

Preservation Essentials

Assistant Editor: William Modrow, Miami University. Please contact William at modrowwm@miamioh.edu if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

Getting Your Start in Library Preservation

*Kim Hoffman, Preservation Librarian, Miami University
Contact Kim at hoffma84@miamioh.edu*

The field of library preservation contains within it a broad range of skill sets and responsibilities. Digital files, dog-eared textbooks, rare manuscripts, and even the library building itself may all fall under the jurisdiction of the preservation librarian. With such a varied purview, it can be difficult for students or emerging professionals to enter the field. Building a well-rounded resume is a daunting task when it seems that preservationists need to know a little bit of everything.

As the new preservation librarian at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, I now have the pleasure of reporting that my own preparation has paid off. I still have much to learn about my new position, and I will continually grow as a practitioner. However, my background, my education, and my experiences during graduate school have given me the tools I will reach for on the job.

As a recent graduate, much of my journey took place in the context of my masters' programs. However, emerging professionals coming from a different context can apply some of the same considerations as they look for opportunities. If you are interested in a career in library preservation, or if you are advising a student who would like to become a preservationist, I hope my journey gives you some ideas for your own. I'll break down how my experiences have served as building blocks for a successful career as a preservation librarian.

Mentorship

During my time as a graduate student at Syracuse University, I worked as a graduate assistant in the library preservation lab. The department focused on safeguarding the library's circulating collections, including environmental monitoring, disaster preparedness, emergency response, and book repair.

As a student worker, my primary responsibility, at least at first, was to identify and complete appropriate repairs to circulating material. Our role balanced the need to return materials to the stacks quickly with the importance of making sturdy repairs that would withstand many years of use.

It was here that I began to understand the considerations that govern preservation management. Before books ever made it to our shelves for students to repair, the preservation librarian had to advocate for the departmental budget, apply for grants, liaise with other departments to agree on a workflow, order supplies, and write training manuals. Once I expressed my interest in the field, the preservation librarian made sure to include me whenever possible in the many activities that kept the lab running. She took the time to explain her projects and the many aspects of her job that would normally be all but invisible to a student worker.

The opportunity to work in a preservation lab was invaluable to me: I developed specific hands-on repair skills and added many relevant projects to my resume. However, if you or your students lack a similar opportunity, hope is not lost. Finding a mentor was ultimately at least as beneficial to shaping my career as the work itself. Librarians and archivists tend to be a helpful group. Look for practitioners who may have experience in the areas you need to develop. Reach out, ask questions, and take advantage of networking opportunities. Making connections in the preservation community can help you to understand current challenges in the field and prepare accordingly.

Internships

As a part of my graduate education, I looked for internships, short-term positions, and grant-funded projects that would supplement my studies. In my experience, internships in preservation or conservation departments aimed at students with a library or archival background are relatively rare. Collections management or curatorial internships, however, are much more common. Because collections care is an important aspect of preservation work, these types of internships are also important building blocks for a preservationist. Look for projects that will allow you to handle fragile materials, manage collections storage, or maintain appropriate museum or library environments. Thanks to the demands of a rotating exhibit schedule, many museums will also need help with gallery prep or exhibition work, which can also be a useful skill in the preservation toolbox.

For me, these kinds of short-term commitments increased my familiarity with the daily concerns of museum and library collections care. Through an internship at a National Park Service site, I learned about environmental monitoring and physical security. At an art museum, I conducted a condition survey to assess whether the private library collection could withstand increased student and researcher use. At a historic house museum, I used my experience to advocate for improved library conditions. On campus, I volunteered to install and uninstall exhibits and learned about mounts and book cradles.

Throughout, the common thread was my preservation mindset. By making my career interests clear and identifying projects that could build my skills or grow my experience, I was able to tie each position together to create a cohesive personal narrative. I also continued to build the broad toolbox of skills that a preservation librarian requires.

Creativity

As I grew my expertise in circulating repair and collections care in general, I remained aware of the gaps in my knowledge and watched for opportunities to fill them. In particular, I wanted to learn more about the conservation of rare and special materials. Though I was able to take a course covering the basics, I needed a more extensive introduction. When traditional avenues, like internships, did not offer the hands-on training I was looking for, I got creative. I learned that I could use an independent studies credit to fulfill requirements of my degree and got support to complete a project in special collections under the supervision of the conservation librarian. At Syracuse University, conservation and preservation are completely separate departments, so this was an important chance for me to work with special collections and understand how another lab functioned.

For a further skills boost, I looked to conferences, workshops, and other professional development opportunities. I often found that I was the only student in attendance. Although these events can be expensive, they are always valuable, and funding sources are often available for students and early career professionals. Through workshops, I learned to care for leather bindings, began exploring digital preservation, and interacted with other professionals in the field.

Putting It All Together

Beyond the obvious—classroom experience, internships, and the other activities we engage in as library and archival professionals—we all have other life experience and interests. Before I decided to change careers and enter graduate school, I worked as a technical writer for various software and hardware products. As a technical writer, my job required me to continually learn the ins and outs of new technology, often while it was still under development, then explain that technology in a way that users could understand. I also managed both projects and people. Along the way, I developed core skills that easily translate to a career in libraries: problem-solving ability, writing and communication, and project management, to name a few. More important, I had evidence that I could quickly learn new technologies. My time in the tech industry prepared me to jump into digital preservation, even though my direct experience was relatively limited.

Although my earlier career was in another industry in a different part of the country, it is still a part of my personal history. Just like my internships, student



The author operating the board shears at the Syracuse University Preservation Lab

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William Modrow, Assistant Editor

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work, and classroom experience, my work in the tech sector shapes my perspective and is another tool in my toolbox. Once I understood the broad responsibilities of a preservation librarian, I was able to see how my own experience supported those functions and to seek out further development as needed.

For most people, there is no easy path to a career in preservation. Even other librarians or archivists may not always know what the job entails or be able to advise aspiring students who face few relevant course offerings. However, with a bit of creative personal development and a firm grasp of preservation essentials, it really is possible to build expertise in library preservation.



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