Securing Archival Collections During a Pandemic

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Introduction

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.
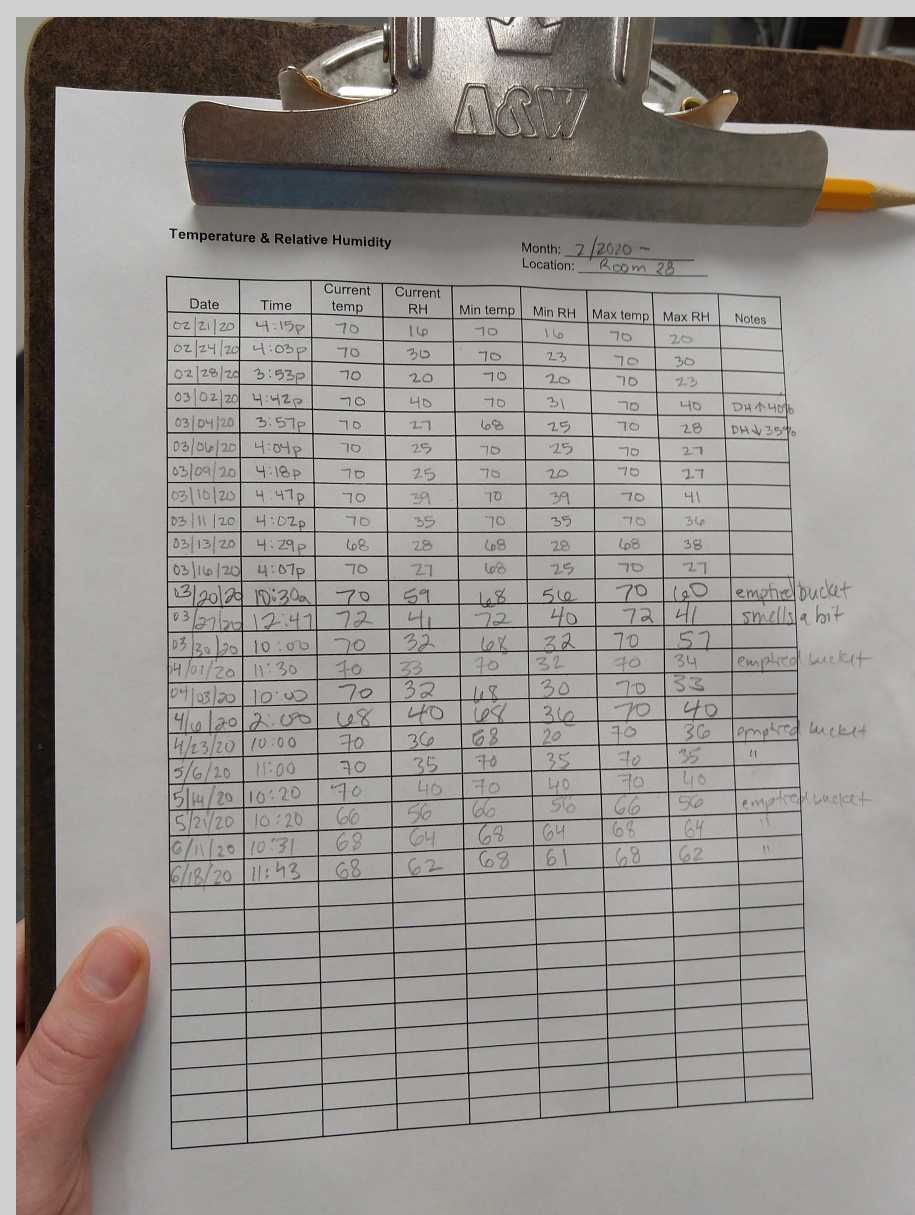
Goals of Shutdown Response

Avoid Damage from Undetected Leaks

An unexpected water disaster could happen anywhere. Our buildings have known issues with plumbing and leaks. If a water disaster had gone undetected for weeks or months, the delay would have compounded the damage.

Recycling bin positioned under an active leak.

Paper log of temperature and relative humidity data.

Continue Environmental Monitoring

We have several different environmental monitoring procedures in place, some of which are manual. Continuing these measures both allowed for uninterrupted data collection as well as ensured we noticed any abnormalities in a timely manner.

