What we’d like to do in the next 15 minutes is to introduce the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and its Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program, with special attention to the ways the institutions funded through this program have engaged students in their projects.
A Forum for Change...

CLIR is an independent, nonprofit organization that forges strategies to enhance research, teaching, and learning environments in collaboration with libraries, cultural institutions, and communities of higher learning.

CLIR pursues three primary goals in support of its mission:
- To foster new approaches to the management of digital and nondigital information resources so that they will be available in the future
- To expand leadership capacity in the information professions
- To analyze changes in the information landscape and help practitioners prepare for them.

CLIR is a private, sponsor-funded research organization that engages in a variety of activities related to “the intersection of libraries, scholarship, and technology.” Some of your institutions are probably among our sponsors, and others of you may be familiar with our publication series, which is available free through our website at CLIR.org. We are small, with only 11 full- and part-time employees. Because we are small, most of our work happens collaboratively with other institutions, agencies, and groups. A few of our programs, including the Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program, provide funding for individuals and institutions, but since this is not the only or even the primary thing we do we tend to operate rather differently from larger private or government funding agencies.
Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives Program

- Cataloging collections of “national significance”
- Using appropriate standards and tools to maximize access, efficiency, interoperability, and sustainability
- Using innovative approaches to cataloging and outreach that engage scholars and other user communities

For details, see: http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/

Based upon the growing public awareness of the problem of hidden collections, our funding program coheres around three major goals, summarized here: cataloging collections of “national significance,” using appropriate standards and tools to maximize access, efficiency, interoperability, and sustainability, and using innovative approaches to cataloging and outreach that engage scholars and other user communities. These comprise the major criteria upon which applications to the program are evaluated. Applicants must include letters of support from scholars attesting to the significance of the nominated materials to current research and teaching, and they must submit detailed project and technical plans outlining and justifying the approach they intend to take to cataloging. They must demonstrate a knowledge of similar projects at other institutions and a willingness to share knowledge and resources with others going forward. Probably the most difficult criterion among the three to define is the third, innovation. For some, this means implementing new standards or tools, workflows, applying minimal processing techniques, or using social networking technologies, but for many projects the incorporation of students as workers, learners, and other contributors to projects is central to their innovative approach.

As you might imagine, each of these criteria raises questions for applicants looking to apply them to their own situations. The most common questions are addressed at length on CLIR’s website. There you can also find brief descriptions of previously funded projects.
Since 2009, CLIR has gathered data from its grant recipients through surveys, site visits, and occasional meetings, in the interest of identifying common problems and creative solutions for addressing them. Much of the data we gather is through an initiative called Observations on Scholarly Engagement with Hidden Special Collections and Archives. This effort is explained in more detail on CLIR’s website. A team of 7 consultants who are former participants in another CLIR program, the Postdoctoral Fellowship in Academic Libraries, works on this initiative. Its general goal is to track successful approaches to engagement of all scholarly users with special collections and archives. Initially the focus of the research did not single out students for special attention. So in preparation for this talk we launched a new survey to gather more specific information about how project staff were working with students.
In gathering our general data we try to look at each project holistically, that is, look for ways staff engage scholars at each step along what we call the “project lifecycle.” So far, we’ve identified two types of scholarly engagement, both internal and external, internal indicating engagement with scholars employed at the library or archive, and external indicating the involvement of scholars or other subject experts from outside the library or archive. We’ve noticed that students are the most frequent types of scholars involved at the critical central stages of cataloging projects, including processing of collections and records creation. We’ve observed the engagement of both student employees from within the local institution and from other institutions at these stages. But we didn’t really have any data to tell us exactly what kinds of students our projects were engaging, what kinds of work they were doing, or what staff thought about their work with students until we launched our recent survey.
We just put together this survey in the last couple of weeks, closing it last Monday, so this information is hot off the presses. We distributed the survey to principal investigators and key staff at all 47 cataloging projects funded so far through the Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program. We collected responses for a 3-week period and got 31 respondents. We’ve posted the results of the survey on our website at the URL here.
Students were involved in an overwhelming majority of the projects, most intensely as student workers. Since our recipients represent many different types of libraries, archives, and museums, what we are seeing here is that even in non-academic institutions students are playing important roles, both as contributors and beneficiaries of projects.
The largest number of projects, 93%, do work with graduate students, but many projects also employ or involve undergraduates. This suggests to us that public discussions such as this one about strategies for working with students may be helpful to large numbers of archival, library, and curatorial staff working with special collections and archives.
We asked respondents why they chose to work with students on their projects. The most significant factors seemed to be the fulfillment of the institutional mission, keeping costs low, and saving time. Interestingly, while saving time was a “highly significant” factor for 41% of respondents, a significant minority, 17%, indicated that employing students didn’t really save staff time. Somewhat less significant for respondents were the factors that working with students was enjoyable (although no one indicated that working with students was NOT enjoyable), and students were easy to find.
We asked our respondents what kinds of work their student employees did on their cataloging projects and found that students do a wide variety of tasks, most frequently data entry, creating container lists and inventories, collection arrangement, writing scope and content notes, and preservation activities. In a minority of projects respondents reported using students for proofreading and quality control or creating posters, collection storage and retrieval, or creating papers, presentations or exhibits. Other kinds of student work mentioned by respondents include writing blog posts, folder labeling, and curating digital photo sets using tools like Flickr.
Respondents had varied opinions about whether particular kinds of skills or knowledge were prerequisite for students employed on their projects. More people felt that it was important that students have a background in museum studies, archival practice, or library and information science than other types of subject knowledge or skills, but almost as many people reported that while a specialist background would be helpful, it is not always possible to find students with those kinds of skills or knowledge. Many respondents expressed the employment of students as a mutually beneficial transaction, as you see here:

