

# The Hybrid Conservator

## Challenges in a Research Library Environment

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*As new preservation programs emerge, many research libraries can afford to hire only one conservation professional, a “hybrid conservator,” whose position description includes oversight of batched, mass production treatments (usually for circulating collections) and execution of single item treatments (usually for special collections). In order to determine some of the most frequent and persistent challenges facing this relatively new strain of conservation professional, an informal survey was developed and distributed to members of the American Library Association’s preservation administrators’ online discussion group (PADG). The results of this survey, albeit limited, indicate several distinct challenges facing those in hybrid conservator positions, centering on the variety of administrative duties that take time away from high-end treatment activities preferred by many conservators. This paper discusses the most pressing concerns of the respondents and proposes solutions to some of the most common challenges facing the hybrid conservator.*

As the field of library and archives conservation continues to develop nearly forty years after its commonly agreed upon date of inception as a profession,<sup>1</sup> many institutions with long established preservation departments employ large workforces to meet the physical needs of their collections. Staff in a typical mature book and paper conservation laboratory include special collections conservators and technicians, general collections conservators and technicians, reformatting experts, and various support personnel.<sup>2</sup> Preservation professionals in these institutions have successfully demonstrated the benefits of preservation to library directors, and their achievements have been noted by institutions hoping to emulate the more established conservation programs.

As the importance of having a preservation program continues to gain acceptance among research library directors, institutions with holdings in the two to five million volume range are adding preservation staff and formalizing programs in hopes of someday boasting a mature, vibrant preservation program with adequate staff to meet most of the needs of the collections.

According to Merrill-Oldham, Morrow, and Roosa in their 1991 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) report *Preservation Program Models*, staffing models for a mature preservation program for an ARL library with two to three million volumes should include a preservation librarian, a chief conservator, and three to six conservation technicians. In an ARL library with three to five million volumes, the conservation staff in a mature program should include a chief conservator, one to two conservators, and four to eight technicians.<sup>3</sup>

While these models seem realistic for mature programs, staffing levels may be lower in an emerging program in a library with two to five million volumes. Often restricted by tight finances and limited resources, these medium-sized

research libraries may employ one conservator to manage both general and special collections conservation in a laboratory designed for both purposes. Such positions, which combine the roles of two increasingly distinct library conservation specialties, have led to a third type of conservation professional: the “hybrid” conservator, a supervising library and archives conservation professional whose position description includes oversight of batched, mass production treatments (usually for circulating collections) and execution of single item treatments (usually for special collections). This paper will discuss the main challenges of the hybrid conservator; that is, one who has dual responsibilities, and recommend ways to create a more agreeable working environment.

### The Split Personality of the Hybrid Conservator

The field of library and archives conservation has matured enough that two distinct types of library conservators have emerged: the general collections conservator and the special collections conservator. Many conservators in large institutions focus on either general or special collections; as a result, the literature reflects the development of unique methods for treatment in each of these specialties. The author found no resources that specifically address the treatment skills of the hybrid conservator. A person in this position must look to resources such as the *Journal for the American Institute for Conservation* and *Book and Paper Group Annual* for current information about special collections conservation techniques. Similarly, many published handbooks show general conservation book repair techniques.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group, which meets at American Institute for Conservation (AIC) meetings, addresses many of the challenges of general collections conservators.

However, an extensive search of preservation literature spanning the last fifteen years uncovered nothing that specifically addresses the challenges faced by the hybrid conservator. This paper seeks to provide solutions as the hybrid conservator, merging special collections and general collections approaches, finds a way to cope with the “split personality” the position requires.

A typical job posting for such a conservator for a new or small program exemplifies the wide range of tasks facing the successful applicant. Job advertisements for hybrid positions were collected and analyzed for shared characteristics.

The author examined all advertisements appearing between January 1993 and August 2003 in two of the most common resources a conservator seeking employment would consult: the Conservation Online distribution list (<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu>) and the *Abbey Newsletter*.

In order to qualify as a hybrid job, positions had to include the treatment of both general and special collections library materials by the conservator in the same lab space. Twenty-one total qualifying postings appeared during this period; fourteen were unique and seven were duplicates, as some institutions advertised the same position multiple times during the survey period without significant variations in job duties. Searches in other publications, such as the *AIC Newsletter*, did not result in additional job advertisements that were not already present in the two sources consulted. The number of times sixteen different duties appeared in these fourteen postings is presented in table 1.

