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If You've Got It, Flaunt It!: Refocusing a Collection with No Connection

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Abstract

Many libraries have a unique collection within their space that holds value and importance but has lost its connection to the college curriculum and the undergraduate research on campus. These collections may have had different people overseeing them over time or had changes in funding. They might have been created without thinking about the big picture. The paper examines one college library's experience of turning an underused and unfocused collection into a vibrant and relevant part of the library through collaboration with key constituents in the academic and local community and staying true to the mission and vision.

Form Follows Function

Two new librarians. Two inherited collections within the bigger library. One, the Curriculum Materials library (CML), saw its heyday in the 1990s when grants were plentiful, and it had dedicated staff for cataloging, purchasing, and collaboration. The other, the Archives and Special Collections, did not have a mission or a clearly defined collection policy. The CML was not being used in field placement, and Archives and Special Collections was not connected to undergraduate research on campus. Both of these unique collections in the library held value and importance, but both were unconnected to the college curriculum. Overgrown and lacking in vision, both collections lacked focus.

The dictum "Form Follows Function" by the American architect Louis Sullivan serves as a helpful looking glass to re-consider a collection that has lost its focus. What function does a collection have? Does the form or scope of the collection follow its function? These are simple questions but fundamental ones. You can't flaunt your form if you don't know what you have. Thus, two librarians at Keene State College began the process of learning about the community the collections were purposed to support, to renew the mission and vision in order to revitalize and rebuild the collections, and to map the collection to the curriculum to ensure future relevance.

The Wallace E. Mason Library is the main library for Keene State College, a four-year liberal arts institution of roughly 5,000 students. Mason

Library, as part of its mission, has focused a great deal of time and resources to supporting (1) the college's curriculum and (2) undergraduate research. With an unclear focus and function, the Archives and Special Collections as well as the Curriculum Materials Library were not clearly supporting the college curriculum and undergraduate research. Collection form was not following function. These fundamental questions needed to be asked first: What function does the collection have? Does the form or scope of the collection follow its function?

Archives and Special Collections

Efforts to refocus and revitalize the Mason Library Archives & Special Collections came with the hiring of Rodney Obien, the library's first full-time tenure-track Archivist. Obien was hired to oversee a collection of 4,000 volumes of rare and unique books and over 100 linear feet of archival manuscript material, covering an eclectic mix of subjects from New Hampshire history, children's literature, to the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. During his first year, Obien also worked on the completion of a new state-of-the-art archives and special collections facility.

Although it was clear that the quality of the collections was excellent, what was not so clear was the function of the collection. The collections were acquired because they were important and should be preserved and shared. Much less clear was what use or interest, if any, the collections had to students, faculty, and the campus community at Keene State College.

The new mission of the Archives and Special Collections was reconceived to focus on (1) collecting and documenting the history of Keene State College and (2) acquiring and developing collections that support the college's curriculum and undergraduate research. The first step was to review the existing collections to determine how they could be integrated into the curriculum and be used to encourage undergraduate research. The subject that came to mind was the growing campus interest in teaching with Primary Sources.

The concept of *study collections* came to the forefront. The existing collections could be used as ones for professors to offer their students examples of primary sources and how they can be used in research. Over the past 2 years, the History department has made use of the Archives' collection of 18th century New Hampshire documents and manuscripts. Entire classes have been devoted to examining these materials and discussing their uses.

The interest in Primary Sources and the Archives—from such diverse departments as American Studies, English, History, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Journalism, and Women and Gender Studies—has led to an effort to develop a Primary Source Literacy curriculum. The curriculum aims to educate undergraduates on how to identify, analyze, and utilize primary sources in their research and to instill an appreciation for historic and cultural preservation. The instructional sessions would draw from the various holdings in the Archives and Special Collections. The curriculum is currently being beta-tested in classes through the 2012–2013 academic year.

The second step was to revisit the criteria for acquiring and developing new special collections. This necessitated a mandate that all new collections must have a tie to the college curriculum and support undergraduate research. The newest collection, the Modern Poetry Collection, offers the best example of the newfound focus.

The Modern Poetry Collection was established to collect, preserve, and share the poetry and critical works of North American poets of the 20th and

21st centuries. The collection specializes in materials relating to poets, poetry, and small press publishers of the Monadnock region, New Hampshire, and New England. The holdings include over 2,500 volumes of rare and unique poetry publications and over 50 linear feet of papers and manuscripts from several New Hampshire Poet Laureates and poets from New Hampshire and New England.

The Modern Poetry Collection was developed in concert with the English department with the intent of tying the collection to the department's curriculum. English courses are being designed around using the Modern Poetry Collection. The poetry or creative writing courses are utilizing the collection to study, for example, a particular poet or movement, to study the process of writing using original manuscripts, or as “prompts” for creative writing assignments. The Archives has worked with the English faculty to solicit recommendations for acquisitions to support future courses; recent recommendations include environmental poetry and works by Beat and Jazz poets.

