

It Takes a Village: An Interdisciplinary Collaboration to Explore Sustainable Preventive Conservation Strategies for Special Collections and Archives

SARAH KEEN

Abstract: In 2016, Colgate University's Special Collections and University Archives department received a grant through the National Endowment for the Humanities' Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections program to explore sustainable preventive conservation strategies for its holdings. The project's goal was to assess and improve environmental controls, storage systems, lighting, and security to allow the department to steward its collections in an environmentally and fiscally sustainable manner. This interdisciplinary endeavor brought together experts from these fields and utilized the local knowledge and expertise already present at the university. The department previously had captured temperature and humidity data from its storage environments. During the grant project, the department installed more dataloggers to monitor the possibilities of microclimates, and the project director worked with consultants from the Image Permanence Institute to gather and analyze a year's worth of environmental data. The project methodology sought to assess this data with an approach based on recent research conducted by the IPI that monitoring and managing long-term trends is more important than tightly controlling temperature and humidity settings. Fortunately (or not), Mother Nature provided an overly rainy summer, allowing the project to capture data on extreme humidity and to test the institution's ability to effectively respond to such a situation and develop long-term solutions. In addition to gaining valuable insight into practices that could better preserve the department's collections, the project illustrated the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to sustainable stewardship of collections and the difficulty of conducting investigations during times of institutional change.

About the Author:

Sarah Keen serves as the University Archivist and Head of Special Collections & University Archives at Colgate University and is an Associate Professor in the Libraries. Previously she worked at the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell University and at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. Sarah is an alumna of the 2015 Archives Leadership Institute and is a member of ARMA, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, and the Society of American Archivists. She earned her B.A. from Alma College and her M.S.I. with a specialization in archives and records management from the University of Michigan's School of Information.