

“Archival Systems and Off-Site Storage”

Roundtable discussion moderated by Liz Caringola and Caitlin Rizzo,
Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland, College Park

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Abstract

Although libraries have been storing materials off-site for decades, archives have only recently begun to send collections off-site. This has major implications for the systems and workflows we use to manage and retrieve materials. At the University of Maryland (UMD) Libraries, we use a combination of systems to make materials accessible at our off-site storage facility. For example, we use Aeon to manage researcher accounts and requests. We are currently split between two management systems as we upgrade from a homegrown Microsoft Access database to ArchivesSpace, which will also be our discoverability system for the public. Additionally, we have print materials that are discoverable via UMD's online library catalog. These systems would ideally integrate in order for patrons and staff alike to have a seamless experience when requesting and managing off-site collections. Our situation is not unique. During this roundtable, participants will discuss the systems they use to manage their archival and special collections materials, as well as the systems-related challenges they face as they move collections off-site. Participants will discuss and brainstorm possible solutions and workarounds for integration and enhanced access.

Notes from our Discussion

As moderators, we (Caitlin and Liz) took turns leading the discussion and taking notes to be uploaded to UMD's institutional repository, DRUM. The discussion notes below omit the names of the speakers from institutions outside of UMD but do include their institutional affiliation. We hope that this will strike a balance between providing a record of our conversation for colleagues who were not able to attend that may want to reach out to attendees based on their responses and giving those in attendance the ability to speak freely in order to have a productive conversation. Attendees who did not wish to have their responses included in the notes could indicate that they were speaking “off record.”

Question 1: What systems is your institution using to manage archival and special collections materials?

Liz Caringola (UMD): We use ArchivesSpace to manage our archival collections, though we still have a foot in an older system, a home-grown Access database that

we call The Beast, which we are still using to manage collection locations. Our cataloged books, serials, etc. are maintained in our library catalog, Aleph, which uses WorldCat as its discovery layer. Researchers request both archival collections and cataloged materials using Aeon. Ideally, Aeon would interface with the off-site database to automate requesting, but currently human intervention is required to pass off-site requests from Aeon to off-site staff. What systems are other institutions using?

Brown University: Sierra and Aeon.

Historical Society of Washington DC: PastPerfect, ArchiveStream.

University of Pittsburgh: Archivists' Toolkit, Voyager for rare books.

University of Maryland University College (UMUC): We recently started trying to make our own database that does not talk to anything/integrate, but I can't get "anyone to listen to me."

Liz (UMD): Do you think that this is a developer issue? An administrative issue?

UMUC: Developer issue--he's a librarian, not an archivist.

Question 2: What systems-related challenges do you face for your off-site collections?

Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC): I'm on the other end. The people from special collections send us an email on a daily basis of what they need so we're manually intervening by going into Voyager and sending requests.

Liz (UMD): How is this scaling for you?

WRLC: Depending on the point of the semester, the demands are large. We get a couple of emails a day just for special collections. We have our own consortium loan service system for books, which is all automated.

Liz (UMD): Has anyone been able to successfully automate systems integration?

Duke: Aeon communicates with GFA inventory software.

Pitt: We are struggling with different types of requesting systems depending on where material may be coming from, and we've got several different systems. How do you handle that?

Liz (UMD): It's difficult for us as well—requests for cataloged materials and archival collections both go through Aeon. Aeon is kind

of the hinge, but we're also working on using Bento box searches as a way to help users to find resources.

Unknown Vendor: I wanted to echo the idea of the one search approach—a lot of this comes down to the metadata schemas these systems are built on. Any one of these platforms could be used by Aeon to scrape data, but you need to know what data to get and what format to spit that data out in. You can do these things, but you need to know what language you're speaking.

UMUC: Do you have a different workflow for internal patrons?

Liz (UMD): I don't think we do. ILL is the exception where we try to divert different patrons to different systems.

UMD-ILL: Neither ILL nor Aeon can talk to the off-site database, but they can talk to one another. If it's something we can identify in the catalog, we can request the material through the ILLIAD/Aeon systems. There are points where this gets murky, like interoperability.

Question 3: Who supports the technology, and how easy has it been to work with your IT department, developers, and/or vendors to make adjustments to accommodate collections located off-site?

JHU: Our library management system is used to manage off-site materials, so we don't have to work between on-site and off-site.

Duke: We have in-house IT management. Troubleshooting happens in-house to discover when certain requests are not coming in. So there's an extra expectation of knowledge.

Liz (UMD): I think that's a great point—we have to become in-house experts to troubleshoot.

Duke: If you're off-site, you have a hard time getting IT to come to you.

US Holocaust Memorial Museum: For us, everyone knows to contact the reference staff, and that's delegated by collections management. The reference staff needs to write reference requests. We use a KEMU database for manuscripts, documents, and archival materials. We have a project manager for IT if something is going wrong.

Liz (UMD): What's been more difficult for us is getting time from our developers who oversee our off-site database. These developers work with the entire USMAI consortium. It's hard to know how we fit into their development schedule, and when they'll have time for us. Other people's experience?

(Unknown): Our developers work in sprints, so we let them know and we get schedules essentially. But the code already exists for our systems to talk to each other, so that's not our problem. Really, we need the schedule for any new development that has to come into a sprint.

