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Carts in the Hallway: Cataloging and Special Collections–A Partnership for Success

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Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

Thesis

The purpose of the article is to demonstrate how Binghamton University Libraries has changed the workflows and channels of communication between Special Collections and the Technical Services Department. Over the last two years these two departments have worked to foster cooperative decision making, in order to increase understanding of project priorities and allow for more efficient cataloging, leading to greater accessibility of Special Collections items. The article also looks at how this relationship can be extended and expanded upon in the future, so that cataloging/metadata librarians and Special Collections staff and librarians can work together to create better access to materials.

Introduction:

Libraries have collected, stored, made accessible and shared print materials with students and researchers around the world in a desire to diffuse knowledge. Special Collections within libraries are gaining prominence, showcasing what is unique about libraries. As this prominence increases, making paper finding aids and lists of materials in a collection is becoming inadequate. Special Collections staff know what is in a collection, but in order for users to be able to find material it is important for the items to be adequately and appropriately cataloged for discovery. With backlogs of uncataloged materials and items being fragile and expensive, it is essential to ensure workflows and processes are as streamlined as possible; cataloging needs to be done quickly and well. However, cataloging departments and Technical Services units do not have enough catalogers, and Special Collection departments rarely have one person dedicated to the task. This article talks about changes we are making to successfully overcome these difficulties and ensure items are discoverable. The key changes we are making are closer collaborations and improved communication between Special Collections and Technical Services catalogers.

Special Collections often have a collection policy and themes in collecting, so understanding these helps the cataloger make connections with other collections and ensures headings stay consistent for researchers and students to locate materials. Collaboratively setting priorities opens the dialog about why things are important and assists the cataloger as they make decisions about how to catalog items from certain collections. Documenting decisions is critical for future catalogers to understand why things are done the way they are and allows for global changes as needed. Having items cataloged correctly assists researchers in finding the material they want, and can therefore help a library determine what collections are most valuable to researchers. As researchers use our special collections we began asking "what didn't you know about our collection, and if you had a choice what would you digitize?" Our priorities don't always match those of a researcher; if they don't know we have something they can't ask for it in digital form. With quality cataloging we have confidence all materials are discoverable by researchers. We can track which collections are used, which informs cataloging priorities from the standpoint of the researcher. As libraries continue to move into the digital realm, digitization projects help to provide attention and access to resources, but the MARC record and metadata are even more crucial for accurately describing and making items

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

accessible. Crosby (2000) states in her article about *Technical services in the 21st century* "our emphasis is on creating catalogs and finding aids that allow researchers to identify materials, draw conclusions, and make their own connection." It is our intent, using tools and better communication across departments, to catalog specifically with the needs of Special Collections in mind, enabling better discoverability of our Special Collections materials for researchers.

Literature Review:

Traditionally, special collections have held a library's most rare and valuable materials; this makes the department a large asset, but because of the fragility of their items the special collections of the past have not been very accessible. Beginning in the early 2000s, this lack of accessibility became increasingly acknowledged, with the Association of Research Libraries emphasizing the need for special collections to become more accessible (ARL 2001).

However, though cataloging is a necessary step for making special collections items discoverable, there is often a dearth of catalogers who can work with special collections. Many special collections departments do not have dedicated catalogers. Even when an institution has catalogers who focus on special collections material, they are often located within technical services or a centralized cataloging department, not special collections (Lundy 2007). This shows the importance of collaboration between special collections departments and cataloging departments/technical services. If cataloging is needed to make special collections material discoverable, but libraries are unable to have dedicated special collections catalogers, the solution is to have the cataloging and special collections departments collaborate closely and build their lines of communication, so that they can communicate effectively to make items accessible.

Barr, in her article about opening special collections to the public, argued that cataloging plays a major role in promoting and providing better access to special collections. She states that cataloging is an "active partner" in opening special collections to the public, and that, unlike past opinions about cataloging, current trends in automation have given cataloging a flexibility to help create finding aids or otherwise help special collections promote their material (Barr 2004). Crosby notes that in some special collection departments and libraries technical services and catalogers are *expected* to prepare findings aids. They may also be in charge of digitizing items from special collections, providing greater accessibility (Crosby 2000). Here is another reason for efficient and reliable communication between the two departments; new technology is allowing catalogers and other technical services staff to play a more active role in improving the discoverability of special collections items.

