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It's Raining in the Archives: Practical Lessons and Impactful Results from Moving an Academic Archives

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Cover Page Footnote

This article was originally scheduled to be presented as a conference session at the Western Archivists Meeting in San Francisco in April 2020. The conference was ultimately canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's Raining in the Archives: Practical Lessons and Impactful Results from Moving an Academic Archives

Maurice R. Blackson
Julia Stringfellow

ABSTRACT

This article explores the move of the Central Washington University Archives and Special Collections (CWUASC) to a new location from the fourth floor to the second floor of the James E. Brooks Library in 2018. The history of the CWUASC, reasons for the move, the planning and designing of the new space, the actual move of the collection by the archives staff, lessons learned, and the impact of the move in reaching a larger audience of faculty, staff, students, and the general public are described. A review of literature on other moves of archives and special collections is also provided.

Introduction

The space that housed the Central Washington University Archives and Special Collections (CWUASC), established in 2005, experienced several challenges such as ceiling leaks, shelves housing collections and books filled to capacity, and a remote location in a corner of the upper floor of the James E. Brooks Library. The water leaks steadily increased until ceiling tiles collapsed in December 2017. The expense of moving the CWUASC was far less than replacing the roof of the library building, and plans to move the archives to a more visible location on the second floor began in January 2018 with an anticipated start date of April 2018. The actual move took place in August 2018 and continued over the next month when it was completed just days before the new academic year began. This article will explore the history of the CWUASC, planning for the move and designing the new space, the actual move of the collection by the archives staff, lessons learned, and the impact of the move in reaching a larger audience of faculty, staff, students, and the general public. A review of literature on other moves of archives and special collections is also provided.

Literature Review

Publications reviewed for this article span 1990-2017 and share the same themes: the need for pre-move planning, logistics involved in the move itself, and problems encountered and suggestions for improvements. The five publications reviewed all provide practical and very helpful steps for planning and conducting of a move, along with results. The 1990 article “Moving an Archives” shares that up to that point, very little had been written about the actual move of an archives. The author interviews ten archives of different types on how they conducted their moves. Takeaways from the interviews include planning and execution as the two major activities of the move, and planning can never begin too early.¹

A shelf-survey is noted as one of the first steps in conducting a move to assess the current location, size, and condition of the collections that will be relocated.² Determining what collections will move to the new space and if any will stay in the current space, how labelling of the boxes to be moved will be handled, and whether to maintain the shelving structure and what types of shelving to use are other key factors in planning a move. The occurrence of unanticipated problems was a theme among all the archives interviewed and a common issue was shelving, whether it was delayed in delivery and installation, wrong size, or not enough for the new space.³

The pros and cons of whether to outsource the move or do it in-house are also discussed. Handling reference services during the move (does the reference desk close or remain open in some capacity during the move?) and keeping patrons informed of changes in hours and location are also important to keep in mind during a move. Of the archives surveyed, all reported their move as being overall successful, all had experienced delays with an aspect of the move, and being heavily involved in the design of the new space was important in the success of the move.⁴ Despite its age, Morrow’s article was incredibly helpful to read for the 2018 move of the CWU Archives due to its practical advice and sharing of lessons learned. It will benefit other archives who are planning a move of their repository.

Another helpful article for providing insight on the dos and don'ts of preparing to move an archives is “Shifting the Sands of Time: Moving an Archive” from 2000. It describes the move of the National Archives of Australia from an old building to a new one. The critical importance of the Project Supervisor in overseeing the move is described.⁵ Surveying the collections and their condition to determine what will go in

1. Mary Frances Morrow, “Moving an Archives,” *The American Archivist* 53, no. 3 (1990): 422.
2. *Ibid*, 423.
3. *Ibid*, 426.
4. *Ibid*, 430.
5. Ted Ling, “Shifting the Sands of Time: Moving an Archive,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 21, no. 2 (2000): 169.

the new building is also key. The description of how to move different formats is also very helpful. Questions to ask potential moving companies are also listed. The author's advice that following the move, the most important priority is getting everything and everyone back to normal as quickly as possible is very useful.⁶ As Ling states in the conclusion, when the move is all over, the project supervisor should share about their repository's experiences with the move, both the good and the bad.⁷ His article was helpful in describing the critical steps of an archives move as well as providing the perspective of a repository on another continent.