Liz (UMD): I think that's why we work so well with our UMD library developers, because we know their sprint schedule and can add JIRA tickets and see when they're assigned and who's working on them. It's hard to see where we fit in with the consortium developers because we don't know their development priorities and schedule.

Question 4: How are you modifying your systems or workflows to accommodate off-site storage?

Holocaust Museum: Over 4,000 archival collection objects are requested to onsite, and I am the only puller. Previously it was the responsibility of three full-time employees who had other responsibilities, and it was up to them to negotiate who had time that week to go and retrieve the collections.

(Unknown): We haven't had to pull anything yet as we're still in the planning phase and it's theoretical at this point, but they're still figuring out how they will have to adjust workflows/systems.

Caitlin (UMD): (To Holocaust Museum) Mentioning that you have the sole responsibility for pulling materials brings up another issue that both Liz and I have discussed at length, which is the issue of labor. Often because of these issues of systems not integrating, we have a related issues determining whose responsibility it is to address these gaps in retrieval and management of off-site material. I wonder how you manage all the materials alone and what happens when you are sick or cannot be there on a given day. Then what happens?

Holocaust Museum: We have materials travel by shuttle to off-site facility twice per week, so that gives me time to pull requests. I use my own system (a spreadsheet) to track what is pulled, notes, etc. When I'm not there, no one else does that. We could put that information in the database, but it's usually not important enough. Though, there is a need to document.

Caitlin (UMD): Same here. If Charlotte takes vacation, what do we do? We have a Researcher Experience team that could fill in, or her supervisor can fill in for her. Though, it seems common for one person to be responsible for pulling/facilitating requests. How do others handle requests that are dependent on human intervention in order to be filled?

Wake Forest: Our off-site facility has two staff people. However, other employees are cross-trained, so if needed I

could operate the order picker in the facility. The facility isn't that far away, so it's not hard to drive over there if needed.

Charlotte (UMD): With all the disconnect between these systems, is there a negative impact on users?

Duke: I guess an obvious one would be time. If it's not automated, it's going to be a lot more difficult.

Liz (UMD): Agreed. Our promised turn-around time is two business days. So far the scale of the requests has been so small, that it's been fine. I think if well-used archival materials move off-site we might have to consider more frequent deliveries from off-site.

WRLC: What I've noticed is that Special Collections talks to us (the off-site staff) more than they talk to their own people. People will send the same requests, and not know that materials are already on campus.

Liz (UMD): That's been one of the advantages of having someone in two positions (off-site and Special Collections) because all requests move through her before going to off-site staff.

Pitt: I think that's a huge problem. I think users are having a tremendously hard time because they don't know what they are looking at. No matter where the thing is, I think it exacerbates the problem.

Liz (UMD): I think right now we have time to intervene. One area in which I've seen an improvement in customer service since moving a collection off-site is that it has been much more efficient to scan theses and dissertations off-site than when they were on campus. To Pitt's point though, I do think across the board our (meaning libraries in general) systems are awful, and since we use them everyday, we become accustomed to them and their quirks. But how do users navigate them? Especially for the more inexperienced users, like undergraduate students, it must be overwhelming to figure out which system to use depending on whether or not they're requesting a book from our general collection vs. Special Collections. I think we're hoping to be able to hire a User Experience librarian to help us with these discovery issues.

Pitt: Statistics? I'm interested in looking at good statistics.

Caitlin (UMD): We pull stats from pretty much every system and then have to combine them to get something meaningful from them. One huge concern is our users finding what they're looking for. The nitty gritty of our collections sometimes prevents us from pulling meaningful stats. For example, some of our large corporate partners request stats regularly, and we have to

manually pull those stats because requests often do not come through Aeon for large, unprocessed collections that are manual pulls so they're not recorded in the same way, etc.

Wake Forest: Illiad and Aeon are SQL databases so you can create a front end and give access to anyone, so as long as they have SQL knowledge, they can pull reports. Going back to patrons, we need to set their expectations reasonably. If a human is going to be involved in mediating their request, then be clear that we need 48 hours; if an exception needs to be made, then you deal with it, but otherwise keep expectations realistic.

Caitlin (UMD): I think patrons are a great thing to pick up on here. I wonder if anyone has thought about what the ideal patron experience or ideal system is? What's the big picture our institutions are aiming for?

(Unknown): For special collections requests, we would like the requests have to come from Special Collections staff and then to have off-site staff fill their requests.

Penn State: Special Collections people will not automate Aeon requests.

Liz (UMD): Is the concern they will have too many people in the reading room or is it more that patrons are going to send problematic requests?

Penn State: I'm not sure.

Liz (UMD): As an archivist, I can attest that it's hard for us to lose control over collections when we send them off-site. At UMD, we mitigate this by keeping some materials on-site that have special concerns, but Charlotte has done a lot to build trust with our staff. Also, we've worked very closely with the curators as we move collections off-site in order to get their input and make sure they're comfortable with the process.

Off-site facility architect: Our work deals with distribution, and students are expecting things faster and it's not taking more time. Today, 42% of people want collections in one to two days. The success off-site is to make indistinguishable in terms of speed. And it's only going to get faster.

Liz (UMD): I think we're used to people expecting a one- to two-day turnaround, but these integrated searches are going to push us to move more quickly in general.

Architect: It's not that far off.

(Unknown): Be careful what you wish, when you get an User Experience librarian that's going to cost more money for development for building capacity for these more expansive infrastructures.