

Reducing Barriers to Access in Archival and Special Collections Public Services

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Archives and special collections libraries are not intuitive spaces for users. Barriers, both real and perceived¹, exist whenever accessing an archive or special collections library. Access to archives and rare books should be within reasonable reach of all who have an interest in historical topics. This paper examines barriers to access in archival and special collections environments, discusses the importance of recognizing barriers, and addresses steps to dismantle them at your institution. Specific examples from our experience help illustrate where barriers exist and how to increase access, inclusivity, and transparency in archival and special collections public services.

Introduction

Imagine yourself as a student, assigned by your professor to write a paper using primary sources from your campus' special collections library. Or imagine that you are a recent homeowner, looking for historical information about your new house. Perhaps you are a genealogist tracking down details about your ancestors' lives. Now imagine that you have a physical or mental disability or are from a historically marginalized group, an English language learner, a young person, or senior citizen. You find yourself at the door of a beautiful but intimidating library. You might ask yourself, "Am I even allowed in?" "How does this place work?" "How can I even *get* in?"

Once inside, you will likely be greeted with warmth and compassion but also with rules. You might be asked to provide photo identification, create an account online, sign a lengthy paper form, and/or store your belongings where you cannot readily access them. As you work through these rules, you might still wonder, "Do I belong here? Is this the place for me?"

Archives and special collections libraries can feel unwelcoming and intimidating for many potential users. Some were constructed to deter entry by architectural design; the public simply was not welcome without the right credentials. While many, if not most, archivists and librarians would agree that we should move away from this model, residual barriers remain. Although some barriers are beyond archivists' direct control, as a profession, we are striving to make our institutions more welcoming, inclusive, equitable, and to reduce barriers to access in our public spaces and programs, just as we do in our technical services, tools, and online portals.

Barriers in the Public Service Environment

In framing this discussion of barriers in the archives and special collections environment, our concept of the barriers in play encompassed and then surpassed the generalized and enduring view of the reference archivist as gatekeeper (Marquis, 2006). Rather, barriers are any physical or intangible obstacle that hinders or restricts access to primary sources and rare book material held in special collections.²

Barriers can be physical, such as a lack of ADA-accessible doors or tables and shelves that cannot be comfortably used if one has mobility issues.

They can arise as financial obstacles: Many archival and rare book collections are only accessible at the institutions that hold them, and researchers must travel to consult these sources. If digitization services are available, these can incur costs that not everyone can bear.

Institutional barriers can limit access, including restrictions on records stipulated in the terms of the deed of gift that specify when or even if a collection can be accessed as well as the specific purposes for which it can be used. Restrictions may be the result of a legal mandate. Collecting and acquisitions policies also reflect dominant narratives and the views of the collection development and acquisitions staff. Traditionally, these collections represent those already in positions of power and authority. Diverse voices are not always included in collections, and researchers frequently encounter representation biases, which also feels like a barrier. These barriers emerge when researchers interact with the archives, activating policies that dictate what they may bring into the archives and use to conduct research.³

Technological barriers also present obstacles to seamless access. Computers available for public use may not be equipped with ADA software that enable those with vision impairment to read the screen. Some of the research community may feel uncomfortable with the navigational tools provided—finding aids and catalog records are not always intuitive tools.

Logistical barriers may limit collection use: limited staff time to devote to remote reference requests; restricted public hours to view archival collections; and long retrieval time to access materials, particularly if material is stored offsite.

Barriers can also reflect social injustice or systemic discrimination and inequality of documentation. For example, more institutions require a registration process that is supplemented by a review of formal identification. If a researcher is undocumented, they may not possess the identification required to access the records in the archives.

Cultural barriers exist when the primary language used at most reference desks in archives and special collections libraries is English. Researchers may be fluent in other languages, but reference desk staff often remains monolingual. Institutional culture can also impact reference interactions, such as for employees to work on other projects in public areas during reference desk shifts. They appear less available to assist researchers and may not notice if someone needs help.