The analysis determined that, in addition to treating both general and special collections materials, this hybrid position is often responsible for:

- Supervising a small workforce of usually no more than two to three FTE (full-time equivalent) staff and one to two FTE students or volunteers
- Engaging in quality control
- Overseeing disaster preparedness and response procedures
- Ordering supplies
- Keeping ARL preservation statistics
- Maintaining laboratory equipment
- Coordinating environmental monitoring activities
- Serving on library and universitywide committees
- Becoming active in the profession at a regional and national level

Given these many tasks, the hybrid conservator is faced with a number of time management issues that, if not addressed properly, may lead to loss of effectiveness, burnout, and frustration.

### The General Collections Conservator

General or circulating collections conservators are responsible for the care and protection of a large quantity of materials, most of which may be checked out by patrons and removed from the library premises during use. Reflecting the sophistication of a large research library system, a general collections conservation department customarily receives damaged materials from many branch and departmental libraries. From the fourteen position descriptions and additional searches on the Web sites of advertising institutions, the author determined that the institutions seeking a hybrid conservator had between three and fourteen branches, with an average of six. Unless strict guidelines are in place, most conservation laboratories could receive much more work than they are able to handle. In order to effectively meet the needs of so many libraries, collections conservators use managerial and mass production approaches,

**Table 1.** Duties for hybrid conservator positions advertised 1993–2003 (n=14)

Duty in job description	Number of occurrences
Treatment of general collections	14
Treatment of special collections	14
Supervise/train staff	11
Supervise/train students	11
Establish treatment specifications and quality control procedures	10
Establish treatment priorities and workflows	9
Participate in disaster preparedness/recovery	9
Participate in outreach to library staff and beyond	7
Order supplies	5
Keep statistics	5
Participate in special projects	5
Maintain equipment	3
Undertake collection surveys	2
Participate in environmental monitoring	2
Cooperate in state and regional groups	2
Manage budget	1

including batching similar repairs for more efficient treatment, precutting supplies and materials used in treatment, and overseeing workflow management to most effectively match the skills of workers with the work to be done.<sup>5</sup> The volume of material treated is maximized in order to more fully meet the repair needs of the collections the lab serves.

General collections conservation staff adhere to specifications delineated for each repair, usually documented in a laboratory manual. Treatment reports are not written for individual items; instead, the laboratory manual lists the steps in each treatment to document the work that is done. In general collections conservation, therefore, the item to be treated is matched to the available treatment options. The collections conservator oversees quality control operations to ensure that the work leaving the conservation lab is consistent and acceptable. General collections conservation has as its goal the production of durable repairs so that the item can be used safely, both in the library and beyond. The focus is on quick turn around time and pragmatic solutions; compromises are sometimes made, with a durable repair often favored over a “perfectly executed and nearly invisible” one.<sup>6</sup>

### The Special Collections Conservator

The rare book or special collections conservator works primarily with closed stacks material, often of higher artifactual value than most items found in circulating or general collections. As noted by Jan Paris in the pamphlet *Choosing and Working with a Conservator*, “The aim of conservation treatment for material with artifactual value is to assure the items’ longevity and continued availability for use, while

altering their physical characteristics as little as possible.”<sup>7</sup> Such a conservator must have a thorough grounding in conservation theory and chemistry and should have served an apprenticeship or internship with a focus on refining hand skills. Given the often priceless nature of the materials this conservator may treat, it is vital that the conservator recognize and articulate his or her treatment limitations.

Special collections conservation usually reverses the basic approach of general collections conservation. Instead of fitting an item to be treated into the available specifications of treatment, this type of library conservation tailors the available treatment options to the particular item, based on lab capabilities, skills of the conservator, and time available to spend on treatment. Before commencing a treatment, the special collections conservator will write a thorough report and take photographs or slides to describe the item and document its present condition. The special collections conservator is well aware of the American Institute for Conservation’s *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* and conducts his or her professional activities accordingly.<sup>8</sup> The special collections conservator sometimes may employ batching techniques similar to those employed in general collections conservation, but usually special collections items will require more individualized attention and result in a longer treatment time and a greater cost per item than general collections items.

### The Hybrid Conservator

As stated earlier, the hybrid conservator oversees and executes both general and special collections conservation treatments. The hybrid conservator must anticipate the needs of diverse collections, from the maps collection with many oversized flat paper items, to the art library that houses oversized and heavy books printed on clay coated paper, to the rare book collection of incunabula. While conservators are trained to regard each item they treat with the same respect and make no distinctions among items of differing values, the reality is that some materials must be afforded more attention. The hybrid conservator’s role is to determine which items require individualized time and care and which can be repaired with a mass production approach.

