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Collaborative Collection Development and Community Outreach: Responding to Faculty Research

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CHAPTER 6*

Collaborative Collection Development and Community Outreach: RESPONDING TO FACULTY RESEARCH

Lynn Eaton and Brian Flota

Introduction

The collaboration between Lynn Eaton, special collections librarian, and Dr. Brian Flota, English liaison librarian[†] at James Madison University (JMU), began with a simple premise. Their goal was to build the special collections' holdings of African American literature. What began with an initial acquisition of eight issues of *Journal of Black Poetry* evolved into a partnership with JMU's Furious Flower Poetry Center (FFPC), the first academic center devoted to African American poetry in the United States. Because of this successful

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† In the fall of 2015, Flota's title changed to humanities librarian. In addition to English, he now serves the theatre and dance and foreign literatures, languages & cultures departments.

venture, the special collections librarian was able to work with JMU faculty to train and support citizen archivists for outreach into the local African American community.

Throughout the process—over two and a half years—Eaton and Flota built on their shared collection development interests to cultivate relationships within the library, across campus, and beyond, into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. This provided and promoted access to African American literary and cultural output that had previously been missing from JMU’s resources and might not have otherwise been accessible. Eaton and Flota’s persistent communication of their collection development focus with interested faculty members and the FFPC demonstrated their commitment to increasing the diversity of their holdings. While this partnership has been extremely rewarding so far, it also offers the opportunity for new types of collaboration in the future.

Institutional Background

James Madison University began in 1908 as the State Normal and Industrial School for Women at Harrisonburg. Over the past century, JMU has transformed itself into a major Master’s level regional university with the vision “to be the national model for the engaged university: engaged with ideas and the world.”¹

The JMU Libraries consists of two main libraries—Carrier Library (which houses social sciences and humanities materials) and Rose Library (which houses materials related to STEM subjects)—and two smaller libraries devoted to music and education resources. The libraries have a liaison program with approximately a dozen subject specialist librarians who work closely with academic schools and departments. Each liaison is responsible for collection development within these disciplines and receives allocated library funds to purchase titles in his areas. Besides selecting the collections items himself, Flota also receives recommendations from English faculty to buy specific titles. Flota’s collection development responsibilities extend to items related to English literature purchased with the intention of residing in special collections. This is especially useful to augment the special collections materials budget.

The JMU special collections began in 1983 with a focus on rare materials from the Shenandoah Valley. Curated by a part time special collections librarian, the initial manuscript collections and print materials (along with the librarian) fit into a small office space. The collection now numbers over seven thousand rare books and serial titles. It also contains over seven hundred linear feet of manuscripts. In comparison to nearby state schools (University of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, George Mason University), JMU’s special collections is much smaller in staff and budget and its holdings

are more limited. Collection development focuses on documenting the history of the Central Shenandoah Valley, but has expanded to include university history as well as materials and collections directly supporting curricular and subject areas of strength for the university. Another area of growth for special collections focuses on supporting the university's goal of "engaged community." Through instruction sessions, tours, class collaborations, and outreach with faculty, classes, and the greater Harrisonburg area, special collections supports engagement with primary source.

Impetus for Collaboration

In July 2013, Lynn Eaton became the special collections librarian, while Brian Flota joined the university the following month as the English liaison librarian. Shortly after Flota's arrival, the librarians discussed potential collaborations and collection development projects. As a result of rare and specialized book requests from English department faculty, they began working together to obtain important single issues of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (dating from the 1920s and 1930s) and a 1583 edition of John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (also known as *The Book of Martyrs*). Flota contributed funds from the English literature budget to Eaton in special collections for the acquisition of these items.* This contribution was essential to ensure the purchase of these texts.

In Spring 2014, English professor Dr. Mollie Godfrey, asked Eaton and Flota to purchase copies of *The Journal of Black Poetry*, an important publication released during the height of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Following this request, a visiting assistant professor in the English department, Dr. Hilary Holladay, inquired about special collections' holdings of African American literature items. After a careful examination of their holdings in this area, Flota and Eaton were surprised, and frankly underwhelmed, with what their collection did *not* include. African American literature has previously been an area of collection strength for the libraries. Developing this area of the collection was due, in part, to supporting JMU's commitment to diversity as outlined in its values statement.² This gap in holdings led Flota and Eaton to substantially increase special collections' holdings of African American literature, especially twentieth-century African American poetry. After pooling funds to purchase eight issues of *The Journal of Black Poetry* and two issues of another key journal, *Umbra*, Eaton and Flota decided to devote a larger portion of their collecting budgets to ensure special collections more fully represented this curricular interest of the English department's faculty who specialize in African American literature.

* At JMU libraries, liaison librarians are able to share their collection development funds with other subject areas without prior approval from the director of collections.

