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Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group 2005: AIC Collections Care Task Force and “Self Preservation”

ABSTRACT

The Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group (LCCDG) featured two topics during the 2005 AIC meeting in Minneapolis. The first was an update from the AIC Collections Care Task Force, which was charged with defining the role of conservation technicians in an institutional setting and investigating the skills required to carry out their professional tasks.

The second agenda item was an open discussion on “self preservation.” Institutions ask collections conservators to perform a diverse range of duties. We are required to be not only conservators, but also administrators, managers, trainers, and authors. The group discussed how we as conservators balance workplace demands with our own professional interests and needs; what motivates us; and how we maintain enthusiasm over the long term when faced with more “other duties as required” and less bench time.

UPDATE FROM THE AIC COLLECTIONS CARE TASK FORCE

Julie Reilly, Associate Director and Chief Conservator at the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center at the Nebraska State Historical Society, presented an update of the AIC Collections Care Task Force. The group, led by Carolyn Rose from 1994 until her death in 2002, worked for eleven years to “define and clarify the role of technicians in conservation practice and in the institutional

This open discussion took place on June 12, 2005, during the AIC 33rd Annual Meeting, June 8–13, 2005, Minneapolis, Minnesota. The moderators organized and led the discussion and recorded notes. Readers are reminded that the moderators do not necessarily endorse all the comments recorded and that although every effort was made to record proceedings accurately, further evaluation or research is advised before putting treatment observations into practice.

setting” (Collections Care Task Force 2005, iii). In Reilly’s presentation and accompanying handout she indicated that the group had to recognize the differences in the roles technicians play among specialties, since in some disciplines technicians are more likely to work on actual objects than in others. The Task Force was challenged to find ways to define the tasks and levels of performance at which a typical technician might perform across disciplines.

The Task Force conducted a literature search and consulted conservators the world over for input on how technician labor is utilized in various conservation settings. Reilly stated that “there was much discussion and comparison of technician work in different contexts and specializations” (Reilly 2005, 5). The Task Force listed and defined the primary tasks that technicians perform in nineteen distinct areas, from documentation and examination to pest management and disaster recovery. It then listed the knowledge and skills required to complete each task. For example, a knowledge area is exhibition practices and a related skill area is mount-making techniques.

Members of the Collections Care Task Force realized that there were levels of performance for each of the tasks listed, from Level 1—a beginning or basic level in which the steps of the task are provided, to Level 3—an advanced level in which the technician might independently carry out a task (Reilly 2005, 8). Level 4 was added to address a conservator’s competence and training.

The Task Force then devised charts that broke down the knowledge and skills required for each level of performance for each of the nineteen primary tasks. Reilly used the task of Collection Housing as an example. She noted that “more than fifty reviewers studied the lists, definitions, and charts . . . including AIC Board members, curators, technicians, representatives of related professional organizations, scientists, and conservation education professionals from around the world” (Reilly 2005, 12). The final report of the Collections Care Task Force, *Requisite Competencies for Conservation Technicians and Collections Care Specialists*, may be found on the AIC web-

site. Ms. Reilly stated that the Task Force hopes that the report will:

- Help to define and plan training
- Act as an aid in hiring and personnel activities
- Act as a guide for curricula development
- Help define and clarify relationships between conservators and conservation technicians
- Help legitimize the vital role that technicians play in conservation and collections care (Reilly 2005, 13)

“SELF PRESERVATION”

Beth Doyle, Collections Conservator for Duke University Libraries, began the “self preservation” discussion by sharing some personal observations:

I have been thinking about my current position and my future career in conservation. When I entered this profession I believed I would spend most of my time working at the bench with the expectation that I would have some administrative duties in my job description. The reality is that most of my time is spent managing the work of the Conservation Unit, not actually *being* a conservator.

Many of the recent job postings require more from one professional position than ever before. You must now possess both circulating and rare book collection conservation skills, perform traditional preservation administration functions including program development, grant writing, and project management, and fulfill tenure-track responsibilities including scholarly research and publishing.

In a recently published article Whitney Baker writes, “sometimes the library administration hopes that the hybrid conservator will be able to solve many problems and reduce backlogs that have plagued the institution for years, but hiring one professional may not create sufficient infrastructure to effect rapid and sweeping change” (Baker 2004, 187). The approach of hiring one person to “do it all,” is increasingly common and I wonder what our futures hold if this trend continues.

