

Research-based Action Steps for Increasing Awareness and Use of Archives

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Abstract

Archives too often go unnoticed and unused. Research-based evidence published in library and information science literature provides recommendations for community outreach to increase positive awareness and use of archival collections and overcome negative perceptions of archives as cold and unwelcoming institutions. A three-step action plan for community outreach to inform the public about archival collections emphasizes social media presence, networking, and hosting events.

Keywords: archives, community outreach, social media, networking, archivist

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Walking into the local archive is like walking back in time. For example, a state history archival collection can clarify records of people, places, and events. There are one-of-a-kind maps, photographs, manuscripts, and numerous records, objects, personal letters, and a special collection that holds so much more. Unfortunately, many people within the communities do not use, or know, about the archives. Archivists are now challenged “to be advocates for their own institutions, fellow archival institutions, and themselves” (Brett, 2013, p.51). A major problem that persists within archives is the stigma about their institution and the view that archives are cold and unwelcoming (Harris, 2012, p.294). In addition, there is the problem that many community members do not know there is an archive in their city. Some community members do not know what an archive is. These problems resulted in little traffic within many archives.

One approach to overcoming the problem of lack of awareness and use of archival collections is to increase outreach efforts to the community. Through positive outreach to the community, archivists can *cancel out* negative perceptions and bring awareness of the value of the collection and the institution to communities. Fortunately, research-based evidence provides examples of successful archival establishments and best practices in conducting community outreach. My review of library and information science literature revealed case studies with

finding identifying the importance of special events, use of social media, opportunities for new connections, advocacy, and create surveys. Incorporating these strategies, a three-step action plan for increasing awareness of and use of archival collection is presented: social media presence, networking, and hosting special events.

Evidence-based Case Studies on Archival Awareness

Many archives are challenged to increase public awareness and use of archival collections. To investigate this topic, a review of journal publications (2015-2020) using the EBSCOhost database at William Allen White Library, Emporia State University, was conducted to identify research-based evidence about best approaches to providing archival community outreach.

Multi-Institutional Event. In Austin, Texas, The Austin Archives Bazaar is an event that is run by volunteers, is informal, and is free to the public (Alonzo, Rushing, & Sorensen, 2018, p. 21). Multiple institutes set up booths and there are key speakers, authors, activists, and historians there to discuss how they use the local archives (Alonzo, 2018 p.7). One of the most prominent events held at the bazaar is a preservation station. Community members can “bring family history materials and get advice on the best ways to preserve them” (p. 8). In total, 20 repositories showcased at the bazaar and 400 people attended. The authors concluded that this was a successful outcome as stated that “the benefits of participating in the Bazaar far outweighed these slight inconveniences and we look forward to participating again” (p. 22). Some advice that this article offers is that it is important to have a dedicated set of leaders with a strong set of volunteers. It is important toward increasing attendance to set a date that does not interfere with other community events.

Advocacy. In efforts to both engage and educate archivists about community outreach, the Issues and Advocacy Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists conducted surveys to learn about archival advocacy (Brett & Jones, 2013). The methodology that the roundtable used was precise so that they could best direct their efforts. One of the advocacy-related actions that the survey respondents asked for was institutional promotion. Coincidentally, the authors note that by doing advocacy work, promotional outreach also occurs. Although the researchers wanted differentiation between advocacy and promotion, they realized that some archivists use the terms interchangeably thus confusing results. Interestingly, many of the respondents indicated that doing outreach is one of the most important parts of their jobs but only approximately one-fourth of the respondents received any assistance in doing so. This study suggests that recognition of the need for assistance in doing community outreach is needed across the board for archives to fully function and gain the positive influence of community outreach. The respondents who did receive assistance said that collaboration between institutions and ample amounts of energy were also needed to ensure that their outreach functions were successful.

University Archivist and Faculty Collaboration. The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Special Collections Department has been making pronounced developments with outreach to the university's students to make their collections more accessible (Harris & Weller, 2012). At UIC, their archivist created a survey that asked straight forward questions to library users. Findings from the survey resulted in numerous changes within their archives. The survey provided new understanding of the user and informed development of existing outreach plans. For example, with the use of finding aids, better processing, digitization, and more relaxed rules, they have been gaining more student use within their archive. One of the most used practices to gain outreach for university archives is pairing with professors to instruct the students to use the

archives primary sources for assignments. Another approach is to showcase archival records throughout the university with exhibits. These exhibits highlight significant collections that can catch the student's attention.

