic. It was both an interactive way for students to remotely use archival materials and a creative outlet for students to share their concerns, frustrations, and fears. The resulting work was highlighted by Drew's Communications Office as an example of a success in the new virtual learning environment.²

Not all courses had such creative projects, but we did aim to make the virtual class visits as interesting and interactive as possible. For the art history classes, this strategy meant using our digitization equipment to our advantage by scanning material at very high resolution so students could see details and pigmentations on early printed books, manuscripts, and artifacts that they would not be able to see as easily with the naked eye if they were in the Archives classroom (see Figures 1 & 2). We could not fully replicate the hands-on, in-person experience, but we could present to students as close to that experience as possible. This approach, developed with Special Collection's resident Art Historian Candace Reilly (Methodist Library & Special Collections Assistant), was extremely successful and repeated in numerous art history classes during the spring 2020 semester and beyond.

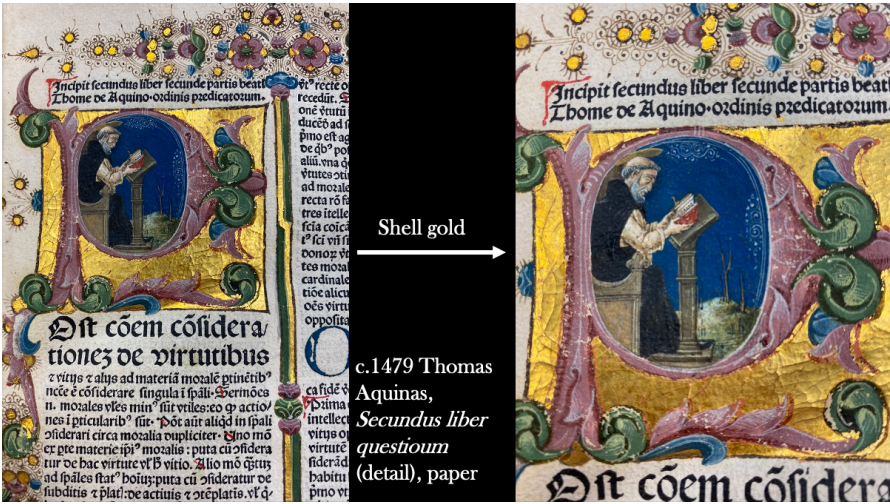


Figure 1: PowerPoint slide from art history class presentation, using high resolution scan to show students the difference between the use of shell gold and gold leaf in Drew University's incunabula collection.



Figure 2: PowerPoint slide from art history class presentation, using high resolution scan to show students the difference between the use of shell gold and gold leaf in Drew University's incunabula collection.

We were able to expand this approach even further in the Fall 2020 semester after we purchased the Elmo TT-12G Interactive Document Camera. The document camera allowed us to livestream our interactions with rare books and manuscripts. Candace and I created an interactive lab in the archives where we could show classes materials

virtually through Zoom and turn pages, zoom in on details, and point out particularities as if the class was in the room with us.

This interactive virtual class experience extended to course assignments. For the history of advertising class, for example, students were originally going to look through selections of different popular magazine and newspaper publications to select an advertisement for analysis. They would look at the ad and determine a few key aspects such as the intended audience, the style of advertisement, and how successful the advertisement was in their opinion. With a classroom filled with hundreds of issues of popular periodicals, the students would have had their choice of eras, topics, and potential audiences. Since we could not scan hundreds of individual issues of magazines and newspapers, we settled for a selection of ads from a handful of diverse publications from the early- to mid-twentieth century. Students were given a brief overview of each of the publications

Core Lesson: Teaching with rare and archival materials can be done successfully in the virtual environment.

that we scanned and were sent a link to a Google Drive folder with scanned images available for their use. We also provided information about and links to a selection of databases that included digitized periodicals such as the *New Yorker*, *Life*, and the *New York Times*. By providing digital access

to these and other resources, the assignment could be completed without changing too much from the original instructions.

Having worked with four classes in quick succession so soon after the shutdown, it was evident that other class visits could be reworked or reimagined without too much difficulty. The key was to engage with faculty first to determine which approach would work best. We offered to host classes in different modes: either lecture style or with a more interactive component. We offered both live and asynchronous formats, which was important for students scattered across the country and around the world following the campus shutdown. With a variety of options available, I reached out to all faculty whose classes had been scheduled for a visit to the Archives over the last months of the semester. I was honest with the faculty about the limitations of this new virtual format but assured them that we could still provide a strong pedagogical interaction for their students that would be similar to an in-person visit.

