Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Planning, Coordinating, and Managing Off-Site Storage is an Area of Increasing Professional Responsibility for Special Collections Departments

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Abstract

Objective – To measure the use of off-site storage for special collections materials and to examine how this use impacts core special collections activities.

Design – Survey questionnaire containing both structured and open ended questions. Follow-up interviews were also conducted.

Setting – Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions in the United States of America.

Subjects – 108 directors of special collections.

Methods – Participants were recruited via email; contact information was compiled through professional directories, web searches, and referrals from professionals at ARL member libraries. The survey was sent out on October 31, 2013, and two reminder emails were distributed before it closed three weeks later. The survey was created and distributed using Qualtrics, a research software that supports online data collection and analysis. All results were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Qualtrics.

Main Results – The final response rate was 58% (63 out of 108). The majority (51 participants, or 81%) reported use of off-site storage for library collections. Of this group, 91% (47 out of 51) house a variety of special collections in off-site storage. The criteria most frequently utilized to designate these materials to off-site storage are use (87%), size (66%),

format (60%), and value (57%). The authors found that special collections directors are most likely to send materials to off-site storage facilities that are established and in use by other departments at their home institution; access to established workflows, especially those linked to transit and delivery, and space for expanding collections are benefits.

In regard to core special collections activities, results indicated that public service was most impacted by off-site storage. The authors discussed challenges related to patron use and satisfaction. In regard to management and processing, directors faced challenges using the same level of staff to maintain two locations instead of one. Also, the integration of new workflows required additional oversight to ensure adequate control at all points of process. Static staffing levels and increased levels of responsibility impacted preservation and conservation activities as well. A central concern was the handling of materials by facility staff not trained as special collections professionals. In regard to the facilities themselves, a general concern was that commercial warehouses do not always provide the kind of environmental control systems recommended for storage of special collections materials.

Of the total sample group, 12 participants (19%) said their institution does not use off-site storage for special collections. When asked if this may occur in the future, four directors (33%) said they anticipate off-site storage use within the next five years. Lack of space was listed as the primary motivation.

Conclusion – Study findings provide evidence for what was previously known anecdotally: planning, coordinating, and managing off-site storage is a significant professional responsibility that will only grow in the future. As primary resources are integrated into research, teaching, and learning activities, the acquisition of special collections materials will continue to grow. Discussions regarding off-site storage workflows and strategic planning will continue as professionals seek compromises that meet the unique needs of acquisition, preservation, and public service.

Commentary

Every day library professionals consider how to make the most of a precious resource: library space. One strategy is investment in off-site storage facilities. The authors stated that the implementation of off-site storage by ARL member libraries increased during the last three decades. Benefits of off-site storage include preservation-quality environmental conditions and convenient storage of materials; challenges are linked to a lack of direct patron access and removal of collections from library stacks (Deardorff & Aamot, 2006).

Despite a large body of professional literature that addresses advantages and challenges connected to off-site storage, few studies explore its impact on special collections. Two notable exceptions are papers by LaFogg and Weideman (2001) and Sundstrand (2008, 2011), which examine the preparation and planning required when relocating archival materials. The study at hand provides evidence for the impact, both positive and negative, of off-site storage on core special collection activities.

The strengths of the study include the suitability of the methodology to the central research question, well-defined criteria for the selection of participants, and the clear presentation of data collection strategies and study findings. The value of the study lies in its uniqueness: through the survey tool, the authors capture observations, thoughts, and opinions regarding the impact of off-site storage on ACRL competencies such as public service, management, preservation, and processing. The findings provide evidence for what was previously known anecdotally and provide a baseline for future studies.

One limitation the reviewer found is that the authors did not provide an operational definition of the term "off-site storage" to survey participants. As this term conjures up varying connotations, a definition may have provided greater clarity. Also, future research including the point of view of staff that do not hold administrative positions would provide insight into the practical aspects of integrating off-site storage into daily responsibilities.

However, the authors acknowledge these limitations and neither impacts the importance of the research findings to the professional community.

As the authors observe, the high response rate indicates that further studies exploring retrieval methods, collection management, and integration of off-site workflows and services are a logical next step. Research projects like these would assist in the development of strategies surrounding retrieval time and delivery, distance, and the perceived loss of browsability (Barclay, 2010). As demands on library space increase, documentation of best practices and strategies linked to off-site storage for special collections is beneficial to both the professional and research communities.

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