While the hybrid position provides an opportunity for a conservator to sample various facets of library conservation, most candidates for a hybrid position would prefer either general or special collections conservation, according to conversations the author has had with job candidates and newly hired hybrid conservators. If it is true that the “collections conservator is first a manager; the rare book conservator is first a skilled practitioner,”<sup>9</sup> then preservation managers hoping to hire a hybrid conservator may assume that it is advantageous to choose someone who has been trained in more specialized, higher-end, single-item

treatment work, reasoning that this person should be able to handle “lower level” circulating collections work. This notion is often not a good assumption. General collections conservation is just as difficult a job, requiring a different set of skills and a unique propensity toward production work and supervision. Someone who prefers spending weeks or months on one item, enjoying solitude and disliking the flurry of activity common to the mass production approach, may find the pace of general collections conservation work unnerving. Being an effective manager is not necessarily a skill possessed by many conservators, nor do all conservators have an interest in supervision.

The conservator considering a hybrid position should evaluate personal strengths and weaknesses and honestly assess the results before applying for a position. Not every conservator enjoys both types of work enough to find a hybrid position satisfying. Anecdotal evidence and comments from the Association of Library Collections and Technical Services’ Preservation Administration Discussion Group (PADG) survey discussed below suggest that many conservators new to the field would prefer to specialize in special collections work in an idealized single-item treatment environment but end up in hybrid positions because: (1) conservation positions that focus solely on the treatment of rare materials are not often available, (2) they reason that a hybrid position will provide the opportunity to “do it all” and gain experience in most aspects of library and archives conservation, or (3) a hybrid position affords young conservators a chance to take charge of a conservation lab early in their careers. These may or may not be acceptable or pragmatic reasons to take on the challenges of a hybrid position. As a potential job applicant, the conservator should discuss his or her concerns and expectations with potential employers to minimize misunderstandings on both sides about the position’s responsibilities before problems arise.

### Survey of Hybrid Conservators

As a hybrid conservator who has worked in two medium-sized conservation laboratories, the author was interested in determining if her experiences were similar to those of her colleagues. In March and April of 2003, she asked members of PADG to participate in an informal survey. Questions asked are provided in the appendix. She provided a definition of the hybrid conservator and asked participants who felt they held such a position to respond. In all, eleven responses were received; one was disregarded because the person’s position as described did not fit within the definition of a hybrid conservator.

Although determining how many hybrid conservators are currently working in the United States is difficult, based on the screening of conservator position ads discussed

above, at least fourteen unique positions are available. Six of the ten respondents to the PADG survey worked in institutions represented by these fourteen job positions; at least three have held more than one of the hybrid positions advertised in the ten-year period. Of the remaining eight (out of fourteen) unique posted positions, two were never filled and two are no longer hybrid positions, leaving only four positions of those advertisements that were not represented by respondents to this survey. In addition, four PADG survey respondents represented institutions that had not advertised in the period from 1993 to 2003. Two of the respondents based their responses on their past experiences as a hybrid conservator, one respondent was in a position that was not advertised nationally, and one was in a position that was not advertised as a hybrid position but has evolved into one. Based on these data, the author assumed a minimum of sixteen hybrid conservators working in the United States at the time of the informal survey. Ten of these are represented in the PADG survey.

Of the ten valid respondents, six worked in institutions with holdings in the two- to five-million volume range. One library was slightly smaller, with 1.5 million volumes, and three had larger holdings. Table 2 presents data on collection size and items treated for each library represented in the survey.

Participants were asked about time management activities, such as the percentage of their work time spent on various administrative duties versus at the bench on treatment. In addition, respondents were questioned to identify which persons, if any, in the conservation lab performed routine conservation laboratory duties, such as supervising students, performing quality control on finished work, ordering supplies, and maintaining equipment.

## Results

### Time Management

#### Scheduling Bench Time

The clearest result from the survey is that most hybrid conservators do not feel that they have enough time working on treatments “at the work bench” when other duties beckon. In fact, only one person stated that he has enough time to spend on treatment and only when, as he reported, “timeliness [in producing a finished product] isn’t a factor.” Time spent at the bench ranged from 3 to 25 percent. The highest percentage was the response of one conservator who felt he had enough time for treatment. The most time spent by someone who did not feel she or he had enough time at the bench was 20 percent. See table 3.

Table 4 compares actual versus desired responsibilities. Respondents were asked to list their three most frequent job duties, based on time spent performing different tasks, and



to identify the three tasks they most wished their job entailed. Treatment of materials appeared as one of the three most frequent duties for only four of the ten respondents. When asked to list the top three tasks they wished

**Table 2.** Institutions represented in the survey (n=10)

Institution*	Holdings (in millions of vols.)**	Volumes treated (per 1000 vols.)***
A	7.5	13.0
B	10.0	30.0
C	7.5	2.0
D	1.5	2.0
E	2.0	12.0
F	3.0	2.5
G	5.0	9.5
H	3.0	14.0
I	3.0	10.0
J	4.0	10.0

\* Some respondents wished to remain anonymous; therefore, institution names are not listed in the results, but have been assigned letters that correlate among the tables in this paper.

