

A ConnectNY White Paper



ConnectNY

Archives and Special Collections in ConnectNY: The Current Landscape and Suggestions for the Future

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Abstract

This working group's efforts align with the Strategic Statement "ConnectNY enhances and expands access to all types of collections: print, digital, and special", the goal "Develop a thorough understanding of the breadth, depth, and scope of the collections across CNY and employ strategies to increase access to these collections" and the objective "Produce a white paper identifying strategies for sharing and marketing special collections and archives across CNY via physical loan, digitization, and digital repository". A survey was constructed to gather information about special collections across ConnectNY libraries. Drawing upon the survey, this paper will describe the current state of member institutions' special collections and provide some suggestions for future initiatives and strategies. Further involvement in the Empire Archival Discovery Cooperative (EADC), integrated support similar to the e-book project, and, further ConnectNY working groups for Digitization/Sharing Projects and Rights Management are recommended.

It is a truism that academic library budgets have been shrinking for years, if not decades, and costs are under ever-increasing scrutiny. Librarians are being asked to document the Return on Investment (ROI) of their collections and operations. Archives and special collections are not exempt from these considerations.

In 2015, OCLC produced a research report titled “Making Archival and Special Collections More Accessible.” The report surveyed 275 academic and research libraries in the US and Canada, and offered insights into the state of special collections nationwide, as well as suggestions for tools and methods that might make description, cataloging, and increasing accessibility easier. Among its key findings:

- Half of archival collections have no online presence;
- While many backlogs [in processing archival and special collections] have decreased, almost as many continue to grow;
- User demand for digitized collections remains insatiable (p. 6).

The report also offers persuasive arguments for why we should care about these issues. In the current financial climate, collections that are not accessible or discoverable are in real danger of being deemed irrelevant and defunded as a result. Speaking of the cost/benefit ratio of archives and special collections, James Michalko of OCLC observes, “You can affect the denominator by reducing the ongoing investment necessary to steward these materials, or you can change the numerator by increasing the utility of the materials for teaching and research both locally and globally (Making Archival and Special Collections More Accessible, p. 3).”

Library consortia, because of their purchasing power and other economies of scale, seem a natural place to turn in confronting some of the challenges increasing access to and discovery of special collections. However, while there have been several studies of the feasibility of consortium-level collaborations involving special collections (e.g., Gee & Legge, 2012), little concrete action has so far been taken. A notable exception is New York State’s Empire Archival Discovery Cooperative (EADC). This is a state-funded project to design and implement a publicly accessible web portal where libraries can create and share archival finding aids. As of this writing, the EADC platform is in beta testing and expects to begin soliciting content in Summer 2016; more on what this implies for ConnectNY below.

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these collections” and the objective “Produce a white paper identifying strategies for sharing and marketing special collections and archives across CNY via physical loan, digitization, and digital repository”.

A survey was constructed to gather information about special collections across ConnectNY libraries. Drawing upon the survey, this paper will describe the current state of member institutions’ special collections and provide some suggestions for future initiatives and strategies. It should be noted that the survey was intended to find out very basic information, as much to lay the groundwork for future investigations as to inform discussion of strategic initiatives.

Survey Results

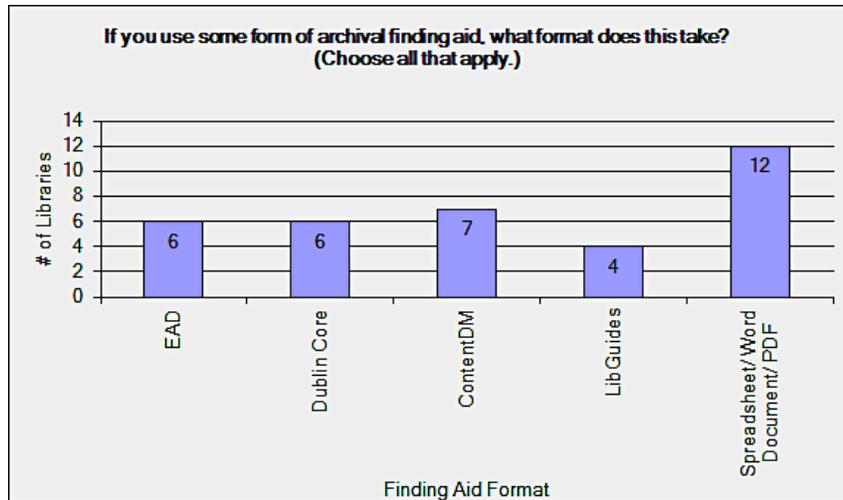
The first three questions on the survey were designed to gather general information about member institutions’ special collections. Only one library did not respond; all respondents indicated that they do maintain special collections or archives, and 16 of 18 have both dedicated staff and a specific collection development policy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, all 18 libraries use their archives or special collections to house institutional records. Sixteen of 18 also collect materials created by members of their academic community (e.g., faculty authors or artists; student research). Fifteen collect rare items focused on a particular theme or donated by a single collector.