As Patty points out, one of the problems that arises when librarian and staff in departments other than technical services try to catalog is that records end up with inconsistent information because of MARC format and the RDA/AACR2 rules needed for cataloging. These inconsistencies can occur when people who are not catalogers, and therefore not as well versed in these formats and rules, try to catalog items themselves, for example in special collections.

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

Furthermore, Patty also notes that cataloging elements like MARC records can enhance special collections languages like EAD, and cataloging tools like MARCEdit can be used to convert EAD to MARCXML. Patty acknowledges, though, that special collections departments' metadata needs are more likely to be more completely and specifically addressed by the department itself, rather than a centralized cataloging or technical services department. This is why good communication and collaboration between the departments is crucial. Working together can allow for better metadata that more specifically fits the needs of special collections (Patty 2008).

While not much research has focused specifically on cataloging for special collections, what is clear from past studies is that it is imperative for special collections and cataloging to work together for increased discoverability and access for the patron. Russell references Bradshaw and Wagner in asserting that in order to provide full access to special collections materials in a changing environment, there must be an "alliance" between the two departments. They state that there must be close collaboration between special collections staff and catalogers so that decisions about how to catalog and what is a priority are made together (Russell 2004) (Bradshaw and Wagner, 2000). Binghamton University came to this same conclusion, and so effective collaboration and communication between the cataloging librarians in technical services and special collections became a priority. This way decisions about what to catalog and how would be made together, thus improving the access and discoverability of items.

Background

In this article the authors will explore working across siloed units in order to align priorities, create better descriptions for materials, and provide researcher appropriate access points. One of the four research centers in the SUNY(State University of New York) system, Binghamton University is a mid sized university. There are about 14,000 undergraduate students and 3700 graduate students, and as a public university US News and World report ranked it 32 in 2018.(US News world report citation?). With over 100 unique collections, 66144 MARC records describing item level materials, and about 44 finding aids, Special Collections consists of donated materials, collections transferred from other departments on campus, and materials transferred from the regular library collections. Some of the major collections include Reinhardt (purchased by the theatre department and later transferred to Special Collections), Rogg (a gift of mostly theatre books), Link (local famous engineer who invented the blue flyers that the Royal Air force used to train pilots), a rare book collection, and a local history collection. There are a significant number of collections without finding aids or any type of DAC's description, which limits access for students or researchers. Carts of materials sit in a hallway waiting to be cataloged, as in the past the idea was "catalog each individual item in OCLC so it can be found." Research notebooks, miscellaneous pamphlets, and other random materials would receive item level cataloging, but may never see a researcher or peak their interest. There was nothing particularly special about these items; the cataloger would come to special collections, review a

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

cart or two and take what they felt was the priority. There was no direction, no input from the staff in special collections, and the question of how to handle the items or why to choose them was not sufficiently answered. The fundamental questions of what is special about these items, why are they important, and who might the audience be were not discussed between catalogers and special collections staff, and so catalogers were often left to figure out the answers and catalog them accordingly.

The catalogers/metadata librarians are housed within the Technical Services department and are responsible for creating quality records for all of the material in Special Collections. This is to ensure that all items in Special Collections are discoverable by researchers anywhere in the world. However, a lack of communication and collaboration has historically meant that cataloging Special Collections items is not a simple process. Aside from the items themselves presenting cataloging challenges, a lack of contextual understanding has led to poor, non-standardized, or inefficient cataloging. Context is important because of the varied formats and content of collections in Special Collections. This means that there are many different priorities and a lot of differing information for catalogers to keep track of.

