

Revisioning Archival Discovery: User-Centered Collaboration

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Abstract

For several years, public services staff from across Harvard Library's 20+ special collections charged with advising on the maintenance and development of the institution's archival discovery interface have advocated for a platform that better meets user and staff needs. The current system, a customized version of the ArchivesSpace public user interface, has proven confusing, with a difficult to understand search algorithm; complicated, tabbed navigational structure; and numerous dead-end links to collection components, reducing user confidence in their findings.

In late-2021, two public services-focused archivist-librarians developed and spearheaded a cross-functional project including staff from technology services, technical services, and public services, to assess ArcLight as an alternative interface. The project, completed in fall 2022, was comprised of four workstreams: the development of functional requirements for an optimal discovery system, user testing of wireframes for an ideal interface, review of peer institution use of ArcLight, and testing of the system with Harvard Library data in a sandbox environment.

Project co-leads intentionally included a broad project team – as well as peers outside the walls of our own institution - as a means of strengthening existing partnerships and developing new relationships. The collaborative, iterative nature of the user testing and cross-library feedback that informed our final recommendations will be shared as a model for developing user-centered systems that build on the expertise of staff serving in a variety of roles at multiple institutions. Without an existing “plug and play” UI that supports both collections and users, our profession must think more broadly, flexibly, and creatively about how to improve visibility, discoverability, and access to archival materials, pushing these cross-functional partnerships forward and ensuring that all voices are included.

About the authors:

Jennifer Fauxsmith, Research Librarian at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute, holds a BFA, Photography from Rochester Institute of Technology and MLIS (archives concentration) from Simmons College. Throughout her work at academic, public, and private repositories and local historical societies, she has been dedicated to improving user access and experience through the full discovery process – from interacting with systems to exploring materials in the reading room.

Heather Oswald is the Manager of Public Services at Harvard Business School's Baker Library Special Collections and Archives. Over the course of her career, Heather has focused on access and outreach at private, research institutions; large, public universities; and historic sites. She is committed to improving the ways in which systems, services, policies, and staff work together to make collections available.

In addition to their repository-specific responsibilities, both Jennifer and Heather have collaborated with colleagues across Harvard Library to test, develop, and implement the institution's archival discovery and access systems.