Social Media. In Louisiana, the Ernest J. Gaines Center is a new research center that has decided to use social media as a tool for community outreach. The platforms that they are using are Facebook and Twitter. With their center being new and small, they have a limited budget with a small staff. By using these platforms, they are not spending any extra money and they have found that it is bringing a "voice of the patron to the archivist and director" (Mosley, 2011, p.2). They have also noticed that by using social media, it has created a more inviting effect for their archive. This is big because a stigma surrounding archives being unenticing. An added benefit to using these social media platforms is that they can use them as an advertising space. They post all of their events to both social media platforms using quotes and photos that are related. As the events approach, they post more often so that It helps bring get people's attention. There are also tools on these platforms that they can use to ask questions to their followers (Mosley, 2011, p. 3). The Ernest J. Gaines Center is located at the University of Louisiana. They intended to gain the attention of the students, but their results have shown that community members unaffiliated to the university have also been viewing their posts, coming to their events, and using the research center. This is a very satisfactory result with outreach.

Record Acquisition. Not all outreach programs are to get more attendance at institutes. Outreach programs can also be used for acquiring records. Kent State University's Department of Special Collections and Archives established a plan to use outreach to gain records for their collection. Specifically, they created a list of records that they needed to complete their

collection on the Black Campus Movement from 1965- 1972. To start, they assessed their archive and then looked into the available documentation that would benefit their collection. This resulted in a list of records that would fit into their scope so they would be able to target specific records through their outreach (Hughes-Watkins, 2014, p.35). The next step was to create a mission statement that stated the goals of their outreach program. After creating a list of potential participants and donors, they sent this statement out.

Leading Change

Community outreach is beneficial to both the archive and the members within the community. Increasing knowledge of the archive creates better research projects for those who use the facility. They can access information that they cannot find elsewhere. Not only community members can use the state archives but so can anyone from other states or countries.

Creating a Social Media Presence. This should be one of the first steps with outreach programs, according to Mosley, 2011. There are many free social media platforms that archives can use to promote themselves such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. A rule of thumb would be to make 2-3 posts per week (Mosley, 2011, p.2). This creates an effective online presence. A small team of staff members or a singular person should be in charge of leading this task. They need to be dedicated and knowledgeable on social media. Social media platforms are also a tool that people can use to contact the archive (Hughes-Watkins, 2014, p.38). It is also a tool that can be updated consistently to reflect any upcoming events and programming that the archive does. By increasing the archive's social media presence, they will result in having more interactions with visitors. Digitization will also be increased because of the need to create new content with your collections (Harris, 2012).

Networking. Part of outreach programs is also collaborating with other archival institutes. An archivist will have to think outside of the box to make contacts. To begin you can assess your collection and figure out what records could be beneficial to add or what records you have that could benefit other repositories. Then, create a list of potential repositories that can be contacted. Develop a purpose statement that enlists what your goals are for this interaction. It is important to be clear and concise. Do follow-ups on anyone you have not heard from (Hughes-Watkins, 2014). These connections will help benefit your institution, but it will also create links for researchers.

Hosting Events. These events can highlight your archive or multiple archives. The most successful events are free and require little from those who attend. Create a survey to fill out before leaving or create an online form that can be accessed from home. Include questions that ask about what they thought of the event, what the archive is, where you are located, and what you do. These can be open-ended questions, or you can provide a way for them to send in results. You can combine these surveys with your social media platforms. By doing surveys, an archivist will be able to hear the voices of its community and meet their needs (Mosley, 2011). Hosting events take a lot of planning ahead of time and having a set structure for how the event should go. Each year it is important to make new improvements to your event that will result in the best outcome.

Suggestions for Practice

While taking these steps for community outreach, it is important to keep in mind the environment you display within your facility. None of these efforts will be worth it if you do not create a welcoming setting for guests. When a patron enters your archive, they should be at ease

and not afraid to get assistance with accessing records (Harris, 2012, p. 302). Community outreach can be hard for archivist because it is not in the job description and there are other tasks at hand that require attention. Always be willing to set some time aside and be flexible with your plan. Create a document plan that is a “fluid document” (Hugh-Watkins, 2014, p. 35). In the beginning, many processes can be overlooked so reflect on what has worked and what does not. Each archive serves a different group of people. Adjustments have to be made to fit the need of the patrons. By increasing community outreach, archives will be able to increase presence within their community.

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