Doyle opened the floor to discussion with the following questions for consideration:

- How do we stay enthusiastic in our jobs when faced with more “other duties as required” and less bench time to practice the craft for which we trained so hard?
- How do you balance workplace demands with our own professional interests and needs?
- What strategies have you, the audience, employed to keep yourself motivated?
- Once in this position, how do you make your institution understand that you are just one person who cannot possibly do everything the job description requires?

Whitney Baker, Conservator for the University of Kansas Libraries, elaborated on the findings of her article, cited above. Respondents to her survey, all of whom oversaw both conservation of circulating collections and special collections in one laboratory space, discussed areas of recommendation for improved job satisfaction. The top determination of the report is, not surprisingly, that almost all conservators wish they had more time for work at the bench.

She presented some ideas from her research and audience members added their own suggestions in broad themes. The personal suggestions for improving one’s “self preservation” appear in thematic categories below.

Time Management

- Schedule bench time and stick to a rigid schedule. Explain to other library staff why this schedule is needed in order to complete your work. If meetings are scheduled during set treatment times, ask to change the meeting time or say that you are unavailable. Make few exceptions to this set bench time.
- Give yourself core treatment hours each day and schedule meetings only at the very beginning or end of the workday.
- Choose one day a week during which no student workers may be in the lab to provide time alone to focus on treatments.
- Give yourself firm treatment deadlines, where they do not naturally exist, in order to prepare enough bench time to complete projects. Add treatment goals to your annual evaluation. At the end of the year, list every single-item treatment on the report to highlight accomplishments.
- Keep track of time spent on each major work project, both treatment and otherwise, to gain a sense of where your time goes. Once you realize where the time is spent, you might better align it with what actually appears on your job description. When you keep track of time, you see what you get done.
- When you are at the bench, do not answer the phone. There is a tendency to feel more guilt when administrative tasks are not completed on schedule than when treatments fall behind. We need to adjust that thinking and instead determine whom we most need to please.
- Batch work where appropriate. Even when you do not have large chunks of time, by planning ahead a few items might be taken through to the next step, which often includes drying time.
- While public tours can be an interruption, we should also remember that the people we introduce to our laboratory might be potential donors. Education and outreach is also important to our collections and our work.

- Do not explain too much—assert your schedule and keep to it. We have a responsibility to take what we need when we need it and should realize that we cannot meet everyone's expectations all of the time.
- As we advance in our careers, we often take on more managerial tasks that lead to less bench time. We need to balance these added duties or accept that we will not advance as readily in the field. Those of us working in institutions are fortunate, as private practice conservators are faced with more managerial duties whether they want them or not.
- If you can ask for more time for more complex treatments that only the head conservator can do, you may be able to be protected from being on so many library committees.
- Do not be afraid to say no to an unreasonable request—determine what you can and cannot offer in terms of services and time.

Enthusiasm for the Job and Staff Motivators

Heather Kaufman, Preservation Services Librarian for MIT Libraries, posed the question of how we tap back into the enthusiasm we felt when we first started out in the field. The answers were varied, as evidenced below:

- One conservator stated that once in a while she was struck by a moment that helps her remember why we devise strategies to preserve our nation's treasures. Another person noted that when you interact with the public you often see the treasures they bring from home, which can be inspirational.
- One workplace hosts long lunches once in a while during which staff work on creative projects, such as creating paste papers. Another lab that employs students has a book arts project day once a semester after classes end and before finals start.
- Another institution holds a mini open house every month for a half an hour during lunchtime. During this time, lab staff demonstrate a simple repair, review handling guidelines, demonstrate how to make a book support, or provide some other educational opportunity. The enthusiasm of the larger staff encourages those in the lab.
- One supervisor holds parties or celebrations when the lab reaches certain landmarks, such as completing the one-hundredth treatment in a collection. She likes to create opportunities for her staff to be creative.
- One lab has "Tuesday's Tips at Two," a fifteen-minute meeting during which the staff asks questions or share ideas with one another. This lab also celebrates Equipment Day to commemorate the arrival of the major pieces of lab equipment.
- One lab holds quick repair sessions one day a month. A conservator from this lab encourages us to try to find novel ways to interject treatment into daily processes

that others cannot refuse. We need to remember that we are providing services for our institutions when we treat materials.

Lab Design and Office Space

- The relative location of the work bench and your telephone, computer, and other office equipment can affect your ability to work on treatments. One participant prefers having an office space outside of the lab so she is not distracted by her email and phone calls.
- Another participant felt too isolated when his office was far away from the floor. He likes being involved in the activity and did not want a walled office.
- If materials and equipment for circulating work and those for special collections work can be separated as required, the workflow may run more smoothly. Common materials and equipment could be placed between the two areas.

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