Pitfalls, Progress, and Partnership: Collaboration Between Special Collections and Preservation in Academic Libraries

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Pitfalls, Progress, and Partnership: Collaboration Between Special Collections and Preservation in Academic Libraries

Hilary T. Seo and Tanya Zanish-Belcher
Abstract

The authors discuss the significance and importance of the working relationship between curators and conservators. Based on their own experiences at an academic research library, they describe the difficulties in administering cross-departmental collections care and conservation. Among the topics discussed is the importance of prioritizing selection for treatment of special collections material, building departmental relationships, and communication issues. Establishing open communication and a collaborative work environment lead to new opportunities and long-term benefits for both departments.

Introduction

Collaboration between Special Collections and Preservation Departments in academic libraries is absolutely essential for the departments to succeed. This article explores the variety of issues that go into preservation decision-making as it relates to Special Collections, including the paramount role of priority setting and effective communication. The authors will also discuss the problems that can result from a lack of communication, competing or conflicting interests, and differing departmental priorities. The article will conclude with recommendations for creating a constructive and collaborative relationship between the two units. This relationship requires not only active participation, communication and education on both sides, but also a partnership that fosters collaboration in the areas of fund raising, staff time management, larger collection issues, and security. The Iowa State University (ISU) Library is used as a case study to demonstrate how these two departments have worked together over the years to build a successful and collaborative relationship. The departments’ experiences—trials, errors, pitfalls, and progress—reflect universal concerns in academic and research libraries.

Curator and Conservator: An Historical Overview
In the mid-1980s, curators and conservators recognized the need to articulate new methods of communication, in order “to build bridges across professions to encourage an exchange of knowledge and information” between the two groups.¹ This spurred discussions to develop guidelines for the working relationship between curators and conservators at the treatment decision level. Unfortunately, the discussions led to the conclusion that a basic agreement and understanding of how curators and conservators should work together was lacking.² Conservators focused narrowly on the individual item and its treatment, were steadfast in their own treatment proposals, and staunchly adhered to the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) Code of Ethics. On the other hand, curators tended to drift away from single-item treatment issues, focusing instead on the larger preservation issues and management of the collection as a whole—leaving treatment decisions solely up to the conservator.

By 1994, the AIC Code of Ethics was simplified and the Standards of Practice was replaced by the Guidelines for Practice that was supplemented by commentaries further explaining the rationale and how to meet the expectations.³ The Guidelines for Practice discuss the essential points a conservator should communicate regarding the treatment of any object, and outline precisely what a curator should expect from a conservator, including the latter’s willingness to “ensure an agreement that reflects shared decisions and realistic expectations,” documentation of examination, and a proposed treatment plan with “justification for and the objectives of treatment, alternative approaches, if feasible, and the potential risks.”⁴ However, the document does not resolve what questions curators and conservators should be asking each other. Pilette and Harris identify three basic responsibilities of the curator and the conservator.⁵ For the curator, unique value, significance, and use are the focus of professional efforts. For the conservator, the central areas of focus are treatment techniques, time and money involved, and
appropriateness of the treatment for the item as well as the collection. Additional efforts to open
the lines of communication between the two professions have continued through the Curators
and Conservators Discussion Group of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the American
Library Association (CCDG/RBMS/ALA). Even with these guidelines in mind and open
communication in place, curators and conservators can still have differing central focuses,
training, and professional language, and face issues that can only be resolved collaboratively.

As conservation awareness has developed and the function has been mainstreamed in
libraries, the combination of experience and knowledge of curators and conservators has grown
accordingly. The establishment of regional centers, private conservation practices, and
conservation facilities in libraries has increased access to a variety of conservation treatments. In
turn, this has required that curators be more involved in treatment decisions and that conservators
have more curatorial discussions about the artifact. Curators can be faced with making final
treatment decisions without fully understanding an object’s physical problems or the limitations
of the proposed treatment. Conservators, on the other hand, have found themselves making
treatment decisions without understanding the significance of the item or its relationship to the
collection. Both of these situations can lead to inappropriate treatments.