The 2002 book *Moving Archives: The Experiences of Eleven Archivists* documents the experiences of archives of different types and sizes throughout the country who moved their repositories. The archivists share the size and features of their collections, why the move was needed, the planning stages, coordination of the move, and the decision whether to hire a moving company or do the move in-house. The very practical advice, such as the need to interview moving companies and determine before the move how the company bills, measuring shelving to ensure it will accommodate all the collections with room to grow, and labeling the collections that will be moved, is very helpful. The interviewees sharing in the first person makes the work sound more informal and personal. Acknowledging the delays in moving and how the staff adapted is also helpful.

The 2010 article "History on the Move: Relocating Special Collections and Archives" describes the move conducted by the Special Collections Research Center of the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). The library completed a massive renovation and expansion in 2009, and as a unit within the library, Special Collections staff met with architects and library administration during the planning process to share their needs regarding security, environmental controls, and shelving for the collections.⁸ The Special Collections staff surveyed the collection and its two storage sites after the space layout was determined. Priorities for what collections would move were established. An outside moving company was hired to move the collections.

All SIUC staff in the Special Collections, regardless of job title, contributed to the steps of the move that included cleaning and dusting, labeling boxes, creating shelf lists, and moving boxes. Before the move began, the new space and shelving were thoroughly cleaned of dust and dirt that occurred during the renovation.⁹ Once the move was completed, a final survey was conducted of the old space to ensure that no

6. Ibid, 179.

7. Ibid, 180.

8. Pamela Hackbart-Dean, Leah Agne, and Julie Mosbo, "History on The Move: Relocating Special Collections and Archives," *Provenance* 28 (2010): 33.

9. Ibid, 38.

collections, staff files, or equipment had been left behind.¹⁰ The authors also note that the move was conducted with serious budget limitations and how security of the collection was enforced during the move. The renovation resulted in the Special Collections having more storage space, separate workrooms for processing and digital projects, and more offices for its staff.

A more current article on moving an archives is the 2017 “Rethinking Special Collections Moves as Opportunities, Not Obstacles.” The article chronicles the move of the Marian Library within the larger University of Dayton Libraries system. The repository faced several challenges that made its move necessary, such as drastic fluctuations in temperature and humidity, shelves filled to capacity with its collections, and lack of security for the room where the collections were stored.¹¹ The entire process of the move, from the beginning stages of planning to completing the move, spanned from spring 2016 to fall 2017.¹² The authors acknowledge the minimal amount of literature on moving an archives or special collections, as Morrow did in her article 27 years earlier.

Opportunities the authors describe in moving their special collections include improving the physical space, ongoing communication with stakeholders, and providing better conditions for the collections as a result of the move. In their move, the Marian Library prioritized which collections would move to the new space since it was not large enough to accommodate all of them. Reviewing legacy practices and updating their access policies and improving security was another opportunity for moving to a new space.¹³ Communicating with stakeholders of the project such as patrons, departments across the university, and library colleagues was also integral in the move going smoothly.¹⁴ Planning an open house event to enable these stakeholders to view the new space and talk with the special collections staff about the treasures was another way to continue communication with these key groups of people.¹⁵

The opportunity of providing better conditions for the collections was accomplished with basic steps during a move such as flagging items that needed conservation work, having two staff members work on moving items at the same time, and involving other staff in the move which was a top priority.¹⁶ The authors do

10. Ibid, 51.

11. Colleen Hoelscher and Sarah Burke Cahalan, "Rethinking Special Collections Moves as Opportunities, Not Obstacles," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 18, no. 2 (2017): 123.