Fourteen collect items related to local or area history, while 13 collect student theses and dissertations. (Regarding student theses, one library reported that while it does collect student theses, they are not classified as special collections. It can probably be assumed that this is the case with other institutions as well.)

Three respondents indicated in comments that they had “significant” rare book collections, many of which do not fall into the “dedicated to a particular theme or donated by a single collector” category. Two libraries also reported sizeable collections of personal papers. And one institution has just acquired a historic house, complete with historic/special collections that are yet to be catalogued.

The next part of the survey addressed the organization and description of member institutions’ special collections. Eighty-nine percent of respondents (16) said their archives or special collections were described or cataloged in some kind of finding aid. Only 11% percent (2) said they had no finding aids. The form of these finding aids covers a fairly wide range, with 13 out of the 16 respondents listing multiple forms of finding aids, from MS Word documents to EAD.

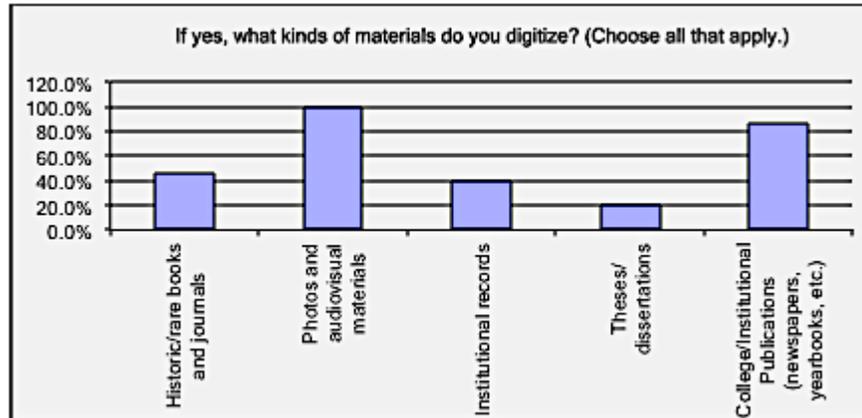


Six libraries responded to the question “If your collections are not described, what would be the biggest help in describing them?” Obviously this is a larger number than those reporting that they had no finding aids. As a number of libraries pointed out, this is due to difficulty keeping up with their ongoing collection activities, or simply the result of having only occasional staff to process newly acquired materials, so collections are “partially” described. Lack of staff was a uniform concern in this area. Lack of time and the constant flow of materials into archives was another barrier to description. One library mentioned a need for professional development. One library mentioned the increasing difficulty of finding grant money for archival projects.

Fourteen of 16 responding libraries said they would be willing to share their finding aids through ConnectNY (although with qualifications in several cases); two said they would not be interested in sharing.

In questions 8 through 12, the survey looked at the current state of digitization and providing access for special collections and archival materials. Seventeen out of 18 libraries responded to the question of whether they are digitizing materials, with 14 institutions indicating that they were already digitizing materials in their special collections and/or archives. This is roughly 82%, which is a high proportion.