The differences between these professions from a disciplinary standpoint are clear, but
the manner and degree to which these differences impact local practice is sometimes overlooked.
The growth and development of the Preservation and Special Collections Departments at the ISU
Library reflect many of the tension points and challenges faced by other academic libraries.

**Case Study Background**

The ISU Library is a mid-sized academic library with an estimated 2.4 million volumes,
51 professional staff, and 96 FTE support staff, serving a campus community of 26,000 students,
1,700 faculty, and 4,400 staff. The library’s Department of Special Collections maintains over 50,000 rare books and 15,000 linear feet of archival materials, supported by three faculty librarians (the department head, a collections archivist, and a records analyst) along with three full-time paraprofessional staff. The Preservation Department currently consists of two faculty librarians (the preservation administrator and the conservator) and eight full-time staff members. Both departments are fairly young, established in 1969 and 1991 respectively. At times, the lack of professional staff has impacted both departments negatively, particularly in the area of joint workflows. However, with a new, state-of-the-art conservation lab, expanded and modernized storage space, and organizational changes (including the addition of a preservation administrator), the departments appear on the verge of creating new levels of collaboration.

**History and Working Relationship of the Departments**

Soon after the department’s creation, staff in Special Collections articulated many concerns regarding the preservation of materials. Throughout the 1970s, local discussions on this topic mirrored a growing national interest. In 1981, the Dean of the Library established a Conservation Task Force to study the overall conservation and preservation needs of the library. The following year, the Task Force produced a report delineating a local program statement that identified priorities and proposed activities and policies. A Conservation Specialist was also appointed in 1982, reporting to the Assistant Director for Collections. The Conservation Task Force became a permanent library committee in 1985, with a charge to monitor preservation concerns.

Recommendations from this task force played a key role in the planning and construction of a new wing to the main library at Iowa State in 1983. The Special Collections Department moved into a new, purpose-built facility, which included preservation elements such as security...
systems, a fire suppression system, climate control, and a small laboratory area. This laboratory was equipped for the production of protective wrappers for selected books and simple flat-paper treatments, including dry-cleaning, tear mending, non-aqueous deacidification, and Mylar encapsulation.

By 1991, the library’s fledgling preservation program had matured into an autonomous Preservation Department, serving not only Special Collections but the entire ISU Library system. A single individual served as both conservator and head of this department. Five years later, in 1996, the library built and equipped a new, 3,000-square foot book and paper conservation laboratory. Based on the facility’s anticipated use, space and equipment were planned for a hybrid lab allowing for the treatment of both circulating works and Special Collections. Although the lab is equipped to enable full book and paper conservation of Special Collections materials, workflow focuses mainly on the circulating general collections. The majority of the treatments performed are defined as ARL level I and II. By 2001, the library administration recognized the need for separate department head (preservation administrator) and conservator positions, and increased staffing accordingly. The Preservation Department now consists of three units: Binding and Marking, Preservation Services, and Conservation, all reporting directly to the preservation administrator. The Department currently oversees preservation activities such as disaster response, environmental monitoring, staff and user education and outreach, commercial library binding, shelf-preparation, collation, preservation reformatting, custom-fit enclosures, and conservation.

In addition to the treatments performed by Preservation, staff in Special Collections perform preventive preservation activities, including re-housing and re-foldering items into acid-free/lignin-free boxes or more appropriate storage containers, flattening folded documents that
do not require humidification, removing staples and other metal attachments, and sleeving photographs and other ephemera in polyester sleeves. This archival processing alleviates some stresses on the library’s Preservation Department and its conservation work by reserving the more complex and time-consuming treatments for items that require and merit this level of attention. Due to time and labor issues within the library, the volume of Special Collections material sent for conservation has been somewhat restricted—only the most fragile or unstable materials have been selected, numbering several hundred items during 1994-2004.