The result of this outreach was nearly universal support from the faculty. We only had a few faculty cancel their class visits, and these canceled classes were more than made up for by faculty who

had previously not had a visit scheduled but saw how easily we could incorporate the archives into the distance learning environment. In the end, we taught more classes in the virtual space than we would have in the physical one, increasing our interaction with students by a half dozen class visits. Our Department's flexibility and inclination to try new approaches, coupled with willing and eager faculty, made the best out of a difficult situation and positioned Special Collections and University Archives to be an important part of the pedagogical support system in the virtual campus.

Remote Research Support

Faculty and students were not the only constituents for whom we needed to be flexible and find new methods of delivery. As mentioned above, in-person researchers were among the most negatively impacted by the campus closure and the limited access to materials. For students and scholars around the world, the pandemic was an interruption of research for class papers, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, book chapters, conference papers, monographs, and much more. This situation was the case for many of the researchers who were using, or planning to use, the materials in our collections. I cannot count the number of emails that started with something along the lines of "I know there is a worldwide pandemic going on, but..." The "but" was always followed by a request or plea that we were not in a position to fulfill. Whether that request was opening our doors for just one person or scanning entire archival collections, hundreds of linear feet, the requests were well beyond our remote capabilities.

The desperate need to access material was made very evident in the first month or so of the pandemic. I had researchers ask if they could come and pick up material to take home. A colleague at another institution was asked by a researcher if they could borrow archival materials and bring them to a nearby hotel to work on their research. Alumni and former faculty asked if we could mail materials to their homes. These requests were well out of the scope of normal activities and resulted from moments of panic and uncertainty on the part of the researchers. With some patience and understanding, we were able to respond to all requests with more realistic and practical solutions.

The more common requests we received were fairly simple: digitizing material for remote research. These requests were not difficult

to fulfill, but we were stymied by our limited access to the building only a few days a week. The solution to this was not to add more people to the building access (this was not allowed per University administration) but to recalibrate how quickly and efficiently we scanned materials. With any scan request from a researcher, I made sure to set low expectations for what we could provide. It was better to under-promise and over-deliver than to pretend to the researcher that things were operating as usual. We also had to adjust our criteria for scanning requests. Prior to the pandemic, we would not scan any materials beyond 75 pages. This was, we thought, a generous amount of material to make available on demand and one that we could meet through a combination of full-time staff and student workers doing the scanning. If a researcher wanted to see more than 75 pages of a particular text, we suggested a visit to the Archives in person to view the materials themselves. This solution was, of course, not an option during the pandemic, so we had to recalibrate our expectations for scanning. Requests for much longer scans were the norm and we did as best we could given the limitations of staff time and access to materials.

In order to properly set expectations and not be taken advantage of, we needed to communicate carefully with researchers. A negotiation of sorts had to take place with certain requests:

- “We cannot scan the entire four volume set of these hymns, but we can scan the title pages and/or tables of contents and you can let us know which particular hymns you would like to see.”
- “This material is too delicate to scan with our current equipment, but if there is something you are looking for specifically, we can take photographs of certain pages or sections.”
- “This archival collection is not digitized and cannot be scanned in its entirety, but I have attached a copy of the finding aid for your reference. If there are certain folders that fit within your research scope, we would be happy to scan those for you.”

By navigating these requests on a case-by-case basis, we were almost always able to decrease the amount of material requested to a much smaller portion of the whole. In this way, we also helped the researcher to better pinpoint the subject matter or topic that they were seeking.

In many ways, we became the proxy of researchers during the pandemic. We served as their eyes looking through the rare book stacks and their hands turning the pages of documents in the archival collections. Our work became more about helping guide the researchers to the material they needed rather than just fulfilling requests. Because I had to slow everything down and dig into the requests with more detail and attention, I could better serve the needs of the researcher and give them what they needed without much fluff or fodder.

Core Lesson: Taking the time to meet with researchers helps build a better relationship and provide better and more accurate services.

Taking the time to work through requests with researchers was conducted primarily via email but also offered through more direct meetings on Zoom. These conversations enabled us to better understand and respond to the needs of patrons and to talk with them about the real aims of their research. I felt more connected with the researchers this way, the same way I felt when patrons would be sitting in the reading room and I could chat with them about their projects. An email exchange was fine and often sufficient, but to truly understand the needs of researchers during the pandemic, I found it much more useful and fulfilling to meet with them face-to-face in a virtual environment. I continued this approach after leaving Drew University at the end of 2020, taking the experiences with me to Princeton Theological Seminary where I later worked with reference library staff to meet with students and other patrons together on Zoom to answer questions and provide information for research.