\*\* Holdings reported in, *ARL Statistics 2001–2002*, comps. and eds. Martha Kyrillidou and Mark Young (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 2003). Values were rounded to the nearest half million volumes.

\*\*\* Volumes treated reported in “Table 3: Conservation Treatment, Binding and Preservation Reformatting” in *ARL Preservation Statistics 2000–2001*, comps. and eds. Mark Young, Martha Kyrillidou, and Julia Blixrud (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries), 26–31. These values do not include flat paper treatments, reformatting, or commercial binding and merely serve as one indication of in-house book treatment capabilities at each institution. Values were rounded to the nearest five hundred volumes.

**Table 3.** Percentage of time spent on treatment versus administrative duties (n=10)

Institution	Time spent on treatment x=(%)	Enough treatment time	Time spent on administration x=(%)
A	3	N	97
B	10	N	50–75
C	10	N	75
D	10	N	20–30
E	25	Y	75
F	10	N	40–90
G	20	N	80
H	20	N	70
I	20	N	70
I	20	N	50
Mean*	15		67
Median	15		70

\* Averages were calculated for ranges of percentages before final mean and median calculations were figured. Because most conservators have duties in addition to treatment and administrative, percentages will not always equal 100 percent.

their jobs encompassed, all ten respondents included treatment of materials; six listed it as the most desired activity.

In written narratives appended to the survey, two respondents commented that they were told when they were hired that their position would involve much more bench time than it actually does. These comments may indicate that preservation administrators have an unrealistic idea of how many administrative tasks will fall to the hybrid conservator. A preservation administrator (PA) who has not previously worked with a conservator might feel that the PA position can and should shoulder most of the departmental administrative tasks. However, the PA and others on hiring committees do not always take into account the often “hidden” time required for the conservator to train and supervise staff and students, prepare treatment specifications, research materials and order supplies, respond to disasters, and compile laboratory statistics. In a panel discussion about the changing duties of book and paper conservators that took place at the 1986 American Institute for Conservation Book and Paper Group meeting, Robert Espinosa stated:

The trend in libraries to create positions of preservation librarians or administrators ideally can address the need for attacking some of these system-wide problems without totally co-opting the time of the conservator. On the other hand the conservator may feel impelled to be involved at this level of policy development because of the far reaching implications of these decisions. As technical specialists, in a field largely determined by technical parameters, we are loathe to completely relinquish control to administrators and precipitate a . . . scenario where decisions are made independently of the technical facts, with potentially disastrous results.<sup>10</sup>

Because a hybrid conservator has many duties, managing a schedule to most readily accommodate a wide variety of activities may be challenging. The length of time necessary to execute a treatment is hard to predict. As a hypothetical example, two hours budgeted for a stain removal treatment for a special collections item could easily balloon to twice that time. In the midst of a difficult treatment, the conservator may not be able to stop easily if other lab issues arise. As Denise Thomas, a paper conservator and member of the panel at the 1986 Book and Paper Group Meeting noted, “such a pace is not sympathetic to sitting down at odd moments and doing careful, restrained, thoughtful conservation treatments.”<sup>11</sup> If the hybrid conservator’s schedule does not allow for such flexibility, treatments that are challenging, unusual, or time consuming might not be started in the first place.

The respondents provided some solutions for the management challenges of finding time at the bench. Most

**Table 4.** Three most frequent duties versus three most desired duties (n=10)

Duty	Actual	Desired <sup>*</sup>
Treatment of materials	4	10
Supervising/training staff and students	10	6
Undertaking administrative duties	9	5
Lab management	5	3
Preparing for exhibits	2	2
Other	0	2

<sup>\*</sup> One respondent listed only one desired responsibility, so this column does not reflect a 100 percent response rate.

hybrid conservators would benefit from setting and adhering to a more rigid work schedule. A few respondents indicated that scheduling blocks of time for treatment is the *only* successful mechanism for engaging in higher-end treatments. Ideally, the conservator might work some hours alone in the lab or at least a few hours without student assistants. Dedicating certain days or times for different types of work will encourage the conservator to make treatment a priority.