**Current Workflow Between the Departments**

With so much of Preservation’s workflow dedicated to general collection materials, the introduction of Special Collections treatments can create bottlenecks in processing. Many of these treatment requests are unplanned, as materials are identified through a variety of channels, including patron use, creation of exhibits, digitization projects, and processing of new acquisitions. Of course, many candidates for treatment are simply donated, in-house transfers from the general collection, or discovered on the shelf in Special Collections. Each item received in the lab must be tracked and reviewed. For Special Collections and materials with unique structures, the conservator must assess condition and determine treatment. A full condition assessment and treatment proposal is required and provided to the curator, and is to be agreed upon by both parties before treatment begins. In an effort to limit bottlenecks, both departments work closely together to schedule and prioritize materials sent for conservation. The process begins with Special Collections identifying items or areas of the collection in need of treatment.

**Criteria for Determining Preservation Priorities**
The identification and selection process for choosing items for conservation treatment is part of the Special Collections Department’s stewardship responsibilities. In turn, the selection process has an impact on what treatment the Preservation Department proposes. Factors involved in the decision-making process for Special Collections include, but are not limited to: the department’s collection development policy and resulting priorities; internal budget and staffing; high researcher demand; special funding from donors or grants; physical considerations such as format; storage problems; fragility; and administrative decisions based on external university relationships. It should also be noted that many of these areas overlap and some treatment decisions are governed by multiple criteria.

Often it is the physical format of an object or book that will determine whether conservation attention is needed. Specific problems or issues can arise with oversized volumes and objects such as sketches, maps, photograph albums, or press books which contain botanical specimens. Scrapbooks, with their variety of formats, larger size and problematic bindings present specific challenges in terms of re-housing and use. Some materials may be sensitive to light exposure (e.g. inks and dyes) or fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity (e.g. vellum) and theses must be housed to prevent unnecessary exposure.

A more recent development is the impact digital projects have on Special Collections and Preservation. The selection of materials for digitization has added another workflow that requires identifying and tracking materials, assessing their condition both before and after digital capture, and treating or re-housing items as needed. In many cases, only a sample of a given collection is digitized (and thus subject to preservation treatment), raising the question of how to treat the identified material without introducing problems for the storage of the entire collection. These partially treated collections will ultimately need to be reviewed again and treated as special
projects when resources permit. Special projects such as the preceding create challenges that
single item treatments do not. Due to the scale of the projects, workflow and tracking issues must
be thought out before implementation, and resources must be allocated, including staff, supplies,
equipment, workspace, and appropriate and secure storage in the lab. The importance of
consistent communication is paramount.

The range of considerations outlined above demonstrate the multi-faceted decision-
making process involved in selecting and treating materials. Once items have been selected,
however, the curator must then begin working with the conservator to develop a mutual
understanding of the artifact in context.

Possibilities for Misunderstandings

No library professional would contest the existence of a strong affinity between the
missions of Special Collections and Preservation in academic libraries. Staff in both departments
have specialized custodial responsibilities for the collections, not only for the benefit of today’s
researchers but for future scholars as well. However, many curators and conservators view their
collections and stewardship responsibilities differently. For curators, a significant portion of their
mission is to ensure intellectual and physical access to collection materials, promote use to
researchers, and publicize and exhibit collections and objects, while the conservator’s desire is to
limit further damage or deterioration by stabilizing and storing artifacts in a secured and
controlled environment and, when possible, limiting access to the original by providing a
surrogate or use copy. Nevertheless, these specialized professions are interrelated and their
missions overlap. The common goal shared by the curator and the conservator is to provide
reasonable and effective access to collections without jeopardizing any aspect of preservation.
The balance between preservation and access is best demonstrated at the conjunction of these two specialized departments, particularly in academic libraries where special collections are used not only by researchers but also by instructors eager to introduce their students to primary source materials. If we ask how best to handle shared goal setting, planning, and decision-making, the obvious answer is that curators and conservators collaborate, discussing relevant problems to determine workable solutions. Complex issues arise when selecting materials for special treatment including the selection of housing and its impact on permanent storage and use, and the determination of physical treatments based on appropriateness and budgetary constraints.

There are many ways in which relationships can break down between the Special Collections and Preservation Departments. Problems can result from inventory discrepancies and other errors in basic record keeping; lack of context and differing expectations by each department; lack of short and long-term planning; ignoring physical realities of storage, use, and needs of the object; and finally, new digital workflows that increase departmental workloads.

