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Article

Data-Driven Decision Making: An Holistic Approach to Assessment in Special Collections Repositories

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Abstract

Objective – In an environment of shrinking budgets and reduced staffing, this study seeks to identify a comprehensive, integrated assessment strategy to better focus diminished resources within special collections repositories.

Methods – This article presents the results of a single case study conducted in the Special and Digital Collections department at a university library. The department created an holistic assessment model, taking into account both public and technical services, to

explore inter-related questions affecting both day-to-day operations as well as long-term, strategic priorities.

Results – Data from a variety of assessment activities positively impacted the department's practices, informing decisions made about staff skill sets, training, and scheduling; outreach activities; and prioritizing technical services. The results provide a comprehensive view of both patron and department needs, allowing for a wide variety of improvements and changes in staffing practices, all driven by data rather than anecdotal evidence.

Conclusion – Although the data generated for this study is institutionally specific, the methodology is applicable to special collections departments at other institutions. A systemic, holistic approach to assessment in special collections departments enables the implementation of operational efficiencies. It also provides data that allows the department to document its value to university-wide stakeholders.

Introduction

Like many academic libraries, the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa Library reports all manner of statistics but has not come effortlessly to assessment (University of South Florida Tampa Library, 2012). Over the last decade, it has participated several times in LibQual. Librarians involved in instruction use a variety of assessment tools, such as pre- and post-tests, but as of yet there is no Library-wide assessment program such as Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (Project SAILS, 2012; Rumble & Noe, 2009; Mery, Newby & Peng, 2012; Sutherland, 2009). A greater emphasis on accountability in higher education, sobering fiscal realities at USF, and considerable attention over the last decade paid to library assessment activities have driven the USF Tampa Library to action.

In late 2009, the USF provost convened a campus-wide Student Success Task Force to recommend a fundamental transformation to the student experience. In its 160-page report, the task force made three recommendations: institutionalize student success as a permanent USF priority, integrate student success into USF's institutional culture, and build the

research capacity to support student success initiatives (University of South Florida, 2010). In 2010, the university formed the Office of Student Success (OSS). For the last three years, OSS has engaged nearly every unit at USF in order to enhance academic progress and student satisfaction, improve graduation and graduate school admission rates, and increase student competitiveness in the marketplace. The Library quickly became central to OSS goals. Library administrators extended hours of operation to 24/5 and welcomed Tutoring and Learning Services, a writing center, STEM teaching lab, student employment center, and the Office of Undergraduate Research into the Library.

The emphasis on accountability for improved student success coincided with deep cuts to higher education in Florida. USF's appropriation from the state legislature fell from nearly $371.91 million in 2007-2008 to $305.25 million in 2011-2012 (University of South Florida System, 2011). During the same period student headcount grew from 28,578 to 45,290 (University of South Florida Office of Decision Support, 2012). In the Tampa Library, the number of professional and non-professional staff declined from 103.59. FTE in February 2008 to 81.59 FTE in February 2013, and in May 2011 the Graduate Assistant

program in cooperation with the School for Library and Information Science was discontinued. The loss of six part-time graduate students placed a particular strain on public services activities throughout the Tampa Library, including the Special Collections reading room. Compounding loss of staff between 2007 and 2011, total Library expenditures decreased 8% from $11.86 million to $10.91 million while print and electronic resources costs at USF increased an average 4.2% annually (University of South Florida Tampa Library, 2012). These cuts required the Library to redouble its efforts to work smarter, assess operations and services, and utilize scarce resources most effectively.

The rising importance of assessment within the library profession, as evidenced by attention to the topic in professional literature, also motivated the USF Tampa Library to take assessment more seriously. An August 2012 survey of publications on assessment indexed in EBSCO Library Literature & Information Science Full Text revealed 236 peer-reviewed articles published 1990-1999 and 676 peer-reviewed articles the following decade. From January 2010-August 2012, alone, 376 articles appeared in publication.

