

## MARAC Fall 2024 Slide show script

Note: These are notes, not the verbatim transcript of the presentation, but will provide the viewer with the essence of the presentation.

### **Title - Margaret**

Overview: we will give you a quick introduction to who we are, review the changes that have happened in our department over several years, then we will discuss how we have and are navigating these changes. There will be time after the presentations to have a discussion and answer questions.

### **Who we are - Margaret and Chrystal**

**Chrystal** - I've been a professional in archives and libraries since (gasp) 2003. The first 3 years of my career were temporarily funded positions; I've been fortunate to work in various organizations (size, mission, private, public, from a historical society to a research institute to academic libraries). My first supervisory role came during my first permanent position - starting with supervising students and interns and, quickly thereafter, full-time employees. As I gained experience as an archivist, more supervisory responsibilities came with it. While originally I did not join the profession to become a manager/leader, I found myself advocating for policies, change, and people more and more - I found joy and purpose in that role and started to seek out those roles (and professional development) more purposefully. Ultimately leading me here, to VCU Libraries as Head of Special Collections and Archives in 2022.

**Margaret** - I've been in archives and libraries since 2005. I began at VCU in 2010 in a temporary project archivist position which fortunately turned into a permanent position. I'm more of a reluctant leader. I like mentoring and helping others, but I never saw myself as a supervisor or manager. However, as the opportunities came, I decided to take the chance. I appreciate Chrystal giving me the opportunity and she and I and the rest of the department have worked together to navigate some major changes. As a nod to the title of our presentation, Chrystal and I thought we'd share our favorite David Bowie!

### **Department Overview - Margaret**

#### **How it Started - Margaret**

To begin, we thought it would be useful to see what our department looked like before the changes that we are discussing in this presentation occurred. This is what our department looked like at the end of 2018. At this time, we were actually two separate departments.

Since about 2012 the two SCA departments worked jointly or "merged without merging." This means the departments were distinct, with their own department heads and in their own divisions. Yet, we worked together, sharing resources and knowledge and creating policies, procedures, and workflows for both departments. For example, we have shared content management systems(ArchivesSpace), had joint meetings, and generally helped each other.

This was done with an eye toward a future merger into a single department. Notice that two positions reported to supervisors at HSL, but they were physically located at JBC and worked with both JBC and HSL collections. I (the A&E archivist) worked on JBC collections too. The

HSL Head/University Archivists worked on UA across the two departments.

### **Rapid Fire Change - Margaret**

Between 2019 and 2024, a host of changes took place for SCA. Notice that COVID is not mentioned, but of course, we were dealing with that in addition to everything else. The changes began with the departure of the JBC SCA head and our accessioning and processing archivist. The change accelerated in 2021 with the new library dean; our previous dean had been at the library for 21 years. A staff member with 31 years of experience retired, and the two SCA departments merged.

In 2022, three more folks retired or left for new careers outside of libraries. During that time we managed to finally hire a new processing archivist, a position that had been vacant for 3 years, fill three open staff positions, and hire our new department head, Chrystal.

In 2023, our longest-tenured person in the department retired. She has been a department head and the university archivist. Our senior curator (former assistant dept head, and interim head at JBC) left for a new position. We were able to hire a full-time university archivist, and I was promoted to Senior Curator for Health Sciences. We hired a new arts collections curator in 2024. We had a delightful few weeks of being fully staffed (except for our hourly position).

Just when we thought we were off the hiring merry-go-round, our research and collections specialist departed for a faculty position at W&M. Wonderful for him, but not so much for us. And, since I made this slide, we have another staff person leaving for a faculty position at another institution. It was anticipated that she would leave, and again, we are very happy for her, but it is yet another change.

### **Where we are now (Nov 2024) - Margaret**

Since 2019 we have lost 160 years of institutional memory; 139 years of that was from the departure of five people. We went from having multiple folks with decades of experience to now, where the longest-serving department members have been here for 14 years and 10 years. Plus, a merger, a new library dean, and a pandemic.

Even if we had experienced only a few of these changes, that would be a challenge, but this amount of change is a challenge on whole different scale. Of course, one thing that makes it easier in some respects is that with so many new folks, they are not experiencing the same level of change, and it provides an opportunity to truly reshape the department.

Now I will turn it over to Chrystal.