Core Lesson: Use the successes of our pandemic response to help highlight the importance of traditional library and archives work.

There is a danger to this comprehensive and individualized approach, however. Evident in nearly all aspects of the library field, the pandemic changed how we do our jobs, and our patrons became comfortable and familiar working remotely with library resources, both materials and personnel. The in-person interactions with materials that were so ingrained in our patrons before the pandemic had been challenged by a huge increase in online and virtual access to materials. The result was a user base that was still very active, but not in the same way as before the pandemic. This change was evident in Special Collections and Archives as well as the main Library as we moved back toward

“normal” operations. Our patrons, whether students and faculty from our own institution or outside scholars from other organizations, were essentially trained not to need to come into the building anymore. We were so good at transitioning to an online virtual environment, patrons learned that they did not always need to use our physical resources.

In the past year, I learned to be careful in handling researchers whose expectations have shifted and see the ways of the pandemic—with the ease of virtual access—as the new normal. I still receive requests similar to those made in peak-pandemic times. By being such supportive, flexible, and successful professionals during the pandemic, in ironic contrast to the low expectations we tried to establish, we in fact set high expectations for levels of service and responsiveness. We need to create a balance between traditional services and the higher-level, on-demand service models of 2020. By pushing back slightly on patron requests, we can try to bring their interactions with our holdings closer to pre-pandemic realities. We can still successfully serve patrons without becoming their servants. Some of the ways in which we learned to interact with researchers remotely in the pandemic can help reset expectations in the current environment. A Zoom meeting or phone call can help mitigate an outlandish request to become one that is more reasonable and effective.

Processing and Cataloging on the Homefront

While we were all scrambling in reaction to an ever-changing landscape of work and life, the collections under our care were waiting patiently to be used. In a field that regularly has backlogs measured not in number of items but in number of years to process and catalog them, we expect processing to move at a relatively slow pace. It is not a surprise, therefore, that processing our collections was the first thing to be deprioritized when the pandemic hit. The human impact on campus was much more important: How is everyone doing? How will we reach our students and other patrons? How do we connect with colleagues? These questions were far more pressing than those related to our materials: When will we finish cataloging that donation? Who will work on rehousing that archival collection that arrived in liquor boxes?

Once we got into a good rhythm with working from home and supporting patrons remotely, we turned our attention to working

with materials. After shelving material that had been left out when we closed down, we began to assess where current projects stood to see if any work could be done by those working from home. Following the lead of our main Library colleagues, I put together a selection of books that I could catalog from home. This cataloging work happened in one of two ways. First, I brought books that were not rare, fragile, or of great financial value home, one box at a time. Second, for those books that should or could not be taken out of the building, I scanned title pages, copyright information, tables of contents, and other front matter to create catalog records remotely. This process enabled us to

Core Lesson: Even in the worst scenarios, good and productive work can be done. Adapting your work to new realities can result in opportunities that may not otherwise have been available.

continue to add books to our catalog even as access to the building was limited.

I prioritized uncataloged materials that were both easiest to catalog and of potential value to our virtual researchers. This prioritization process created an increase in copy cataloging and selecting books that would be useful for class visits. While we did not catalog a huge quantity of our backlog, we made progress and did not let the backlog linger completely

untouched for months and years.

The same approach was taken with our archival collections. While we certainly could not take archival materials home (not only due to the rarity and fragility of the items, but also due to the sheer size of some of the collections) we could work on them from a distance. Some of the projects our staff and student workers worked on remotely included:

- Editing and updating metadata for digitized photograph collections
- Reviewing existing finding aids to update and add subject headings
- Editing and updating descriptions of bound manuscripts using digitized surrogates
- Using existing inventories of archival collections to develop formal finding aids
- Researching the history of our most heavily used rare books and manuscripts (provenance, ownership marks, scarcity, etc.)
- Creating blog posts about our collection

- Updating the Library website to include more detailed descriptions of collections
- Transcribing manuscript material using digitized surrogates

These projects could all be done remotely, and almost all without the need to have any physical items from the collection on hand. In fact, many of the projects that were undertaken during the pandemic may not have been completed under normal circumstances.