These are many of the common barriers that researchers may encounter; however, it is not a comprehensive list. Furthermore, not all these barriers are within archivists' control; several obstacles represent larger systemic issues

and the environment in which individuals and institutions exist. We can exert agency over these obstacles and advocate for changes to these larger structural, systemic barriers, but direct action may not always be possible.

Though barriers are many and varied, this paper focuses on physical barriers, institutional barriers, and those that circumvent social justice goals. In general practice and for the purpose of this paper, archival social justice goals are defined as equal and equitable access to archival and rare book collections, research spaces, and employment with these collections and spaces. Furthermore, the barriers presented by the Covid-19 pandemic are unique to this period in time; the pandemic has brought issues of accessibility and access to collections into the archival profession's collective consciousness. Hopefully, the current conversations and strategies to increase access to archival sources and spaces continue to effect changes even after the pandemic has ceased to be an immediate crisis.⁴

The authors work in academic archives and special collections at major public universities, each with undergraduate populations in the mid-40,000s. One set of examples comes from the Eberly Family Special Collections Library, a department of the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) Library System. This library has 20 full-time staff and faculty, with 2.5 FTE team members in a dedicated public services role. It serves 1,600-2,000 researchers on average in the reading room and a growing number of remote requests. The 2017 average was approximately 800 completed requests. The other archive, the Bentley Historical Library, operates as an independent academic unit, which reports directly to the Office of the Provost at the University of Michigan (U-M). It employs 35 staff, including archivists, project archivists, conservators, communications and development specialists, and administrators. Its reading room hosts close to 4,000 researchers, and its staff answers approximately 1,400 remote reference queries per year. Both libraries have been actively engaged in trying to advance accessibility of their holdings as well as in their public spaces.⁵

Why It Matters

As archivists in cultural institutions that purport to preserve public history and collective memory, we must be aware of how we unconsciously work against this goal. If we pride ourselves on being what Jimerson calls "archives for all" (2007), then we must work to exemplify this as we provide access to collections for researchers. But we must also take responsibility for increasing the diversity and inclusivity of our spaces, profession, and collections. The conversation itself is not new. In some ways, the archival profession has long been concerned about diversity. Adkins wrote in her 2007 Society of American Archivists (SAA) Presidential Address that the profession needed to attend to diversity in the record, profession, and SAA as an organization. Years later, in his SAA Presidential Address, Meissner (2017) noted that we have not met those goals and called for a focus on inclusion rather than diversity. He suggested that inclusion can be a behavior and could motivate the profession towards action. Others have gone further to call for increased social justice within the field. The 2017 SAA Annual Meeting included a day-long ["Liberated Archive" program](#), an example of a more radical approach to inclusion and equity in archives.

Much of what has been presented at archival conferences and published in journals (e.g., *The American Archivist*) has centered on discussions about diversity in collections and the profession. For example, *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion* from Caldera and Neal (2014) contains essays that focus almost entirely on diversity in the archival record and profession. Often, when we think about access, we think about description—finding material on underrepresented groups and changing the way that material is described in catalog records and finding aids. These efforts are important and can help alter the profession significantly. Additionally, because one of the profession's primary tasks is to preserve the record, expanding institutions' collections will help the larger society gain a more accurate and representative understanding of the past. Numerous scholars have written about this issue (Mason, 2002; Harris, 2007; Flinn, 2007; Weld, 2014; Lepore, 2019). For example, Sutherland's (2017) "Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice" offers a critique of the

conventional approaches (and these practices' complicity) to collecting and history-building that thwart anti-racist collection development efforts.

But there is another thread to weave into the conversation: The people-centered interactions that occur at public service points. Archives and archivists increasingly recognize that they survive and thrive based on the relationships they create with people. The services they provide, not only the collections they curate, draw people to the archives. Marquis (2006) argued that, "Thinking... of the ways we already shape the archives experience—and then working to improve them—will not only enhance our researchers' work lives but remind us of our own contributions to the research partnership" (p. 41). The interaction and relationship that public service practitioners build and nourish with researchers is a part of this partnership—reducing the barriers to archival access is one way of nurturing it.