In addition, the hybrid conservator might only answer e-mail and the telephone at scheduled times during the day. In a culture of immediate response and gratification, this technique may be initially unpopular. However, making an effort to check messages immediately in the morning, at lunch, and at the end of the day should not significantly affect most inquiries. Of course, emergencies may arise that require immediate attention.

Some survey respondents appreciated having firm treatment deadlines in order to justify time spent in treatment. Although this strategy is most often used for conservation treatment for items prior to exhibition, it also could be applied to routine lab treatment as well. This approach may be stressful for some people; success is largely dependent on the conservator's work habits and motivation.

Two hybrid conservators responding to the survey reported that they include treatment goals as part of their yearly performance evaluation plan, thereby elevating treatment time above other laboratory duties. As one respondent noted, this approach provides an opportunity for her to discuss expectations and mutual goals with her supervisor. The conservator discovered that "finding the time [to treat items at the bench] and letting other things slide was actually a measure of success" under this model.

Breaking the mentality that the hybrid conservator must be available to meet everyone's needs at every moment is difficult, but is key to the well being of the hybrid conservator. Because, as one respondent stated, "getting up the mental energy to push people and problems away and just work" is the most difficult aspect of time

management, it will be necessary to educate staff inside and outside the department that the work of a conservator is not always that similar to other library departments where unexpected interruptions, though not enjoyed, will not be detrimental to the task at hand. Since a "Please Call Again" sign on the door might frustrate other library staff, the conservator might host an open house or make a presentation for library staff to explain more about the work of a conservator and the occasional need to close the laboratory door during a difficult treatment.

### Meeting Needs of Constituents

As discussed earlier, most hybrid conservation laboratories serve various branch libraries as well as the departments within special collections. With one conservator supervising all this activity, strategies are required to effectively meet the needs of many constituent libraries.

Some institutions have established quota systems in which each branch library or collection is awarded a number of hours or points of treatment time per specified time period.<sup>12</sup> Using such a system spreads treatment time throughout the library system, affording every library a chance to improve the condition of at least part of its collections. This system places some of the burden on the various branch and departmental library staff to learn about damaged items in order to determine which materials require most immediate treatment. As a result, this approach may cut down on unnecessary or low priority work. It also allows the conservation staff to gain a good sense of regular workload, so that the laboratory is not inundated with an unusually high volume of work or surprise projects at peak times of the year, such as at the end of each semester or when an important exhibit will be mounted. However, it may result in a great amount of work for the conservation staff, as someone must estimate available treatment hours per year, determine how many hours each library should be awarded, and track how many points each library has spent at any given moment.

Just as a general collections conservator is beholden to the various branch and departmental libraries on campus, the special collections conservator works with representatives of the various collections within special collections, such as rare books, university or institutional archives, and manuscripts. No matter the collection, there will be a far greater need for conservation treatment than a hybrid conservator, who is only partially dedicated to special collections work, could ever hope to meet. Staff from the divisions within special collections should devise treatment priority lists to help the hybrid conservator find a way to balance the needs of competing priorities. A quota system also might function in this environment, although the time the conservator can spend on any one collection probably

will be quite small. In order to attempt to serve the needs of all constituents and be responsive to others in the library system, the hybrid conservator should complete at least one treatment, survey, or project for each department within special collections each year.

For both general and special conservation arenas, the conservator might schedule a standing meeting time for staff in different departments of special collections or various general collections libraries or branches so problems can be discussed at a routine time, rather than having unexpected questions result in ill-timed interruptions at other times. In this manner, the hybrid conservator is able to discuss problems with library staff on his or her own schedule.

### Personnel Supervision

Staffing poses one of the greatest challenges for the hybrid conservator, as so much of the success of the small hybrid program depends on the personnel working in it. Information about staffing levels is presented in table 5. Nine out of ten institutions responding to the survey employed permanent staff working under the conservators, averaging 2.44 FTE per institution, and all but one had student workers, averaging 2.00 FTE per institution.

Most labs overseen by the hybrid conservators who answered the survey did not have a large workforce. As demonstrated by the data in table 4, ten responding conservators listed supervision, training, or both as primary responsibilities, whereas only six considered this as one of the desired top three duties. Responses given in the survey suggest that the combination of small workforces and high expectations of lab output leads to frustration.

Work in the hybrid conservation laboratory requires extensive technical training and is highly dependent on people to get the work done. Since many months may pass before a replacement will be trained after a staff member leaves, losing a highly trained worker in a small laboratory can result in serious consequences for lab efficiency, output, and morale. A few respondents to the survey indicated that their greatest professional worry is that highly trained staff will leave, forcing them to start anew the labor-intensive process of hiring and training.

