

Bridging Capacity and Care: Fieldwork in UK and US Special Collections and Archives

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Abstract:

This presentation offers findings from "Bridging Capacity and Care," a multi-sited qualitative field study that engaged over 280 library professionals and 23 unique special collections and archives repositories in the United States and United Kingdom from July-December 2024. Through site visits, with a highly diversified research cohort ranging in size and specialization, utilizing focus groups, interviews, and work-shadowing, this study investigated how archival and special collections staff are navigating the tensions between capacity limitations and the deep care they invest in their multifaceted work. The study employed a mixed-methods design, centering qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, workflow observations, and institutional artifact collection. The findings illustrate the lived realities of practitioners navigating persistent strains around staffing, space, digital preservation readiness, and contentious metadata practices, often magnified by structural reorganizations that have redistributed specialized labor, particularly across generalized technical and digital collections services units. Despite such operational pressures, however, staff expressed a commitment to ethical and inclusive practices and a hunger for community-oriented, scalable, and sustainable models of care. By documenting and interpreting these patterns, this study shares a nuanced view of the evolving ethos of stewardship. It reflects on the intellectual and emotional labor that defines contemporary archival work and invites discussion about how the profession might recalibrate its priorities in ways that acknowledge both infrastructural deficits and deep capacity for care.

About the author:

Emilie Hardman is Lead Researcher for Archives and Special Collections within JSTOR Digital Stewardship Services and Senior Curator at ITHAKA. Previously, Hardman served as Head of Archives and Digital Strategy at the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona; Head of Distinctive Collections at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); and Head of Teaching, Learning, and Digital Initiatives at Harvard University's Houghton Library. An academic background in sociology, with a concentration in qualitative methods and cultural sociology, informs an ongoing commitment to building a deep understanding of the practices of primary sources stewardship. Emilie is based in Providence, Rhode Island and Tucson, Arizona.