Aims

Within an environment of rising expectations, decreasing resources, and the profession's growing interest in assessment, the Tampa Library formally revisited strategic goals set in 2008 in order to adapt them to the dramatically shifting terrain. Following a lengthy process that involved the entire staff, a written report in May 2011 "reset" the strategic direction begun three years earlier. The report confirmed Special & Digital Collections' (SDC) significant role in cultivating a research culture within the Library. Specifically, SDC was asked to redouble its efforts to build several collections of national distinction (albeit with fewer resources), develop and refine research tools and services to support these collections, and expand its

outreach. Library investment of staff time and financial resources prioritized strategic projects (University of South Florida Tampa Library Office of the Dean, 2011).

SDC staff quickly realized it could not meet its obligations under the Library's strategic plan nor continue to improve public services and collections in an environment of diminishing human and financial resources without greater attention paid to assessment. Department librarians and staff also understood that the questions it sought to answer, though focused primarily on public services, were interrelated and thus required an approach that addressed a variety of activities in a comprehensive and integrated manner. Specifically, SDC's assessment plan asked the following:

> 1) What are the Department's staffing needs?
> 2) What staff skill sets and training are required to meet researchers' expectations, and what personnel skills and functions are most needed by the Department in the future?
> 3) Where should the Department target its outreach efforts?
> 4) How can the Department streamline and prioritize technical services to support patron needs?
> 5) How can collection development and intellectual access activities best align with strategic goals and patron needs?

Literature Review

The professional literature includes a rapidly growing number of publications on assessment for academic libraries in general, but discussions of assessment methodologies for special collections and archives tend to be sparse and to focus on answering specific questions, usually related to technical services (Bancroft Library, 2011; Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections, 2013). Common types of assessment studies in special collections literature include methodologies for computing the time

(Abraham, Balzarini & Frantilla, 1985) or money (Ericksen & Shuster, 1995) required to process archival materials, reducing the backlog of hidden collections (Jones, 2004), measuring the impact of special collections cataloging (Lundy, 2008), and performing condition assessments (Green, 2004). While many of these studies, particularly those discussing minimal standards processing, consider access and user implications (Greene & Meissner, 2005), very few as yet focus specifically on establishing metrics for defining "good" public services in special collections or archives. The Archival Metrics project is an outlier, providing toolkits for assessing various parts of a special collections or archives department, including public services web tools. Although the toolkits are important resources for special collections and archival repositories, they are not exhaustive. They do not, for example, provide mechanisms for assessing technical services in relationship to public services. More recent literature, particularly the Fall 2012 special *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* issue on assessment, focuses on a varied array of hypothetical assessment strategies for special collections and archives. Articles from this issue establish the framework for an evidence-based practice approach to assessment (Chapman & Yakel, 2012), outline methods for conducting archival collections assessment (Conway & Proffitt, 2012) and instruction assessment (Bahde & Smedberg, 2012), and considerations for assessing online finding aid and website design (Hu, 2012). Only one article offers a practical case study, detailing how assessment methodologies might be applied in a specific circumstance (Gustainis, 2012).

Methods

As SDC was unable to find an existing assessment methodology that considers the entire special collections environment, SDC librarians and staff created an holistic assessment model that takes into account the needs, requirements, and standards of public services, technical services, and administration.

This paper presents the results of qualitative and quantitative assessment activities, which, when taken as a whole, provided SDC with a comprehensive view of patron and Department needs. From January 2011 to December 2012, staff collected quantitative data on collection use, reading room activity, and website traffic using circulation and reading room statistics, reader registration profiles, and web analytics. To accomplish the necessary quantitative data collection, the Department utilized a variety of free and library-wide licensed systems to automate existing manual processes and thereby create operational efficiencies. Although there are a variety of tools available to facilitate assessment activities, SDC chose Google Analytics, Desk Tracker, LibGuides, and SQL queries in content management systems, such as Fedora Commons Repository Software. To address challenges specific to managing Special Collections, the Department licensed Aeon. Patron surveys and usability testing provided qualitative information on the patron experience in the reading room and with the Department's web tools.

Aeon

Aeon, a product of Atlas Systems, Inc., is a material request and workflow management software specifically designed for special collections libraries and archives. The data collected in Aeon provides staff with detailed patron information as well as reading room and material usage statistics. Patron data includes status (undergraduate, graduate, faculty, staff, community user, visiting scholar, etc.), discipline (humanities, social sciences, etc.), research interests (optional), and the day, time, and duration of each visit. Material request data includes the type of material (e.g., monograph, archival material, etc.), collection name, day and time a user received and returned materials, the patron's user ID, and standard bibliographic information.