The transcription project was a great example of a need meeting an opportunity. Before the pandemic most of our student workers who were interested in transcribing manuscripts were working on other projects or were focused on particular collections that did not need transcription. With the shift to fully remote work, we were able to give students an opportunity to work with materials that were otherwise not transcribed. I scanned letters, diaries, other primary documents, and sent the images as PDFs to students to transcribe. If students encountered difficult words or passages, they would note them in the transcript and I would check the original document when I next went into the Archives.

The projects we worked on during the first six months of the pandemic helped us to describe and make accessible our materials and, therefore, better serve our patrons. They also provided our students with a way to continue working and make money in a time when there was endless uncertainty about the financial impact of the pandemic. By developing a robust series of projects and aligning them with the interests and skill sets of our student workers, we were able to keep 70 percent of our student workers employed during the rest of the semester and into the summer. The result was an eager and engaged group of student workers who were given the opportunity to continue learning on the job, had a creative outlet, and felt like they had a purpose outside of schoolwork. One student noted:

I'm incredibly fortunate in that I've been working for the Archives remotely. The transition to virtual schooling has not been an easy one, but having the luxury of consistent and reliable work has been comforting. In addition, Brian and Candace have gone out of their way to keep tabs on all of us by holding regular Zoom meetings for everybody to check in and catch up. I know I probably sound like a broken record when I say this, but I truly am so grateful to have had such a wonderful experience as a student employee. (Zoe Bowser, "Working

in the Archives” from the Drew University Special Collections Blog, April 1, 2020.)

The Department’s student workers did an incredible job of adapting to the new world of remote work, and their offsite assistance was essential as we dealt with researcher requests and the demands of our ongoing work.

The full-time staff were likewise adaptable to working remotely, even though it was quite difficult at times to figure out how to work so far away from our materials. University Archivist Matthew Beland developed a LibGuide for our digitized resources, including digital copies of the Drew *Acorn*, the long-standing student newspaper at the University. By highlighting and working with digital surrogates of our holdings, he was still able to provide access to Drew University’s history.

My Special Collections colleague, Candace Reilly, and I navigated a particularly strange processing problem. On March 6, about a week before the campus shutdown, we attended the 60th Annual New York Antiquarian Book Fair. The fair was a strange affair, with people hesitant to get too close or shake hands because of the rising number of COVID-19 cases. While there, we purchased some items for Drew’s collection. We took some of those items back with us, while others were due to be mailed to our offices at Drew over the coming weeks. With the closure of campus, including some of our mail services, it was unclear how and when the materials would be delivered.

This was a concern not only for us at Drew but for many other librarians, archivists, and curators around the world. What were we to do with items already ordered or being donated that were on their way? One colleague at another institution had some rare books delivered to her house since the institution’s mailroom was closed. Holding onto rare materials in your own home is not ideal and leads to all sorts of questions about what happens if the items are stolen, damaged, or lost. I intercepted a few donors before they sent material and asked them to hold their donations until we returned to campus. However, the books we bought at the book fair were already on their way. The only thing we could do was wait and see. Part of my access to campus was the ability to visit the mailroom on my chosen on-campus days. I dutifully went every time I was on campus in the hopes that the material we purchased had arrived. It took many weeks of fretting and uncertainty before all the items finally made their way to campus.

The final material concern we addressed related to our physical exhibitions. About a month before the campus closure, we installed a new exhibit on the history of travel in the Archives exhibit space. There were a dozen cases of material that, as of mid-March 2020, no one would come to see. Instead of deinstalling the exhibit, I created a video tour of the exhibition that was posted on social media. Even though people could not come into the building to see the display, we could still share it with the public. After the videos were uploaded, I deinstalled the exhibit and put the material away. The videos were well-received and prompted us to use our social media platforms to post more videos, including behind-the-scenes tours of the Archives building. In this way we shared our materials with the public and highlighted parts of our collections without having to open the doors.

Administration from a Distance

Thus far I have focused mainly on the work being done, not on the people *doing* the work. The activities discussed above were completed while our staff dealt with personal difficulties, struggles, concerns, and confusion. No matter how flexible we were or how successful our efforts, we were ultimately improvising throughout, often making processes and workflows up as we went. I am extremely proud of the work the Department completed during the initial wave of the pandemic and the sustained work that we continued to produce over the months that followed.