The work continues to encourage undergraduates to use the Archives and Special Collections for conducting original research. The strategy is to approach the academic departments asking if there are students interested in doing archival research and matching collections to their interest. Most recently, one student compiled a comprehensive filmography of the New Hampshire film producer Louis de Rochemont using de Rochemont's personal papers and film archives that are housed at Keene State College. This academic year, a group of History majors will be working on transcribing an 18th century New Hampshire property ledger with the hopes of publishing the transcription along with a scholarly essay.

The Archives has also worked to recruit undergraduate interns from various departments, particularly those students who may be interested in pursuing a career in archives or rare books or who are simply interested in having experience working with the materials. And in this area, undergraduate interest has peaked most. Over the past 3 years, the Archives has hosted six

internships from majors hailing English, film studies, and history.

The increased interest by History majors for internships has promoted the History department to develop a formal internship program involving the Archives and Special Collections. The program is two-semester-long. Students will be required to first do a semester-long introductory internship at the Archives, where they learn basic archival methods and theory and apply them to processing collections at the Archives. Second semester, students can continue interning at the Archives or can work at other archival or special collections repositories in the Keene-area.

Curriculum Materials Library

As the Archives and Special Collections were being reframed, it was clear that the curriculum materials library at KSC was in dire need of re-focus and revitalization as well. The collection of over 9,000 items holding pre-kindergarten to grade 12 geography, language arts, mathematics, reading, science, social studies, and school counseling teaching materials was overseen by the newly hired information literacy librarian, Elizabeth Dolinger. Although the collection emphasized practical materials presenting teaching methods and activities, much of the material was outdated both in content and formats. Two-thirds of the collection had a publication date older than 2002. While there were newer items available, these materials were not explicitly connected to, or developed in support of, the curriculum or mission of the Education department at Keene State or to the curriculum in the community classrooms where student teaching is taking place. Most concerning, the resources were in no way aligned with New Hampshire K–12 Common Core State Standards. This was evident in the lack of usage. Less than 20% of the collection had circulated in fiscal year 2012, a number that had only been dropping in the previous 5 years.

Again, the fundamental question needed to be asked: What is the function of the CML? This called for Elizabeth Dolinger along with the collection development librarian, Jennifer Ditzkoff,

to begin to develop a new mission: visit other CMLs to determine best practices and fully realize the function of the collection in collaboration with the Education faculty.

The CML's new mission focused on (1) promoting excellence in pre-kindergarten to grade 12 teacher preparations through the use of quality resources and instruction and in alignment with the Mason Library and Keene State College mission and vision and (2) acquiring and developing collections that support the college's Education and student teacher curriculum to collaboratively develop information for literate, ethical, critical thinkers to teach the next generation of students. The new mission allowed the beginning review of the existing collections to determine how they could be best integrated into the curriculum and be used by undergraduate and graduate student researchers in their field placements.

Through site visits to determine best practices for CMLs, it became clear that the CMLs that were most connected to their college curriculum weren't necessarily the most well-funded or contained the latest and greatest technology. The CMLs that were most connected, and had fully realized functions, were the ones that had a system of collaboration in place. Thus, that connection needed to be rebuilt at Keene State College. The collaborations of the past were built on relationships rather than formal agreements. There were no systems designed to build a vibrant and useful collection based on the curriculum being taught or the K–12 curriculum that the student teachers were being introduced to in their field placements. Therefore, an arrangement needed to be created to ensure ongoing support of the CML.

Each grade-level section of the Education Methods and Materials courses were targeted to designate a representative to become official liaisons to the CML. These liaisons were asked to attend regular meetings, exchange correspondence with the Librarian in charge of the CML, and help with marketing and promotion ideas for the CML. The representatives were also asked to incorporate the required use of the CML materials in an assignment in their course and

supply purchase requests for resources needed to support the Education curriculum.

In return, the increased usage statistics of the CML space and resources would allow greater funding opportunities for furniture and technology in the long term. In the short term, the functional resources in the CML would help the Education department seeking accreditation through the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Focusing on Standard 3 for the upcoming NCATE review cycle would require looking at the resources needed to develop teacher candidates in their field placements and clinical practice.

The new mission and increased collaboration has allowed the CML to determine the function to allow the best form to take shape. Currently, a new collection development policy is being created to ensure that the resources being purchased are actively in support of the curriculum. Student volunteers from the core Methods and Materials courses are earning credit by weeding the outdated materials and giving input about the resources needed during experiential field placement. Connections to key

constituents and stakeholders are being made within the larger community of K–12 teachers where pre-service teachers are being placed. Currently, the CML is being used by more classes and students than it has in 5 years prior.

Conclusion

For those hoping to refocus a collection to revitalize it, the dictum “Form Follows Function” should be useful. Ask yourself: What function does the collection have? Does the form of the collection follow the function? In both the case of the Archives and the CML, the mission was reconceived to align with the Library’s emphasis on the curriculum. Archives and Special Collections refocused on undergraduate research at Keen State College and the CML realigned with student field work. Both unique collections gained a function. The function in turn gave the collections a new means to shape or form its resources in accordance with its function to increase relevance and open the doors to collaboration and continual support from key stakeholders. Finally the form does follow the function, and Mason Library is able to flaunt the form!