In the small hybrid lab, the conservator is responsible for initial training of all staff. The conservator must first establish a treatment manual, in which the lab repairs are spelled out in detail, along with supplies needed and estimated time required for each treatment. The conservator also will establish a statistics form so workers may keep track of work done. Having the chance to train others and impart knowledge, often one of the most gratifying parts of the job, requires large amounts of time for preparation and teaching.

**Table 5.** Staffing levels in hybrid labs (n=10)

Institution	Staff (FTE)	Student staff (FTE)
A	8.75	1.50
B	1.25–2.00*	2.25
C	3.00	0.75
D	2.00	0.40
E	2.00	2.00
F	2.00	0.00
G	3.00	4.00
H	1.00	3.00
I	0.00	0.50
J	1.00	3.00
Mean	2.44	2.00
Median	2.00	2.10

\* The average of this range was used to calculate the mean and median below.

### Technicians and Assistants

In all but one of the responding libraries, conservation technicians aided the hybrid conservator. Typical duties of these assistants, as based on the survey responses, included treating circulating collections, performing quality control for finished work from the general collections, compiling periodic lab statistics, training students in general collections work, treating special collections materials, ordering supplies, and maintaining equipment. Table 6 reports data on work assigned to conservators, assistants, and student staff.

A few respondents indicated that they appreciate the continuity provided by permanent staff and would gladly trade in student assistant hours for permanent staff if the option were available. Ideally, a conservator will have at least one assistant who shoulders some of the administrative tasks that keep the conservator from high-end treatment. One respondent stated that she felt that a good technician could run the general collections program, freeing her to deal with special collections. Ideally, she wished her lab had a senior technician to supervise general collections work and handle special problems; other staff could then execute the work under the senior technician's direction. However, some of the tasks that require the least amount of training, such as pamphlet binding and "tip ins," are better completed by student workers or volunteers, so some level of student staffing is beneficial.

Because of the repetitive and often tedious nature of the work, as well as the implications for workflow if turnover is high, promoting high staff morale is crucial. Continuing education opportunities should be made available to help keep assistants interested in the work. Libraries often focus on training programs for the student workforce; while opportunities for staff are not always valued as highly, they are just as essential to the health of the lab.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 6.** Assignment of duties (n=10)

Duty	Number of libraries in which duty is performed by		
	Conservator	Assistants	Student employees
Treat general collections	6	8	9
Train in general collections treatment	9	4	0
Supervise general collections treatment	10	2	0
Perform quality control of general collections work	9	5	0
Treat special collections	9	4	1
Train in special collections treatment	6	1	0
Supervise special collections treatment	6	1	0
Perform quality control of special collections work	9	0	0
Compile periodic statistics	8	5	2
Compile yearly ARL statistics	6	3	2
Order supplies	10	4	1
Maintain equipment	10	3	0

### Student Employees and Volunteers

According to the survey data featured in table 6, nine out of ten institutions employed student workers to treat general collections materials. One institution also utilized 0.5 FTE students to treat special collections materials. Most libraries rely heavily on a student workforce because of the low cost and ready availability of the labor. Although exceptions exist, some conservation laboratories are staffed with student assistants who may not be highly motivated by the work or, if they are, do not always have much time to dedicate to the job. Because a hybrid conservation laboratory is usually small and highly reliant on student labor, selecting and retaining reliable and competent students is of special concern.

Due to the variable nature of a student workforce, training is a constant priority and will be quite draining for the hybrid conservator without a technician or senior student to take on this responsibility. One manner of retaining students is to provide ever more difficult tasks to encourage interest in the work.<sup>14</sup> Motivating students by promotion and incentives, such as learning a more artistic or historic binding structure once a semester, may help keep highly trained students in the lab and not searching for higher paid alternatives off campus.

Once the students are hired, scheduling their work time is another challenge. Many conservators permit students to work whenever they can during the normal workday, as the conservation laboratories are not often open in the evenings and on weekends when students might prefer to work. However, this manner of “open scheduling” usually means that the hybrid conservator is not left with any large blocks of time necessary for single item treatment without interruption. One survey respondent noted that she changed her attitude toward student workers—instead of making herself available whenever the students could come and work, she hired fewer of them and scheduled their work times around hers.

Volunteers are a related, but separate, issue. “Free” labor has a cost. Volunteers will require significant supervision and attention from lab staff. Volunteers and unpaid interns may be a welcome addition to a conservation laboratory, especially for a special project that falls outside the normal work routine, yet the learning curve for work in the conservation lab is fairly steep and volunteers often do not work sufficient hours to learn the

skills necessary to be an asset to the lab. Many volunteers have a vested interest in working in the lab and ascertaining a volunteer’s motives may be difficult. If volunteers hope to work on personal collections or set up their own business repairing books, there may be a conflict of interest. Many volunteers will not be happy in the lab when they realize that their work is usually at the low end and involves repetitive and often tedious tasks. The supervisor should clearly define the skills that the volunteer will learn to avoid confusion and unmet expectations.<sup>15</sup> A few respondents noted that they have refused volunteer labor because the infrastructure was not in place to support the work of outsiders.