12. Ibid, 123.

13. Ibid, 126.

14. Ibid, 127.

15. Ibid, 127.

16. Ibid, 130.

an excellent job in laying out the steps they undertook for a successful move and describing it as a positive experience rather than one that can seem extremely overwhelming and exhausting.

The publications reviewed for this article were useful for the CWUASC staff as they prepared for the move. Despite the best of planning, learning how another repository conducted their move inevitably added more items to the list of steps to take in undertaking a successful archives move.

History of the Central Washington University Archives and Special Collections

The Central Washington University Archives and Special Collections (CWUASC) was established in 2005 as “the repository for official and unofficial records that document the history of the university. It therefore serves as a regional repository to house, preserve, and promote the unique cultural history of central Washington” (<http://www.lib.cwu.edu/Archives-Special-Collections>). The regional history collection encompasses the eight counties east of the Cascade Mountains that include Benton, Chelan, Douglas, Grant, Kittitas, Klickitat, Okanogan, and Yakima counties. In addition to the university archives and regional history multi-disciplinary focus, the third collecting area is that of rare and unique books that focus on the Pacific Northwest and by regional authors.

The university was founded as the Washington State Normal School in 1891 to educate future elementary and junior high teachers (<http://www.cwu.edu/about/history>). The earliest documentation found in the CWUASC regarding the need to establish an official archives for the university appears in 1970 with the creation of an Archives Definition Committee.¹⁷ Though the committee met several times and discussion continued for over five years, the end decision was that the establishment was a low priority and the college administration could not financially support creating and maintaining one.¹⁸ Until the official archives was founded and was assigned a space on the fourth floor of the James E. Brooks Library, departments retained their own records, rare books were located throughout the library's main stacks or housed in a locked room, and records mandated to be kept permanently by the state were stored in the Central Branch of the Washington State Archives located across the street from the CWU campus. These permanent records and books were slowly moved to the archives while collections on regional history began to be sought out and acquired after the official repository was founded. The staffing of the

17. Archives Definition Committee Minutes, June 24, 1970, Central Washington University Archives Vertical File Collection, Central Washington University Archives and Special Collections, Ellensburg, Washington.

18. Correspondence from Jennifer Jacues to Richard Waddle, August 5, 1975, Central Washington University Archives Vertical File Collection, Central Washington University Archives and Special Collections, Ellensburg, Washington.

CWUASC began with a university archivist and student workers. The current staff consist of two faculty members, a staff member, and student assistants and interns.

The archives are housed in the James E. Brooks Library on the university's main campus. Built in 1974, the four-story structure also contains an upper mezzanine level. The building was last remodeled in 1997, lighting and HVAC remodeled in 2000, and the roof replaced in 2004.¹⁹ The physical location of CWUASC, tucked away in a corner of the fourth floor of the library, was the space previously used for a television lounge. The space was small, totaling 2,052 square feet that included the reading room, faculty and staff office areas, shelving for collections, and a small processing room where archives supplies were also stored. The area designated as the reading room was 423 square feet and had space for only two tables, the reference desk, and a small corner cubicle used as a faculty office. The shelves that housed the collections totaled 850 linear feet and were in the same open space as the reading room, making it difficult to discourage browsing by patrons that walked



Figure 1. CWU Archives Reading Room, October 2017.

19. Lauren M. Walton, *Building a History: Evaluation of Central Washington University Campus Buildings to Determine Eligibility for Listing on the National Register of Historic Places* (Ellensburg, WA: Central Washington University, 2015), 209.

in the door wanting to see the archives. The space was also not large enough to host an entire class, so instruction sessions were done in a separate classroom and students were shown the archives briefly at the end of the session by crowding into the small space. By 2017, the shelves were filled to capacity with books and collections. Increased space was needed to accommodate new acquisitions. The CWU Archives had outgrown its space.