Recent work by numerous scholars and archival professionals have added to the literature about accessibility in public services. Caswell's 2017 article, "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives," discussed how we can recognize and combat white privilege in archives and included suggestions of how to do so in the reading room. Her description of white privileges in the access and use area of archives included three privileges: using archives without eliciting surveillance, seeing someone white behind the reference desk, and not being questioned for using an archive. She and her students suggested actions that could combat white supremacy in the archives.

Greene (2010a & 2010b), Tang (2019), Ganz (2019), and others have advocated for increased accessibility in reading rooms for many years. To Greene (2010a), simply following ADA guidelines is not enough: archives must ensure that their reading room tables can accommodate wheelchairs and offer places to sit during consultations with an archivist, among other things. Researchers with disabilities have also advocated for themselves. For example, in "Archives and the Road to Accessibility," Gallagher (2019) argued for a greater awareness of invisible disabilities. The revised [SAA Guidelines for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities](#) also provided suggestions when preparing for researchers with various types of disabilities. These writers raised awareness of potential barriers and solutions for making public services more inclusive. As McCrea (2017) noted, "a professional commitment to access and use means consciously increasing awareness of accessibility issues and working proactively—individually and collectively—to eliminate accessibility barriers for people with disabilities" (p. 14). This paper adds to the work already underway in many areas of archival practice.

Many boundaries are unintentionally activated; these barriers exist, because we have not fully interrogated their impact on people in positions of lesser power and privilege. As archivists, we are privileged by our education and class status; not everyone who wishes to access the archives benefits from those same advantages. This discussion must begin with a thorough interrogation of how our perspectives as archival practitioners have been skewed by the privileges we enjoy.

We invite physical access with doors that are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and with the flexible arrangement of library furniture. These tactile, spatial cues send a subconscious message to those who experience reduced or limited mobility.⁶ If our protocols for requesting boxes or digital reproductions require staff members to steer a user through the process, we send an unintentional message this way, too.

To understand the unintentional barriers that exist at our public services, we must first know what these barriers are. As archival professionals, we become so inured to the processes involved in retrieving, using, and tracking collections that we no longer see our common practices as potentially problematic. By examining the perceived and actual barriers, we have an opportunity to adjust our spaces, practices, and policies with a goal of increasing equitable access to our collections.

Enlisting the help of individuals who have never used special or archival collections can be a useful method, such as focus groups, user experience testing, and accessibility assessments—but it is crucial to act. Hoppe and Jung (2017) summarize the issues surrounding barriers to access:

Removing any unintentional barriers, physical or hierarchical, is critical to creating an egalitarian, user-empowered environment...Our biggest challenge with assessment is to foster information from the unheard voices. A great number of scholars with authentic needs for our reference services do not approach us. We need to continue to investigate ways to learn about and understand the unheard of our non-users (p. 148).

Consulting directly with would-be researchers allows us to explore the potential approaches institutions might take to reduce access barriers but also to engage with practical actions and implement tangible changes.

Examples of Overcoming Barriers from Public and User-focused Services

While barriers can be contemplated in an abstract way, it is helpful to consider our institutional working environments and reflect on the barriers that exist and strategies that can dismantle them. Upon reflection, we considered the privileges that we enjoy as able-bodied individuals who do not experience limited movement, vision or hearing impairments, or require unique accommodations in our working lives. Thus, the barriers identified and steps taken to reduce them evolved out of a privileged status: able-bodied, knowledgeable about archival operations, and white. Though this view creates limitations on our perspective, we offer our contributions as allies engaged and committed to changing the institutional environment in which our archives and special collections libraries operate. At the same time, our institutions are also working to address equity, diversity, and inclusion. This institutional commitment informs our approach, framing these actions as efforts to effect change within larger systems as well as parallel to broader structural changes.

