

A Reference Librarian in Special Collections

Making the Most of a Learning Opportunity

Maureen Perry,
Guest Columnist

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Many librarians have been asked to take on additional responsibilities during these tight economic times. In this column, Maureen Perry writes about what she learned from her year as a hybrid librarian, splitting her time between reference and special collections. She found this assignment enjoyable, and her essay reminds us of the value of job exchanges and other job enrichment opportunities.—*Editor*

Many reference librarians find themselves taking on duties outside of their respective skill sets. What follows is the story of my academic year in special collections. I hope that the insights I have gained there will inspire others to make the most of the learning opportunities that these assignments can present. Though the term *archive* has a specific meaning, I shall use the terms *archive/archival* and *special collections* interchangeably for the sake of brevity.

AN UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY

The University of Southern Maine's (USM) Lewiston-Auburn College houses an extensive collection of items related to local and regional Franco-American life.¹ When it lost a coordinator, I was asked to help maintain the Franco-American Collection (FAC) until a new coordinator could be hired. Though not an archivist by training, I do serve on the collection's board of directors and as liaison to the college's arts and humanities division, which includes French North American studies. The college's dean saw the collection's potential as a community resource.

I spent the 2009–10 academic year in two worlds: special collections and regular reference. Although I had no formalized training in the area, I was able to put together my own training plan. From the head of special collections at our Portland campus I learned about the appropriate forms; other local special collections librarians showed me some preservation basics.² The curator of the college's Atrium Art Gallery helped me design and mount window displays.³

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS REFERENCE

The most rewarding part of the experience was working with the patrons. Though I still worked with patrons daily in my regular post, I found that reference work in the FAC differed from my regular work in two major ways, which only served to help further develop my reference skills.

Firstly, archival reference questions can be time intensive.⁴ As O'Donnell points out, seemingly basic factual questions

can often involve deep contextual research. This concept can apply to regular reference questions but applies especially well to archival questions.⁵ As a Franco-American and a Lewiston native, I often found myself drawing upon my background, as well as turning to local experts (including my own mother), in helping patrons with their research.

One patron was researching local parochial schools, and since my mother had attended parochial school and later served as business manager for one of the parishes, I drew upon that expertise.⁶ Now in my regular reference consultations I more frequently mention the value of using subject experts as information sources.

Secondly, special collections differ from regular collections in their arrangement of materials. Generally the materials in a special collection are not shelved according to a call number order.⁷ The FAC's items are arranged first by geographic region (with a particular emphasis on Lewiston) and then by general subject. Biographical materials have their own section and are filed alphabetically by biographee. A finding aid describes what is located where. While this point may seem obvious, the quality of the finding aid did impact the reference service I was able to provide, especially since patrons often came to see particular items.

Back in my regular role I now have more appreciation for good cataloging and description. When I send notifications about new books in my liaison areas, I pay closer attention in case I catch a discrepancy in the catalog record. I recommend items to my patrons, and our catalogers enable us to find these items. When I create subject guides, I am now more mindful of what wording would best help my patrons find what they need.

I have gained a special appreciation for the role of outreach. The better you know your collection, the better you can promote it. Promoting the collection attracts donors—whose gifts impact the collection's inventory. Likewise, knowing my regular collection helps me better evaluate potential donations, weeds, and purchases. In addition, I can recommend FAC items when they fit a general reference question.

CROSS-TRAINING TRUTHS

My cross-training experiences reflect corresponding truths of cross-training in general. Cross-training is an investment in time, and DeZelar-Tiedman mentions the learning curve involved in most cross-training.⁸ My learning curve involved the aforementioned preservation basics, archival record-keeping, etc. as well as making time for the in-depth contextual research my reference questions entailed.

Cross-training is also a study in interrelationships. It allows the trainee to better understand the interdependence of different library functions.⁹ This idea reflects my experience in special collections, from finding items to using them to promoting them.

TIPS FOR REFERENCE LIBRARIANS

Cross-training scenarios can differ considerably. Here are some tips that can apply to most scenarios:

Ask for Help

A cross-training experience can be a learning experience, but you can—and should—ask for help when needed. As I mentioned above, I had a great deal of help in areas where I had less experience or talent.

Spot the Connections

Since cross-training highlights the interrelatedness of library functions, make use of the concrete opportunities these connections present. For example, I was helping a patron with a question on Franco-American cooking. I found a cookbook that later filled a gap in a window display I was designing. These serendipitous moments do take place: don't dismiss the ways in which one duty can inform another.

Seek Learning Moments

I realize that many cross-training assignments are not as pleasant as mine has been. Even I sometimes felt torn between the two worlds. However, most job experiences can be learning experiences. Keep your eyes and ears open for insights that you can bring back to your regular duties. Doing so may help you make the best of your situation.

Document, Document, Document

From the beginning of my assignment I kept a log of my release time activities. This made my supervisor and the dean aware of the many things that needed doing. It also helped during my performance evaluation. Even now it helps me inform the new coordinator of priorities I have identified. For most people, good documentation can help with performance appraisals and with finding the learning opportunities as mentioned above.

The documentation can take forms other than text. For example, I have maintained the link to an online mini-exhibit I created.¹⁰ This link can serve as a record of my learning and as an outreach tool.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

The College has hired a new coordinator for the FAC. I still serve on the FAC's board of directors. Now the opinions I offer at board meetings are better informed by experience.

By incorporating its primary sources into my instruction, I can still promote the FAC. Now I am working on ways to

include FAC holdings in courses outside of French North American studies.

My supervisor followed Margaret Myers's definition of staffing: "all methods of matching skills available with the tasks to be performed."¹¹ I had the good fortune of still working within my comfort zone (the reference duties) and within an interest area (Franco-American studies). All the same, the assignment filled a temporary need for the college and made me a better reference librarian as well.

Many institutions face lean staffing situations in these tough budgetary times. If sharing my story can help others in their added duties, then my experience has been doubly worthwhile.¹²

References and Notes

1. Franco-American Collection, University of Southern Maine, *University of Southern Maine's Franco-American Collection/Collection Franco-Américaine*, <http://usm.maine.edu/lac/franco> (accessed Oct. 15, 2010).
2. I thank Susie Bock, Head of Special Collections, University of Southern Maine Libraries. I also thank the staff of the Edmund S. Muskie Archives, Bates College (Lewiston, Maine).
3. Additionally I thank Robyn Holman, Curator of the Atrium Art Gallery, USM Lewiston-Auburn College.
4. Frances O'Donnell, "Reference Service in an Academic Archives," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 26, no. 2 (2000): 113.
5. Ibid.
6. Very special thanks go to my mother, Pauline Perry, for her constant support.
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11. Margaret Myers, "Staffing Patterns," in *Personnel Administration in Libraries*, eds. Sheila Creth and Fredrick Duda (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1989), 40–63.
12. I thank Barb Mann, Assistant Director and Public Services/Instruction/Information Literacy Librarian at the University of Maryland University College, for her editorial assistance.