JMU's commitment to diversity is well represented by the FFPC, the nation's first academic center focusing on African American poetry. Eaton and Flota's acquisition of African American literature titles for special collections became an essential talking point in discussions with the FFPC leadership about the commitment of special collections and the JMU libraries to further develop and support these collections.

Project Scope

Collection Development

Flota and Eaton's outreach to and communication with the FFPC was an important step for the development of JMU special collections' African American literature collection. According to the FFPC's website, the mission of the Center is to “**cultivate, honor, and promote the diverse voices of African American poets** by making the genre accessible to a wide audience and collaborating with educational and cultural institutions, literary organizations, and artists.”³ (Emphasis in original). The Center hosts visiting poets, sponsors workshops, holds a summer poetry camp for children, and holds panels, seminars, and a decennial poetry conference.⁴

Prior to Flota and Eaton's arrival at JMU, the FFPC staff reached out to special collections for assistance in organizing and describing a selection of their historic material. During the summer of 2012, a special collections student intern spent a few weeks working with a small subset of their archival materials, with the materials remaining at the FFPC. Discussions began at this time about the potential establishment of an archival collection with JMU special collections. These talks did not proceed far, in part, because of employee turnover in special collections.

In July 2014, Eaton met with FFPC director, Dr. Gabbin, and her staff to review and discuss the archival materials in the FFPC. Eaton had heard great things about FFPC's collection, but had not seen it. Eaton's knowledge about the collection's content was limited to a two-year-old finding aid. After meeting with the FFPC staff and surveying their holdings, it became clear to Eaton and Dr. Gabbin that the print, analog, and born-digital materials in the collection would fit well within special collections' new focus on African American literature and would provide a rich source of material for students and scholars from multiple areas of study.

Nationally, there are other collections of African American poetry, but the breadth of the FFPC materials—the poets, the span of time, and the audio-visual documentation of poetry readings—make it stand out as an invaluable resource. In spring 2015, the deed of gift for the FFPC Archives was formal-

ized, with the FFPC agreeing to donate their archives (physical and digital) to JMU Libraries. Materials in the FFPC collection feature items related to the three decennial conferences—highlighted by extensive video documentation of each conference—including FFPC’s quarterly poetry readings, interviews and correspondence with prominent African American poets, biographical content, and FFPC records. The ultimate goal for the FFPC Archives project is to create an interactive, multimedia, online archive providing search functions along with tools to encourage social and creative connections, remixing, and new scholarship.

To support the third Furious Flower Poetry Conference, held in late September 2014, Flota ordered all available books of poetry and prose by the forty poets performing at the conference for the library’s general collection at the request of the FFPC. Flota also created two displays, featuring titles by these poets, that were hosted in both Carrier and Rose Library. In addition, Flota presented a paper at the Furious Flower Poetry Conference on the writer Ishmael Reed and his use of the figure of the black cowboy in his early poetry. These efforts deepened his relationships to both the English department and the FFPC. Following the conference, Flota and Eaton worked together and shared their funds to purchase a wide selection of important African American literature titles.

Outreach

In the spring of 2015, English professor, Dr. Godfrey, and writing, rhetoric and technical communication (WRTC) professor, Dr. Seán McCarthy, reached out to Eaton with an opportunity for collaboration. Godfrey and McCarthy received a Diversity Excellence Education Program grant from JMU⁵ to organize a local history initiative to curate an online and traveling exhibit celebrating the Lucy Simms School (now known as the Lucy Simms Continuing Education Center), which was Harrisonburg, Virginia’s elementary and high school for African American children from 1939 to 1966.⁶ The project would better document and represent the local African American community.

The grant provided funds for Godfrey and McCarthy to work with students over an entire year. Eaton trained junior and senior JMU students in archival research, archival processing, digitization, and metadata to help create an online exhibit of manuscripts, photographs, and artifacts gathered from the local African American community. Eaton enlisted the skills of Kate Morris, the special collections research services and technical services librarian, who then created and led an archival processing training session for the students in September 2015. Additional JMU library colleagues assisted in the digitization and online exhibit software training for the class. The materials were shared throughout the local community as part of a regional traveling exhibit. Staff

then developed an online exhibit to highlight the content.⁷ This collaborative work has built positive relationships between JMU and the surrounding community and area repositories.⁸

Conclusion

Impact

Since they began working at JMU in 2013, Eaton and Flota's collaboration not only built up the physical holdings of the collection, but also a fruitful relationship with English faculty and the FFPC. Because of the increase in African American literary titles in special collections, JMU English classes, with an emphasis on African American literature, now have improved resources and regularly visit Eaton and her staff in the special collections reading room. Flota introduced more English students to this material through one-shot instruction sessions, which provided students the opportunity to study and see the application of primary sources to their in-class research. In several instances, Eaton and Flota co-taught these sessions. As a result, students increasingly use these materials in their coursework. Before this collaboration, these kinds of experiences would not have been possible. Collecting this material reveals a culture, literary tradition, and time period of which students, otherwise, might have been unaware.