### **Rebuilding and Approaches - Chrystal**

- Profound change, emotionally destabilizing - So I will give some tips/strategies/case studies for navigating change.
- To frame our rebuilding and approaches I feel like I should give a little background into me and my leadership. If any of you are like me, formal management or leadership training was something I had to seek out and build on my own or through professional

development. **When** it came to the “on-the-job training,” it has always been guided by what my instincts told me, by forming my own peer mentorship space when able (aka work-friends), or by what I had experienced/seen in other leaders. Many of the approaches and things outlined here are based on the practice of management and leadership, not so much the theory. With that said, however, there are many resources out there that discuss management theories and approaches - like Relationship Management - these approaches have helped me as I navigate being a leader and give me a path toward continual improvement. And that really is what the basis of this presentation is about - learning how to do the best, be the best for you and your team-- that there is continual change, sometimes rapid, sometimes subtle, and so growth and change often go hand in hand.

- At the core, I am a human-centric leader so creating a culture of trust, care, and belonging is a top priority for me. A step I take in fostering this environment is by building meaningful relationships.

### **Relationship building slide - Chrystal**

- Thinking back to the VCU context and all the change - and myself being new to the team - a critical first step in rebuilding and moving forward successfully was focused on intentional relationship building. Here are some components we put into practice. Please note that we are primarily in-person but do flex, and work remotely, so some of these things were done in person via Zoom.
  - One-on-one meetings
  - Team celebrations (i.e. years of service milestones), activities (welcoming new hires), planning to go to the campus letter-press studio, field trips to other institutions, talked about doing internal “awards”
  - Lunches, coffee, walks
  - Casual conversations
- Building authentic/trusting relationships with individuals and the team is in itself its own reward. The bonus (in my view) is that the relationships built and fostered create positive mechanisms for employee and manager growth, create an environment for sustained communication and feedback, build rapport, help develop a shared vision, improve collaboration, and from my experience, foster more grace and empathy.

### **Organizational Leadership Team Development (Chrystal)**

- Creating space to focus on relationships and team building is a must, especially if change is a constant. AKA not work-focused or driven.
- Communication and transparency is also a critical practice that helps us embrace or face change in the workplace. Intentional decision-making and consistency related to transparency and communication are important. Taking the time to establish your best practices (and articulating them) provides a framework that everyone can benefit from.
- Most everyone is a middle manager, the middle might just look a bit different depending on where you are in the organization. Establishing documentation and practices that can

be seen at different levels of the organization helps provide consistency and a controlled level of transparency, is strategic, and is a method of advocacy for your department.

- Here are some components we put into place
  - Establishing routine department meetings (including a structured agenda). For a team that was recently reorganized/merged it was important to establish routine meetings and baseline practices for the meetings to build awareness of our work internally and work towards becoming one unit. The way we approach the meeting has changed over time as we continue to build our relationships and team development.
  - Quickly want to highlight the importance of reporting out. VCU Libraries has an internal blog which is part of the organizational culture, and for me, it became quickly apparent that it was a mechanism to advocate and promote the department through meeting minutes.
- Vision/Strategic planning - Now, I generally would not want to come into a department and, within my first year, make lots of changes or start a strategic plan- but because there was already so much change and upheaval it was, I felt critical to create something consistent that guided us - and that for me was a Departmental vision and strategic plan. So after about 5 months, I started by talking with the leadership team I had, then brought the idea to the entire team. We started by working collaboratively to establish a team vision. We had a document that preceded me and we used that as the baseline to start conversations and work from. This gave us our guiding principles, which allowed us to then again, in a collaborative space, work together to articulate our goals and objectives; it was an iterative process that developed over time. I would say from the vision to the final strategic plan, it was a year-long process.
- Retreat - I wanted to make sure it was a time to finalize the strategic plan and reflect on the past year, but I also wanted it to not be all work!

#### **Continual Growth slide:**

- Chrystal - I am always learning and growing to the best of my ability. As I continue as a leader and reflect on all that was shared here today, I try to take time to identify where there are growth opportunities for myself, and for the team.
  - I have made it an intentional practice (and part of my goals/yearly work plan - infuse it in my position effectiveness, service, scholarship) to seek out professional development and leadership training - through my institution, through programs like H.E.R.S. ( Higher Education Resource Services) Leading From the Middle), enhance my learning connected to leadership approaches that resonate with me - like Appreciative Inquiry model, and building/leveraging mentorship and professional relationships - whether it is with my cohort from the Archives Leadership Institute, to former bosses, mentors, and former colleagues.
- Margaret - I have taken opportunities to learn how to be a better leader and supervisor. I've learned a great deal from those who have supervised me over the years. Since I now have more supervisory responsibilities, I have worked to improve my skills in that area by reading and taking classes. I am working hard on my active listening skills, and I am trying to be a more transparent communicator.

