

LIBRAS Continuing Education Conference Report
Submitted by Julie Wroblewski, Archives & Special Collections Librarian
Benedictine University
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I attended the 2012 Midwest Archives Conference (MAC) in Grand Rapids to learn about new techniques, ideas, tools, and programs in archives as well as to meet with and gather information from other archivists. MAC continues to be one of the best values for practical sessions and interesting discussion both in and out of the conference events. I appreciate LIBRAS' support in helping me attend this year and look forward to putting the information and education I gained to use at my institution.

At the conference, I attended the following sessions:

New Grantsmanship: Digital Sustainability, Open Access, and Consortial Arrangements

In this session, I learned about the types of projects that are receiving funding from federal grant programs (such as the NEH and NHPRC) and some tips about structuring proposals. Nearly all federal grants now require open access publication of the results and research and heavily favor digital projects. The best chance of success comes with a project that is collaborative in nature, so continuing to network with other LIBRAS schools and institutions about projects that could involve shared resources or deliverables will be important. Many of our schools have smaller repositories and more limited resources, yet share many common goals. Pooling our efforts and collaborating on grants will allow for more ambitious projects and useful resources, much as we are starting to do with the LIBRAS institutional repository Constellation.

Juggling Act: Managing Small Shops

This panel session featured lone archivists from variety of institutions who shared tips and strategies for how to be maximally effective. What I found especially useful is that 1) all of the panelists focused on working with what you had and did not make assumptions that you would ever gain (or even want) to grow your professional staff (some archives are meant to remain small) and 2) that this small size can create valuable opportunities for the students and others in a university community precisely because of being small. The archivist from Concordia (in Minnesota) was particularly interesting and had several ideas that I plan to pursue here at Ben U. For example, she had developed internships for undergraduates studying marketing and communications in which they develop more and better outreach materials and programs.

This Call for a Celebration! Engaging Your Archives in Institutional Milestones and Anniversaries

This panel session featured a range of types of institutions. Some of the larger ones struggled to make their projects relevant to those with fewer resources, but I gathered several ideas that I would like to use during October (homecoming and National Archives Month) to cap off our 125th anniversary year.

How Using Students and Community Volunteers Can Benefit Your Archives.

This session provided information on how to structure student employment and volunteers of a variety of ages and backgrounds to promote visibility in the community and to get more done. Many of the techniques mentioned are ones I already employ, though the archivist from one of the NARA outposts had some interesting and non-traditional takes on how to structure adult volunteers. The most dynamic part of this session came with the question and answer session, which became a heated discussion of the ethics of using volunteers with library and archives backgrounds who are un or underemployed and the responsibilities of paid staff to advocate for more positions rather than exploiting free labor. Rhetoric aside, the ethics of providing something for nothing and creating repositories that are dependent on unpaid help raise some interesting ethical dilemmas that should be taken into consideration when bringing in volunteers and interns.

Hands-On Plus: Work/Teaching with/about Manuscripts

Two of the panelists focused on the education of archivists in training and while interesting, this was not especially relevant. The third speaker, however, discussed how she used primary sources to develop classes for humanities students and for the core freshman classes (the general writing/reading/critical thinking classes that many liberal arts schools require in the first semester) to promote not just an understanding of those types of sources but also of academic honesty, critical thinking, and good writing. Some ideas will be useful in what I am currently planning for Historiography and the advanced level history classes. The incorporation into other areas is ambitious but worth thinking about for the future as we expand library instruction.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Reexamining Remote Reference Services

This panel session was a surprise hit for me. The panel of speakers presented compelling statistics for why archives should focus more on remote patrons and how doing this greatly benefits the repositories and their parent institutions. A substantial part of the discussion involved examples of how to track usage, patron satisfaction, and other metrics so that policies and procedures (and their impact) are driven by data rather than anecdote. I also learned about a new web tool, archivesmetrics.org, that has been developed to provide archivists with templates for tracking a variety of metrics. The practical and results-oriented focus of this session was impressive and useful.

In addition to the regular sessions, I also attended:

- The vendor fair, where I gathered information about outsourcing some digitization services not just for archives but for other campus departments.
- The keynote address by Kate Theimer (author of the ArchivesNext blog and several books) on participatory archives. Theimer is something of a rock star in the field with interesting and innovative ideas for making archives more useful and accessible to all. The increase of web tools and technology have changed how people interact with archives, what they expect from them, and even who becomes a patron or contributor. Archivists who hang on to the old model of “scholarly researchers” and in person visits do so at their peril.

- Behind the scenes tour of the Grand Rapids Community Archives and Research Center. It is always interesting to see how other facilities operate. This one has some similar issues to what we face at Ben U, including a recent facilities move, so lots of good information.

While at MAC, I also was the organizer of the Chicago Area Archivists social event on Friday evening, which almost 30 people attended. At this event, I was able to gather some additional tips and ideas about anniversaries and facilities moves, had several promising conversations about collaborating on conference proposals in the next year, and some discussions with other LIBRAS schools about partnering on grant ideas.