

10-2017

## Collaborative Preservation—A Model

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### Recommended Citation

Prochaska, Holly (2017) "Collaborative Preservation—A Model," *MAC Newsletter*: Vol. 45 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol45/iss2/10>

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# Preservation Essentials

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## Collaborative Preservation—A Model

*By Holly Prochaska, University of Cincinnati Libraries*

This article offers information on the Preservation Lab, a hybrid collaborative preservation lab equally managed, staffed, and equipped by the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County (PLCH) and University of Cincinnati Libraries (UCL). The lab provides conservation treatment and preservation services to the two parent organizations and third-party work to other cultural heritage institutions. The article examines the formation of the lab, why collaboration was the right choice for our institutions, how the Preservation Lab partners with our archivists, and other opportunities for preservation collaboration.

### A Brief History

Like most successful partnerships, the preservation collaboration between the University of Cincinnati Libraries and the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County began with a friendly chat between two colleagues and a simple idea that benefited both partners. At the time, in 2010, both library systems were only providing basic repairs to general collection materials and housing for special collections and archives. Neither institution had a conservator on staff to conserve its most valuable and unique items, which negatively impacted individual stewardship mandates. This shared lament at a professional meeting, and recognition of our shared goals and our geographic proximity, opened a new and exciting dialogue.

In addition to a strong institutional will to work together to raise up both our institutions, we had some substantial tangible resources waiting to be tapped. UCL, which in the past had a robust conservation lab, had a large lab facility and much of the necessary equipment. PLCH had funding identified to employ a conservator. These two pieces were pivotal to putting us both on the path to providing efficient, effective, and high-level preservation to two nationally significant research collections. After 18 months of planning, legal agreements, renovations, grant writing, and joint staff training, the collaborative lab opened in January 2012—a land speed record in both an academic and a county government environment!

The current lab staffing includes a conservator, a preservation librarian, four conservation technicians, one bindery

technician, three volunteers, and five student workers. We provide both general collection repair and special collections conservation as well as a suite of preservation services.

### Why Collaborate?

It is not uncommon for large public libraries or mid-sized academic libraries to manage preservation labs. It is uncommon for two diverse types of libraries to join together to provide preservation services collaboratively. This was the right choice for UCL and PLCH as we have been able to

- Pool our staff resources to expand our capacity for general repairs and special collections conservation, as well as staff training;
- Share the cost of staffing, equipment, and supplies;
- Seek an innovative solution to address preservation needs of two closely aligned institutions;
- Increase our capacity to allow us to offer services to smaller institutions for a fee—addressing both outreach and lab sustainability;
- Improve the preservation lab facility at UC Libraries;
- Rejuvenate our departments—new staff, new goals, new techniques, new opportunities; and
- Provide collaborative planning and mutual aid during and after disaster events.

In addition to the above goals established during the planning stages, we have been able to meet needs not originally envisioned as lab responsibilities/opportunities. For example, we have expanded our relationship with each institution's digitization department, collaborating from the onset during the monthly preservation intake meetings. Having the collection curators, preservation staff, and digitization staff meet together allows us to consider more fully how to provide access to our unique materials—both the physically stabilized object and its digital surrogate. Dialogues on access lead to problem solving around the best time to digitize an object (often during conservation treatments) and special handling during digitization.

Furthermore, areas of interdepartmental collaboration continue to grow and include assistance with exhibit prep (condition reports, surrogates, matting, packing, and transport), instruction (materials handling during digiti-

zation, cradle construction, lab tours), and an expanding suite of services associated with photographic documentation (Reflectance Transformation Imaging, publically available preservation treatment reports, surrogates).

### **Preservation in Archives**

The Preservation Lab's interactions with the libraries' archival collections mirrors that of special collections—we work closely with the archivists to ensure continued access to the physical artifact and assist with handling during digitization and exhibition. For example, a current collaboration is the processing and digitization of a large collection of letters, records, and data associated with research on an industrial chemical. The order and care of the records over the years has been substantial, however, the materials used to house them are now acidic and lack customization for the objects' unique needs, therefore not meeting current housing best practices.

Working with the archivist, the lab established the housing needs of the collection, provided the supplies request and vendor quotes, discussed interleaving to isolate some foldered materials, provided conservation and custom housing for rolled data sheets, and advised on parameters to determine which items could be safely digitized on machine-fed scanners versus which would require digitization individually on a flat-bed scanner. As the archivist is extremely comfortable with and knowledgeable about preservation, she will be able to enact the plan and adjust it as necessary considering the too-often competing factors of funding, timing, and long-term stewardship.

### **Additional Regional Opportunities**

At UC and PLCH, we consider ourselves lucky to have built such a robust lab, largely due to our institutions' willingness and desire to work together. Our situation is unique, however, as many archives are not associated with

large parent institutions that have funding and facilities to bring to the table. That said, partnering on a smaller scale can lead to larger opportunities once trust is built and successes are experienced. Consider these preservation activities that might start you down a path of heightened collaborative stewardship:

- Mutual aid during emergencies—geographically proximal cultural heritage institutions agree to mutual aid during disasters with an agreed-upon memo of understanding.
- Disaster planning and emergency response—institutions engaged in mutual aid should have disaster planning documents that align to ensure ease of execution.
- Joint grant applications—institutions with overlapping collections, for example, one holding the letters of an important figure and the other holding that persons' library, could jointly apply for preservation grants such as NEH Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions ([www.neh.gov/grants/preservation/preservation-assistance-grants-smaller-institutions](http://www.neh.gov/grants/preservation/preservation-assistance-grants-smaller-institutions)) or through IMLS's Collection Assessment for Preservation Program ([www.imls.gov/grants/available/collections-assessment-preservation-program-cap](http://www.imls.gov/grants/available/collections-assessment-preservation-program-cap)) or, in Ohio, for a LSTA Preservation/Conservation Grant ([library.ohio.gov/documents/ohio-lsta-conservation-grant-rfp/](http://library.ohio.gov/documents/ohio-lsta-conservation-grant-rfp/)).
- Regional preservation organizations—get involved in such groups as the Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium (ICPC) or the Ohio Preservation Council—or, if you don't have a regional group, start your own!
- Online communities—Connecting to Collections Care provides online forums to help facilitate discussions on caring for valuable collections.

Last, please do consider the Preservation Lab as a resource; at the lab we are always happy to share our experiences, our victories, and our challenges ([thepreservationlab.org](http://thepreservationlab.org)).