In the following examples, we describe several barriers and how each institution chose to address them. This is not a comprehensive list of all barriers at these institutions, and there is always more work to be done to deconstruct the barriers that prevent users from accessing collections and spaces. Yet, these scenarios depict the actions taken in the hopes that they might allow other institutions to examine and revise local practices, spaces, and policies to create greater access and inclusivity.

Cultural Barriers - Part I

One of the barriers that the Eberly Family Special Collections Library perceived was the imbalance of power and expertise between researchers and library staff. For many student researchers, the reading room desk was their first encounter with the research environment of an archives or special collections. We received unofficial feedback that this environment felt intimidating to potential researchers, particularly students. It also meant that student researchers were interacting with staff who were not their peers. As a result, students were uncomfortable with framing research questions and the existing reference infrastructure for encouraging learner-centered exploration. The Head of Research Services for Special Collections was able to make the case to the administration that additional student workers would enhance the primary source research experience for undergraduate students, enrich the educational experience of undergraduate student employees, and provide additional opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction within the special collections environment. Furthermore, the experience as a student employee on the reference desk might expose students from various and diverse backgrounds to the potential of a career in archives or special collections librarianship.

In fall 2017, an additional three students were hired for the department, bringing the total to four student workers. Of this initial cohort of Collections Services Assistants, all four students represented cultures and communities that were not previously a part of our team. When researchers arrive at the reference desk, students of color are prepared to assist them. This speaks directly to Caswell's (2017) recommendation of working toward greater inclusion

in hiring practices, so that all researchers have a reasonable expectation of seeing someone of their race or background when they approach the reference desk. While no formal feedback was collected to evaluate increased perceptions of inclusivity, these student workers contributed to greater diversity among staff and enabled opportunities for true peer-to-peer interactions.

Though it was an overwhelmingly positive development, there were temporary consequences that affected our service levels during the initial onboarding activities. For example, time spent in training a cohort of new employees impacted remote reference services as well as the time available for other ongoing job-related tasks. In addition, long-standing patrons expressed impatience when newer student employees had difficulty locating materials in onsite storage locations. However, taking adequate time to ensure proper and complete training for employees was crucial to empower students to provide informed public services. One of the unforeseen challenges of attempting to create inclusivity through greater student employment opportunities include the need to publicize positions in more varied venues to recruit an inclusive and diverse cohort of student workers. Perhaps more direct recruitment to multicultural and international student organizations could help achieve this. While this strategy is not the only tactic available to increase the diversity among the special collections and archival workforce, it is one approach over which we had agency and authority for hiring decisions. Though not a perfect, comprehensive solution, it comprised one small step towards a more inclusive work environment and represents a first action that serves to build momentum towards more systemic changes.

Cultural Barriers - Part II

For many years, the hallway leading to the Bentley Historical Library's classroom has celebrated its past directors with portraits in the hallway. Oil paintings and photographs, the portraits depicted older, white men. Near each image was a small sign indicating the portraits' subjects and the artists' names with little indication of why these men were on the walls. The result of this decor was a space that inadvertently suggested that the library was a place that valued older, white men above all others and maintained traditions without reflection. In fact, the hallway was at odds with work that was happening elsewhere in the library to decrease barriers to access; increase diversity, equity, and inclusion; and to provide a more welcoming environment to all visitors, but especially students.

Although the Bentley has long been engaged in thinking about ways to increase researcher access to materials and better interact with them in the reading room, this interest has had a renewed focus over the past six years or so.⁷ This focus has taken several tracks, including a focus on customer service in the reading room. Reading room staff are trained using Zingerman's (2020) nationally recognized "ZingTrain" customer service methods. With the implementation of Aeon, the circulation management system, the reading room was also reorganized to create three "zones," in which researchers are welcomed, reference assistance is offered, and materials are paged. The flow of the room is designed to help researchers understand more easily where they can go for different kinds of help. The relatively new position of Archivist for Academic Programs and Outreach was created in part to help students feel more welcomed and better engaged with the library. To better match the priorities of creating an inclusive environment and representing the diversity of U-M and the state, the hallway needed a change. This initiative reflects the recommendations to recognize and tear down white supremacy by representing people of color in displays (Caswell, 2017).