“The focus of our institution’s work with students is to establish a mutually-beneficial cooperation in which the student contributes to the mission of the institution while also obtaining experience or knowledge that benefits their academic experience.”
More respondents reported providing training on a one-on-one basis, as needed throughout the project, while significant minorities reported using peer training or formal or informal group training along with working one-on-one. For a few respondents student workers are taking relevant coursework connected to their project, in which training would presumably be a part. What was clear from the results is that all students need training: no respondent indicated that training was unnecessary for their students.
Ongoing supervision of students throughout the project is typically handled by allowing students to work independently with access to project staff nearby. In a minority of cases, respondents reported working side-by-side with students. Only a small minority reported that students needed to make appointments in order to have contact with project staff. No respondents reported employing students to work on projects from off-site.
From a staff perspective, what are the primary advantages and disadvantages of working with students on your project?

Frequently mentioned advantages:
• Students are good at routine work.
• Working with library and archival collections is a valuable educational experience for students.
• Students are fun, enthusiastic, and rewarding to work with.
• Students offer relevant subject knowledge and a scholarly perspective.
• Student labor keeps project costs low.

Frequently mentioned disadvantages:
• Students require extensive training.
• Students require extensive supervision, which is time-consuming for staff.
• There is high turnover among student hires, increasing training burden for staff.
• Students have unpredictable schedules, cannot always work 9-5, and can be unreliable when studies and other commitments interfere with project work.

We’ll be thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of working with students in our later discussion, so we’ll just briefly touch upon what these were for our respondents now. The most frequently reported advantages you see listed here:

• Students are good at routine work.
• Working with library and archival collections is a valuable educational experience for students.
• Students are fun, enthusiastic, and rewarding to work with.
• Students offer relevant subject knowledge and a scholarly perspective.
• Student labor keeps project costs low.

The most frequently mentioned disadvantages:
• Students require extensive training.
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• There is high turnover among student hires, increasing training burden for staff.
• Students have unpredictable schedules, cannot always work 9-5, and can be unreliable when studies and other commitments interfere with project work.
A strong majority of respondents, 64%, reported that project work helped advance students’ academic or career goals, with many of them reporting that student workers were pursuing or had decided to pursue a career in the library, archival, or museum professions. Many respondents indicated that former student workers had successfully secured work based in part on their experience on the project. As you can read here, some respondents considered project work to be important “cross training” for their students, either for future careers as researchers or for building experience in archival work as preparation for an allied profession such as curatorial work in museums.
We’ll turn now to our two case studies to get a student perspective.
Questions

- How does your institution work with students? What specific kinds of tasks do you give to students?
- What qualities do you look for in the student workers you hire?
- How do you train students, and how does training and working with students differ from similar interactions with paraprofessional staff?
- What are the most rewarding aspects of working with students?
- What are the most frustrating aspects of working with students, and how do you manage these frustrating aspects?
- Has your work with students affected their studies or career plans? If so, how?
- How might students assist in promoting collections to the community?
- How might archival professionals be better prepared or trained to work with students?
- How might archival professionals better track outcomes of student engagement with collections?