From January 2011-December 2012, 4,547 material transactions and 1,355 reading room

visits were recorded. At the end of each semester, staff generates and analyzes a standard set of reports (see Figure 1). The combination of data collected and reported enables SDC staff to identify when the reading room is most active, what type of patrons use the reading room and when, and what collections are used and by whom. Aeon also tracks which staff members are involved in each step of each transaction. Analysis of this data provides insight into staff members' proficiency in their use of Aeon and identifies potential training needs.

Desk Tracker

Aeon offers valuable data on reading room and collections use, but the software is not designed to record all patron contact. SDC librarian and staff interaction with patrons takes many forms, including face-to-face communication, email, letter, fax, and telephone calls, and serves a variety of purposes, including research consultations, program planning, collection development, and donor relations. In order to

better assess the use of librarian time and the knowledge required by reading room staff, SDC needed a system to capture data on all types of patron interactions.

Desk Tracker is a web-based library statistics system offered by Compendium Library Services LLC. The program enables library staff to record general patron transaction activities, generate reports via a standardized reporting process, and customize Desk Tracker windows to capture both individual and public service point information. The customization features make it possible for staff at each service location to collect unique data, but also to standardize across service points how patron transaction information is recorded and tracked and the type and level of data that is collected.

As with Aeon, staff members record user type. In addition, they also note the purpose of the visit, the specific request(s) made and/or question(s) asked, and the outcome of the interaction (see Figure 2). In the case of material requests, the interaction is noted in Desk Tracker, but all details of the request appear in Aeon.
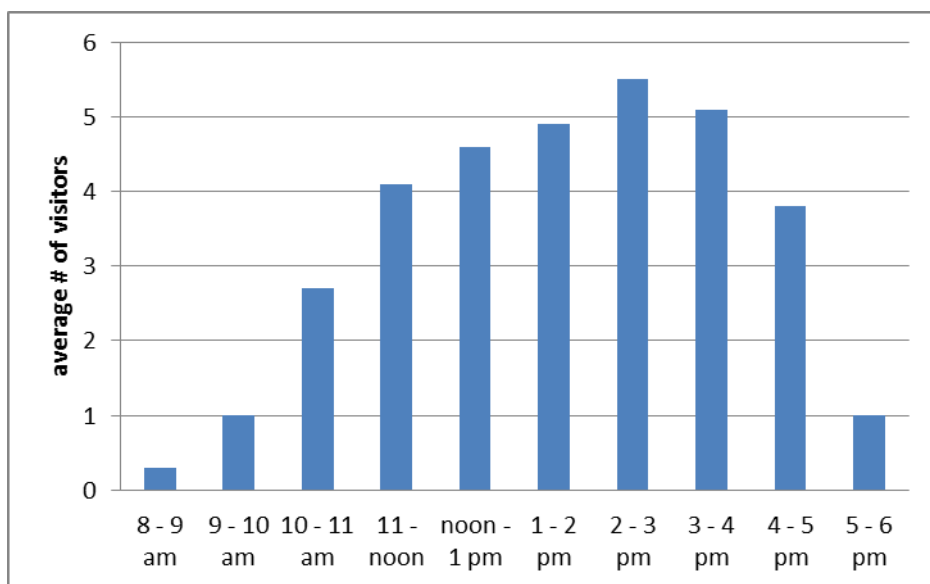

Figure 1
Average # of reading room visits by hour
January 3, 2011 – December 9, 2011 (n=1,355 visits)

Figure 2
Desk Tracker reading room staff form

Reading Room Patron Survey

Rather than developing an independent instrument to measure patron satisfaction in the reading room, SDC adapted existing instruments created by the Archival Metrics project. SDC modified its instrument to be as short, simple, and as meaningful to the institutional context as possible. All patrons who request materials in the reading room are asked to fill out a paper survey, which is provided to them with their requested materials. A staff member then enters survey data into a SurveyMonkey form to facilitate data analysis. While ideal circumstances would require each patron to complete the questionnaire in a web-

based form during each visit, some patrons decline to receive or complete the survey, and the physical layout and limited computer availability in USF's reading room preclude a web-based option.