The staff and administration were interested in making the change, but they also wanted to continue to honor the past directors, one of whom is still living. A solution was reached when the library's current director decided to hang the portraits in his office, making it the "Directors' Office." The hallway was repainted and stands ready for new images. Immediately, the energy of the hallway changed. Though white blank walls are perhaps not very welcoming, they are neutral in a way that they were not before.

The library formed a team of archivists to work with an interior designer to create a more welcoming space in the hallway. After soliciting suggestions from all library staff, the team selected photographs from the university history collections, focusing on student life. The designer worked with those images to create a space that would help current students feel welcome, represented, and connected to the archives. The committee focused on selecting images of students engaged in different types of activities, such as studying and recreating. It wanted students entering the library to see images of activities they can relate to. At the same time, it endeavored to select images that represent a range of races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual identities, at least as much as those categories can be identified in archival photographs. It intends that the images will be able to stand on their own with minimal contextualization.

Figuring out what images to use was, not surprisingly, quite difficult. While there was an imbalance in representation in the archival photographs, the committee nonetheless found more potential images than could fit in the limited space. The hallway to the classroom is not very long, and given options for hanging images, it had to choose fewer than 10 representative photographs. To help mitigate this limitation, the committee, with administrative approval, selected an installation system that will allow the photographs to be changed relatively easily. The photographs were installed in fall 2020. However, no students have seen them yet because the library is only hosting online classes due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Physical Barriers

Institutions are more than the buildings that house them; however, in many cases, the first introduction that a student has with an archives or special collections is the physical library itself—starting at the front door. At Penn State, the front doors of the Special Collections Library had long been an issue that staff wanted to address. They are not electric and require visitors to pull the door towards them to enter. It is a double-door entry with two glass doors and a large aluminum handle on each. Neither door opens as widely as a standard doorway due to how the door hinges forward. The doors close slowly, which means that one side can be opened, and if a wider entrance is required, the other side as well. For visitors using wheelchairs or other mobility aids (e.g., walkers, scooters, canes, or crutches), this is problematic. We have been advised by several former facilities representatives that these safeguards meet ADA specifications.

Many of our staff members have observed our researchers encountering issues over the years, and our advocacy work to improve this entry point has encompassed decades—since the space was built, practically. One of our strategic goals for 2020, which contributed to the larger equity, justice, and inclusivity work taking place at the library and university level, was to charge an Accessibility in Public Spaces task force to assess many of the issues regarding accessible research services. In January 2020, the group was tasked with evaluating the accessibility of all public spaces, including research spaces as well as exhibition areas. The task force’s responsibility was to explore and recommend enhancements to the accessibility of these spaces. To begin to understand principles of universal design and to learn more about the application of these principles in libraries, the group began a literature review. We attempted to center our approach on universal design to better encompass the needs of all present and future user audiences to “begin a sustained commitment to evaluating what access means for all users” (Kumbier & Starkey, 2016, p. 478).

Members of the task force also sought additional sources from the Penn State campus community; with several offices dedicated to accessibility and adaptive technology, members of the task force wanted to ensure recommendations incorporated the larger efforts already underway. However, the focus of the evaluation was our reading, reference, and exhibition spaces. These spaces are distributed throughout our library. In some cases, storage areas are used to display collections but also serve dual purposes as research and teaching spaces. As such, accessibility for visitors was not the primary consideration in establishing these spaces.

The group received invaluable help from a volunteer who offered to tour the public spaces in the Eberly Family Special Collections Library's immediate footprint; the volunteer uses a wheelchair daily. These areas receive the most sustained use of any of the Special Collections Library's public spaces, which made them an ideal starting point for an accessibility audit. The volunteer began at the front door and approached each component of the research and exhibition areas, offering feedback on which areas presented access or visibility challenges. As a result, the task force began to compile preliminary recommendations and improvements to these spaces, such as automatic doors, an adjustable-height reference desk, adjustable-height references tables, moveable furniture, and screen magnifiers for public workstations.

