

# Other Duties as Assigned: the evolving responsibilities of preservation administrators

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As you heard in Jennifer's introduction, I am a preservation librarian. Most of us would also call ourselves preservation administrators. For purposes of this talk, the terms are essentially interchangeable.

Before I talk about how the responsibilities of preservation administrators are evolving, I want to establish what we are evolving from.

## Traditional "Preservation Librarian"

### ALWAYS INCLUDES...

- General collections care
  - Repair
  - Shelf preparation
  - Commercial binding
- Environmental monitoring
- Disaster response
- Staff and patron training
- Grants

### SOMETIMES INCLUDES...

- *Special collections care*
- *Management of conservation lab*
- *Reformatting (e.g. microfilm)*

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What you see on the left is a list of the responsibilities that are almost always included in a preservation librarian position. These have remained constant since the field first started booming 30 years ago. Depending on the institution, preservation administrators may have more or less responsibility for the preservation of special collections material and the other items I have listed in italics on the right.

With the advent of digital collections, preservation administrator positions have evolved to include the digital frontier. I reviewed job postings from the past 3 years to get a feel for how things are changing, and this is what I found...



## Preservation Librarian

### ALWAYS INCLUDES...

- General collections care
  - Repair
  - Shelf preparation
  - Commercial binding
- Environmental monitoring
- Disaster response
- Staff and patron training
- Grants
- **Advises on digital preservation**
- **Works with IT staff**

### SOMETIMES INCLUDES...

- *Special collections care*
- *Management of conservation lab*
- *Reformatting*
- ***Develop and coordinate a library-wide digital preservation program***

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The new and improved preservation librarian position includes the same things as the “traditional” position, and most—but not all—include “digital.” Often the only difference is the addition of a sentence or a bullet point that says the preservation administrator will serve as an advisor or consultant on digital preservation, or that ze will collaborate with technology, metadata, or digital library staff (*Ohio, Yale, Penn*). Sometimes, instead of just one bullet point, the newer positions will include the “whole enchilada,” as you see on the right: develop and coordinate a digital preservation program for the entire library (*UIUC and Countway/Harvard*).

I’ve drawn this data from recently posted positions, but there are plenty of preservation administrators who have stayed in place as their positions evolved around them. To capture what is changing on the ground, I requested feedback from members of the Preservation Administration Discussion Group, which is an email list within the American Library Association. This is a “homebase” for people with my type of job. I received plenty of candid feedback from my colleagues, and I’ve grouped their feedback into categories.

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I found two ***Digital Preservation Librarian*** positions.

- *These covered the big picture of digital preservation*
- *Reported to Head of Preservation (U Mich & Iowa)*

## Evolution in Book & Paper

- Changes in funding
- New initiatives
- Expanded focus
- Additional strategies for advocacy
- Diffusion of preservation



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Not surprisingly, preservation librarians are seeing an evolution in the traditional book and paper workflows. First – funding. Libraries are increasing spending on electronic resources and decreasing spending on print, and they are aligning staff and budget resources with this change. This results in declining budgets for print-related workflows, including those in preservation. ... A corollary to decreased funding is the increased emphasis on grants and donor cultivation, and in some cases a move to cost-recovery operations. Because of these changes, preservation librarians are finding it advantageous to strengthen their skills in marketing and business planning.

New initiatives such as shelf ready books from vendors have also reduced volume and staff in print workflows. ... High density storage is another initiative that has become more widespread. This is one that affects delivery models and prompts new considerations for disaster recovery. ... Enhanced exhibits programs—both “live” and online—require greater involvement by preservation staff.

Digitization projects have prompted an expanded focus on collection-level preservation rather than the traditional item-level focus. Digital projects have also generated a greater flexibility and blending between special and general collections. ... The involvement of preservation departments in digital workflows has gotten us thinking more about access since not all digitization is for preservation purposes. This has required a shift of focus and a broader understanding of the library’s goals.

How we advocate for print preservation has evolved as well. For example, sometimes we see an increase in the requests for tangible materials after the library makes images of them available online. Our institutions may be surprised that in some cases, digitization has not solved the access problem but instead increases our need to maintain the print item. ... Refreshed advocacy may be required due to our libraries’ participation in consortial agreements for shared print archiving, which influences our treatment and retention decisions.

My colleagues also note a diffusion of preservation across library departments. Catalogers are thinking about preservation metadata, IT people are thinking about the persistence of digital files, and scanning operators are asking about care and handling for the objects they scan. Instead of a one-stop-shop, a preservation administrator may find himself more of a team leader— of a dispersed and non-homogeneous team. Or maybe that is a ring leader, or pied piper for preservation.

## Expanded Knowledge Base



- Metadata standards & creation
- Copyright
- Audio/Visual reformatting and preservation
- Institutional repositories
- Digital preservation & lifecycle management
- Advocacy and training

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This leads me to something that everyone commented on: the expanded knowledge base implied by the earlier job descriptions. There are all sorts of things that current preservation administrators are learning *in place*—metadata being one of the top mentions. A few of the “new things” are enhancements of areas we have always worked in but that are made more complicated by the advent of digital technologies and online access—areas such as copyright and the preservation of audio-visual materials. Others are just plain new, like understanding repository architecture and trustworthiness or even managing the institutional repository itself. Likewise, lifecycle management, curation, and digital preservation are becoming part of the preservation administrator’s vocabulary.

If advocacy and training were not a preservation librarian’s strength before, then ze will need to improve in this area. Everyone knows *something* about digital topics, but the conventional wisdom of consumer electronics and technology does not necessarily apply to the preservation goals of a cultural heritage institution. Communicating clearly and convincingly about preservation topics as they relate to the institution’s mission is crucial.

## Intersections with IT

- Collaborate & work together
- Absorb workflows
- Delegate & supervise appropriately



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Which brings me to my final slide: Intersections with IT. In many cases my colleagues find they are working closely with developers, digital library people, and metadata staff with whom they did not interface in the past. In some cases preservation departments actually absorb technology-intensive workflows like thesis reformatting, scanning, or electronic reserves. Understanding the different IT skill sets—for example, knowing the difference between desktop support and server maintenance—is particularly important when the preservation librarian is responsible for supervising IT staff. To delegate appropriately and manage successfully, a preservation administrator must “speak the language” of IT staff and have a strong understanding of IT workflows. The information flows both ways, as the preservation administrator should take care to inculcate IT staff with a grounding in library preservation.

# Thank you

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In conclusion, the responsibilities of preservation administrators are evolving as we speak. This is reflected in changes in job postings and in anecdotal evidence from practitioners. Traditional book and paper workflows are changing as libraries direct more resources to digital collections, and preservation staff find themselves intersecting with IT staff much more often. A significant amount of technology-specific expertise is now expected from preservation librarians. What I hear from my preservation colleagues is that most of them are truly enjoying this opportunity to expand their knowledge base and to be on the leading edge of their library's services.