With so many collections needing descriptions, collections continuing to arrive, and no direction on how cataloging should be prioritized, it becomes difficult for catalogers to devote their attention solely to one collection. Consequently, a backlog was created and remains ongoing. Currently, there are always items that need to be cataloged and have been sitting in storage, from a variety of collections.
In 2016, with a new Director of Library Technology and Special Collections, who had little experience with special collections, things started to change. Discussions about why things were being cataloged and what the best organization of materials is started to take place between Special Collections and Cataloging staff.

While asking these questions, particularly questions about why things were being cataloged and best organization practices, it became apparent that there was a lack of communication between Special Collections, where items are housed, and the Technical Services department, which makes the items accessible via MARC records. It was decided that in order to make the collections more discoverable, and work more efficient, better communication between the departments was needed. This ensures that items are cataloged correctly for the intended audience and that priorities are understood so that cataloging takes place in a timely fashion. In turn, these things would make Special Collections items more discoverable for researchers. The problem is that prior to 2016, these departments were siloed; cataloging and special collections rarely collaborated or discussed workflows for cataloging collections. First we will give a brief explanation of past practices and workflows to illustrate these problems, and then we will discuss how we are beginning to address these issues and how we can move forward in the future.

Past Practice

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

Because Special Collections and Cataloging did not communicate effectively, answers to questions were often incomplete or conflicting, resulting in inconsistency in catalog records within the same collections, confusion on the part of the catalogers, and slow processing. Examining a previous simplistic workflow will illustrate how and where these problems occurred.
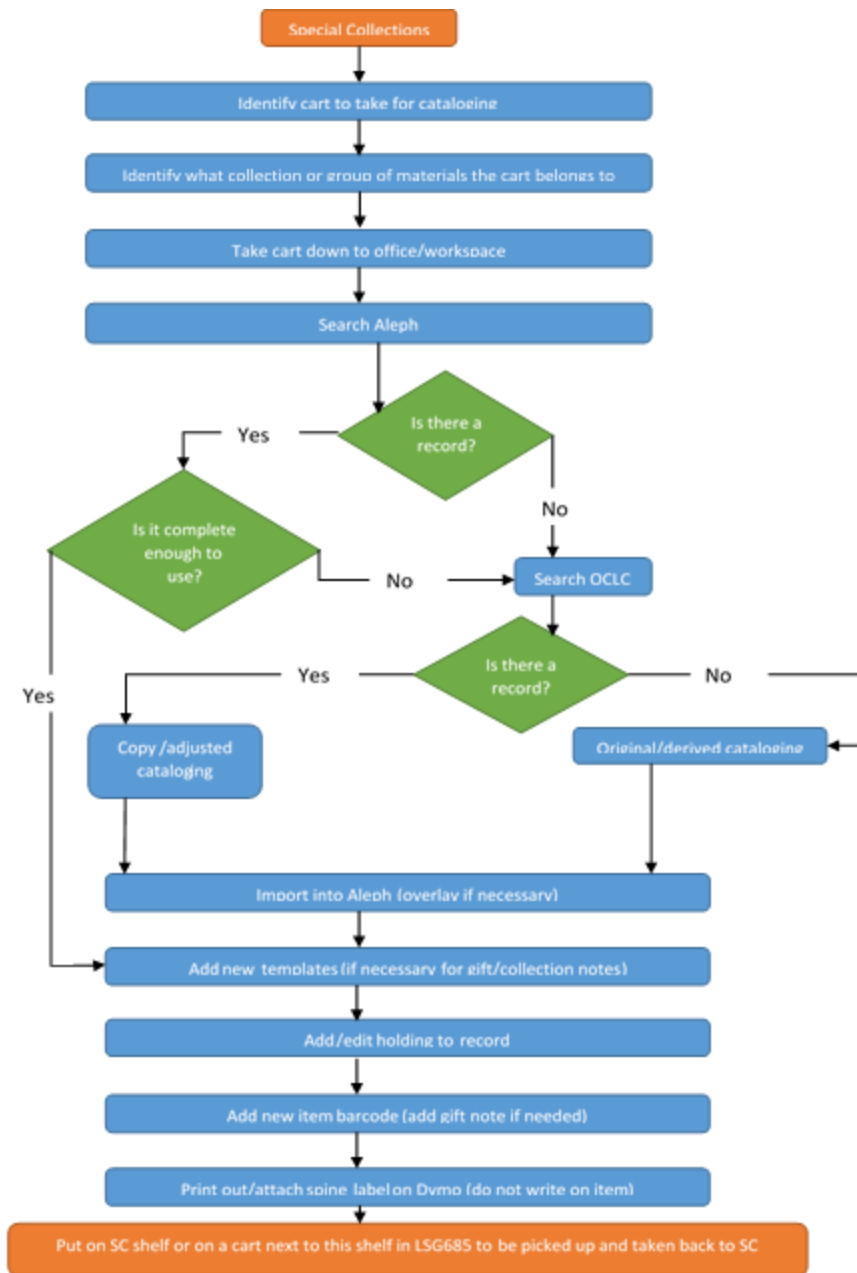

