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Up-and-Comers: News for Student Archivists—Justin Seidler, Assistant Editor

This is Justin Seidler's last effort as assistant editor for the Up-and-Comers column (thanks for your great work, Justin!). If you would like to join the staff of the MAC Newsletter and work with this important column, please contact Editor Paul Eisloeffel at paul.eisloeffel@nebraska.gov.

The Lone Arranger

By Justin Seidler, Albion College

The term “lone arranger” is frequently and lovingly tossed around in our professional literature and in the archival community at large. It identifies a unique position that arises usually from the budgetary constraints of small institutions that require the skill sets of a varied range of information science professionals. These skill sets may include, but are not limited to that of an archivist, records manager, digital asset curator, special collections librarian, rare books and manuscripts curator, preservation specialist, conservation specialist, genealogist, teacher, supervisor, event planner, secretary, receptionist, sorcerer, and psychic. This may seem like a job predicated on overcoming insurmountable odds and doing the impossible with very few resources, because that is exactly what it is. At times it seems that no mere mortal can possibly shoulder the daunting list of responsibilities that characterize this infamous position, but someone needs to do it—and that someone can and should be you, the up-and-comer.

The challenges that face a single archivist and special collections librarian will, in effect, provide a more profound and enduring education than any archival master's program could ever hope to provide for its students. The education generally begins by breaking the individual down to a quivering mass of nothing, then rebuilding the person with eyes wide open to the realities of the position. The most important and effective tool any up-and-comer can possess is a positive attitude and a sense of adventure. Accordingly, it is at this time that one must remember: it is not an adventure if everything goes according to plan. Take a deep breath and expect the unexpected.

The Job Description

The archivist and special collections librarian, hereafter referred to as the “lone arranger,” is responsible to the library for the administration of the college archives and special collections. This includes appraisal, preservation, and management of historical materials and records relating to the history and function of the college, its faculty, staff, administration, and students (i.e., photographs, inactive administrative files, artifacts, copy and research, and any and all items of historical significance). You, the lone arranger, will work with the library director to develop

and enforce policies for access and care of the archives and its materials, as well as develop and/or review collection development policies and procedures.

The lone arranger must work with donors to bring new collections to the archives, organizing by agency, subject, and medium. Backlogged materials must be reviewed with regard to physical condition and relevance to the collection development policy. Accordingly, materials must be arranged, described, preserved, and carefully documented with archival software such as Archivists' Toolkit. EAD finding aids must be created according to *DACS (Description: An Archives Content Standard)* and other archival best practices.

Preservation of the institution's collection means understanding and dealing with curatorial care, mending operations, and reformatting of materials. The lone arranger will maintain storage systems and exhibition practices appropriate to the collections while being mindful of the research needs for particular media.

In addition to the above, one must understand records management to properly maintain a program whereby records necessary to the function and historical documentation of the institution are created, retained, and destroyed according to a standardized, scheduled process. The lone arranger will also be responsible for working with library staff to establish and maintain a digital repository, exhibitions, outreach programs, and web development.

The lone arranger juggles all of the above all at the same time—and regardless of how large or small the budget is. It remains the case for all of us that there is never enough money to go around.

The Complications

It is one thing to look at the job description and say to one's self, “All of this was covered in my master's program. I can tell you all about it!” It is, however, quite another thing to actually juggle the responsibilities that the institution needs to have undertaken and maintain some semblance of sanity. Complications arise as a normal part of the job; they involve event planning, committee work, faculty meetings, supervising and managing of students and

volunteers, and sometimes damage control or even theft. It is precisely these recurring moments that require of the lone arranger a supremely positive attitude.

No necessary project was ever attempted that did not first require multiple preliminary projects. Those projects, in turn, require their own necessary conditions, and so forth. The result can seem like a paradox fit for Zeno, when the chances of starting anything seem infinitesimally small. For example, oversized collections are cluttering your work environment, virtually burying your desk and computer. The collections need to be rehoused and placed in proper oversized storage shelves. First, however, the repository needs proper shelves to house the materials. Before that can happen, though, space needs to be made for the shelves by moving furniture out of the research room. Before that can happen, however, space needs to be made elsewhere in the building for the furniture, which requires the consent of at least one committee, which requires a well-written proposal, which is difficult to produce because the desk and computer are buried under all of the oversized collections.

The previous example is actually based on a uniquely complicated situation in the Archives and Special Collections of Albion College in Albion, Michigan. In her will, written in 1909, Madelon Stockwell Turner, an Albion alumna and daughter of the first principal of the college, did bequeath the majority of her property to the college so that it might erect a building in memory of her father and mother. In



Nineteenth-century parlor furniture is housed in Albion College Special Collections by stipulation of the donor's last will and testament.

this building the will stipulated that her 11-piece rosewood parlor furniture set was to have its own place and was to remain on display along with a number of other personal items that belonged to the family. The furniture is now displayed in the reading and research room of Albion College Archives and Special Collections, due to its climate-controlled environment and UV filtering windows, occupying space that might otherwise

be used for the proper storage of Albion's ever-growing collections.

Every archives is a breeding ground for complications, challenges, curveballs, and problems in need of solutions; the difference here being that the lone arranger is working with a skeleton crew of one. Even in the event that student workers or volunteers help lighten the load, those people require training and supervision, which can often generate more work than it saves. All of these things, however, should be considered part of the job and taken in stride. It is important to remember that no matter how isolating the position may feel, you are rarely alone.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Even the loneliest arranger's work does not exist in a vacuum. Not only is there a network of professionals that make up the institution that the archives supports, there is also an entire network of professionals in the archival community at large. For example, one should never underestimate the beauty of the listserv. Listservs are an invaluable source of information right at your fingertips. The modern technological age makes it possible to maintain a constant connection with communities in very specific areas of information science. Seemingly every group from students to directors has its own listserv full of people asking and answering questions that can only be addressed by that specific community! The reference librarian may not be able to provide any guidance when it comes to sixteenth-century vellum manuscripts, but there is at least one listserv or roundtable just waiting to spark up a debate about proper preservation techniques.

Certainly, no education can compare to the trial-by-fire of shouldered responsibilities facing the lone arranger. To say that such a prospect is overwhelming is truly an understatement. Even in the event that one is able to receive assistance from faculty and staff of an institution, it is still up to the archivist to make the tough decisions and stick to them. All of these responsibilities, however, produce a rather unexpected and positive effect, namely, a dramatic boost in professional ability and self-confidence. It is truly amazing what we as human beings can do when we have to and even more amazing to look back at our own accomplishments as individuals and say, "I overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to accomplish something I never expected to accomplish." Therein lies true adventure; reflecting upon the tumultuous journey that led us to where we are now. The position of lone arranger, though daunting and overwhelming, is nevertheless an invaluable challenging experience to make a true veteran out of any up-and-comer.