The one-page, one-minute survey asks users to rate their satisfaction in the reading room in six concrete, easily measured areas: the helpfulness of staff, time spent waiting for materials, hours of operation, noise levels, website functionality, and photocopying / duplication services. Two additional questions ask patrons to rate their overall experience and their progress towards meeting research goals for the visit. The survey collects limited demographic information about

the patron: status (undergraduate student, graduate student, faculty member, visiting scholar, community user) and the purpose of his/her visit to Special Collections (class assignment, dissertation or thesis, publication, family history, etc.). The survey ends with an open-ended comment field, asking for ways in which the reading room experience could be improved.

Website and Digital Collections Usability Study

Based on lackluster response rates to web-based usability testing at the USF Library, during the Spring 2011 semester SDC opted to conduct face-to-face website usability testing with a small sampling (n=10) of representative user types: undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members. Unfortunately, no community users were available or willing to participate, resulting in a small but significant gap in the population sampled. This usability testing focused on two of SDC's web tools: its main website and its digital collections user interface (CORAL).

The only demographics captured during usability testing were user status and preferred browser. During the test, SDC staff asked participants to find information on the Department's website and to perform a series of tasks using CORAL. A staff member observed the user during the test, created screen captures, recorded any verbal questions or comments, but did not provide help. After completing the series of tasks, staff asked each user a series of open-ended questions.

Web Analytics

SDC uses a variety of content management systems to organize its web presence, including WordPress, LibGuides, and Omeka. The Department utilizes Google Analytics to track total and unique page views, bounce rates, exit rates, average time on pages for all WordPress and Omeka web pages, as well as the browser

and operating systems used to access these websites. In addition to its main website content, SDC also maintains a number of LibGuide-based subject pages, and the Department uses the software's built-in statistics tools to track individual page and guide views, device type, browser, and operating system.

Fedora Commons

SDC currently utilizes an internally developed digital asset management system built using the Fedora Commons Repository Software to store and access its own text, image, and audio/video digital content. Searches, hits, views, and downloads are recorded in the database so that regular and ad hoc reports can be generated to identify digital collection and item usage. Reports also detail the number of items in each collection and the size in megabytes for each item and collection.

Results and Discussion

After implementing the tools outlined above and initiating data collection, SDC librarians and staff analyzed the results of each process separately and as part of a long-term assessment strategy to inform changes in departmental practices. Staff focused particularly on analyzing intersecting data points from multiple tools and devoted its time to improving services, rather than highlighting a list of problems that, for a variety of institutional or budgetary reasons, could not be fixed. With two years of ongoing, integrated data collection complete, the assessment outcomes described below have offered an excellent starting point for data-driven decision making. Over time, the Department plans to refine its continuous assessment strategies, learn more from data collected, and improve its operations accordingly.

Staffing Needs

Prior to 2009, two Department employees, often at least one librarian, staffed the public services

desk in the reading room during all hours of operation (Monday - Friday, 9 am – 6 pm). The Department's "just in case" model ensured that someone capable of answering any type of reference question would always be available, just in case they were needed. Budget and staffing cuts necessitated changes. A single staff member, often a temporary student employee, began working solo shifts at the public service desk during reduced hours (Monday – Friday, 10 am – 5 pm), paging materials, answering basic reference questions when possible, and providing a librarian's phone number or email address when greater knowledge or a reference consultation was needed.

Librarians and administration worried about the implications of the new reading room model on quality service. Department staff used several of the tools described above to assess the impact of these service changes on patron satisfaction and, most importantly, prioritized data rather than anecdotal evidence in its discussions.

