



Hidden No More

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When we first accepted responsibility for administering *Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives* in 2008, we appreciated the urgency and gravity of the problem that the program was designed to address: far too many materials languished, undiscovered, in cultural heritage institutions nationwide, and scholarship was at risk because potentially vital resources were unavailable for use. Among the reasons materials remained hidden were lack of sufficient funds, expertise, infrastructure, and standardized approaches to exercising intellectual control. Each of these issues presented serious roadblocks for the professionals charged with making special collections and archives discoverable and usable. CLIR's charge, made possible by the generosity of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, was to help remove those roadblocks for some, while seeking to understand these impediments and share ideas about potential ways to surmount them.

While the work of the *Cataloging Hidden Collections* recipients is ongoing, this publication represents the fruition of CLIR's efforts in important ways. As a record of the program's second symposium for grant recipients (the first was held in March 2010), the volume captures the richness and breadth of the professional conversations connected with the program over its eight-year history. The presentations offer many practical ideas for improving the efficiency and efficacy of the work required to make rare and unique materials accessible, ideas that are translatable and replicable across a variety of types of collections, and

within institutions of varied sizes and missions. By making these ideas widely available, we hope that they might prove useful to professional communities well beyond those directly involved in the 129 projects CLIR funded between 2008 and 2014.

For us, as program staff, these proceedings are also a reminder of the wealth of opportunities we have had to learn from our program's constituents. Through receiving questions and feedback from applicants, exchanges with our dedicated panel of reviewers, reviewing and preparing grant reports, and conducting site visits to grant recipients, we have heard much that we consider essential for others—scholars, funders, and the general public alike—to appreciate with respect to the “hiddenness” of cultural materials. Beyond the collections themselves, many aspects of the work that goes into making them accessible deserve widespread attention, not just to prompt continued investment in description—although admittedly that will be critical—but also to inspire hope within those of us who believe in the open dissemination of knowledge and culture.

The labor involved in cataloging hidden collections most often takes place in private corners, obscured from public view. Few people outside the cultural heritage professions recognize the breadth and variety of the contributions of librarians, archivists, curators, and researchers in their endeavors to understand and contextualize scholarly materials. When distant from one another in time, space, or both, the labor of each



of these groups can be invisible to the others, despite the interdependence of their work. The essays in this volume reveal innovative developments for the many kinds of intellectual labor required to make collections accessible: the team workflows, specialized vocabularies, and sustainable and adaptable storage of catalog records and finding aids; the optimization of approaches to the description of special formats such as audiovisual materials, fine prints, or textiles; or the assessment of risks related to collection content, such as risks to personal privacy. The sections on cataloging, arrangement and description, audiovisual collections, and science collections are particularly helpful in this regard.

We have been fortunate to see with our own eyes the impact of many of these innovations in the course of making site visits to recipient institutions. Each visit has afforded us a unique opportunity to view the work of library, archival, and museum professionals in situ, coming face to face with the many challenges these professionals must overcome in their daily work. Handling unwieldy, disorganized collections; dealing with mysterious documents or objects that surface unexpectedly; working in cramped and remote locations; making case-by-case decisions about what information to capture for a description and what to let go; adapting standards and systems to new purposes; bridging cultural divides between institutions, professions, and scholarly fields of inquiry—all of these are common difficulties for the professionals who have undertaken the work of *Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives*.

Describing collections, like all kinds of work in cultural heritage institutions, is inherently collaborative. But changes in information and communication technologies in recent decades have expanded the scale of collaboration needed to

bring research resources to the attention of end users. Working closely with others from different institutions, professional backgrounds, and even countries is now more the norm than the exception. Most of us recognize the positive effects of such large-scale collaboration and increased standardization in language and data structures; in theory, these developments make description cheaper, faster, and better. Yet in practice there are logistical and financial burdens facing those who pursue these seemingly straightforward goals. In the section of this volume focusing on collaboration, the authors of three papers provide a realistic assessment that should prove helpful to professionals planning to enlarge or deepen their working partnerships.

The section on student and faculty involvement offers similar realistic assessments of the limits of the transformative potential of innovative practices, revealing the practical limitations of engaging these user communities in generating high-quality descriptions. At the same time, these essays expose compelling examples of “hidden learning,” often described in the words of student workers, taking place within the context of grant projects. A companion piece to this publication by Kelly Miller and Michelle Morton, “Learning at Work in the Archives: The Impact of Access to Primary Sources on Teaching and Learning,” provides additional evidence of the value of scholarly engagement and student learning in the context of work with hidden collections. This study grew out of CLIR’s three-year effort to document aspects of scholarly engagement through the activities and experiences of early participants in CLIR’s program, titled “[Observations on Scholarly Engagement with Hidden Special Collections and Archives](#).” Additional information about this study is available on the program website, and in [Miller’s and Morton’s related piece in *ArchiveJournal*](#) from 2012.



Grants from the *Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives* program have made it possible for scholars, students, and the general public to find and use vast quantities of diverse materials that were not previously discoverable online. This was the program's original purpose, and it has been immensely gratifying to witness its fulfillment over time. But to those of us who have actively participated in the program, the investment of the Mellon Foundation has yielded far more. Grant projects have offered life-changing professional development opportunities for a generation of talented and dedicated staff members new to the cultural heritage professions;

they have provided students with unique learning experiences; they have helped forge new collaborative partnerships between institutions; in many institutions, they have prompted the improvement of practices and workflows that are now standard operating procedures. This volume documents these additional benefits of CLIR's program well, and at first-hand. It is our hope that within its pages readers will encounter the full breadth and diversity of activity in today's cultural heritage institutions—all of which is vital to how we understand ourselves both now and in the future—so that they might better appreciate, and perhaps even contribute to, the continuation of this important work.