Avoid Surprises

Pests may take advantage of quiet buildings and any forgotten food or trash. Patrons might miss the book drop and leave materials outside. Having access to the buildings can allow trained staff to spot risks before they become problems.

Pile of books left outside a locked entrance to the library.

Conclusion

Our collections-focused shutdown response consisted of a three-pronged approach: written documents, facility preparation, and ongoing walkthroughs with documentation. These three elements support each other; 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 one or two of these elements may be more achievable while still mitigating physical risk to the collection.

Planning and Policy Writing

Look for precedents
- Relevant sections in existing university policy
- Outside examples:
  - Ex., National Park Service walkthrough procedures for before/after government shutdown

Meet with stakeholders
- Disaster response team, including Preservation and Facilities
- Department heads
- Communications team

Outcome of this phase:
- Developed two documents: Outbreak Policy and Extended Shutdown Procedure
- Update general emergency preparedness binders
- Assembled a team with backups to assume duties in case of illness or quarantine

Disaster Response Handbook.

Preparing the Facilities

Covering stacks with plastic in area of prior leaks.

Preparations we completed before closing the facilities:

- Photograph the space in detail.
- Remove all materials from the floor if possible.
- Read data loggers.
- Secure special collections material.
- Remove all food, clean out all fridges. Contact dining and vending where appropriate.
- Unplug anything that can be unplugged.
- For any areas of known or suspected water issues: either move materials or cover with plastic.
- Pull all trash and put it in the outside dumpster.
- Photograph any areas suspected of likely water issues.
- Empty all book drops.
- Do a walkthrough using the walkthrough checklist.

Ongoing Walkthroughs

- Walk the exterior walls of the space, paying attention to windows.
- Watch the ceiling tiles for new discoloration or signs of water.
- Check the stacks.
- In general, look for any signs of changes or risk.
- Take photographs of issues or potential issues. Photos can:
  - Reveal changes that might otherwise be missed.
  - Help collaborators clearly communicate concerns.
  - Be attached to incident reports or maintenance requests.
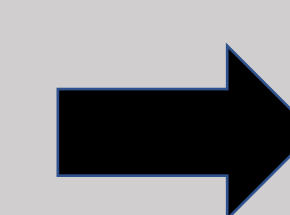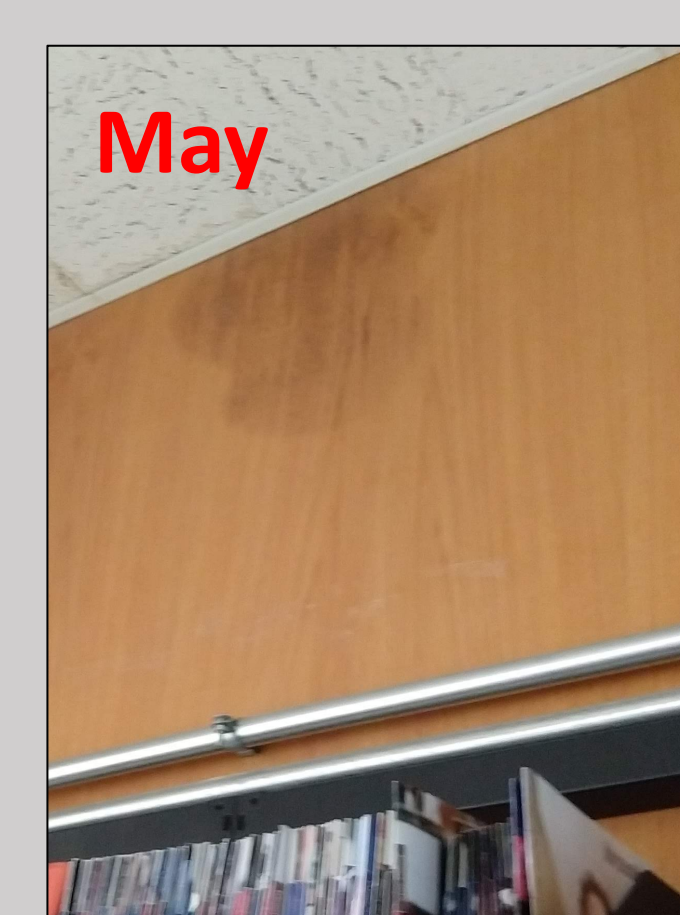

Walkthrough log in shared Google Drive.

Images documenting change in water staining, demonstrating an active leak.

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