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Abstract

Major library renovations, here defined as those requiring the removal of all staff and collections to one or more alternate locations, are especially challenging for both staff and patrons. This poster highlights how a major renovation has become – and continues to be – an opportunity for innovation and productive change at the South Caroliniana Library.

Keywords

Archives, Special Collections, User Services, Collections, Renovation

The South Caroliniana Library is one of the premier research archives and special collections repositories in South Carolina and the Southeast region of the United States, with collection holdings that help researchers understand South Carolina and Southern history and culture. Since 1940, the Library has resided in the South Carolina College library building, constructed in 1840 and based on a design by Robert Mills. The current renovation project, which began in 2016, has required the removal of all collections and staff to alternate locations. This poster examines from the perspectives of both Collections and User Services staff at the Library some of the impacts and challenges brought about by the renovation and describes opportunities for increased productivity through assessment and innovation.

As we at the Library have discovered – and as one might expect – by default a major renovation challenges staff to assess and revise long-established procedures and protocols regarding both technical services operations and patron access to research materials. In order to successfully continue the workflow of the Library during this period of disruption, staff from Collections and User Services have collaborated more closely and implemented intentional communication practices. Although born of necessity, these practices have resulted in increased productivity, more efficient use of physical spaces, and expanded patron access to previously unprocessed collections.

For example, when the Library closed to the public and the reading room was relocated – requiring patrons to access materials in an unfamiliar space several blocks away from our historic building – staff communicated this change of location to the public at every possible opportunity to save patrons from having to take a lengthy walk across campus. Furthermore, while most Library collections were once readily available without prior notice, the temporary reading room location has limited storage space and collections are distributed among multiple locations, requiring patrons to provide advance notice of research visits. This change in service was also communicated at every possibility, in

order to minimize the potential for frustrating patrons who may have travelled many hours to access collections, only to find that they were offsite and unavailable.

These significant changes, both in terms of location and service, challenged Library staff to assess the efficacy of the established methods used with when communicating with patrons, chiefly consisting of in-person and telephone conversations. Although face-to-face reference interviews resulted in high accuracy in terms of the selection of relevant research materials using the catalog, asking patrons to return the following day to use selected items was deemed – rightly so! – less than ideal. In addition, phone conversations, while useful for gaining some insight into a patron’s research topic, tend to not capture enough detail for Library staff to ensure the correct research materials are on hand at a specified time with absolute certainty. Given these limitations, brought about by attempting to use established practices in new and changed circumstances, the decision was made to move the reference interview from verbal (e.g. phone) to written (e.g. email) communication as often as would allow.

The benefits of shifting the reference interview to email whenever possible – recognizing that not all patrons have access to computers – have proved to be greater than anticipated. Although originally implemented to ensure that appropriate collections were brought onsite at the correct time, two additional results are important to note, and highlight how increased communication between Collections and User Services staff ultimately benefit patron research. Now, when patrons first make contact via email, User Services staff have the time to more thoroughly review catalog records and finding aids before responding, resulting in a deeper grasp of the research topic. Previously, in the interests of time while having a face-to-face conversation, Library staff may have stopped searching the catalog after the patron indicated satisfaction at the number of items located. Now, through the delay in conversation that email allows, staff can dig deeply into subject headings and related topics and suggest

additional materials of possible interest. Patrons have expressed their appreciation with this, as their research visit is often more productive than originally anticipated.

Furthermore, depending upon the research topic, when conducting reference interviews via email User Services staff have the time to consult with colleagues who have greater subject-specific knowledge that oftentimes extends to collections not yet fully processed and described. If the patron is not planning to visit for some time, Collections staff can prioritize under-processed collections in order to make them available for research. In short, a simple change in communication method with patrons effected by User Services staff now allows Collections staff to integrate and prioritize pressing research need into project workflow and management.

Although the staff and patrons of the South Caroliniana Library have had to adjust to significant changes brought about a major building renovation that is still at least a year away from completion, both parties have benefitted. When Collections and User Services staff responded to these changes by increasing collaboration and intentional communication, patrons benefitted from the shift to email-based reference interviews, and, ultimately, are exposed to a greater variety of collection materials for their research. Moving forward, staff plan to continue to seek ways that increased collaboration and communication can lead to more informed decisions that further the mission of the Library and support research as we look forward to returning to our historic building.