



Facing an Earthquake at the University of Maryland – College Park Libraries

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Libraries.}|images/stories/newsletter12/sep12/nichols/books-floor.png{/rokbox}{rokbox |album=|nichols |thumb=|images/stories/newsletter12/space.png|title=|Facing an Earthquake at the University of Maryland :: Picking up the pieces after the August 2011 earthquake: Courtesy of University of Maryland Libraries.

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On August 23, 2011 at 1:51 pm Eastern Daylight Time (EDT), a 5.8 magnitude earthquake began in Mineral, Virginia. More than 100 miles from the epicenter, all eight of the libraries on the University of Maryland - College Park Campus had to cope with the aftermath of the strongest earthquake to hit the region in over a century. This article is about the immediate and long term effects of the earthquake as well as the lessons the University of Maryland - College Park Libraries learned during its recovery.

Immediately following the earthquake and with the Library's disaster plan providing guidance, the Libraries' teams, such as the Salvage Squad, took action to stabilize and restore the library. These groups oversaw notification of campus facilities, emergency services, and communication with the public. One of the first obstacles they faced was overloaded cellular and smartphone services. To keep the public informed about the libraries safety and reopening, Twitter and other social media tools were used. Although this was a good solution, many library patrons and staff were confused about the status of the library with regard to reopening and clean up.

Another issue was that in their haste to vacate the premises, many library patrons and staff left possessions in the library. Due to safety concerns, library staff was prohibited from entering the building for an hour, and patrons were not permitted to re-enter. As a result, library patrons had to wait for the library staff to return their possessions.

Once the building was secure and the situation stabilized, the library faced the more than 27,000 books that had fallen to the floor. With the assistance of volunteers the books were divided into two groups –damaged and undamaged. Damaged books went to the Preservation Department where they underwent monograph repair. Non-damaged books went on trucks for shelving. Within six days of the earthquake, all undamaged books were re-shelved.

After addressing the most urgent issues, the libraries and the government documents department addressed instability of the shelves. Deferred maintenance and lack of shelf brackets caused ranges to fall over. In McKeldin Library, compact shelving, which housed the bulk of the University's government print documents, were unstable. To resolve problems with the compact shelving, the vender went to the library to assess the damage and begin repairs. In the aftermath of the earthquake, shelving bracing brackets were tightened or installed where



it was appropriate.

An up-to-date disaster plan and policy is critical. The library's disaster plan includes the Five Step Plan for what to do immediately after an emergency. As technologies change and people become more dependent upon them, contingency plans need to be in place in case Internet and cell phone services are unavailable. At the University of Maryland - College Park McKeldin Library, there is the "red phone," which is used to contact emergency services when other forms of communication are unavailable. Because of these factors, library employees were able to mobilize and quickly begin the recovery process as soon as the earthquake was over.

In addition, it was useful for the University of Maryland Libraries to have policies for follow-up actions after a disaster. Because of this, the library Salvage Squad quickly contacted the compact shelving vender to assess our damage, the safety of the shelves, and to start the repair process.

Ultimately, the experiences of the Libraries reinforce the fact that disasters are always unexpected and an organization's response is shaped by the nature of the emergency. The best way for a library to respond to any emergency is to have a thorough and regularly-updated plan for how to address different types of emergencies. The University of Maryland – College Park Libraries' disaster plan underwent a successful test in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Suggested Reading

- * Disaster Planning and Salvage Resources Online
“ [Disaster preparedness and response](#)” Conservation OnLine
- * Disaster Planning Worksheet
“ [Karen E. Brown, "Worksheet for Outlining a Disaster Plan"](#) in Preservation of Library & Archival Materials (Andover, MA: Northeast Document Conservation Center, 1999)

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