An added challenge began when water appeared on the reading room tables in 2015, having leaked from the ceiling. The cause was determined that when the campus Facilities department switched from air conditioning to heat for the year, coolant was leaking because the air handlers were mounted over the Archives space. The CWUASC staff began monitoring the ceiling and any water leaks closely. Small leaks typically occurred twice a year, then became so severe in 2017 that the ceiling tiles in the area collapsed. There was a dire need to relocate the CWUASC and save its collections.



Figures 2 and 3. Ceiling leak in CWU Archives, October 2017 (left). Ceiling leak in CWU Archives, December 2017 (right).

While this was occurring in late 2017/early 2018, the second floor of the library was being transformed into a group study and a library commons area. It was previously the periodicals floor with a periodical reading area and shelves of bound periodicals filling the rest of the floor. The bound periodicals were transferred to storage to make room for the group study area. The CWUASC unit kept the library administration apprised of the leaking in the archives space during this time, and with no inexpensive solution to stop the leaking besides putting a new roof on the library and removing the air handlers temporarily to repair the leak (an estimated cost of \$500,000-\$1,000,000), it was decided the CWUASC would move to the space the periodicals reading room had occupied. The move would place the CWUASC in a more visible and trafficked location on the second floor next to the main library

stairwell. The new space was also adjacent to the digital initiatives room where the scanning of archival material for the institutional repository ScholarWorks (<https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/>) took place.

Planning for the Move and Designing the New Space

The plans for the move of the entire CWUASC, including its collections and faculty and staff offices, was a continuous collaboration between the unit, library administration, the campus' Facilities department, and vendors providing necessary supplies for the space, such as U/V filters for the windows and lights and a partition wall to separate the collections space. Funding to facilitate the move was extremely limited; furniture and shelving was repurposed from other areas of the library, and the bulk of the work fell to the two faculty members, staff member, and student assistants of the CWUASC. The dimensions of the new space on the second floor were measured (double the space of the CWUASC on the fourth floor) and a floor plan for where the collections would be housed and the reading room was designed by the Senior Lecturer faculty archivist. The flaws of the previous archives space helped guide the decisions and form of the new space. The floor plan draft was shared with Facilities with the assumption they would have someone design a professional blueprint based on the pencil sketch. Ultimately, one carpenter was assigned to the project and used the sketch to create the new space. Throughout the design and move process, the sketch was taped to one of the columns in the new area to guide both Facilities and CWUASC staff as to where things went.

A critical element different from the previous space was the separation of the collections area from the reading room. Space needed for shelving was allocated with room to accommodate future collections and a soft wall partition six feet tall with a locking door was ordered to separate the areas and provide security to the collections space and ensure it was not accessible to patrons. The collections area was large enough to provide storage space for archives supplies that were previously mostly stored in the compact shelving of the archive's storage room housed on the first floor of the library. The most regularly used collections would be housed with the rare and unique books in the collections area, while less requested collections were stored in the locked space on the first floor. Other necessary elements included purchasing and installing film over the windows that blocked out U/V rays as well as filters over the lights. New blinds were ordered for all the exterior windows, and new carpeting was installed to replace the decades-old carpeting in the space. The setup of the faculty and staff office areas was also determined. The main area was large enough for both the reading room and processing area.

The design of the reading room area followed best practices and guidelines. The reading room for an archives has traditionally been where researchers study archival materials. The uniqueness and rarity of these materials requires the archives reading room to have stricter guidelines and be more closely monitored than general reading areas of a library. When designing a reading room for an archive or special collections, there are several factors to consider for a successful and useful reading