First, the reading room survey provided simple quantitative data on factors such as patrons' satisfaction with hours of operation and wait time, as well as qualitative information on their experience in the reading room. Staff discovered that their perceptions of inadequate staffing levels and excessive wait times were exaggerated. During the first 2 years of data collection, only 1 of the 223 respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the service provided in the reading room. Patrons were not shy in expressing concerns about other matters, particularly SDC's inadequate photo duplication services, limited hours of operation, and sometimes confusing website. Staff worried about collections expertise and research consultations "on demand" in the reading room, but patrons' survey responses revealed that they did not mind receiving a librarian's email address or phone number in lieu of an immediate answer. In fact, instead of the anticipated complaints, users routinely offered compliments about staff knowledge, availability, and helpfulness. Sample responses to the

question "what can we do to make improve your experience in the Special Collections reading room" include: "Nothing! :)" and "Nothing; clone your staff & send them downstairs to first floor reference desk. Attitudes are SO helpful up here!" Constructive criticism comments included "Extended evening hours," "At work & class from 9 am to 5 pm daily. I have trouble getting to S.C. during the open hours," and "Make copier accessible to reader[s]." Based on the collected data, staff decided that major changes to the service model were not needed, but that operational modifications would be beneficial.

Two significant changes occurred due to results from the reading room survey. First, patrons confirmed the inadequacy of photo duplication services. The Department relied on a single flat bed photocopier, inaccessible to patrons, and staff denied many copy orders either on account of materials' size or fragility. Staff offered use of an inexpensive digital camera, but it was not a popular solution, as lighting levels and limited camera functionality frequently resulted in blurry images, especially of textual materials. Staff believed that an overhead scanner with a book cradle provided a better solution, but the cost seemed prohibitive given the Library's declining operating budget. Using the qualitative and quantitative data generated by the patron survey, SDC partnered with the Academic Services unit at the Tampa Library to write a successful student technology fee grant to install three overhead scanners in the building, including one in the reading room. With the scanner installed, patron complaints about reproduction services have drastically decreased, although they have not disappeared entirely, and many patrons have offered positive feedback on the change from limited photocopies to self-service scanning.

Second, in response to the dissatisfaction expressed by users over reading room hours, staff looked for simple ways to modify hours of operation without accruing additional costs. Using data exported from Aeon, staff analyzed

traffic patterns in the reading room. They isolated high demand during lunch and early afternoon and more limited use late in the afternoon. They noted the frequency with which the Department opened to waiting patrons, which ultimately led staff to open the reading room an hour earlier. Current staffing levels preclude evening and weekend hours, despite repeated requests for "different" hours on the reading room survey and in phone calls to the Department, documented in Desk Tracker. The data also confirmed that a second staff member at the public service desk is generally not needed before lunch and at the end of the day, but additional support is required for three hours in the afternoon Monday through Thursday. Today, the Department's reading room manager, with additional help readily available, covers these hours. Additionally, data from 2011 on limited late afternoon use during Summer semesters led the Department to close an hour earlier from May to August in 2012, making better use of staffing resources.

Data derived from Desk Tracker provide granular information on patrons' needs in the reading room. Early afternoon hours tend to be the busiest, but undergraduates with known item retrieval requests constitute a disproportionate number of users during these hours. Visiting researchers, graduate students, and USF faculty, for whom more time consuming transactions usually occur, tend to arrive much earlier in the day, and they often have communicated with a librarian liaison before their visit. For patrons who have called ahead or already completed a research consultation, item retrieval requests tend to be more predictable and thus less time consuming for desk staff.

Training and Supervision

Prior to Aeon's adoption by USF in Spring 2010, Special Collections staff did not uniformly adhere to written procedures regarding information expected on reader registration forms and call slips or the order in which tasks were to be completed at the reading room public service desk. As a result, the Department knew little about some of its patrons for purposes of outreach and security, could not accurately count collection use from illegible or incomplete call slips, and faced unacceptably high numbers of misplaced materials with no way but memory to trace the last staff member to touch an item.

With multiple librarians overseeing the reading room but no single person in charge, effective training and supervision proved difficult. New students or staff working the public service desk struggled to remember and follow policies and procedures, and a few recalcitrant longtime employees remained wedded to old ways of doing things. Juggling multiple responsibilities, the Department's director and librarians did the best they could to address issues as they occurred, but the collaborative approach to training and supervision proved increasingly ineffective. Amidst other changes underway in public services, Department members decided to fill a line vacated by an administrative assistant with an operations manager to oversee staff and student training and supervision, revise and implement new reading room procedures, coordinate security, collect and analyze statistics, and maintain public services software management systems.