Eaton and Flota's work diversifies JMU's special collections holdings and provides directed, growing, on-campus resources for increased scholarship in African American literature by students, faculty, and visiting scholars. Their collaboration builds constructive relationships across campus and the community.

Eaton and Flota plan to develop the collection of African American literature indefinitely; the collection has already yielded positive benefits for JMU and the local community. The groundwork for productive collaboration has been firmly laid within the library and with other JMU faculty partners. Through their communication, responsiveness and collaboration, Flota and Eaton gained the trust of the English and WRTC departments as well as the FFPC. Based on this trust, another English professor, Dr. Allison Fagan, has begun working with Eaton and Flota to develop a Chicana/o American literature collection within special collections.

Lessons Learned

The continually evolving collaboration between Eaton and Flota was, on the whole, positive. They worked effectively within the constraints of budgets and time. Eaton and Flota identified a range of affordable and attainable items—periodicals, poetry chap books, and pulp paperbacks—to form the basis of the

African American literature holdings in special collections. Their philosophy regarding outreach is based in collection development—in other words, “If you collect it, they will come”—which led to the acquisition of the FFPC Archives. Their efforts were maximized, in part, by Flota’s frequent communication with English department faculty and FFPC staff. Special collections staff and Flota were responsive to faculty requests for assistance and instruction, creating a climate of accommodation and aiding the development of new relationships and new opportunities for collaboration.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive results of Eaton and Flota’s collaboration, there are several things they would do differently. Eaton and Flota were so focused on extra-library relationships that they failed to share information about their collaboration with other librarians. In hindsight, they could have utilized the African American literature LibGuide, which Flota maintains, to promote the collection. Eaton could have highlighted collection material on the special collections home page. With more time, Eaton would make greater use of social media to market African American literature resources more widely. Lastly, Eaton and Flota could have reached out to JMU’s Office of Access & Inclusion to develop other avenues through which to promote the collection, such as their annual Diversity Conference, where librarians, faculty, and staff could present on the African American literature holdings in special collections.

Next Steps

In the 2015–2016 academic year, Flota and Eaton have continued to purchase noteworthy African American literature texts. They will work with Dr. Godfrey in the English Department on a Diversity Curriculum Development Grant at JMU to purchase rare African American literature items to be used in an English course she will teach in the 2017–2018 academic year. Being awarded this grant would highlight special collections’ expanded holdings in this field, which is a resource for students and scholars. Flota and Eaton’s relationship with the FFPC, underscored by the acquisition of their archives, has the potential to draw national interest. The active collecting of traditional printed materials will make JMU special collections an attractive repository for future donations of personal and institutional papers, manuscripts, and digital materials related to African American literature, culture, and local history. As a result, these efforts must be sustained indefinitely.

To build on the productive work of their collaboration thus far, Flota and Eaton wish to extend their efforts into new collection development areas, such as Chicano/a Literature. Their work needs to be shared explicitly with colleagues in the libraries as a guide for collaborative efforts. Eaton and Flota will seek partners within the Office of Access and Inclusion and, ideally, serve as

members of JMU's Diversity Council to promote these collection development areas, identify new areas of need, and develop opportunities inspired by JMU's commitment to diversity.

By trusting their collection development instincts and following the lead of several JMU faculty members, Eaton and Flota cultivated a small but growing collection, demonstrating that the libraries were committed to making special collections' holdings diverse and reflective of JMU's vibrant curricula. The success of this collaboration is such that the libraries have committed to continuing support of these initiatives and has directed additional money towards special collections. With the groundwork laid, there is now significant potential for Eaton and Flota to contribute to JMU and the community through a shared university vision that focuses on diversity as a core value.

Notes

1. James Madison University, "JMU's Strategic Plan," accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.jmu.edu/jmuplans/jmu-strategic-plan/index.shtml>.
2. Ibid. JMU outlines its commitment to diversity in the most current iteration of its "Mission, Vision, and Values Statement" as such: "We strive to be an inclusive community that values the richness of all individuals and perspectives."
3. James Madison University, "About," accessed April 4, 2016. <http://www.jmu.edu/furiousflower/about/index.shtml>.
4. Ibid.
5. See <https://www.jmu.edu/multicultural/programs/deepimpact-program.shtml>.
6. "Rockingham County Public Schools, "Chapters of Rockingham," accessed April 4, 2016, <http://localhistory.rockingham.k12.va.us/lucy-simms.html>.
7. At this time, the online exhibit is being beta-tested and is not available to the public.
8. Local repositories include Bridgewater College, Eastern Mennonite University, the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society, and the Massanutten Regional Public Library.

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