Exhibit 1

Going through these steps, it is clear that cataloging was very divorced from Special Collections; there is no space in this workflow for communication or collaboration between the two departments. This is not to say there was not some along the way; however, it was so random and informal that it was not included in the standardized workflow.

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

Here is an example of why communication is important. Special Collections staff might decide what collections should be cataloged first, or how carts of items going to cataloging should be arranged. This resulted occasionally in confusion on the part of the cataloger when they picked up material to catalog, as the cart may not relate to anything they have cataloged recently. They were left to wonder why priorities changed, why carts were organized a certain way, or what to do in cases of collections that had never been cataloged before. By increasing communication between Special Collections and cataloging, priorities can be explained and agreed upon in advance, any questions about new collections can be answered or clarified, and a standard way of organizing carts that makes sense to both Special Collections and cataloging can be established. Discussions of these types would make the process of cataloging items more efficient, which would make them discoverable by the public more quickly. They would also allow for consensus on answers to those questions posed earlier, which would allow for documentation about cataloging Special Collections to be produced, thus increasing the standardization of records and productivity in the future.

Current Practice

In 2017 the first small steps toward implementing a more inclusive workflow to address concerns were taken, and the silos started to crumble as communication improved. Librarians from both department began to talk about how to best ensure items would get cataloged, and how to facilitate working through the backlog. Special Collections started to prioritize carts with the intent to send a message about what was important and should be picked up for cataloging first, as noted in the current workflow exhibit 1. The department did this by simply labeling carts one through three. However, problems arose for the catalogers when priorities seemed to abruptly change. An example of this confusion is if the last three carts designated as priority one were from a specific collection. The cataloger would therefore think that the particular collection was a priority, and expect priority one status items to be from this collection. However, the next time a cataloger went to get a cart a different collection had priority one status than the last three times, and items from that collection were now labeled priority two. It would be helpful for catalogers to understand why priorities had shifted. Each collection has some specific rules; it is more efficient for a cataloger to continue with a certain collection than to be constantly shifting between collections. This decreases efficiency as catalogers have to pay more attention to each cart, making sure they are not using the incorrect rules for a given collection.

Special Collections staff did not consider the continuity and efficiency aspects of cataloging the same collection repeatedly. Often the priority was set based on the type of material and desire to get specific items cataloged. If the Special Collections staff need to change priorities, they should explain what is important about this new priority, so the cataloger can understand why and shift their thinking appropriately. Telling the cataloger what is important about the new items also allows the cataloger to determine if this is something that will impact the actual cataloging of the items. For example, is a special note needed? What if the cataloger has a question

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

about the priorities, who do they ask? What if other questions arise, such as If the cart has unfamiliar items; are they an addition to an existing collection? Are there specific rules for this group of materials? The first workflow did not address these questions or how they would be handled.

