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Bridging Capacity and Care

A Field Report on Archives and Special Collections

Prepared for the JSTOR Digital Stewardship Services program by
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The Field Report

- Listening, learning, identifying patterns and sharing back

- Find full report here:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep70507

By the numbers

6 months

arranging and executing 1-2 day visits for each site from July - December 2024.

23 sites

in the sample, including academic special libraries and archives in the US & UK.

282 people

engaged with, including staff, administration, and student workers.

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Descriptive Debt & Digital Tensions

"MPLP 'gets things out the door,' but it feels like we're just kicking the can down the road."

There is broad agreement that a lack of sufficient metadata creates the biggest bottleneck for digital collections. While More Product, Less Process (MPLP) helped reduce nominal backlog numbers, minimal description has made digital collections in particular far more complex to plan and execute.

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Devaluation of Descriptive Labor

Leadership has tended to value high-visibility outcomes like digitization projects and have seen less value in behind the scenes activities like processing. The wide adoption of MPLP, with its insubstantial metadata, and reliance on student labor for processing work may have also furthered the perception that processing is a less important activity.

"There's a tendency to say 'put a student on it,' but that doesn't mean the work isn't professional work."

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Process Fragmentation

"[We] used to do the whole thing. Now metadata is someone else, digitization is someone else, and we're not always looped in."

Digitization and other key workflows typically move items across multiple teams (e.g. archivists, digitization labs, metadata units, digital initiatives). Each group may use different systems and procedures, making continuity a challenge and raising questions of ownership and accountability.

Role Generalization as Co-Existing Condition

While process fragmentation may seem contradictory to this theme, it isn't. Staff in archives are *also* stretching to fill gaps left by staff turnover, shrinking teams, and under-resourced infrastructure that they hold together.

"We've become generalists out of necessity — juggling technical work, public service, and preservation all at once."

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Infrastructure Interoperability Issues

"Every system is great at one thing, terrible at everything else, and none of them talk to each other…"

All repositories experienced at least one significant issue with the interoperability of their digital collections tools. Institutions rely on multiple platforms, tools, and services throughout their workflows and most don't have clean through-lines.

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Teaching and Learning as Core Commitment

Demand for teaching with special collections has surged across all sites in the past five years, but 35% still lack any dedicated instructional space, a mismatch that strains both staff and physical resources.

"Instruction is the most legible thing we do."

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Stewardship Today: Patterns Across the Field

Archival stewardship is being redefined through the intersecting demands of descriptive debt, digital imperatives, redistributed labor, and growing emphasis on visible, ethical engagement.

Thank you

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