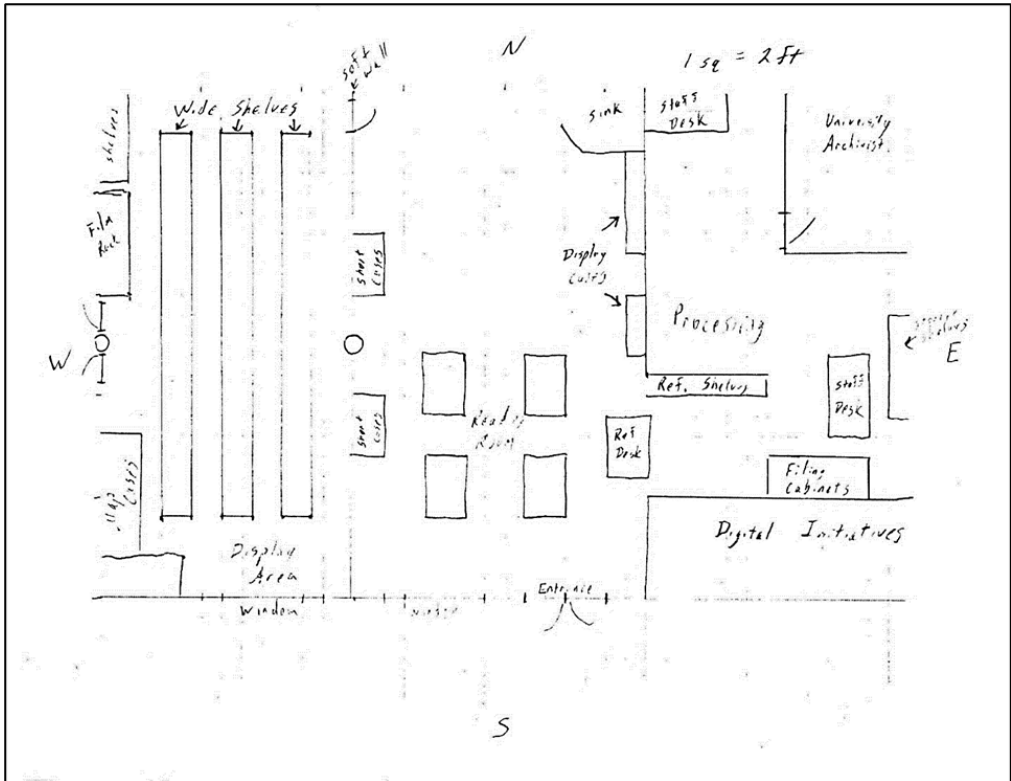


Figure 4. Sketch of new space layout for the CWU Archives, design by M.R. Blackson.

room. These include space, furniture, and décor. The reading room should be comfortable and secure with space for multiple researchers and staff to work in the same area but not be cramped. The reading room area was large enough for six tables and allowed a patron to have a table to themselves. In designing the reading room, the needs of both researchers and staff were noted. The reading room was designed so that the reference desk was facing the tables used by patrons with easy sight of the door as well as the reference computer that was for patron use. The Society of American Archivists website provides the Facilities and Equipment best practices for designing an archive and reading room, and these guided the design (<https://www2.archivists.org/node/14805>).

With the design of the new space completed in spring 2018, the next few months were a time of waiting to see when work on the new space would begin and shelving would be installed. Trophies and other artifacts housed in display cases were packed in early summer in anticipation of the move soon occurring. The CWU Archives faculty and staff packed up their offices leaving out items they needed before the move occurred. The Archives continued its reference hours throughout the summer with the challenge of a cramped space with packed boxes. As the summer went on

and the academic year was fast approaching, the CWUASC staff were eager to start the move.

Process of the Move

The move of the CWUASC space was originally scheduled for April 2018. There were several delays in the move due to Facilities having other projects across campus and needing to set up shelving and offices in the new space. The previous CWUASC space had already been reassigned as the new Athletics Tutoring Center, and those staff were eager to have their new space designed and available to move in. As summer went on and the start of the academic year was just a month away, the interim library dean and the campus athletics director alerted university administration of the dire need for the moves to happen. The installation of shelving began and furniture was moved finally in August 2018. As this was taking place, the CWUASC unit emailed out to the library asking for any spare carts to store books for the move. When the shelves that housed the books were emptied, the CWUASC staff moved them down to the second floor for Facilities to install in the new space.