Current Evolving and Future Practice

Each department has their own understanding of situations and priorities. It is not expected that Special Collections staff would understand cataloging priorities and vice versa. Discussing why priorities have shifted with a cataloger before making a final decision can be helpful. In response to the siloed, static workflow, a more collaborative, aspirational one was created. This is exhibit 2:

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)


```
Special Collections
        │
        ▼
Meet with SC staff once to go over collections
        │
        ▼
Look for cart with priority 1 status
        │
        ▼
Is this cart part of a collection you've been working on?
```

Ask SC staff why the continuity has been broken ◄── No ── Is this cart part of a collection you've been working on?

Is there a good reason? ── No ── Reevaluate with SC and try to find a priority cart from the same collection

Yes

Yes

Read sign on cart and necessary documentation

Ask SC staff any questions not answered in documentation or on sign
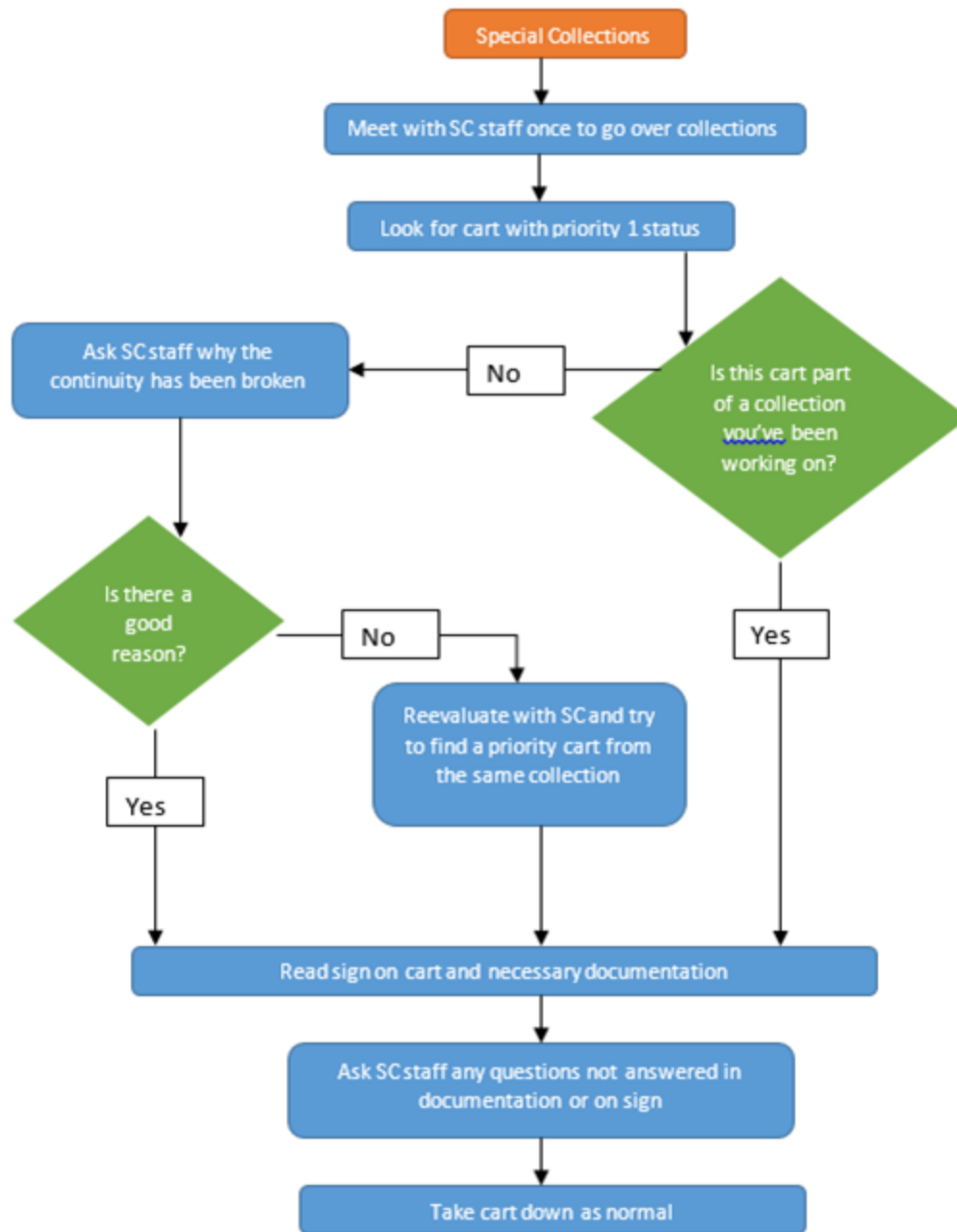
Take cart down as normal