In response to what types of materials they are digitizing, the following chart gives a breakdown (15 of 18 members answered this question):

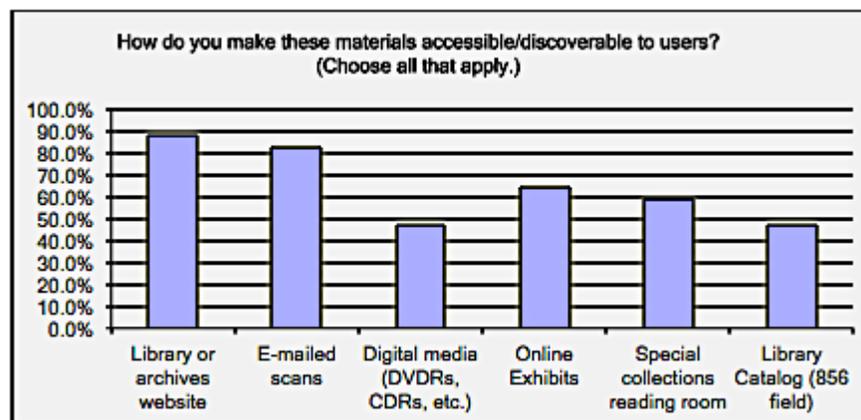


This shows that all answering institutions are digitizing photos and audiovisual materials, and the majority is digitizing college or institutional publications. Approximately one-third is digitizing historic books and journals, as well as institutional records. Twenty percent are digitizing theses and dissertations. In response to other types of materials that member libraries digitize, the following were listed:

- one-off items as requested by patrons for research or reference purposes;
- manuscript collections; and
- artist books or sculptural items.

Some responses indicated an institution's need to outsource digitizing, which is prohibitively expensive and requires grant-based funding or other sources to make possible. Also the need to protect and preserve another format (in digital form) is an additional issue raised through digitization practices.

In response to a question of how these materials are made available to users, the following chart shows the responses:



Seventeen out of 18 members responded, so the answer here has application beyond the digital scope of the previous questions. Most institutions are using websites and emailed scans as a primary means of providing these materials (both options had over 80% reporting). Online exhibits are another important opportunity for presenting materials to users with nearly two thirds of institutions selecting this. Special collections and archival reading rooms were also popular with over half the members mentioning this, as well as digital media and utilizing the library catalog. These responses demonstrate that member institutions are already engaged in a variety of activities to deliver these kinds of materials and provide access to end users.

Some responses here provide further insight. One institution describes using finding aids developed in LibGuides and pulling relevant documents for patrons. Another institution mentions using ISSU, Shared Shelf Commons and Flickr to supply digital scans of photographs and yearbooks. Other digital sharing platforms such as Hudson River Valley Heritage (HRVH) and the New York Heritage Collection are mentioned as well, which leads directly to the next question.

When asked whether they are participating in Digital Resource Sharing, 18 out of 18 libraries answered. The responses divided with 39% saying they do while 61% said they do not. Those who are participating in these endeavors listed HRVH, DPLA, NYS Historic Newspapers, New York Heritage Project, ManuscriptLink, and Mark Twain Papers (UC) as examples. One response indicated technical issues preventing them from participating at this point, but their willingness to do so.

In question 12 when asked about rights statements for special collections or archival materials, 18 libraries responded with 16 saying yes and 2 saying no.

Key takeaways from the survey:

- Nearly everyone complained of a lack of staff and/or time as the greatest barriers to making their collections more discoverable.
- Almost all respondents are interested in making their collections more discoverable, particularly digitally, though there are concerns about what this might entail.
- There is no consistency in the type of finding aids employed by ConnectNY member institutions.

These, therefore, are the issues that are addressed in the suggestions below.

Future Initiatives and Strategies

Suggestion #1: ConnectNY as a Resource for Expertise, Training, and Funding

Lack of staff and, to a lesser extent, lack of expertise in the ever-expanding pool of possible metadata schemas, is a perennial lament of institutions with archives and special collections. This might be an area where ConnectNY could have the largest impact. In the first place, ConnectNY has a wide variety of institutions with a deep pool of staff expertise from which to draw. As we have done consistently with e-books, it might be possible to set up and coordinate our expertise in archives and special collections as well. Specifically, the areas of description, preservation, marketing, and curricular or scholarly use are ripe for collaboration.