When this part was completed, the CWUASC faculty and staff began bringing the book collection down on carts, and placing it in the new shelves, keeping the Library of Congress call number order of the books intact. The labelling of carts was critical in keeping the order of the books the same. It took far longer to move the book collection than the archival and manuscripts collections! Student assistants and staff from all over the library also pitched in to move books and collections. From start to finish, it took about a month to move everything to the new space. There was a CWUASC staff member in the area at all times to oversee the process of moving books and collections and ensuring non-archives staff and students were handling the materials properly and keeping them in order. During this time, the Archives closed and did not provide reading room hours. This was communicated through both the Archives and library's social media, a notice in the daily email on university news that went out to the campus, and signage on the doors of the old and new spaces of the Archives.

The soft wall that separated the collections from the reading room area was one of the last things to be installed and was completed by an outside contractor. An issue with the space was the unevenness of the floor from one area of the collections to the other and the challenge of installing a locked door on the uneven space. The contractors even considered not installing a door, which was a requirement to instill the security of the collections. The intervention of the interim library dean stating this was a "must" finally resulted in a door with a lock (with two keys available only to CWUASC staff) being installed.

Results of the Archives in a More Visible Location

The first and most obvious result of the move was the increase in space for the CWU Archives. The overall area was 3,000 square feet, an increase of 1,000 square

feet from the old area. The reading room was 620 square feet, an increase of 200 square feet from the previous reading room, and did not share the space with a faculty office. There was now 1,200 linear feet of shelving to store collections, an increase of 30 percent from the previous shelving area.

By the start of the academic year in September 2018, the entire CWU Archives, its collections, and offices had been moved out of its previous location and to the second floor. The Athletics Tutoring Center that occupied the former Archives space, hastily moved into its new location and set up before the first day of classes. As the Archives staff and its student assistants continued to unpack boxes and set up their new space and reading room, curious onlookers would stop in and ask what the new space was and where Periodicals had moved. This was an opportunity to tell people about the Archives and its resources. Display cases containing athletics trophies, rare children's books from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and other university and regional memorabilia were housed throughout the reading room and patrons were encouraged to look at them and ask questions. Reading room hours were expanded from 10am-2pm Monday through Friday to staying open until 3pm to accommodate the expected increase of patrons. The door was open during reading room hours and patrons were encouraged to enter and view the area. The collections space was now separated by a partition wall with a locked door increasing the security and ensuring it was inaccessible to patrons.

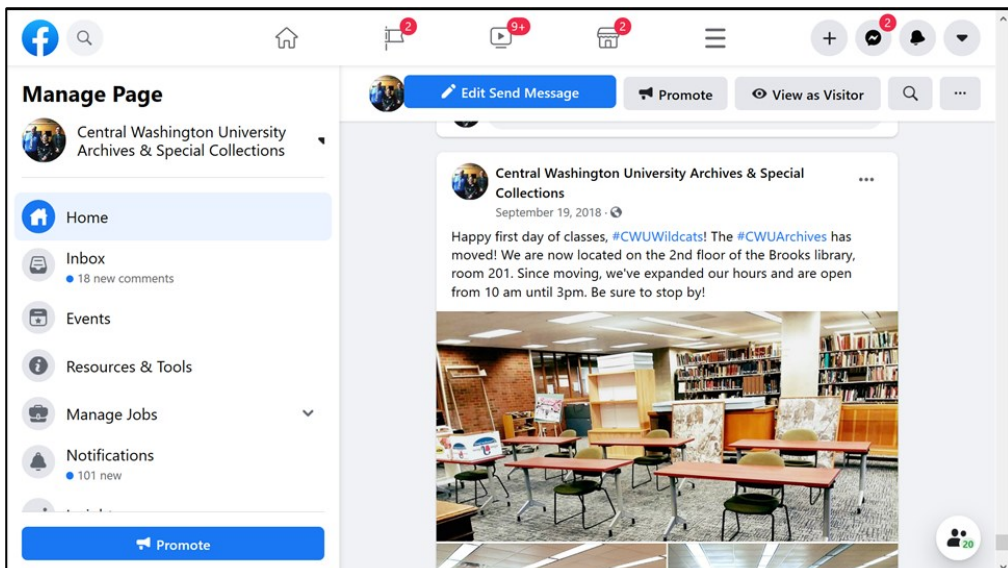


Figure 5. CWU Archives Facebook post from September 19, 2018 noting the new space and first day of classes.