During the group's investigations, the task force learned a lot about the tools and services already available through the Student Disability Resources Office. Working with the Strategic Technology Unit at the Penn State Libraries, the group also learned that an ADA suite of software was available on one of the public workstations. These were valuable discoveries that helped the task force make strategic recommendations for accessibility in research and exhibition space. However, the public workstations require log-in credentials issued by Penn State, and the student services available address needs specific to students enrolled in courses. Our reading room and exhibition spaces are open to anyone, and we serve a wider audience, in addition to students and faculty. We realized that our recommendations would need to encompass the resources already available, but we would also need to take responsibility for our spaces directly—we would not be able to follow a turnkey blueprint from Penn State.

The work of the task force began in January 2020; by March 2020, the work was underway but far from complete. The Director of the Student Disability Resources Office was scheduled to talk to us and had offered to help with further accessibility audits by enlisting additional volunteers. The task force was scheduled to visit the campus art museum to observe principles of universal design in their gallery spaces. There were additional, dispersed exhibition and research spaces that had been part of the initial task force charge; we had not scheduled audits of these spaces. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our reading room was last open to the public on March 13, 2020; all of our task force members quickly pivoted to a remote work arrangement, and our task force shifted focus. We incorporated an assessment of peer institutions' websites and statements regarding accessibility tools and services. We continued our work on the literature review and reading list that would accompany our final report. By July 2020, we submitted the final report; the most urgent of the recommendations was to pursue the installation of automatic door openers.

Technical Barriers

Materials in special collections and archives can sometimes themselves be a barrier, which can be especially frustrating. Sometimes, this may be because of the format. Handwritten documents can feel off-putting if students have not had previous experience with reading them. While this challenge—shared by all researchers—can be solved through practice, patience, and education; at other times, materials' inaccessibility might be solved with technology. A student visited the Bentley Historical Library's classroom with her history class for the first stage of a short research project. Unbeknownst to the archivist leading the class, the student had a vision impairment, which prevented her from seeing typewritten text. After the class, she contacted the library wondering how she might get access to the materials she needed. Archivists were quickly able to ascertain that digitized copies of material that she could enlarge on her computer would work for her. So, within two days, our curation archivist had created PDFs and given her access to the three relevant folders of material she identified as needed.

This situation brought issues of accessibility in the Bentley's classroom and reading room into greater relief, even as the solution echoed recommendations by the [SAA Guidelines for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities](#). The library formed an "Accessibility Committee" to research best practices and resources, evaluate public services (especially instruction), and propose ways to increase accessibility. The committee's first priority was to create

an accessibility statement we could share with students and faculty. They consulted with U-M's Services for Students with Disabilities Office and created a statement⁸ specifically about visiting the library that faculty can add to their syllabi or online course sites. Though no students have yet taken us up on our offer, the library is better prepared and has reduced an accessibility barrier for future instruction activities.

Policy Barriers

In 2015, the Eberly Family Special Collections Library began to allow students who are not using the collections to study in our reading and reference rooms. Each student who uses the space, whether they use collection material or not, must register as a researcher. They must observe all the same rules, such as storing bags and coats in a locker, using pencils, and storing covered beverages in a designated area. This ensures that we maintain security of collections and spaces; we know who is in the reading or reference room at any time, regardless of whether collection material is in use. While allowing researchers to use the space but not collections does not aid in strengthening use metrics for the collections, it does allow students who have never been introduced to a special collections environment to observe researchers engaging with materials, and it allows us the opportunity to explain the mission and purpose of the Special Collections Library to a new audience.