A key part of this successful, sustained work was our internal communications during the first few weeks and months of the pandemic. We met regularly via Zoom to check in with each other on our work and home lives. These regular check-ins provided me, as a manager, with an opportunity to see how everyone was coping and provided a space and place for everyone to share concerns, vent frustrations, celebrate our successes, and plan for future projects. These meetings also allowed me to share administrative updates which I learned from my own regular meetings with other Department Heads and the University Librarian. Prior to the pandemic, these meetings were more intermittent and often felt rote. During the pandemic, I realized how important the regular check-in and touch points were for myself and everyone else in the Department. Rather than a perfunctory exchange of information, these meetings served to help lift one another up and support the work we did. In the world

of work-from-home and isolated days in an empty building, having a way to meet, share, and chat with colleagues was needed more than ever before. Our personal connections were strengthened and professional ties reinforced.

As mentioned above, we hosted similar check-ins with our student workers. Students found comfort in these meetings and used them to share frustrations as well as their personal struggles and triumphs, and to take a break from the relentless bad news of our pandemic world. For the full-time staff, the meetings were a chance to see how our students were coping and learn how the virtual learning environment was working (or not working) from the student perspective. Students from all levels worked in the Archives, from first-year undergraduates to PhD students, and everyone in between. The result was an interesting mix of lived experiences and personal reactions to the pandemic and its impact.

Core Lesson: Regular meetings and check-ins are more than just a management tool; they can seriously impact how people work with one another and on their own.

As the spring semester ended and we looked towards summer and fall, these meetings took on a slightly different tone with students expressing sadness. Some students were graduating and had missed out on the opportunity to fully experience their senior year of college. Our student workers expressed uncertainty about what would happen after the summer. For those returning to school, would they be back on campus and working in the Archives, or would we still be in this virtual environment? As May 2020 came to a close, these questions remained unanswerable.

For the staff, we worked mainly within the virtual environment throughout the summer. Restrictions eased to accommodate an increase in the number of staff who could work a modified virtual schedule and come to campus on occasion to work onsite. On certain days, I was no longer the only person in the building. Things were slowly coming back to normal, though we knew it would be a long time before we could fully return to a pre-pandemic working environment. By mid-June 2020, we began to plan for what reopening the campus might look like. With the fall 2020 semester approaching, the Library and Archives began to prepare for a return to partial in-person work. The University decided upon a hybrid semester with some classes meeting in person, some online, and some in a hybrid mode.

In August 2020, after six months of being stuck in our homes or in empty buildings on campus, we started to return to a version of our jobs which seemed more familiar. They were not exactly what we left behind in March 2020, but they were far more recognizable than what we experienced in the earliest days of the pandemic. Things did not go back to “normal” or even close to it in the fall 2020 semester, but we felt as if we were climbing out of the darkest depths of the pandemic and back into the light. We took what we had learned from the prior months and applied it to this new, hybrid environment. We met regularly and checked in with one another to make sure things were moving in the right direction, but now had an occasional opportunity to meet in person instead of exclusively on Zoom. Perhaps most satisfyingly, we had the chance to work directly and regularly with our materials again. That, more than anything, was the most healing aspect of our return to on-campus work. For each of us in the Department, being able to physically touch and work with the material regularly was a joy.

A New Job in an Uncertain Time

This chapter closes with a final transition: this time, a personal one. In December of 2020, I left Drew University for a new job. It was a difficult decision and a difficult time to leave, but the opportunity to work at Princeton Theological Seminary was one that I could not refuse. While I felt sad about leaving my colleagues, friends, and students at Drew, I knew this was a chance to grow professionally and take a step forward in my career.

Changing jobs during the pandemic was not easy. By December, I felt we were in a great rhythm at Drew. We had done extraordinary work and made incredible strides, especially considering the size of our Department and the amount of work we accomplished.³ Leaving the place where I had worked for so long and where I exerted so much energy to lead us in the right direction, in spite of a pandemic, was difficult. Going to a new Library and leading a Department facing its own problems and in need of a new direction was even more of a challenge.⁴

When I started as the Head of Special Collections & Archives at Princeton, it was evident that this position was very different from my previous one at Drew. I was the only staff member in the Department when I was hired, the previous staff having left or

retired back in 2019. Throughout 2020, including the pandemic months, the Department was essentially shuttered and not in operation. What I walked into was a combination of stasis and a clean slate which was both scary and exciting. I had to learn an entire collection without anyone to guide me through the materials. In many ways, the pandemic helped me to acclimate to the position much more quickly and effectively than if I had joined an open and fully operational Department. From January 2021 until June 2021, about six months, I worked by myself in the Department, going into the office a few days a week and working from home the other days. During my on-site days, I took the time to explore the collection and learn its layout. I oriented myself to its organizational schema, explored its facets and foibles, and absorbed and embraced this unknown collection.

