



american  
institute for  
conservation

**Preserving Cultural  
Heritage**

Article: Library and Archives Conservation Discussion Group 2024 Managing Collection Needs and Conservation Practices in the Face of Capacity Challenges

Authors: Kim Norman and Heather Hamilton

Source: Book and Paper Group Annual 43, 2024

Pages: 123-125

Editors: Roger S. Williams, Managing Editor, and Amy Crist, Assistant Editor

Editorial Office: [bpgannual@gmail.com](mailto:bpgannual@gmail.com)

ISSN: 2835-7418

---

The *Book and Paper Group Annual* is published once each year by the Book and Paper Group (BPG), a specialty group of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). It was published in print from 1982 to 2021, and transitioned to a digital publication in 2022. All issues are available online at <https://culturalheritage.org>.

Print copies of back issues are available from AIC. All correspondence concerning back issues should be addressed to:

American Institute for Conservation

727 15th Street NW, Suite 500

Washington, DC 20005

[info@culturalheritage.org](mailto:info@culturalheritage.org) [www.culturalheritage.org](http://www.culturalheritage.org)

The *Book and Paper Group Annual* is a non-juried publication. Papers presented at the Book and Paper Session of the annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works are selected by committee based on abstracts. After presentation authors have the opportunity to revise their papers before submitting them for publication in the *Annual*; there is no further selection review of these papers. Independent submissions are published at the discretion of the BPG Publications Committee. Authors are responsible for the content and accuracy of their submissions and for the methods and/or materials they present. Publication in the *Annual* does not constitute official statements or endorsement by the BPG or by AIC.

## Library and Archives Conservation Discussion Group 2024 Managing Collection Needs and Conservation Practices in the Face of Capacity Challenges

### INTRODUCTION

The Library and Archives Conservation Discussion Group (LACDG) session was held in person on Friday, May 24, 2024, at AIC's 52nd Annual Meeting. LACDG co-chairs solicited contributions on the topic of preserving collections within institutional capacity limits. Staff from the Harry Ransom Center proposed a presentation detailing their acquisitions protocols: *Preservation Challenges and Solutions in Acquisitions Workflows*. Interdepartmental collaboration has helped the Ransom Center streamline a labor-intensive task. The presenters discussed the successes and ongoing pinch points of their process. The presentation was followed by an open discussion with many session participants speaking from the floor.

### PRESENTERS

Genevieve Pierce Kyle, preventive conservator, Harry Ransom Center (g.pierce@austin.utexas.edu)

Christine Bethke, accessioning archivist, Harry Ransom Center (christine.bethke@austin.utexas.edu)

Heather Hamilton, paper conservator, Harry Ransom Center (hhamilton@utexas.edu)

### SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

#### *Preservation Challenges and Solutions in Acquisitions Workflows*

Genevieve and Christine described the Harry Ransom Center's process of receiving collections. Ensuring the preservation of materials and preparing them for archival

processing begins in the days before and immediately after collections are delivered. All newly acquired collections go through the following receiving process:

acclimation and quarantine > collection inspection >  
accessioning > processing

Collection inspections are a collaboration between the Description and Access Department and Preservation/Conservation. For larger collections, an inspection may involve up to 10 or more staff members. Participating staff receive training to quickly but carefully inspect an entire collection for mold, insects, and stability.

The inspection allows conservation staff to get a broad overview of the condition and understand whether conservation treatments are likely to be needed. During this time, accessioning staff determine initial housing and storage needs. Care is taken to retain the original order of the materials. Special formats, such as digital materials and AV, are flagged to aid in future processing. If mold or pests are found, the affected items are separated for remediation.