In addition to the increased foot traffic and number of patrons, classes that had instruction sessions with the Archives could now meet in the space. Classes from the History, Philosophy and Religious Studies, Anthropology, and Museum Studies departments requested instruction each quarter to learn about the Archives and its resources, specifically primary sources.

Events could now be held in the CWU Archives. The first events took place in October 2018, the month also being American Archives Month (<https://www2.archivists.org/initiatives/american-archives-month-the-power-of-collaboration>). The inaugural one was the Annual Ellensburg Archives and Museums Crawl the first Saturday of the month. Previously, tour guests had been crammed into the space. Now artifacts and other treasures from collections were displayed on the tables in the reading room, there was adequate space for chairs, and guests could tour the area without bumping into each other. The second event was the reception celebrating the new space that was open to the university and community members. The program and refreshments occurred in a space across the hall from the Archives and then guests could enter the Archives (leaving food and drink at the door) and tour the stacks and view collection highlights displayed on the reading room tables.



Figure 6. CWU Archives showcasing collections for the reception honoring its new space, October 2018.

The use of social media was powerful in promoting the new space and its features. Throughout the summer, posts were shared on Facebook and Instagram, the social media platforms used by the CWU Archives. The posts provided updates on packing up the collection, progress on the new space with carpet and shelving installation, and then the progress of the move and how the space looked on the first day of classes.

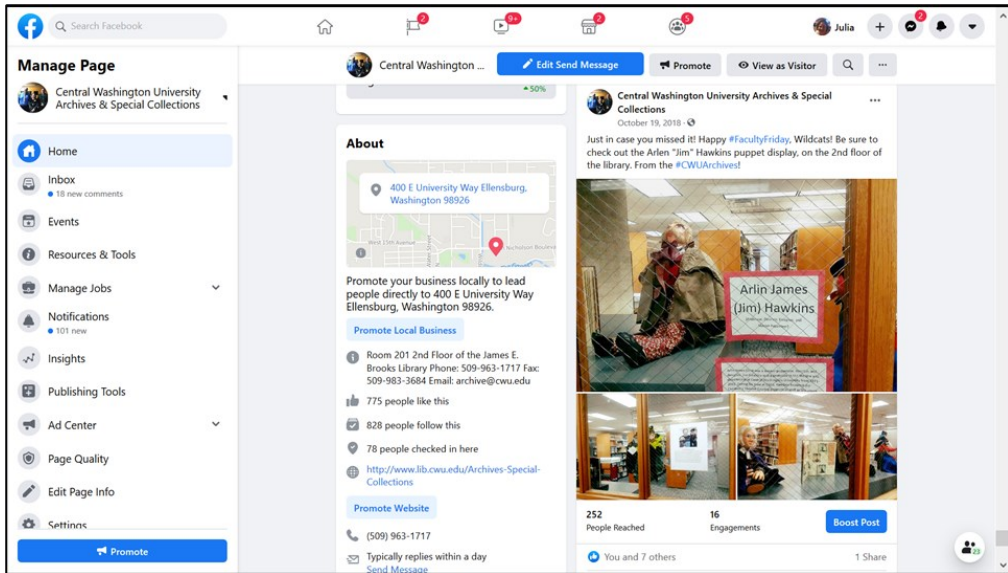


Figure 7. CWU Archives Facebook page post on October 19, 2018 showing display of puppets in the museum area of the Archives.