We have found that students are curious about this area of the library and ask questions about Special Collections' holdings, which sometimes leads to articulating a nascent research interest into something that they return to later. We anticipated this practice would allow us to be a good library partner—to be collaborative and generous with our space. However, we did not anticipate the positive response of students, particularly during examination periods. During finals week each semester, quiet study space in the library is at a premium, and students start to explore new options for focused study. Special Collections is a quiet space that often has availability; we have started to see students return during each finals week, many of them bringing classmates and friends. On occasion, students balk at needing to register.⁹ However, once they realize how little time it takes to register, they often become repeat users of the space. While the library recognizes “how a space that is ‘inviting’ to one group of students might feel alienating or irrelevant to another depending upon their cultural norms and expectations” (Brook et al., 2015, p. 260), the previously restricted reading room has become an alternative and welcoming scholarly space for a number of students. By removing the need to be a “credentialed” or “qualified” researcher, we have reduced one barrier to access the space, if not the collections. And perhaps, with any luck, we will have created an avenue for a new researcher to return to Special Collections to discover the rich research content contained in the holdings.

Logistical Barriers

Another way the Bentley Historical Library has tried to decrease barriers to access is by changing its hours. Like many archives, it has somewhat limited hours, generally open from 9am-5pm Monday through Friday. From September through April, it is also open on Saturday mornings. As the library has increased its teaching capacity, faculty indicated that its hours made it difficult for working students to complete their assignments. The Archivist for Academic Programs and Outreach and the Assistant Director for Reference and Academic Programs proposed a solution that would provide additional public hours without putting an undue burden on staff. They suggested that the library hold evening hours (5pm-9pm) one night a week for the last month of each semester. These additional hours give students who need to finish research projects by the end of the term additional time to complete them.

We expected this change to allow more students to visit the library, and we did have additional students visit during those evening hours, but the library was open to any researcher during that time. We also had additional non-student researchers, those visiting from out of town who were happy to get a bit more time at the library, and those

whose work schedules prevented them from getting to the library during the workday. The test semester demonstrated that increasing our opening hours increased student access to the library, thus, accomplishing the goal of increasing access to collections outside of usual business hours. Use statistics demonstrated this success and proved the change should be permanent. Certainly, there could be more done to accommodate those who work 9am-5pm, but this provides a compromise that allows extended hours with the current level of staffing.

All this changed, of course, with the library's closure in March 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The library was closed from March until September, when it reopened to U-M students, staff, and faculty by appointment on specific afternoons. With our hours even more limited, the reference staff has worked to accommodate student needs in other ways, such as holding weekly office hours via Zoom, providing video reference consultations, and prioritizing digitization for class-related materials. Like many archives and special collections libraries, the Bentley faces challenges during the pandemic but continues to make accessibility a priority.

Conclusion

What if a researcher of any experience level could enter an archives or special collections reading room for the first time and feel as if they knew exactly what to do? What if a researcher walked into the reading room and saw someone serving on the reference desk who reflected their own cultural or ethnic background and shared experience? What if a researcher walked past an exhibit that reflected an inclusive perspective of history rather than an alienating one? What if a researcher felt welcome in the reading room, even without immediate plans to use archival holdings? What if a researcher could complete their workday, and then head to the archives to dive into the research for a book project? Rather than far-fetched scenarios, these are what-if situations that we brought into reality at our institutions. However, we do not mean to suggest that these changes to spaces, workflows, and service and staffing models are a stopping point in the ongoing work to reduce barriers to access or that our solutions are the best ones. The work must continue for us and our institutions. There are other strategies we hope to explore in the near future, such as additional accessibility audits of public spaces to determine whether physical spaces can be accessed by everyone. While this might mean engaging with other university offices who have greater control over physical spaces, it is useful for on-site staff to be aware of challenges that users may face. Other strategies might include focus groups of a targeted user community that existing service options may be missing, or even alienating. Through instruction, too, we have opportunities to gather feedback directly from students using tools like quick surveys or polls as a class wrap-up activity. All these efforts can help us identify and begin to address real and perceived barriers to the libraries' spaces and materials.