Christine is a member of the National Best Practices for Archival Processing Working Group (NBPAAWG). She defined accessioning to help us understand this critical element of archives work. The NBPAAWG defines *accessioning* this way:

*Accessioning is the basis of all archival stewardship. It is a suite of activities through which we appraise, transfer, stabilize, and document archival acquisitions. Accessioning provides pathways to access, informs future decisions, and promotes sustained resource commitment for the care of archival materials. (Archival Accessioning Work Group 2024)*

While the receiving process at the Ransom Center works well, there are pinch points and long-standing gaps in information sharing that create challenges. For example, the first

---

Summaries of discussion groups at the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC's 52nd Annual Meeting, May 20–24, 2024, Salt Lake City, Utah

moments after delivery of a collection can be overwhelming. While delivery drivers transport collections to the facility and unload them from the truck, Ransom Center staff are responsible for moving the boxes to the quarantine space. This task is performed by the preservation team, not by facilities staff. If the collection is large, if the boxes are in poor condition, or if the materials are unwieldy, moving them safely is difficult.

Perhaps the most challenging issue is having limited information about a collection's condition before it arrives. Materials affected by mold or insects can unexpectedly require many staff hours that have not been planned for, creating long delays in archival processing and, ultimately, delays in access for researchers.

In advance of this meeting, Heather prepared a survey to gather information about current acquisitions processes across libraries and archives. Responses were solicited from members of the Book and Paper Group and the Preservation Section of the Society of American Archivists. Responses were anonymous. There were 26 responses in all. Survey questions included the following:

1. Are conservation staff involved in the acquisition process *before* the decision is made to acquire a collection?

Always 4%    Often 15%    Rarely 69%    No 12%

2. Are conservation staff involved in planning to physically receive new collections?

Always 4%    Often 27%    Rarely 42%    No 27%

3. Are conservation staff involved on the day collections arrive?

Always 8%    Often 8%    Rarely 49%    No 35%

4. Is condition information provided by the donor/seller before acquisition decisions are made?

Always 16%    Often 32%    Rarely 48%    No 4%

5. Is the condition of a collection taken into account when considering whether to acquire materials?

Always 4%    Often 27%    Rarely 42%    No 27%

6. Is a quarantine process used for incoming collections?

Always 16%    Often 48%    Rarely 32%    No 4%

7. Are incoming collections assessed for condition right away?

Always 28%    Often 36%    Rarely 20%    No 16%

8. If you could choose, what are the key things you would want to know about a collection before it arrives at your loading dock?

*Most common responses:*

1. Where the items have been stored
2. Whether there are known mold or insect problems
3. Material types such as AV and photos
4. Inventory and descriptive information
5. Are there classified materials or ownership issues present?

After the presentation, the floor was opened for a broader discussion. Many session participants stepped forward to speak about their acquisitions experiences. Challenges that were mentioned included insufficient staffing for large-scale collection inspections, limited physical space available for these inspections, and a lack of understanding by administrators about what is involved in the process of receiving collections. Positive experiences included administrators who respect the knowledge conservators bring to acquisitions decisions and using data to support calls for process changes. But the topic that garnered the most discussion by far was mold on incoming collections. Acquisitions that arrive with mold create treatment backlogs and a bottleneck in the process of making collections accessible. As of now, there are more challenges than solutions when it comes to mold. We need to establish informed guidelines that we can use across our institutions, to educate our colleagues outside of conservation and to standardize our responses to mold.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The co-chairs wish to extend their thanks to all the speakers for generously sharing their insights and experiences. They also want to thank the audience for their thoughtful questions and comments during the session.

#### REFERENCE

Archival Accessioning Work Group. 2024. "Archival Accessioning Best Practices." Circulation Draft, Feb. 2024, p. 1. <https://accessioningbestpractices.com/2024/01/09/january-2024-update-from-the-national-best-practices-for-archival-accessioning-working-group/>.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

KIM NORMAN

Director, Preservation and Digitization Services

Emory Libraries

Atlanta, GA

[kim.norman@emory.edu](mailto:kim.norman@emory.edu)

HEATHER HAMILTON

Senior Paper Conservator

Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas

Austin, TX

[heather.hamilton@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:heather.hamilton@austin.utexas.edu)