

# Consortial preservation management

## A new model for library preservation administration

by Brian J. Baird

In the 1970s, research libraries began to focus more attention and resources on library preservation. Library preservation dramatically grew in the 1980s and early 1990s, but in recent years the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) has documented that spending for preservation has decreased. This is particularly true for preservation staffing.<sup>1</sup> Money previously spent on staff is now being channeled toward other activities, with a large part of the funding supporting digitization programs. Many of the larger research libraries have struggled to adequately fill their preservation administrator (PA) positions with experienced personnel, in part because salaries offered for these positions have not been adequate enough to entice qualified PAs to move away from their current institutions.

America's librarians are an aging population: 66 percent are over 45 years of age and only 22 percent are under 40 years.<sup>2</sup> This means that future prospects do not look bright for filling specialized professional positions, such as PAs, because there will be fewer candidates for the jobs posted. However, the situation is not necessarily as bleak as it may initially appear.

### A practical solution

Currently, many research libraries find themselves with fairly well-developed parts of a preservation program, but they lack the administrative structure needed to effectively

coordinate preservation efforts throughout the library system. This is the role of the preservation administrator. An effective PA can provide the leadership, expertise, and direction necessary to ensure that a library's preservation program is providing the services the library needs. This role does not necessarily have to be filled by an expert on full retainer at the library. It would benefit some libraries to investigate ways to develop cooperative relationships with other libraries to conduct their preservation administrative duties.

Communications technology and the maturity of library preservation as a profession provide opportunities for libraries to secure preservation expertise via a consortial agreement, with libraries in a state or region jointly hiring a PA. The PA can work from a host institution that will provide an office, communications support, and staff assistance. The consortia partners can then secure as much preservation assistance as they want. Such a model could be particularly attractive in the western parts of the country, where populations are smaller and expertise is more difficult to find.

### How consortial agreements work

Currently, I have a full-time appointment at the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries as their preservation librarian. For the last two years, I have also held an adjunct appointment with the Kansas State University (KSU) Libraries, where I work with their preservation team.

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#### About the author

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The agreement between the two libraries specifically calls for me to make five daylong visits per year to KSU, where I work with the preservation team to provide general training for their library staff and work with staff members who are conducting specific preservation activities (such as the binding unit supervisor and the book repair technician).

During the time I have worked with KSU, we have engaged in the following activities:

- library binding (KU and KSU share a binding contract);
- book repair training;
- preservation supply orders and specifications;
- staff training on preservation issues and care and handling of library materials; and
- preparing bid specifications for a micro-filming project.

In the coming months we will work on larger projects, such as disaster planning, condition surveys of the collections, and developing a library-wide preservation plan.

In addition to driving 90 miles to KSU five times a year, I have also had their staff visit the preservation department at the KU Libraries to receive specific training. We have also visited Heckman Bindery, our contract binder, in North Manchester, Indiana. Between visits we interact fairly regularly via e-mail and telephone.

Working in any consortial arrangement presents challenges, but libraries should continue to put time and energy into developing these cooperative relationships. When properly designed, the benefits outweigh the costs.

This holds true for consortial preservation management agreements. For each cooperative group, details will need to be worked out based on state laws, purchasing regulations, and the like, but once such agreements are established, as the KU-KSU experience illustrates, they can prove to be very effective.

The model we have established in Kansas is an attractive option for many regions of the country. In addition to the current agreement between KU and KSU, the KU preservation department also offers conservation services to other educational institutions throughout the state on a cost-recovery basis.<sup>3</sup>

This program has been very successful and has enabled educational agencies from around the state to acquire book conservation services and expertise that are otherwise unavailable to

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individual institutions. Such a program provides the host institution with a way of generating income to offset the expenses of running a fully staffed and equipped conservation facility. Likewise, it allows participating agencies to secure high-quality conservation services without having to have an in-house laboratory. The consortial PA can also provide expertise and training on a regular basis so that participating libraries need only hire technicians to repair materials from the circulating collections.