Changing jobs during the pandemic might not seem like a good decision or a low-stress situation, but in many ways it was both. I had the freedom of uninterrupted time to learn as much about the collection in six months as I could. By the time the Seminary emerged from its closed campus status, I felt like I had been there for years instead of months. I then hired a small group of student workers who helped dig through backlogs of rare books, archival collections, and artifacts, and we started to reorganize the collection, making it accessible. The Seminary reopened to the campus community in June 2021, and to the public at the end of August. With the return to in-person services, my time of appraisal and slowly learning the collection ended. In its place, however, was as close a return to pre-pandemic work as I had witnessed in nearly 18 months. Even though I was in a new job at a different institution, it started to feel like my old job again. The pandemic brought about a countless number of changes and interruptions, but there were days in the fall of 2021 that felt as if the world was mending.

Core Lesson: Take advantage of opportunities for internal assessment and reflection on the work you do. We are not often given moments to slow down and evaluate what is around us.

Conclusion

The threat from COVID-19 is not over. Even now, there are hundreds of deaths and thousands of people stricken every day around the world. We have reached a point where we have learned to live with the virus in its endemic status. As this shift occurred, thanks largely to vaccines and boosters, the world of libraries and archives has almost returned to pre-pandemic work. Some of us still work from home a few days a week, but we meet in person more often than not. Class sessions and researcher visits in the Archives at Princeton Theological Seminary happen regularly and in person. We have full access to all our materials again, without the need to scan everything on demand. While special collections and archival work is looking familiar and becoming “normal” in many ways, the legacy of the pandemic and our experiences in dealing with it remain.

Valuable and important lessons were learned from our responses to the pandemic. For rare book librarians, archivists, and other special collections professionals, much was gained from our experiences that began in March 2020. The pandemic exposed some of the most glaring weaknesses of archival and special collections work and the institutional structures (or lack thereof) that support this work. Archivists and special collections librarians were not well-prepared to quickly move into an entirely online format. Patrons and staff were too reliant on, and tied to, the physical materials that made a fast pivot to virtual work and services challenging and frustrating. Many of these problems existed prior to the pandemic, but archivists and special collections librarians did not see the problems because of the traditional approaches we embraced. These problems were quickly illuminated when the standard way we worked was threatened.

What is clear, however, is that the collective response to the pandemic showed that we can be more nimble, flexible, and adaptable than we first thought. For special collections and archives professionals, this response necessitated a clear need to move quickly, adapt as needed, and prepare for an unfamiliar future. Our institutions are notoriously slow to change; the pandemic forced us to be nimble in our response to change. In many cases, the efforts made to address pandemic-related issues proved beneficial beyond the worst parts of the crisis. From new realities of research to the development of new pedagogical tools to virtual methods of archival interaction, we created a different future for the work we do as rare book librarians,

archivists, and special collections professionals. The core lessons I highlighted throughout this chapter speak to areas of professional growth for special collections and archives departments. It is not a comprehensive list of lessons learned throughout the field, and they may seem obvious to some. For me, however, it has been helpful over the past three years to keep these lessons in mind, not only to shape the way I work and lead in the context of the pandemic, but to shape how I want to work and lead moving into the future.

Notes

- 1 The work I discuss in this chapter was, of course, not done by myself alone. The lessons learned and failures experienced may be mine, but the work of dealing with the pandemic was a collective effort. At Drew University I was fortunate to work with an amazing team of hard-working and dedicated professionals. Of note are the other members of the Special Collections & University Archives department: Matthew Beland (University Archivist), Masato Okinaka (Library Conservator), and Candace Reilly (Methodist Library and Special Collections Assistant). My great thanks to all of them for helping us to survive and thrive throughout the toughest parts of the pandemic.
- 2 For coverage of how the class used Special Collections material to create the memes, see “Drew Class Meme-ifies the Coronavirus” on Drew University’s website: <https://drew.edu/stories/2020/03/27/drew-class-meme-ifies-the-coronavirus/>
- 3 Our tiny, but mighty Department of four people became only three after the retirement of our Conservator in May 2020. The position was not replaced, leaving us with only three full-time staff in Special Collections & University Archives for the summer months and into the fall. This fact made my departure at the end of 2020 even more difficult—with the remaining staff members having to carry the weight of the Department on their own for months before my replacement was hired.
- 4 My colleagues at Princeton Theological Seminary have written an excellent chapter in this book about the ways in which they handled the pandemic and the many changes that it wrought.