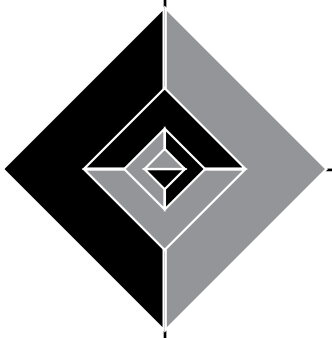

SPEC Kit 347

Community-based Collections

July 2015

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Academic libraries are actively acquiring much more than individual papers and institutional record collections—they are also acquiring community-based collections. Community-based collections are those that have been amassed not by one individual but by a collective, which may take the form of a museum, ethnic or cultural organization, or other diaspora group active in the documentation of its past. Often these collections have significant emotional dimensions in that they speak to the community's heritage and identity. As such, these broad archives are often extremely personal to those who collected, and sometimes created, the materials. In addition to more traditional roles such as caring for the physical collection, in working with community-based collections libraries are navigating new territory with the integration and stewardship of these active and directly connected communities. A commitment to ongoing community engagement, with some level of shared governance or other collaborative activity to build, process, or publicize the collection, is often a key part of acquiring community-based collections.

The purpose of this survey was two-fold: first to assess the breadth of collecting practice taking place at the intersection of research libraries and cultural communities, and second, to discover what activities are being conducted by these libraries to support community groups in the collection, documentation, and stewardship of their shared heritage, including public outreach and educational initiatives relating to the collection. This type of work augments the traditional service role of libraries by suggesting a greater continuity between the repository and the originator(s) of a collection.

Forty-eight of the 125 ARL member libraries submitted survey responses for 55 community-based collections between March 2 and April 6, 2015, for a 38% response rate. The data shared suggests that, while collecting practices are far from uniform, libraries are acquiring community-based collections with accelerating frequency. Nineteen respondents (35%) report not having any community-based collections while 36 (65%) report having one or more. Most of those institutions have one or two collections, though six (11%) report having more than 15. Several respondents also indicated that their community-based collection is composed of several smaller collections.

The majority of respondents (29 or 81%) have acquired these collections within the past 25 years. Twelve of those who have community-based collections (23%) are currently discussing acquiring another collection, while four have no plans to acquire another one in the future. Twenty-eight respondents (54%) agree that there is an increasing need for libraries to acquire such collections, including five who do not yet have one. Most of the respondents who do not currently have community-based collections do not expect to acquire any in the future, though several said they would be open to the idea if there was a need or the material fit within their collecting goals.

Collections: Scale, Scope, and Support

The 55 collections reported on in this survey represent diverse communities, including activist groups, professional organizations and societies, music cultures, ethnic groups, and communities brought together through shared experiences. Despite this diversity, the communities are united by a variety of often overlapping characteristics. The majority (23 or 64%) share a

special interest or represent an affinity group; sixteen (44%) are part of a social group; fifteen (42%) are joined by a common ethnic group or geographic location; eight (22%) are part of a professional organization; seven (19%) are part of a political organization; five (14%) are part of a religious organization; and eleven (31%) share some other characteristic. The comments of those that marked the box for "Other characteristic" indicate that several could also be classified as a special interest or affinity group. The majority of communities represented by these collections (23 or 64%) are local in whole or in part to the collecting library.

Community-based collections come to libraries in a variety of ways. In most cases (24 or 69%), there is an affinity between the collection and existing library holdings and interests. The survey data also indicate the communities have a wide variety of urgencies that necessitates collection partnerships and support, including aging of the community (37%) and threats to the materials (23%). Over half of the respondents (20 or 57%) described particular urgencies in depth, most commonly the need to preserve records and histories in danger of being lost or overlooked. Many librarians report working with key community "ambassadors" in the acquisitions and outreach process.

The majority of the community-based collections hold materials that are consistent with traditional library and special collections holdings, including manuscripts, photographs, newspapers, artifacts, books, oral histories, audio-visual materials, and ephemera, though most of the collections primarily hold manuscripts and photographs. Although the libraries process and house these diverse materials in varying ways, several respondents observed that housing artifacts presents a particular challenge. Finding aids (28 or 80%) and MARC entries in library catalogues (24 or 69%) are the two most common ways to describe the collection, although a number of institutions use spreadsheets (34%) and publicly-accessible databases (26%) to arrange collection items.