Aeon offers uniform, required workflows that limit the ability to provide or accept incomplete patron registration or materials request information or skip steps in the request, retrieval, and re-shelving of items. Aeon reports provide information on transaction types and about individual staff members' performance with the product, thereby identifying areas in need of additional training. For example, analysis of the data on users signed into and out of the reading room revealed that some staff members were not always diligent about signing patrons out. Remediation and enhanced supervision ensured that staff more accurately recorded reading room traffic data.

Web Presence

SDC's website is often the first point of contact between patrons and the Department, and it serves as an essential outreach tool. Phone calls and in-person questions from puzzled or frustrated patrons suggested that SDC's website navigation structure was not always intuitive and its content occasionally incomplete. Early results from the reading room patron survey, which asks users how easily they navigated the Department's website, confirmed this suspicion. Usability testing with patrons and bounce rates derived from Google Analytics provided concrete information on specific and suspected navigation difficulties, confusing terminology, and technical barriers to accessing information.

When SDC first conducted usability testing on its web pages, the Library used LibGuides as its content management system. This CMS necessitated a tabbed structure, but staff built pages without consistent, hierarchical navigation accessible from every page of the site. Not surprisingly, patrons most often experienced difficulty with basic navigation. Undergraduates, in particular, struggled to find the Special & Digital Collections portion of the Library's main landing page. Once they arrived, however, most users understood the site's terminology and successfully located basic information such as Department hours and a librarian to help with a project on a specific topic.

To make the website a more effective outreach tool, two SDC librarians collaborated with the newly hired Webmaster to improve navigation. In addition, one librarian participated in the Library's website redesign team to ensure that the group considered SDC needs. Technical limitations in the LibGuides platform prevented the design of flexible navigational structures, thus negatively impacting the user experience. As a result, staff moved considerable amounts of content to WordPress, a CMS which accommodates the flexible design of uniform navigation. As users more often experienced

problems with navigation, not content or vocabulary, the Department asked the Webmaster to provide only structural and design support, and it retained control over its content management. These significant changes to the Department's website require additional assessment, planned for Summer 2013, to measure the efficacy of the modifications and determine what improvements might still be made.

Further usability testing, in conjunction with statistics from Google Analytics, highlighted a known issue in SDC's digital collections user interface (CORAL): 36 percent of the site's users accessed the collections in Internet Explorer, and those users experienced greater difficulty in performing simple and complex searches. In addition, users requested several enhancements, including Boolean operators, the ability to limit searches by format (text, audio, and/or video), and access to higher resolution downloadable images. They identified visual changes to the interface to make it more intuitive, reduce click-throughs, and permit reproduction of metadata. SDC librarians, administration, and the CORAL developer documented, discussed, and prioritized all user concerns. As with assessment of the reading room, staff focused on issues that could be changed rather than those without a practicable solution. During Spring and Summer 2012, the developer made programmatic modifications and enhancements to CORAL in order to address these issues. In addition, Google Analytics and LibGuides statistical data indicated an increase in the use of smartphones and tablet devices to access SDC web content. This change in our users' profile highlighted the need to develop user interfaces that are device and browser independent. To that end, current programming projects, such as SDC's oral history player interface (OHPi), are being developed in HTML5 to replace Flash-based systems currently in place.

Data derived from page hits, combined with collection use patterns from CORAL and Aeon, provided insights into new avenues for

outreach. Some of the Department's most heavily used collections correlate with its most frequently used web pages, but some collection pages have extremely high hit rates despite sporadic collection use. Low bounce rates suggest that page visits do not result from false hits, but staff have not been able to discover why, in some instances, webpage usage coincides with collection usage and other times it does not. Librarians are currently experimenting to see if high web hits for collections with lower usage statistics offers an opportunity for targeted outreach and instruction efforts to translate interest into use.