**Basic Record Keeping**

Although basic record keeping sounds simple and mundane, the importance of carefully tracking materials as they move from Special Collections to Preservation and back again cannot be overstated. It is crucial not only to maintaining effective workflows, but also to building trust in a good working relationship.

Prior to 1998, there was no concerted effort to track items that were moved from Special Collections to the various Preservation units for treatment. Items were removed from shelves without any paperwork except for a brief note on the shelf list card. From 1998-2000, Special Collections staff filled out a paper check-out slip in duplicate, placing one copy on the shelf and arranging for the second copy to accompany the object. The paperwork, though it included call
number and object identifiers, did not provide any pertinent information for treatment, and often got lost in the treatment process. Without paperwork, items were difficult to locate and identify, especially when they were part of a larger collection. Neither department kept a list of items undergoing treatment, resulting in occasional finger pointing when items could not immediately be found. In response to this situation, the two departments developed separate inventories that were often in disagreement due to poor maintenance practices on both sides.

**Example:** The papers of Alexander Lippisch, a German aviation expert who invented the Delta Wing, contain a variety of formats including oversized sketches. A number of these sketches were removed from the collection for conservation work, but due to the lack of appropriate paperwork, the sketches were temporarily but effectively “lost.” After a series of delays, the sketches were ultimately sent for private conservation work. They were eventually returned to Special Collections after a period of several years.

**Solution:** A paper transmittal form that requires signatures was developed to record collection information (provided by Special Collections staff) and date of transfer. The transfer form travels with the object to Preservation for assessment, and a copy is maintained in Special Collections as well. Treatment proposals and treatment documentation are now provided for items that require more than simple enclosures or repairs. This allows for curator input in terms of significance of the object and any concerns that may arise due to specific treatments or housings, and the provision of documentation for provenance purposes. For a rare book or archival item, documentation of a physical change to the item is paramount to its provenance. A detailed description of what was done, along with visual documentation, is essential to maintaining ongoing information about the department’s collections.
In addition to paper tracking methods, the library’s online catalog is used to indicate current status. Once an item is received in one of the Preservation units, the item’s status is changed to “In Conservation for repair,” “At bindery,” or “Brittle” to indicate which workflow the item has been assigned. After it has been treated and returned to Special Collections, the status is changed to “checked-in.” The departments are currently working on a shared database that will allow Special Collections staff to add entries whenever they have an item requiring treatment or housing. Conservation staff can enter items that are received from Special Collection and add treatment decision information. Items that are entered into the database for future treatment can be sorted by treatment type and pulled on a project basis as time and resources permit.

With these tracking methods in place, staff can better document the transfer, special needs and associated collection materials for any given object. As a result, trust between the two departments has improved greatly. There is more willingness to provide information and discuss problems and potential treatments before the actual treatment work begins.

**Lack of Context & Differing Expectations**

Occasionally, the amount of resource devoted to treatment may outweigh the value or significance of the artifact. Conversely, limited or no treatment can lead to further damage, especially when items are handled excessively or stored improperly. As mentioned previously, collection development criteria directly influence preservation priorities. Special Collections must constantly and consistently consider its criteria for preservation priorities: what is most important to the collection and requires treatment?

Disagreements over treatment decisions can result from differing perspectives and expectations of the staff in the two departments. Both departments clearly need to discuss, in
advance, the value (both monetary and associative) of such collections or objects, and the impact of full conservation treatment. When objects are assessed in a vacuum—ignoring any meaningful context or relationship to a larger collection—the result can be unfounded assumptions and unnecessary treatments. Special Collections staff also face the added risk that researchers may request items that are awaiting or undergoing treatment, and that cannot be retrieved from the Preservation workflow in a timely enough manner.