Community-based collections are both created and managed by group effort. Most of the respondents (28 or 78%) have a team of library professionals who share processing/cataloguing, reference, interpretation, and other duties on a daily basis, with graduate and undergraduate student assistants playing significant roles. The general governance of the collection is the sole responsibility of the library for most of the respondents (24 or 67%), but seven (19%) reported they share governance duties with the community organization.

In most cases, financial responsibility for collection care rests solely on the libraries' shoulders (28 responses or 78%); only a small portion (6 or 17%) shares that responsibility with the community. This financial burden is a significant and troubling aspect of collection care when coupled with the number of respondents (32 or 89%) who reported that there is no endowment supporting the collection. Only four libraries (11%) report having an endowment and those were secured after acquisition of the collection.

Community Stewardship

While stewardship of the affiliated community is an integral part of managing community-based collections, the survey responses indicate that libraries may be veering away from formal, regularly scheduled, stewardship structures like advisory councils. Instead, many report more casual methods, such as informal meetings or ongoing personal relationships. To this end, email and in-person, one-on-one meetings are the most commonly reported methods of communicating with community members, although several libraries also send collection announcements through community newsletters. Notably, virtual meeting platforms such as Skype or GoToMeeting are the least used methods of communication.

Donor Relations

The large majority of survey respondents (32 or 89%) have no annual membership or friends affiliation associated with the community-based collection, but they do encourage private donations. Only about half of the respondents publicly recognize monetary donations, typically by way of a published list of donors' names.

Volunteer Activities

Despite expressing a desire to do so, most of the responding libraries (28 or 78%) are not retaining any members of the affiliated community as volunteers with the collection. Though no clear reason is given for not employing volunteers from the community,

respondents speculate that if such a program were implemented, it would center on a crowdsourcing format. Of the affiliated community members who are already volunteers, some are indeed engaged in crowdsourcing and metadata activities, but they more commonly assist with exhibits and interpretation projects.

While it seems that, overall, there are few volunteer opportunities within community-based collections, the responding libraries reported using more non-community volunteers (13 or 36%) than affiliated-community volunteers (8 or 22%). In their comments about volunteer opportunities, respondents noted that the non-community volunteers tend to be students or interns, most commonly involved in collections processing/care activities. This seems to complement the affiliated-community volunteers' work on crowdsourcing and metadata projects. These various experiments with volunteer engagement represent a desirable division of volunteer labor; a division that seeks to balance the deep knowledge of collection content by affiliated-community members, the availability and interest of non-community volunteers, and the expertise of professional library staff.

Engagement

Milestones of community engagement vary widely among the responding libraries, but the most common landmark events include special exhibits, interpretive programs or lectures, the initial acquisition of the collection, and digitization of all or part of the collection materials. Several respondents also noted the importance of hiring an assistant curator or connecting with individual community members as milestones of engagement.

Most of the libraries report stable or increased in-person use of the collection following its acquisition and several respondents specified that visitation fluctuates near anniversaries or significant dates within the collection and/or community. Comments indicate that in-person use by the affiliated community may see a decrease due to members' age or other factors affecting the size or strength of that community. Despite multiple comments from library staff whose collections are not digitized (or are unavailable for digital viewing), there appears to have been an uptick in online visitation for about half of the collections (52%) since their acquisition, with respondents crediting virtual exhibits and eliminated physical space for the increase in online engagement.

Outreach and Promotion

Outreach and promotion activities for community-based collections seem to be on par with other library collections. Instances of promoting finding aids, contacting faculty, including items in exhibitions, and registered user communications are similar. The difference is having certain activities also undertaken by the community. In general, libraries seem to be undertaking the bulk of outreach work through engaging in communications, events, exhibitions, and education activities, which are all part of the general library endeavors. Yet, the community is also undertaking significant outreach work, such as by contacting other community members (15 responses or 68%), hosting events (11 or 50%), and sharing via social media (9 or 40%).

Rewards and Challenges

Community-based collections present libraries and archives with an opportunity for dynamism and innovation. They defy traditional archival theory not only because they include a heterogeneous array of object types, but also because, as several respondents noted, they can involve negotiating interpersonal relationships. There are great rewards and complex challenges associated with preserving and incorporating these collections into an academic institution. As one respondent noted, "it is a sacred responsibility that consumes many."

