

## Against the Grain

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# Optimizing Library Services--Libraries, Librarians, and Disaster Management in the 21st Century

Emy Nelson Decker

*Atlanta University Center*, edecker@auctr.edu

Jennifer Townes

*Atlanta University Center*, jtownes@auctr.edu

Lindsay Johnston

*IGI Global*, ljohnston@igi-global.com

Ann Lupold

*IGI Global*, alupold@igi-global.com

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# Optimizing Library Services — Libraries, Librarians, and Disaster Management in the 21st Century

by **Emy Nelson Decker, MA, MLIS** (Unit Head, E-Learning Technologies, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library) <edecker@auctr.edu>

and **Jennifer Townes** (Unit Head, Information & Research Services, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library) <jtownes@auctr.edu>

Column Editors: **Lindsay Johnston** (Managing Director, IGI Global) <ljohnston@igi-global.com>

and **Ann Lupold** (Promotions Coordinator, IGI Global) <alupold@igi-global.com>

The April 25th, 2015 earthquake that devastated Nepal reminds us that disasters occur whether we are prepared for them or not. While preserving human life is always the primary goal, the way that librarians conceptualize disasters and how they prepare for them determines in large part how our libraries and archives will fare if and when they are hit by a natural or anthropogenic disaster.

The conversation surrounding disaster management and contingency planning in the modern library is fraught. What is a disaster and what constitutes one from the standpoint of a library or archive? The definition of a disaster is an unpredictable event; anything from a burst pipe, a fire, a hurricane. A single burst pipe within a building that sends water rushing into the basement level of an archive can prove just as damaging to a rare books collection as can the aftermath of a major regional disaster such as Hurricane Katrina.

Problems can arise when spaces not originally intended for libraries and collections become repurposed to these ends. On an academic campus, how often has an older building been repurposed to hold some of the library's or archive's most precious treasures? With budgets being what they are, and often suffering from additional annual reductions, it is increasingly common that professionals must do what they can to maximize the space they are provided. Unfortunately, sometimes these spaces are perilous to both the safety of the staff and to the longevity of the collections.

Decades of small but devastating problems have plagued libraries, such as a compromised roof or a rodent infestation. We have unfortunately also seen the impact of malicious anthropogenic disasters (wars, September 11th, etc.) that have demonstrated to librarians, archivists, and museum professionals the need to protect resources from threats that originate from the deliberate actions of humans. Prevention of disaster is frequently more cost-effective than repair, and planning ahead is a good direction for a library to take. It is this concept that we hope compels librarians to take note and develop a plan before an event occurs.

Our forthcoming title, *Handbook of Research on Disaster Management and Contingency Planning in Modern Libraries*, moves beyond the plethora of traditional disaster planning manuals currently available to those

librarians and archivists tasked with creating a disaster plan. It provides case studies and contemporary theory that elucidates the responses — both positive and negative — that libraries have had to disasters ranging in both type as well as scale. In addition, the *Handbook* focuses on incidents and theory developed since the year 2000, as well as disaster planning in developing countries.

While manuals are unequivocally essential to informing a disaster plan, they have a tendency to be static and provide idealized responses to specifically described categories of disaster. This new volume complements the strategies outlined in these books by offering an essential compendium of case studies. These case studies provide a description of disaster plans developed — as well as those plans that need to be revised — and introduce new theories and methods of mitigating the impact of the disaster, whatever type and scale it may be. The reader is offered a rare glimpse into the features of plans as well as information as to why they worked or why they did not. By describing actual disaster events that have taken place since the year 2000, and by looking at the results of the disaster plans in action, the reader is allowed an unusual forensic view of what happened before, during, and immediately following many different types and scales of disasters.

The international scope of the volume provides a context that examines the nature of problems that can befall a library or archive when it is situated in a developing nation. As opposed to existing literature that focuses more upon the ways in which the first world addresses disasters, the *Handbook* includes responses developing nations have had to a variety of disasters in already tenuous situations. These obstacles to mitigation are often not considered, and perhaps, too, these examples will provide valuable points of comparison for librarians familiar only with the profession from an epistemological standpoint situated within North America.

The *Handbook of Research on Disaster Management and Contingency Planning in Modern Libraries* provides the reader a step-by-step method for considering disasters and their impacts from the steps involved in preparing a disaster plan, to surviving a disaster, to the takeaways and lessons librarians and archivists have learned from their involvement with

any given disaster. The chapters collectively acknowledge the need for service continuity in any library setting and introduce plans for coordinating emergency responses, steps to take, the creation and revision of disaster plans, and the role of new technologies in enhancing both the library's and the community's recovery. This information should be of value to any person working in a library or archive. Chapters in the volume also emphasize the need to consider staff safety when creating disaster plans and give due consideration to ways in which libraries can create plans for unforeseen situations. Further, the volume also explores the potential emotional impacts of disasters on library staff and patrons, and guidance is offered for library staff members who might someday find themselves in the role of curator for a temporary shrine following a traumatic event. The ephemera surrounding traumatic events require a special handling or archiving all of its own, and these objects, imbued with human emotions, must be treated in a careful and respectful way as they are preserved.

Any type of contingency planning for libraries is important because we are building more and more evidence that preparedness is possible, even if prevention is not. What we can do, with some degree of success, is prepare the one variable over which we do have control — ourselves. Ideally, disaster planning should be second nature to library and archives staff. We can better arm ourselves by fostering a culture of responsibility, appropriate training, and a dynamic disaster plan. These things will prove much more effective and useful in any disaster situation than a thick manual full of "what if" situations.

What is needed in many libraries and archives is a change in organizational culture surrounding the discussion of disaster and their impact. Many libraries and archives seem to adopt an "it won't happen to us" or "let's hope for the best" kind of approach with disaster plans. More often than not, these disaster plans are tucked in a drawer somewhere and are many years out of date and do not accurately reflect current staff. While no one wants to be tasked with thinking about impending doom, this volume demonstrates that just a little bit of forethought can alleviate some of the worst possible outcomes. Readers will learn from the experiences of others, reconsider the ways in which they think about disaster, and hopefully create or redesign their library or archive's disaster plan. 🌱