**Examples:** Recently several photographs that were sent for treatment and re-housing were returned to Special Collections after having been out for a number of years. The archivists and preservation administrator (none of whom were at the institution at the time of the original transfer) were shocked to realize that time, labor, and supplies had been expended on objects that should have been de-accessioned from the collections. Similar situations can also arise with special-needs artifacts. A National Medal of Science, belonging to a major donor to the Special Collections Department, was mounted and framed with a photograph of President George H.W. Bush. An image of the medal was needed for an exhibit, but unfortunately the medal could not be photographed well through the glass. Conservation was requested to dismantle the frame and remove the medal. The donor agreed that the object should be re-housed, but insisted that it be maintained in the same structure regardless of the fact that it was constructed of poor quality materials. Conservation was not immediately informed of this and had some difficulty restoring the object to its intended state, especially since the original housing structure had failed.

**Solution:** The curator’s responsibility does not end with identifying items in need of conservation treatment; she is an integral part of an ongoing dialogue between curator and conservator. The curator possesses the most knowledge about an object’s value and other intangible qualities, understanding how the object is used and currently stored, and how it fits
within a larger collection. As previously mentioned, the departments have developed a transmittal form that accompanies the object. Over time, this form evolved to include information that would assist the conservator in making treatment decisions. Special Collections staff are required to indicate what the general problem is, and answer the following questions: How and where is the object stored (e.g., alone or in a box with various other materials)? Is the item part of a larger collection or series? Are there accompanying materials? Have associated materials been treated, or are they in need of treatment? What use issues need to be considered? What is the item’s intrinsic value? When is this item needed? Based on the answers to these questions, the conservator can then propose timely and appropriate treatment options.

**Lack of Planning**

Not only is it necessary for curators and conservators to discuss treatment options, but they must also engage in shared, systematic planning, both short-term and long-term. Limited resources, funding, staff time, workspace, equipment, supplies, and researcher demands require the two departments to jointly identify and plan items or collections to be treated during the fiscal year. Without such selection and planning, the treatment of high-priority fragile or damaged materials may never be accomplished, since all of the staff’s time may be spent reacting to other problems that are not as significant. Another problem caused by a lack of planning is that some projects or objects sent to Conservation may cause bottlenecks or may simply be backlogged in Conservation until time, space, and supplies allow for treatment. Oversized materials, large collections, and treatments that require special set-up, equipment or supplies all cause strains on Conservation. What planning can do is enable the grouping of minor or mid-level treatment types that allows for an efficient batch processing approach.
**Example:** The Special Collections Department received special, one-time funding to purchase a rare 1513 edition of a work by Vitruvius Pollio. When the book arrived, it required extensive conservation treatment for which monies had not been provided in the one-time purchase funding. The unexpected arrival of this item in the Preservation workflow definitely impacted that department’s budget and ability to provide an optimal level of treatment. The problems resulting from inadequate planning are not entirely fiscal. Difficulties can also ensue when a curator miscalculates the conservation needs of a rare book, based solely on the brief description a dealer has provided; or when a curator fails to understand the potential conservation risk of purchasing previously “restored” or rebound books; or when a conservator recommends against the purchase of an item requiring extensive treatment, only to discover that the item has already been ordered and received.

**Solution:** Careful and collaborative planning can prevent such surprises. Currently, the Preservation and Special Collections Departments at ISU jointly plan for the upcoming fiscal year, making budget estimates for possible expenditures and identifying items or collections that should be treated. The curator also notifies the conservator of plans to purchase rare books or to acquire a collection that needs immediate attention. In 2004, the Special Collections Department purchased a rare book collection from the American Association of Variable Star Observers. Thanks to advance planning, the two departments were able to implement a detailed survey of the collection when it arrived, which will in turn direct the conservation work for each volume. This will also allow Preservation to fold the planning process into its budget and regular conservation workflow. Another recent successful project was a survey to examine and make housing recommendations for rare books that had previously been placed in polypropylene bags to protect their bindings during the department’s move to its current location. Having this
information readily available will greatly assist the preservation administrator in planning future treatments and in managing the department’s budget and staffing resources.