Exhibit 2

This workflow allows for more collaboration and communication at the beginning of the workflow. The exhibit 1 workflow does not mention Special Collections at all except to say that catalogers pick the carts up from this department. Adding the exhibit 2 workflow to this already existing workflow would allow for collaboration, making the workflow more dynamic. The exhibit 2 workflow in fact starts when someone is hired or a new collection is brought in. The catalogers meet with the Special Collections staff to go over each collection. This would give everyone a basic knowledge of all the collections they would be cataloging in the future, and allow the catalogers to ask Special Collections staff some basic questions and vice versa. It

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

would also acquaint the catalogers with Special Collections staff members and give them an understanding of who the point person is for each collection. This means that in the future, if the cataloger has a question when retrieving a cart they know who to ask. The next step is for the cataloger to pick up a priority one cart. Now, however, this step is dynamic rather than static, since it involves the potential for communication between departments.

Looking at this step in the exhibit 2 workflow, we see that it forces the cataloger to think strategically about what they are going to catalog. They are expected to ask *why* a cart is priority one; if the cart has items from a collection the cataloger is working on, then the cataloger will proceed as normal. If the items belong to a different collection, the cataloger is expected to ask the appropriate Special Collections staff member why this continuity has been broken. If there is a good reason the cataloger will have armed themselves with further information, which might be helpful. If it was simply an oversight on the part of Special Collections the priorities can be shifted at this point to maintain cataloging efficiency.

The next step involves reading the sign on the cart. Here, we see that rather than the carts just having a priority number, they are expected to contain more explicit information. Anything new or special about the items on the cart should be noted on this priority label; this will hopefully preemptively address any questions the cataloger might encounter while cataloging the item. The point is that the communication, as much as possible, should take place before the cart goes to cataloging, so that items are not held in a catalogers office for long periods of time while the cataloger tries to get questions answered. To aid in this proactive communication, documentation on cataloging each collection should be available and up to date, so that if a cataloger starts working on a collection new to them they will have these documents to consult. If documentation is available when a cataloger initially picks up a cart, then between the documentation and the note on the cart the cataloger can ask questions. At this point they will still be in Special Collections, so it will be easier for them to find a Special Collections staff member and get answers right away, rather than during the actual cataloging.

This effective workflow starts for both departments in Special Collections before a cart is even made, and *concludes* with the cart label, rather than starting with the label like the exhibit 1 workflow. Adding in more detail to workflow 2, we would get something that encompasses interdepartmental communication as well as documentation, and might look something like Exhibit 3:

