

Collections Conservation at Princeton University Libraries

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Princeton University Libraries (PUL) consist of Firestone Library, sixteen branch libraries, and two annexes (for off-site storage) which have combined holdings of 4.5 million books. PUL has one of the highest ratios of number of circulations to number of students in the nation with an average of over 100 circulations per student. This ratio affects PUL in two ways. First, it means a large number of items get used, and second, a high amount of retrospective research is performed meaning the older material must be maintained.

The Library has had an active book repair program for many years, but it was not until the late 1970's that true conservation and preservation programs began to develop. In the last year, the PUL reorganized its preservation efforts by establishing a Preservation Office and by hiring Robert Milevski as the preservation librarian. The Preservation Office consists of three units at this time: Collections Conservation, Brittle Books, and Arabic Preservation Project (grant-funded microfilming projects). PUL has also had a history of special collections conservation, but it was always separate from book repair and other preservation activities. With the recent reorganization this unit has been pulled into the new Preservation Office. Much time and many resources have been devoted to upgrading and improving general collections conservation since the reorganization of the Preservation Office and the hiring of Brian Baird as collections conservator. The philosophy of the Collections Conservation Unit is high production, sound treatments from a conservation point of view, and aesthetically pleasing results. This has involved staff retraining, unit reorganization, and changes in treatment standards.

Last year collections conservation staff executed more than 18,000 treatments. The staff presently consist of one professional (the general collections conservator), two FTE support staff, and three students (in addition, one FTE professional level book treatment position is currently vacant). The conservation lab is being completely remodeled which involves moving the special collections conservation operation into the same area with general collections conservation, and providing more room and equipment for both. By autumn, Princeton will have hired a paper conservator for special collections and a book conservator for the general collections; and with the additional lab space, more students will also be hired. When fully staffed, the Collections Conservation Unit will consist of four FTE's (two professional and two support staff), seven students (1.5 FTE), and one or two volunteers (0.5 FTE). Thus organized, in the next fiscal year Princeton plans to double the number of items treated last year and to treble it two years from now.

All of the material in the Princeton University Libraries that is identified for treatment is sent to the Collections Conservation Unit where the collections conservator reviews it and decides upon the most appropriate treatment for every item, including whether it requires in-house or commercial treatment. Material is primarily identified through handling and recorded use (i.e. circulation). In addition, bibliographers and selectors are encouraged to work with collections conservation staff to identify heavily used subject areas in the stacks which do not normally have recorded use, but which require maintenance and treatment.

Damaged materials arrive at collections conservation either on a book truck or through the mail. Branch libraries are limited in what they can send by use of a point system. The point system, loosely based on the model at the Library of Congress, allocates available staff treatment hours among the libraries as well as regulates the flow of materials from them into the unit. Most libraries are instructed to keep three to five books charged to collections conservation all the time. Limiting the number of items sent for treatment helps prevent the unit from being buried in a back log.

Each branch library has a set number of treatment hours, or points, assigned to it. The number of points used by each library is tracked by the collections conservator. Each month the library receives a printed report stating how many points have been used, where the points have been spent, that is, what treatments have been executed, and how many points remain. The point system has a rotation system appended to it so that each branch library receives extra points every four years. These extra points can be used for special projects the bibliographers, selectors, or collections conservator may identify.

At Princeton, the conservation technicians are part of the library support staff and are represented by a union. Their salaries and position titles are negotiated with the library administration every two years, along with those of the other library support staff. They are treated no differently than other library employees having opportunities to serve on committees, and to receive professional training.

For the conservation technician, no formal conservation training is required; it is provided on the job. Each technician is trained in a variety of treatments. The higher level technician is required to know and understand all of the treatments executed in-house, but is not required to perform them on a regular basis. This person's primary duty is to perform case binding. The lower level technician is responsible for temporary bindings and enclosures and is not required to know how to do the upper level treatments. The salaries for conservation technicians range between 18 and 26 thousand dollars per year.

In collections conservation at Princeton, access to library material is an important consideration. All treatments, standards, and policies are established with access in mind. To this end, material is repaired or rebound rather than boxed when it is possible believing, generally, that a fully functional item is a more accessible and more usable than one which is boxed. Currently, we have a back log to deal with, but it will be gone by the end of the summer. In general, we attempt to turn around material sent to us on the following schedule: 24-48 hours for special rush situations; 5 days for normal rush; and 30 days for normal treatment.

The majority of the treatments performed here are identical to those performed at Brigham Young University. Our standards and conservation theory are also similar.