Most of the respondents agree that a primary reward of archiving community-based collections is preserving a possibly overlooked history. Several respondents also shared the feeling that the collection benefits from the context provided by the rest of the library's holdings and vice versa. Providing access and strengthening community relationships are also shared rewards of managing community-based collections.

As with many types of collections, there are also significant challenges. A lack of resources is the main challenge respondents face with community-based collections. While not unique to this type of collection,

this issue is perhaps more acutely felt when working with expanding collections that benefit from an ongoing investment of time and energy to support a variety of preservation needs. Most of the survey respondents cite financial and staffing resources as a challenge to working with community-based collections. The amount of time needed for processing, digitization, and community outreach paired with small budgets is a concern. Adequate storage space for materials is also a problem reported by a number of institutions.

Staff / Community Satisfaction

Both library staff and the community are perceived as being mostly satisfied (68% and 72% respectively) with the working relationships they have with each other. Comments from respondents indicate that the slight dissatisfaction may be linked to divergent expectations and goals between library staff and community members. Staff satisfaction with the overall strategy for managing the community-based collections is slightly lower (58%), but even those reporting dissatisfaction or neutrality optimistically describe possibilities for continuing growth and improvement in the future.

Rewarding experiences for library faculty and staff are often closely tied to job duties such as providing access, preserving a legacy, and facilitating original research and scholarship. Respondents also identified a number of rewards derived from working with community-based collections, including revitalizing organizations and strengthening communities. Several respondents also noted the possibility of highlighting diversity, promoting inclusiveness, and providing a presence to underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Assessment

Twenty-nine of the survey respondents (52%) have done some kind of collection assessment. The most common assessment technique is gathering statistics (20 responses or 69%), which is most frequently conducted on an annual basis. Statistics are most commonly gathered on collection usage and outreach efforts. Some respondents have collected internal collection processing statistics, as well. About half of the respondents have conducted internal surveys of library staff, typically on collection processing, on a one-time or occasional basis. Ten have conducted interviews and focus groups with community users, most often to gather information on collection use and outreach. In at least one instance, an interview of community members also contributed to collection processing as the interviews yielded oral history records for the collection. Occasionally, some respondents have solicited comments from or surveyed collection users. About half of the responding libraries have used several of these methods at different times to assess their community-based collections.

The primary purpose of conducting collection assessments is to understand and improve collection usage. Other reasons are related to grant requirements or grant preparation, and as part of library-wide collection management assessment. Two respondents used assessment for the express purpose of building relationships with the local community, soliciting their feedback, or promoting external stakeholder "buy in." Significantly, no respondents reported that assessment is a way of promoting internal stakeholder buy-in within the library.

It appears that assessment is not currently seen as a major component of most community-based collections work. Statistics gathering on collection processing and usage forms part of many libraries' normal institutional assessment procedures and priority-setting exercises. For a notable minority of respondents, however, collection assessment is an important way to improve community-based collection processing, usage, and engagement, and for a small number of institutions, assessment is a way to create a vehicle to solicit involvement with collection communities and users in ongoing collection development work.

Conclusion

The institutional incorporation of community-based collections expands the mission of library faculty and staff from custodianship to stewardship, not only of a collection, but also of a community. In this process, libraries and community partners bring together archival knowledge with interpersonal skills, local expertise, and emotional intelligence. Importantly, libraries may also depart from the unidirectional

description of collections, as traditionally practiced by archives and repositories, to a multifocal process that includes the voices of the community. This takes a variety of collection management forms; the majority of community-based collections are treated similarly to other library acquisitions, while a smaller number of libraries (~20%) are experimenting with innovative peer-to-peer forms of engagement.

The low survey response rate coupled with the relatively recent acquisition of the reported collections suggests that this is new territory for ARL member institutions. The generosity and intensity of the responses received on this survey point to this as an important, growing area for research libraries to watch in the near future. One can also infer from the responses that the libraries' traditional strengths of service, preservation, and access are assets in the acquisition of community-based collections. Yet, academic research libraries seem to lack widespread expertise and resources in community stewardship and could benefit from looking toward similar cultural stewards outside of peer institutions. This SPEC Kit aims to provide important documentation and support for conversations between libraries, archives, and other cultural entities about developing sustainable models to preserve and support community and cultural heritage.