

Securing Archival Collections During a Pandemic

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Abstract: In early March of 2020, the Miami University Library prepared for the possibility of an extended shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our disaster response team was charged with developing a library policy governing our procedures during an extended shutdown. The goal was to mitigate the additional risks to the library collection caused by reduced monitoring while staff were largely absent. The new procedure would apply to both general and special collections as well as the archives, spanning one dedicated building as well as four additional facilities. We implemented a three-pronged approach to shutdown preparedness.

Introduction

The Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Preservation and University Archives is located within the Miami University Library in Oxford, Ohio. The department collections include rare books, manuscripts, and three archives: the Miami University Archives, the Western College Memorial Archives, and the Oxford College Archives. These collections are housed in three locations across two different buildings on the Miami University campus. In addition to the special collections and archives locations, the libraries include one main building and three branch locations as of March of 2020 (one of these branch locations has since closed). While all library spaces on campus are climate controlled, aging buildings and mechanicals have contributed to prior issues with temperature, humidity, and water events.

Problem Statement

In March of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, library staff realized that we would likely be working remotely for the near future. Facing the prospect of an extended shutdown, I expected an increased risk to the collection of adverse events such as leaks, pests, or HVAC failures. Without staff in the building following their usual routines, these problems might go unnoticed and cause unusually extensive damage. At Miami University, the archives, special collections, and general library collections all share several buildings. Additionally, the Preservation Librarian is responsible for the care of both special and circulating collections. This overlap encourages us to think holistically when addressing disaster and emergency planning.

Method

Ultimately, we implemented a three-pronged approach to securing our collections during the extended facilities closure: we wrote new policies and procedures, prepared the facilities in advance, and conducted regular walkthroughs to monitor the space.

Written Policies and Procedures

The Miami University Libraries had an existing Response Team responsible for developing policies and procedures for continuous operation of services. The team consists of the Facilities and Planning

Coordinator, the Preservation Librarian, and the heads of every library department. Because the libraries had no existing policies addressing a pandemic or an extended shutdown, the first step was to develop written guidance for this new circumstance. The goal was to keep staff members safe while mitigating the additional risks to the library collections. The new procedure would apply to both general and special collections as well as the archives, spanning one dedicated building as well as four additional facilities. We prioritized speed and clarity over formality, given the uncertainty and rapid change we faced.

Within a short period of time, we developed an Outbreak Policy, Extended Shutdown Procedure, and Walkthrough Checklist for conducting regular checks on closed facilities. These documents were collected in a shared Google drive for ease of access. In addition, we updated our Immediate Action Guide binders, located at every service point and in every department. Our goal was to ensure up-to-date contact information and guidance was readily available in the event that someone conducting a walkthrough encountered an emergent situation. The library communications team was included throughout this process, which allowed them to quickly relay information to staff and patrons as needed.

Advance Preparation

Once we had agreed on guidelines and updated our documentation, we began taking proactive steps to prepare the space before being asked to close the buildings. We assembled a team of volunteers and trained them to conduct walkthroughs as backup in case the Preservation Librarian or Facilities Coordinator became unavailable. This training included instructions for continuing our environmental monitoring program by logging data manually during walkthroughs. In the archives, we cleared the floor of boxes or other archival material to prevent water wicking from the carpet in case of a water event. In several locations, we preemptively covered the stacks with plastic sheeting in areas that had previously been impacted by recurring water leaks. Library staff were asked to remove any food stored in their offices and begin pulling their office trash to communal bins each evening.

Regular Walkthroughs and Adjusting the Plan

When the facilities shutdown was announced, our team began implementing the regular walkthrough procedure on the first day that the buildings were closed to general staff. The initial days after staff were asked to work from home revealed a few surprises and the potential for improvements to our plan. In some cases, backup walkthrough team members needed to have their building access restored after general staff had their access temporarily revoked. There was also still trash remaining throughout the buildings. Since custodial staff were no longer coming to campus, our team pulled the remaining trash to exterior dumpsters in order to remove all remaining food waste. Many patrons returned books via the book drops in the initial days of the shutdown, requiring the team to empty the book drops frequently.

During the first walkthroughs of the empty library spaces, the team took extra time to photograph problem areas and upload those photos to the shared Google Drive. This photographic documentation allowed us to track condition changes over the course of the spring and summer. We paid particular attention to the exterior walls and any known problem areas. Over the first few weeks, we worked with library leadership to identify a walkthrough frequency that all parties found comfortable. Our initial plan to be on campus three times a week was eventually scaled back to once a week to reduce our exposure and increase the time between visits (and potential contamination).

Conclusion

Our shutdown response consisted of a three-pronged approach: written documents, advance preparation, and ongoing walkthroughs with documentation. As a result, our response team caught several leaks during the shutdown before they caused any extensive damage. We found that the three elements of our approach supported each other and worked together to create a robust solution for securing our collections during an extended facilities closure. However, some aspects, such as facility access during a shutdown, relied on administrative approval and may not be available for all institutions. Where the three-pronged approach is not feasible, implementing fewer of these measures may be more achievable. For example, if walkthroughs during a shutdown are not approved, preparing the space while the facility is open will still mitigate risk to the collection.