### Additional Recommendations

#### Lab Design and Office Space

Some of the respondents to the survey took the opportunity to include personal comments. A frequent additional area of concern was the design of the laboratory and office space for the conservator because of its effects on workflow. A hybrid conservation lab is constructed as an all-purpose space for both general and special collections work. Authors of a report about the design of a hybrid laboratory at Iowa State University noted that “a treatment facility designed solely for one type of collection or the other will be very different from one designed to treat the needs of both general and special collections with a broad range of physical problems.”<sup>16</sup> The hybrid conservator may work on a stressful single item treatment at the same time and in the same space in which students sew or staple pamphlets into binders and tip errata into books. Mass production work in general collections conservation may result in a frenzy of activity in the lab whereas single-item treatment may require focused concentration in silence. Making changes and improvements to laboratory space may improve the



hybrid conservator's ability to successfully work in that environment.

At least half of the ten respondents to the survey were the first hybrid conservators at their institutions and thus played a large role in setting up the lab, ordering supplies and equipment, and organizing workflow paths. Although these are time-consuming first steps that will undoubtedly take much time away from treatment, a well planned lab will yield benefits in the future. Soliciting the opinions of others is useful in determining what setup will work best in an ideal hybrid conservation facility.

Theoretically, the hybrid laboratory will have separate areas for circulating and special collections work. This division is necessary for the conservator to concentrate on high-end treatments apart from the production setting of general collections work. One survey respondent noted that dedicating a space to special collections work was useful in managing her time. Before she organized her lab space, so much energy was required to gather the necessary supplies and equipment that it was easy to allow other work to take precedence. For her, "having . . . space ready and waiting for me to get to work whenever I was able allowed me to stick to my plans better."

All conservation work requires ample space. Most hybrid lab staff will share large equipment, such as book presses, job backers, and the board shear. An ideal room for mass production work might include stations with precut supplies to minimize work time per item and feature shared benches for student workers. Special collections work may require specialized equipment, such as a microscope, washing sinks fed with purified water, a suction table, and photo documentation equipment. Ideally, this equipment should be located near the conservator's work bench. The hybrid conservator should evaluate how different workflow needs can be accommodated in a shared space so that all activities and related equipment locations are optimized.<sup>17</sup>

In a hybrid laboratory, security takes on special significance. Keeping track of work with many employees at different levels of training and trustworthiness coming in and out of the space may be difficult. The hybrid laboratory must have either a safe or locking drawers and cabinets in order to keep special collections materials secure. To heighten security, only certain employees should be permitted a key to the laboratory. Some conservation laboratories are equipped with security systems for added protection.

The location of the hybrid conservator's office in relation to the workbench merits consideration. The hybrid conservator needs not only a workbench for treatment, but also a desk with a computer, phone, and other typical office equipment. If the computer and phone are located next to the workbench, the conservator should exercise restraint to avoid answering the phone and e-mail when projects are under way. If the desk is outside of the lab, the conservator

may run back and forth from desk to bench, but it may be easier to focus on the task at hand.

### **Other Responsibilities outside the Lab**

As a library staff member, the hybrid conservator participates in other library activities that, while important, take time away from primary responsibilities in the lab. According to the job positions examined for this paper, at least half of the hybrid conservators serve on library and institutional committees, participate in regional and national professional organizations, engage in education and outreach, answer preservation questions from the general public, or perform some or all of these duties. Although not all of these responsibilities were listed in all job descriptions, almost all hybrid conservators have external responsibilities to other library departments, the public at large, and regional and national conservation and library organizations. Many survey respondents felt particularly frustrated with these other responsibilities, as they can be overwhelming.

The added component of holding a faculty appointment can further complicate the time management challenges of the hybrid conservator. Although many benefits come with faculty status, not the least of which is greater credibility in the institution and larger community, the rigors of a tenure-track position are significant. These may include requirements for regional and national service, publication, and research. While these activities may promote professional development and lead to satisfaction, they also may require large amounts of time away from primary job responsibilities. The conservator must find a means of balancing responsibilities in the lab and those in the larger conservation and library communities.