Many smaller academic institutions are often near larger research libraries and could greatly benefit from the preservation expertise of staff found at the larger institution. Formalizing an agreement for the PA to provide such services will enable the host institution to recoup some of the salary costs for their PA.

### **Requirements for a good PA**

For a consortial preservation management program to work effectively, the PA must have a strong background in preservation administration, have more than a theoretical knowledge of library preservation issues (they need experience running an effective preservation program), and possess strong organizational and communication skills. Effectively communicating preservation principles and theories to individuals with little or no prior preservation experience is imperative.

Also key are interpersonal relationship skills to resolve concerns library staff members might have about the programs being implemented. In a consortial arrangement it is easy for the individual libraries to lose track of all the activities that are taking place. It is the responsibility of the PA to effectively and regularly communicate with participating libraries to ensure that all preservation team members and appro-

prate administrative personnel are kept abreast of the progress that is being made on preservation projects.

The PA must also have strong leadership skills and be self-motivated. This means accepting the responsibility for providing the necessary energy and leadership to get preservation programs started. It also means having the discipline and determination to see projects through, despite distractions that may arise in the libraries where the services are being offered.

Because many preservation activities are important, but not urgent, it is often tempting for library staff to allow preservation-related duties to get moved to a back burner and never get picked up again. It is the PA's job to provide the leadership and motivation necessary to keep this from happening. He or she must clearly demonstrate, by example, how to complete tasks on time and follow up regularly with preservation team members to ensure they are meeting their obligations.

Despite all this, the PA must be flexible and adaptive. Procedures that work in one library may not work in another. The PA should have the experience necessary to recognize what will and will not work and be dynamic enough to adjust an agenda to meet the specific needs of individual libraries.

Few people naturally have the skill sets necessary to effectively administer preservation programs at more than one institution at a time. However, these skills can be learned just as other management skills are learned.

## Final thoughts

The idea of libraries acquiring part-time

preservation expertise is certainly not new. Service bureaus around the country offer such services to libraries on a regular basis.<sup>4</sup> While these programs are excellent, a consortial agreement between libraries allows participating institutions to have access to preservation expertise on a more regular and consistent basis.

In many research libraries, PAs have accepted additional job duties as needed by their institution. Instead of capturing time from the PA to accomplish other library duties, institutions should consider opportunities to offer preservation services to neighboring libraries unable to support these needs for themselves. The KU-KSU model is just one example of how this can work well. Establishing consortial preservation management agreements has great potential that should be investigated in earnest by more research libraries.

## Notes

1. Julia Blixrud, "Preservation Expenditures Level; Microfilming, Staffing Decline," *Bi-monthly Newsletter of Research Library Issues and Actions*, Issue 201 (December 1998). See the ARL Web site at <http://www.arl.org/newsltr/201/stats%2Dpres.html>.

2. Mary Jo Lynch, "What we Now Know about Librarians," *American Libraries* 31 (February 2000): 9.

3. See the University of Kansas Libraries' Preservation Department Web page for more information about this service at <http://www2.lib.ku.edu/preservation/>.

4. For example, see the Regional Alliance for Preservation Web page at <http://www.rap-arcc.org>. ■

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(*ACRL in Atlanta* continued from page 565)

willing to pay \$20 a month for Questia. Williams is pursuing global markets where he envisions the Questia product bundled with required textbooks.

Morris Shephard (chief marketing officer of Knowledge Ventures) described his development strategy: to produce nonfrustrating research tools that keep students interested at teachable moments and that enable teachers to retrieve sources quickly, thus attaining credibility with their students. Shephard promoted emerging partnerships between libraries and

knowledge industries and blasted textbook publishers as wrong-headed old losers.

Susan Swords Steffen (Elmhurst College) reported on a pilot project with Questia at her library. Students who used Questia were disappointed with their search results, but they were unaware of the superior database products available to them via proxy campuswide. Steffen implored librarians to market their services more effectively and take a proactive role with vendors to make library database products more accessible and convenient to use.—*Claudia Shorr, Guinnett University Center Library, cshorr@guc.usg.edu* ■

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