**Ignoring Physical Realities**

The physical realities libraries and archives face are two-fold, and include both the storage of collections and the physical use and handling of materials. These realities play a significant role in the treatment and housing of objects. In fact, failing to understand how and where an object is stored, how it relates to items stored in the same contiguous space, and how it is used (physically) by researchers, can lead to a variety of preservation problems. These include treatments or housings that prevent patrons from using the item as intended, make it difficult for staff to lift or transport the item through aisles and doors, and items that cannot be returned to their original storage space due to extreme dimensional changes.

In addition to storage and usability concerns, Special Collections may have certain policies in place regarding the organization of collections, storage of various media, or size designations. Some departments may choose to separate collections or associated materials based on format or size, while others require joint housing of collections and objects with mixed media.

**Example:** Selected issues of the *Iowa Home Economics Association Newsletter* were sent to Conservation. The issues were re-housed in a standard archival box that significantly altered the issues’ dimensions so they could no longer be housed with the other issues. This resulted in some difficulty in both storing the collection (due to a lack of oversized shelving space) and locating this material via public catalog records, which do not reflect Special Collection’s oversize shelving as a separate location. These problems could have been avoided with a custom-fit box or wrapper. Another example of a problem created by treatment or re-housing involved a number of county atlases. Due to their fragile condition, these were encapsulated and post-bound. The
new bindings were extremely heavy and made it difficult for an individual reference archivist to
lift and transport each atlas to the Special Collections Reading Room. In addition, researchers
often wanted reproductions of specific pages, and the binding made this impossible.

**Solution:** Each of the preceding problems could have been avoided if effective pre-treatment
communication had occurred, so that staff in both departments would understand each other’s
needs and constraints. When both sides openly share this type of information, useful
compromises may become apparent. The heads of both departments now meet weekly to discuss
precisely these types of issues on a case-by-case basis in order to reach a compromise and
solution. Special Collections presents what it considers to be the needs of the object, and
Preservation responds with possible treatments. The decisions are made as a partnership that
results in better care of the library’s collections. For example, the 1895 death mask of Margaret
Stanton is an artifact that Special Collections brings out frequently for exhibits and tours,
especially for grade school children who find the mask fascinating. This plaster cast from the
Victorian era is not fragile per se but will shatter if dropped. The curator requested a housing that
could serve as proper storage and also be used for display purposes. An attractive archival box
with a removable lid and drop front was designed to support and display the mask without
having to remove or reposition it for viewing. The final decision was collaborative and
consultative, based on the best interest of the object and keeping the institution’s overall mission
in mind. As a result, Special Collections and Preservation staff are more likely to feel confident
with the final decision.

**New Digital Realities**

Providing digital access to Special Collections materials has resulted in additional
responsibilities for both the Special Collections and Preservation Departments. The items
selected for digitization may require revised cataloging or finding aids, the creation of metadata, physical handling during transfers, basic cleaning or conservation work, and/or new housing--before or after the scanning process. These requirements have resulted in new stresses on areas with limited resources. A lack of established policies and procedures among library departments during these early stages of a new workflow can result in numerous problems for rare materials. Items may be damaged through handling by numerous staff, may get lost in transfer, or may be altered in ways that preclude their return to previous storage spaces.

**Example:** Special Collections has a collection of fashion plates from the 17th century through the 20th, which were collected by a professor in the university’s textiles and clothing program. To showcase this unique collection in the online environment, Special Collections staff worked with a member of the teaching faculty to select and digitize significant plates from a series of historical periods. Oftentimes, this resulted in one or two plates being removed from a folder of up to twenty related items. Because of the digitization project, the selected items became a preservation priority, though they had no innate value independent of the rest of the collection. The selected plates were all sent to Conservation for cleaning prior to being scanned. Their arrival in Conservation triggered a number of misassumptions and problems in workflow and process. Plates that had been carefully organized sequentially by their digital object identifiers were reorganized in Conservation, to reflect their physical size and to streamline treatment. This made it difficult to synchronize the physical scanning process with metadata creation, and to re-file the plates in Special Collections. Conservation staff also inadvertently removed digital object identifiers from several laminated plates, further complicating the digitization workflow. These identifiers, had been attached with PlastiKlips, and the staff—not comprehending their significance—had removed them, considering the clips to be damaging. Some plates were also
held in Conservation for further treatment without notification to the digitizing unit or Special Collections. Since the plates were taken out of scanning order and some were without their identifiers, it was difficult to determine which plates were missing. Finally, several plates were re-housed in such a way that they no longer fit in their original folders.