Technical Services and Collection Development

The same budget cuts that necessitated changes to SDC's public services staffing policies also resulted in slower rates for cataloguing monographs and serials, processing archival collections, and acquiring or creating collections. In Spring 2012, the Department's dedicated cataloguer resigned, leaving much of the work to a single remaining paraprofessional. SDC staff utilized the reading room patron survey, Aeon, Desk Tracker, and CORAL statistics to reset some of its technical services priorities, make targeted acquisitions, and establish more responsive cataloguing, archival processing, and digitization priorities.

In terms of stacks maintenance, SDC has thirty-six distinct location codes in USF's catalog for monographic collections and an additional two codes for archival and manuscript collections. Locations are further delineated in a separately maintained stacks guide, which indicates the range and shelf number for each collection. As in many repositories, space is at a premium, and in recent years staff members have spent considerable time shifting collections to accommodate new acquisitions. Now, with data on which collections patrons most heavily use, stacks management decisions are more thoughtful. Infrequently used collections, for example, now reside in quasi-remote storage,

freeing space near the reading room for heavily used materials.

Collection use data has also driven decisions about whether to pursue or accept specific donations and to make particular purchases. For example, materials related to the cigar industry and its ethnic communities in Ybor City and West Tampa comprise one of SDC's most heavily used collection areas. As a result, one SDC librarian has devoted additional effort to working with potential donors to assess and, where appropriate, accept donations of manuscripts and monographs. With the Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center's collections receiving growing use by faculty and students, SDC librarians have expanded relationships with targeted rare book and manuscript vendors in the U.S. and abroad to purchase published and unpublished materials. Given increased demand for the subject area by users, these items receive priority cataloguing and processing.

Reading room patron surveys, Google Analytics, and Aeon and Desk Tracker statistics now play a greater role in determining digitization priorities. For example, based upon extensive use of a local African American newspaper, the Department embarked upon a preservation/access project to digitize paper copies of the previous five years. SDC librarians track disproportionate hits to subject pages on the Department web site, the high use of specific collections, and individual digitization requests. Patrons' needs have joined a parallel production track within the digitization lab. Longer-term, internally directed projects designed to grow USF's reputation as a research library occur alongside externally driven, more immediate, smaller scale digital collection building.

Conclusions

During the last two years, Special & Digital Collections has focused considerable energy on developing and implementing a systematic, holistic assessment strategy to improve a range

of services in the Department. With data derived from several assessment tools, staff has better aligned reading room hours and staff skill sets with patron needs, utilized limited financial and human resources to build the physical and digital collections demanded by its patrons, and more thoughtfully targeted its outreach efforts.

Despite significant improvements to Department operations, SDC's assessment efforts are not complete. Most SDC assessment activities are continuous, but not all. The Department needs to conduct more frequent usability studies of its web tools and several content management systems. Since mid-2012, SDC's digital collections have resided in USF's institutional repository as well as in CORAL. As yet, SDC has not gauged patrons' satisfaction with the repository or determined their preferences between systems. In coming months, the Department plans to implement new photo duplication request processes, and those too will require careful analysis and patron feedback. Recent changes to cataloguing workflows, shifting from a dedicated professional cataloguer to greater reliance on paraprofessionals and carefully supervised students, need both quantitative and qualitative study. Although there were no national metrics for assessing special collections in place when SDC began its assessment projects, a task force of the Rare Book and Manuscript Section of ACRL is currently working to address this gap (ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, 2013). Once the task force establishes metrics and assessment standards, SDC plans to integrate them into its methodology and to track self-improvement from year to year and to compare itself to peer and aspirant institutions.

Despite these challenges, something transformative has occurred over the last two years at USF. Where once SDC librarians and staff aspired to assessment, today the Department has adopted a systemic, holistic strategy that has become part of its working culture. This culture of assessment has enabled the Department to improve operational

efficiencies and to maintain or, in some instances, increase levels of service during lean financial times. Data derived from assessment activities clearly demonstrate the impact of SDC activities and allow the Department to illustrate its alignment with institutional priorities to Library and University administration on a routine basis as well as during formal reviews, such as University-wide reaccreditation processes. The greatest hurdle to continuous improvement has been overcome, leaving USF's Special and Digital Collections Department well situated for continued relevance and success.

Acknowledgements

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