A second option in this area is leveraging ConnectNY resources to receive grants. ConnectNY might be a vehicle by which smaller schools benefit from the grant-writing resources of larger schools or might be able to act collaboratively to attain bigger grants. A related option might be to offer grants through ConnectNY itself. One of the largest hurdles for receiving external grants is the initial preservation assessment survey by an expert, something that ConnectNY Libraries might be able to provide to each other, or perhaps contribute funding for.

Suggestion #2: ConnectNY Finding Aids Portal as part of EADC

One survey respondent mentioned the Empire Archival Discovery Cooperative (EADC), a statewide archival discovery project, and suggested a ConnectNY project would duplicate the EADC. Indeed, a number of our goals and survey questions come directly from previous attempts to create projects like this. As another respondent noted, “There have been numerous plans by the 3Rs and other consortial groups to develop programs to assist archives and special collections, but they rarely have come to fruition.”

Despite those reservations, it appears the EADC project is in fact coming to fruition. The infrastructure is in place and the platform is already in the beta-testing stage, mainly to develop documentation and supporting materials. This summer (2016), EADC will be soliciting contributions from the first round of libraries, museums and archives that are involved with the Empire State Library Network (ESLN, formerly the 3Rs). All ConnectNY members are part of the ESLN councils, so EADC seems a natural solution for the finding-aid problems that were brought to light in the survey.

Notably, using the EADC service will cost little for libraries – hundreds of dollars a year or less (a person directly involved in the development of EADC mentioned a range between \$75-\$400 depending on the size of the institution and other factors). State funding is keeping those costs low. Moreover, ESLN will provide training and support for libraries to participate in this project. These were issues raised by some institutions in the survey; EADC offers an easy solution.

EADC will be fully searchable by keyword, institution and more. Links will be stable. Moreover the infrastructure behind EADC is developed in such a way as to expose finding-aid content to larger scale archival/special collection networks: Social Networks and Archival Context (SNAC), for example.

As one of our members noted, there is a risk of needless duplication of effort if the EADC project turns out to be viable. Given that EADC has already developed a workable system for creating and sharing finding aids, it would be a waste of time and resources for ConnectNY to try and develop its own system. A better option would be for ConnectNY to create a page on its website with links to member institutions' finding aids. Ultimately, ConnectNY should plan to use EADC and may want to consider having a liaison involved with the EADC project.

Suggestion #3: ConnectNY Committee for Digitization/Sharing Projects and Rights Management

The survey shows that there is a wealth of knowledgeable staff involved with a variety of digitization practices across the ConnectNY institutions. An appropriate next step would be to create a ConnectNY Committee devoted to further developing digitization practices and sharing of digital materials. This group could also implement training seminars and workshops centered on topics like rights management, digitization best practices and so on. It could also look at the feasibility of creating an online portal for all ConnectNY members to share and distribute their digital materials.

For rights management, one important factor to consider is that the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) and Europeana are developing a standardized rights language. A summary of these statements and recent developments on this front can be found at RightsStatements.org. Using this as a basic resource, ConnectNY could offer rights-management training (webinars, in-person clinics, etc.) to member institutions. It is important to note in this context that both DPLA and Europeana provide and advocate for open access, and our recommendation is that, where feasible, ConnectNY move toward digital open access to special collections as well. Having these materials available to download and be used is important to recent developments around rights, usage, and access.

While partnering with bigger portals like the DPLA should be considered, ConnectNY can also create a webpage linking out to various collections at member institutions. From the responses in the survey, it seems apparent that many libraries are already sharing their digital materials through a variety of platforms. We could at minimum create a centralized list of links for ConnectNY members. Furthermore, in terms of creating a ConnectNY-centric portal for digital access, it is recommended that we take advantage of things already in existence – perhaps the ESLN and its councils can offer support or specific opportunities similar to EADC. It might also be worth considering utilizing open-source programs like Omeka to create collaborative exhibits across various

ConnectNY members. For this to be effective, further surveying and collection analysis would be required, but it would provide a unique way of bringing together collections and materials from different ConnectNY libraries in one place.

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