**Solution:** As a result of the previous experiences, both departments became extremely proactive and operated in tandem to draft digital project paperwork that required signatures and item counts for their departments. They also encouraged the library to develop a workflow involving all appropriate library units for any rare or general collection materials being digitized. The two departments were proactive in bringing their concerns to both the library administration and the library-wide committee overseeing digital initiatives. Finally, the department heads raised the issue of the time and labor costs of digitizing projects, as well as the need to provide staff training in the care and handling of objects and other security issues.

**Furthering a Proactive Partnership**

In addition to the activities described above, the departments also have partnered in developing donor relations, staff awareness and training, and community outreach.

In 2003, the ISU Library’s Special Collections and Preservation Departments jointly hosted a donor with personal and corporate foundation interests in the library. The departments provided a joint presentation highlighting their individual but closely interrelated needs, and a joint tour of their facilities. The result was a greater understanding of the inter-connectedness of the two departments, not only for the donor (who in the end supported gifts for both departments), but for the library administration as well.

The departments have also explored a number of methods by which to continue educating their staff about cross-departmental issues and maintaining open communications. To ensure a
successful relationship, the conservator and curator should have a basic understanding of each other’s concerns and be prepared to frankly discuss potential problems. Possible methods for facilitating a better relationship include frequent visits, tours, and joint staff meetings on specific topics. Staff in both departments should engage in regularly scheduled joint meetings. This increased contact could easily lead to joint projects and research. Specific examples of collaborative projects are not limited to collections care, but might extend to the creation of exhibits and other forms of outreach.

The more the two departments interact, the more staff will be able to emphasize and foster close working relationships to determine workable solutions. Sharing departmental policies, procedures, and philosophies has resulted in better communication, a more collaborative partnership, and improved public services. The more the departments know about each other, the better able they are to present a united front to support their shared mission to the administration and the rest of the library.

**Conclusion**

The complexity of the dealings between Special Collections and Preservation requires a close working relationship, based on mutual respect for the object and a shared understanding of each department’s mission. The delicate balance between preservation and access is complicated by each department’s unique concerns and responsibilities for selection, resource management, storage, and use.

With an ongoing dialog between curator and conservator that leads to efficacious treatment decisions, conservation pitfalls can be avoided. Dissonance between curator and conservator over appropriate level of treatment, collection and treatment priorities, storage issues, level of documentation, and use of materials can all be avoided by having these
discussions. Certainly, compromise should not endanger the object or its evidentiary value; however, creative compromise can help to meet the needs of both current and future researchers for effective access and long-term preservation.

Special Collections and Preservation departments must be proactive in fostering their partnership. With consistent and open communication, the institution’s twin goals of access and preservation can be achieved. A willingness to explore a collaborative relationship will result in appropriate treatments, efficient use of staff time, and mutual satisfaction with the outcome. By establishing an ongoing relationship and achieving an effective cross-departmental workflow, the departments can also identify additional areas for future collaboration, such as funding and programming opportunities.

4 Ibid. 26, 34-35.
5 Roberta Pilette and Carolyn Harris, “It Takes Two to Tango: A Conservator’s View of Curator/Conservator Relations,” Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship 4 (Fall 1989): 110.
6 The Specialist’s main responsibilities were in Special Collections, and the position focused on book and paper conservation, preservation policy and procedures, oversight of a pest control program, and preservation education of library staff and patrons.
8 ARL defines Level I conservation treatments as those requiring 15 minutes or less to perform, Level II as those requiring more than 15 minutes but less than two hours to perform, and Level III as those requiring two hours or more to perform. For the fiscal year 2003, 4,716 level I and 829 level II treatments were performed by 2.25 FTE support staff and 2.0 FTE student workers. These treatments included repair to or re-housing of circulated materials, new publishers’ bindings with minor problems, and new materials requiring some shelf preparation such as pamphlet binding or protective wrappers.