Archival Outreach in Academic Libraries Research Reflection

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Archives have always been an interest to me. I lacked experience handling primary sources, but the lack of knowledge led to my curiosity about archives and the professional field. Furthermore, I wondered about the approaches to promoting archival collections. I narrowed the topic to a specific library type because I am starting to consider working in academic libraries. I am indecisive about which field of librarianship I want to pursue-public libraries, academic libraries, or museums. Therefore, I was hoping this pathfinder research would inform me of my decision. In addition, I was interested in the outreach aspect because I have eleven years of outreach experience, specifically in the non-profit space. I was curious if archival outreach practice resembled the methods I practiced. In my reflection on conducting this research topic, I will discuss my process in developing the pathfinder and the lessons learned.

In conducting the research, I learned of many diverse approaches to archival outreach in academic libraries. Recommendations of archival outreach are technical approaches like using traditional mediums (i.e., design promotional webpages) and nontraditional mediums. (i.e., social media), using physical buildings as a form of promotion (i.e., makerspaces), critical thinking methods (i.e., applying inclusive approaches), traditional field approaches (i.e., conducting community focus groups), and more. What surprised me about the topic is that some of the methods are comparable to what I learned in my experience of conducting outreach (i.e., hosting focus groups to elevate program goals and reflect the needs of the serving community). I was surprised there was not much information about how institutional funding supports archival outreach.

A few approaches to conducting this research worked well for me. In developing the list of pathfinder keywords, I practiced answering the who, what, where, why, and how. I felt that considering these elements helped me cover a diverse range of resources that could support developing my pathfinder. Another approach I found helpful was creating preliminary drafts, submitting them to Dr. Di Pilato, and reading the feedback and suggestions. For example, when I drafted a list of keywords for the word cloud, I could not believe I failed to include *outreach*. Dr. Di Pilato helped by stating the obvious. I was probably tired, and I neglected to find enough time to write the draft. Having a second pair of eyes helped make my research better. Another help was examining the Library of Congress Catalog (LCC) subject headings. Library professionals who are more well-versed than me created the controlled vocabulary. Borrowing the subject headings to conduct my research led me to more diverse content about archival outreach approaches. Lastly, what worked well was taking breaks between days to develop the pathfinder. Sometimes I would look at my draft and realize that some of the keywords or resources I listed may not strongly support my topic.

In addition, there were challenges I faced in conducting this research. At first, I panicked in figuring out which databases to use. I was inexperienced in using professional databases. I was only familiar with search engines from Google and public organizational websites. Later, I found the databases (ProQuest, Society of American Archivist, and more) through USC Libraries. When I searched for research material, I would visit the profiles of materials and then see a list of potential databases. I then proceeded to investigate database company websites and their mission statements. Another challenge was that it took a while to narrow down a sea of databases.

After creating my first pathfinder, I realized that there are a few things I would do differently next time when developing another one. I will compare the controlled vocabulary of academic databases I use with LCC. LCC's controlled vocabulary reflects traditional words with traditional connotations, whereas a database like ProQuest might have controlled vocabularies that reflect inclusivity. Another point I realized is that my list of keywords was broad, and using those alone in the database search engine can lead to immediate results that might not support my pathfinder topic. It is important to stress the need to use Boolean operators to help narrow the search.

There are a few strategies I would recommend to someone researching this topic. The first is to get access to an academic or research database. The array of archival outreach approaches in academic libraries is discoverable in these databases. Using Google will limit the researcher to written work published many years ago and access to only the abstracts of recently published works. As mentioned earlier, I recommend using Boolean operators to help refine the search.

In conclusion, following the guidelines and procedures in researching archival outreach in academic libraries was very enlightening for me. Before, I was always afraid to perform research because I felt inexperienced and not taught how to properly. This process helped me learn about research elements, and I feel more comfortable. Now am more curious about how database companies curate their collections of materials and what standards they follow. Overall, this research process will be the beginning of how I approach and apply research in my library profession. However, I must remember to plan out my research accordingly and make time to revise and edit out resources that do not strongly support my pathfinder topic.