- We also support our colleagues in the department to improve their skills or to try new things.

### **Opportunities and Outcomes Slide: Chrystal**

- Coming into a setting where there was a lot of change, I tried to learn and understand the environment to the best of my ability. Through team building, relationship building, and strategic planning - through this collaborative effort, I took all the information I was collecting and tried to find paths that would turn these challenges into opportunities and outcomes.

### **Documentation Slide: (C & M)**

- **Chrystal:** One opportunity that clearly presented itself due to the enormous amount of staff turnover was the creation of documentation. We were extremely fortunate to still have a mix of long-time employees coupled with new employees to infuse knowledge, expertise, and insight into creating or building off documentation.
- **Margaret:** Processing manual - This is something that we have been trying to write for years. We did have a wiki with a good deal of documentation, but there were a lot of departmental practices that were unwritten. Having a new processing archivist and university archivist was an ideal time to take on this project. With Chrystal's support, we paused processing for six months and took the time we needed to create this manual which will save us time in the future when onboarding and make our work easier now that we have a manual to refer to.
- **Chrystal:** Collection development policy - It was apparent that a new, more robust collection development policy was needed, especially because many of those who left VCU were the knowledge keepers - and had been instrumental in donor relations and collecting. After about a year of absorbing/learning for myself and for new members (or new to their roles), I crafted a new policy (using existing knowledge and documentation, peer/aspirant, and professional data) and sought departmental and stakeholder feedback. We revised as needed and sent it off for approval.
- **Margaret:** Legacy department information - I started this in anticipation of my supervisor's retirement and because we have so many new folks. I had notes scattered about, along with some of my own knowledge. I turned it into a document with a timeline of SCA, details about past practices (e.g., old accession formats), information about various platforms we use(d) and why, etc. Also, when Jodi was near retirement, we had HSL 101 sessions where we walked through our spaces and took notes as she basically did a brain dump of all she knew. It gave us the opportunity to ask questions. It was very useful for the new folks and a good reminder for me.
- **Chrystal:** Student/internship supervisor manual - it was important to document so that we all follow the same process and ethos around this important work. I asked for volunteers and those whose roles aligned to participate in the crafting of documentation. Since we are not pausing other work, like we had with the processing manual - and are not hiring new students until next Fall - we slowed the process down - we decided as a group what the timeline would be, and crafted an outline and have separated the work across two semesters.

## Reorganization and Recrafting Job Descriptions (Chrystal)

One of the most important aspects of trying to turn a negative (great people leaving) into an opportunity was recrafting the department and positions. To do this, I heavily relied on the strategic plan, the experience and knowledge of the team, and the team itself to make strategically important decisions. And, of course, I had to work within the constraints of our monetary resources.

- Full-time University Archivist and an Arts Collections Curator - both important collecting scopes for SCA
  - Previous positions included this work, but honestly, it was only a part of each individual's role - the past individuals had been department leaders/managers, and separating out these additional functions allowed us to craft job descriptions which gave us the opportunity to have these roles be the main focus rather than a portion of a position.
- Senior Curator of Health Sciences - changes in position
  - Demonstrated need when we recrafted the University Archivist position, important collection scope of VCU, and an opportunity to promote from within an amazing archivist, leader, and mentor for the department. Willing to take it on, and so it was a no-brainer to promote from within.
- Re-aligning job descriptions, titles, roles
  - E.g., changing Jessica's title to Collections archivist to reflect the work she is already doing.
  - Research and Collections Coordinator - with the departure of the person in this position, we have an opportunity to reimagine some aspects of the position to align with current needs.
- Departmental teams -providing leadership opportunities within SCA committees (User Services Team, Processing Team, Instruction and Outreach Team)

## Takeways (C&M)

- **Chrystal:** Change always happens; finding ways to sit with that and make strategic decisions at the right time, involving the right people.
- **Margaret:** Trying doesn't always mean it is permanent: Times of change are a good time to try something new. You are already in a state of flux. However, just because you chose to do something doesn't mean you are stuck with it forever. If it is not working change it!
- **Chrystal:** Re-evaluate, find places for small corrections to stay on track - being a responsible manager is never done