### **Conclusion**

In order to retain and develop an effective hybrid conservator, the conservator, preservation administrator, and library administrator must cooperate. The library administrator may require additional information about the benefits and limitations of hiring only one conservator to manage both circulating and special collections conservation. Administrators should educate themselves about how conservation fits into a research library preservation program. Sometimes the library administration hopes that the hybrid conservator will be able to solve many problems and reduce backlogs that have plagued the institution for years, but hiring one professional may not create sufficient infrastructure to effect rapid and sweeping change.

Preservation administrators (PAs) should understand the very real desire of most conservators to dedicate significant work time to treatment activities. After years of school

and apprenticeships to gain those skills, this lack of bench time is usually the greatest frustration facing the hybrid conservator. PAs should encourage professional development opportunities that will build on the hybrid conservator's existing skills and lead to professional satisfaction.

In addition, the hybrid conservator may be hired with unrealistic expectations, on both the part of the supervisor and the conservator. The PA and conservator should work together to develop a pragmatic list of priorities for the conservation program. The hybrid conservator should be encouraged to undertake a time management survey to determine how time is allocated if it seems that top goals are not being accomplished. Both the PA and conservator should be realistic about what one conservator can accomplish when facing the needs of a research institution, and the PA should understand that with the skeletal staff of most hybrid conservation laboratories, large or unusual projects might require extra staff or volunteers to accomplish. For the normal routine, the hybrid conservator will require at least one assistant to manage student employees and supervise the daily work of the general collections program.

Despite the very real challenges of working as a hybrid conservator, there are many benefits to serving in such a position. For one, it allows a conservator to be in charge of a department, often at a fairly early stage in his or her career. The position also affords the opportunity to keep abreast of wide-ranging aspects of the field, from learning about scanning replacement pages for damaged circulating volumes to discovering new techniques for reattaching loose boards to leather-bound volumes in a special collections environment. The hybrid conservator also may feel that focusing on both general and special collections conservation tasks makes a difference for the largest possible percentage of a research library collection. Having the opportunity to pass on knowledge to others by supervising and training is often one of the most satisfying aspects of the job. Finally, one survey respondent noted that a conservator in a unique and often new position in the library may have a higher degree of internal visibility than conservation colleagues at larger institutions. The conservator may be regarded as "special" and treated accordingly, enjoying a more direct line to library administration than a conservator with comparable years of service at a larger institution.

Part of the challenge of creating a true strain of hybrid conservators is the lack of well defined models on which to build. This type of conservator is not adequately discussed in most conservation training programs, in which general and special collections conservation are not usually mentioned in the same sentence, let alone explored in the same class. As more research libraries realize a need for conservation professionals to oversee the physical care of their collections, the trend toward hybrid conservation staff likely

will continue to increase. As a result, more published examples of successfully operating hybrid facilities are needed as this type of conservation program becomes more common. Using this research, the library administrator, the preservation administrator, and the conservator can work together to create an environment that promotes retention and encourages the hybrid conservator's professional satisfaction for the long term.

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## Appendix Hybrid Conservator Survey

A "hybrid conservator" is defined as a conservation professional whose job description includes supervision or treatment of both batched, mass production treatments (usually for circulating collections) and single-item treatment (usually for special collections materials).

### 1. Managing Time

What are the top three responsibilities/duties of your position, as based on time spent at each activity?

What are the top three responsibilities you wish your job entailed?

What percentage of your time (approximately) is spent on administrative duties?

What percentage of your time (approximately) is spent at the bench?

Do you feel you have enough time to complete single-item treatments?

What is the most difficult aspect of organizing your time?

### 2. Supervising Others

Do you supervise permanent staff? Y      N

If so, how many permanent staff members (or equivalent) do you have in your lab?

Do you have other workers (students, volunteers) in the lab? Y      N

If so, how many (or equivalent) do you have in the lab?

Who does the following activities in your lab:

Monitoring and ordering supplies?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Maintaining laboratory equipment?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done

Keeping track of monthly (or periodic) treatment statistics?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Compiling yearly ARL statistics?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Treating circulating collections material?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Training lab workers in circulating collections treatment?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Supervising lab workers in circulating collections treatment?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Treating special collections material?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Training lab workers in special collections treatment?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Supervising lab workers in special collections treatment?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Maintaining quality control for finished circulating collections work?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done
Maintaining quality control for finished special collections work?	Conservator	Staff Assistant	Someone else	Not done

**3. Training**

Did you attend a graduate program in conservation? Y      N

If so, which one?

Please list additional professional training (apprenticeship, internship, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

My training prior to becoming a conservation professional taught me what I needed to know to be an effective hybrid library and archives conservator.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

Thank you for participating in this survey. If you have any additional comments, please list them below.  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_