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
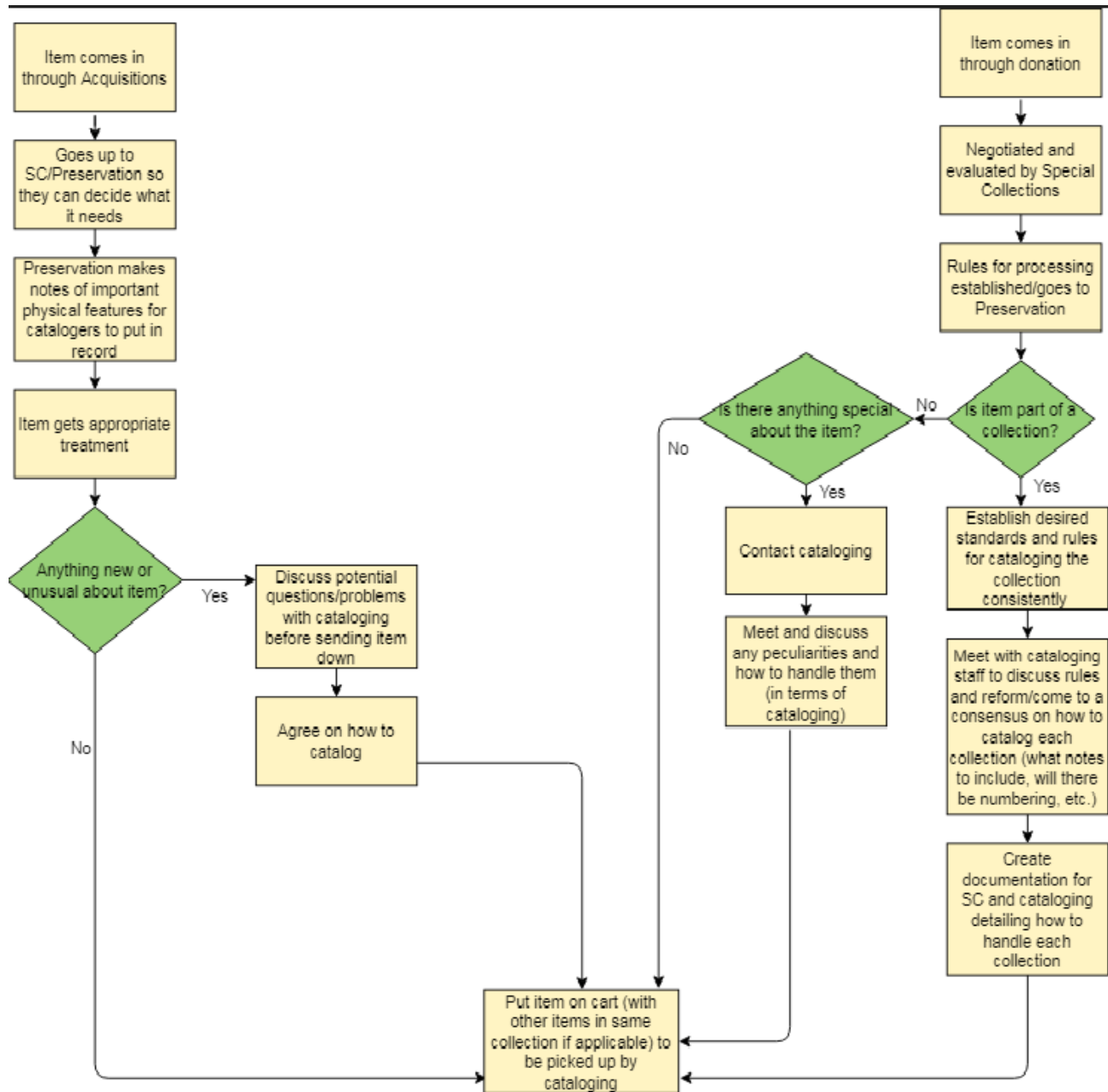(temporary title)

Exhibit 3

This workflow obviously requires open lines of communication and a willingness on everyone's part to be available for collaboration. While this takes time, the results can be very rewarding and worthwhile. At Binghamton University Libraries we have begun to see the positive effects of more closely communicating. In 2018 a new Head of Special Collections was hired. Special Collections and Technical Services decided to take advantage of this development and try new approaches to working together. In Technical Services, a cataloger was chosen to be semi Special Collections specific; working with the Head of Special Collections, this cataloger works to resolve issues, both new and old, found in Special Collections. The lines of communication

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

and collaboration have been opened wide, and this starts with meetings. Monthly meetings have become the norm, with catalogers and the Director of Technical Services meeting with the Head of Special Collections to discuss any questions or problems that have arisen in the past month. This allows not only for knowledge sharing and more efficient workflows, but also for collaborative and clear resolutions to problems. An example of this is an issue encountered while doing cleanup in the cataloging system.