We hope this paper demonstrated that even small changes can hold meaningful impacts. Reducing barriers to spaces, collections, and the profession requires everyone to contribute to this work. If each institution took an honest assessment of existing spaces and services, we would *all* come up with ideas to implement. Actions, even small actions, create improvements over an obstacle-ridden status quo. Small but intentional changes create momentum to achieve universal accessibility for collections and spaces. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic impacts the services our institutions provide; as a result, archival and library practitioners have become increasingly creative in the methods we use to reach users. Archival and special collections practitioners have developed flexible, agile approaches to engaging with users and these strategies make our collections and services available to new audiences. We have shown creativity and resiliency throughout the pandemic. If we can maintain these creative approaches even as our work returns to greater normalcy, our profession will see greater movement towards accessible spaces, collections, and services in special collections and archives.

Notes

- ¹ However, perceived barriers are very real to the individuals affected by them. At the same time, as researchers become more experienced with the procedures used to access archives and special collections, the impact of perceived barriers may be mitigated.
- ² Archivists and librarians may not have control over all the areas that may be seen as obstacles, which can become barriers, and some are in place for the safety and security of collections and people in our spaces. However, users, who may be new to the research process in special collections and archives, might have a different understanding of the same situations as those "in the know." One method of combating this that is not addressed here is transparent communication with users. Each visitor interaction is an opportunity to welcome them to archival public spaces and teach them how to navigate institutional policies.
- ³ Efforts to maintain the safety and security of public spaces and collections must be made; however, we must ensure that guidelines allow for exceptions in the case of adaptive technologies. Furthermore, security measures can be perceived as discouraging access; what is routine to archive and library workers is new and unfamiliar to others.
- ⁴ There are informal community of practice discussions taking place in the archival profession that deal with the specifics of providing reference services in archives and special collections during the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. Two such examples are the Teaching with Primary Sources Collective (bit.ly/3v0GfeC) and SAA's Reference, Access, and Outreach Community Calls (bit.ly/3tyZzPJ).
- ⁵ For example, since 2015, the Bentley Historical Library's curation staff have engaged in a "hidden collections" project that systematically examined catalog records and finding aids to create additional description to make collections more easily accessible. The Eberly Family Special Collections Library has been expanding their practices regarding access to unprocessed collections, creating bilingual description for specific collections, and removing racist, objectionable, and inaccurate descriptive terms from finding aids.
- ⁶ Archivists may not have complete control over the entrances to their buildings or the process for upgrading their buildings, much less over the building codes that guide accessibility. Yet, it is important to be aware of how even the things they cannot control affect how people feel walking through the library's doors.
- ⁷ The Bentley has made staff training in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) a priority by bringing U-M trainings on cognitive/unconscious bias, intercultural awareness, communication styles, and disability awareness. There have been additional efforts to recruit and retain a diverse staff, collect materials relating to under-documented populations in Michigan, and expose hidden collections in the library's holdings. DEI is also a campus-wide goal. The Bentley has created a DEI plan (bit.ly/3x6NOSN).
- ⁸ Archivists send the following message to U-M faculty who bring their classes to the Bentley. "We've been working with Services for Students with Disabilities to come up with a short statement that we are suggesting faculty add to their syllabi or Canvas site. The idea is to alert students to the fact that they'll be coming to the Bentley Historical Library and to provide a way for them to get accommodations should they need them. Please feel free to add this to your syllabus or pass along to your students in some other way: This class will visit the Bentley Historical Library during the semester. You will have an opportunity to work with original materials, such as handwritten diaries, photographs, typewritten correspondence, audio-visual material, and other types of primary documents. If you think you might need an accommodation to access this material, please let your instructor know, or contact the Bentley's Archivist for Academic Programs and Outreach. The Bentley Historical Library looks forward to welcoming you!"
- ⁹ The Eberly is exploring options to balance security of collections while increasing accessibility and inclusivity of all users and audiences; this continues to be a work in progress.

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