The new space has interior windows that overlooks the collections area. Map cases containing oversize materials were placed under the windows to create a space for displays that became very popular with the students. The displays are designed by student assistants with advice from staff. Display themes included CWU sports history and parallel sports seasons, student activities and traditions, a collection of puppets designed by a former Theatre faculty member (Figure 7), and artifacts from local mining towns.

The new space was also ideal to show potential donors considering whether to donate a collection to the CWU Archives or another repository. Local poet and publisher Jampa Dorje had the idea of collecting books by regional authors and donating them to the CWU Archives. He was pleased upon seeing the new space in Fall 2018 and being able to access it more easily rather than going to a remote corner on the library's fourth floor. He frequently came to the new space to ask questions and learn how books in Archives and Special Collections were housed. He began donating books in 2019 and a bookcase next to the reference desk was deemed the

location for his collection of books. The donation was celebrated with a talk and reception in October 2019. The program and reception were held in another space on the floor, with books on display in the Archives reading room where patrons (sans food and drink) could browse the books, talk with the donor, and learn more about the collection. The free event was open to the university and local community, leading to other regional authors learning of the collection and donating their works to it.



Figure 8. October 2019 reception in the new space of the CWU Archives honoring the "High Mountain Valley Local Authors Collection" donation.

Lessons Learned

The move of the CWU Archives was successful due to the coordination of the stakeholders involved which included library administration, faculty, staff, and student assistants, as well as CWU Facilities staff and outside vendors who installed

the partition wall and locked door. The CWU Archives, in addition to its staff of three, had a student assistant during the summer and then a student assistant, intern, and graduate assistant who helped pack materials, move them to the second floor, and then unpack boxes and arrange the collections space and reading room area. The work of the students was closely overseen by the Archives staff. The library administration was kept continuously in the loop on the move and its progress with the administrative specialist communicating regularly with vendors regarding when supplies would arrive and workers would be onsite to install the partition wall. The interim dean and associate dean also helped with the move by moving collections and books to the new space and arranging them. Other library faculty and staff also assisted with moving collections and loaned their student assistants when possible.

The CWU Archives was at the mercy of Facilities, and their top priority during the summer was ensuring residence halls were ready for students in the fall. We had to learn patience due to the long wait to begin the actual move and the delays along the way. The project of moving to the new space was pushed back several times. Being flexible and ready to go when it was finally time in late August was an added challenge in moving the archives.

Advice for anyone planning a move is to plan early and consider all the minute details. Be flexible and deal with issues as they happen. Research what others have done and make a detailed plan. Coordinate carefully with others involved in the move. Be prepared to communicate the special needs of collections and how to safely move fragile and unique materials safely. Moving of physical special collections and archival collections needs to be done carefully and methodically to protect the items and maintain their order. Make a plan and train your staff how to carefully move the materials in your collections.

The relocation of the CWU Archives only involved moving between two floors within the same building, but we had to coordinate with the CWU Facilities department and outside vendors. Moving to a new building would involve even more planning and coordination between outsourced movers and vendors. A detailed plan should be shared with any entities involved in the move. Be ready to deal with problems as they arise. Be prepared to revise timelines and try to be flexible as things happen that are beyond your control. Plan for problems and be prepared to handle unforeseen issues as they arise.

Conclusion

The move had several benefits for the CWUASC and the greater campus community. The collections are now safely away from leaking ceilings and beyond the reach of patrons wanting to browse shelves of delicate and rare books. The new reading room is inviting, spacious and its location on the very busy second floor enables many more drop-in patrons. The space enables faculty to hold instruction sessions in the archives. Patrons can also see the processing area and staff can demonstrate how collections are processed and described. Patron traffic has also

increased since the move. In 2016 before the move, there were 12 instruction sessions and 190 in-person patron visits to CWUASC. In 2019 one year after the move, there were 24 instruction sessions and 209 in-person patron visits. These successes in improving the CWU Archives made the move even more worthwhile despite the delays along the way.

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