The Reinhardt Collection is one of the largest and most used collection. While doing some cleanup, the Special Collections cataloger realized that there is a subset of monographs within the Reinhardt Collection that form their own little sub-collection. The sub-collection had two problems; items were cataloged but not contributed to OCLC, which means the records were not discoverable via WorldCat to scholars worldwide, and the items were cataloged incorrectly as standard monographs, which they are not. All of these problems were fleshed out during discussions between Special Collections librarians and the cataloging librarian. After realizing these problems, the next step for the librarians was to collaboratively come up with a solution. The monographs were not regularly printed monographs, but neither were they promptbooks. After speaking to each other and an outside source, all three librarians agreed on calling these items playscripts. The cataloger is now in the process of recataloging this sub-collection so that there are records in OCLC and the items are properly described as playscripts. Because the decisions about what to call the items and how to catalog them were made collaboratively across departments, members of both departments now know why the sub-collection is being cataloged this way, can answer future questions about the sub-collection, and are confident in the decisions.

Conclusion

We are seeing that communication and collaboration are helping both departments work more efficiently and to a higher standard, both separately and together. In the future this will continue, as new technological changes in Special Collections will precipitate collaboration with Technical Services. Special Collections is currently migrating to ArchivesSpace, and it has been suggested that after the finding aid record is created a corresponding catalog record should also be made for linking purposes. Another idea is that with the new technology using OAI-PMH (Open Archives Initiative-Protocol Metadata Harvester), MARC records do not need to be created and they are submitted directly to the Discovery tool. These EAD's could also then be contributed to Archive-Grid, which would make them available to WorldCat. This is an example of Special Collections and Technical Services working on what solutions we might like in real time using frequent conversations. Some of these conversations and solutions revolve around using Library of Congress subject headings in ArchivesSpace to ensure future linking. This means that catalogers working with Special Collections need to be especially careful in keeping information consistent so that the metadata can be reused or linked with other systems. A future example of this could be extracting the metadata from digitized items and either converting MARC metadata to Dublin Core, or using Dublin Core from the outset to describe the digitized item. In addition, as we look to the future of metadata, linked data may become even more

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

valuable for Special Collections access, but Special Collections staff and librarians are not familiar with how to use linked data; it is outside their purview. Catalogers are beginning to work with linked data, and so communication between the two departments is even more important.

With the continued success of our increased communication style and new workflow, the special collections and technical services departments are working together to find and utilize the best tools to make Special Collections content accessible. Consequently, a solution that works for everyone and that everyone understands will no doubt be reached.

Carts in the hallway:
Cataloging and Special Collections--a partnership for success
(temporary title)

Opening Up Special Collections to the Public: A Partnership Between Cataloging and the Special and Area Studies Collections Department at the University of Florida
Barr, Tatiana G.
Technical Services Quarterly, 25 May 2004, Vol.21(4), p.31-43

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J124v21n04_03

Providing Access to Uncataloged Special Collections with In-Process Records
Lundy, M. Winslow
Cataloging & Classification Quarterly, 10 October 2007, Vol.45 (1), p.39-58

Talks about using students to do minimal cataloging of SC items in order to make them discoverable, and then hopefully the records will be completed later. Not our policy, but this is one way to deal with backlog…

Special collections cataloging at a crossroads: a survey of ARL libraries
Russell, Beth M
The Journal of Academic Librarianship, 2004, Vol.30(4), pp.294-303 [
Basically states that there is no standardized way to catalog SC, or for cataloging and SC to work together, although it is acknowledged that they should.

Metadata, Technology, and Processing a Backlog in a University Special Collections
Patty, William Jordan
Journal of Archival Organization, 2008, Vol.6(1-2), p.102-120 [Peer Reviewed Journal]
Case study focusing on how a cataloger reduced backlog, but talks quite a bit about how SC worked with different departments to keep up with their changing needs.

Technical Services in Twenty-First Century Special Collections
Ellen Crosby BA and MLibr and PhD (2000) Technical Services in Twenty-First Century Special Collections, Cataloging & Classification Quarterly, 30:2-3, 167-176, DOI: 10.1300/J104v30n02_02
Historical perspective on cataloging and special collections looking to the future!

How to cite this website?
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Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Press. Pg 26