White Paper
Award #: PF-266604-19
Assuring Sustainable Collection Growth with High-Density Mobile Storage
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The University of Arizona Poetry Center
04/16/2021
Project Activities

Overview

The University of Arizona Poetry Center (UAPC) is one of the most extensive and accessible collections of contemporary poetry in the United States. A community-focused literary resource housed within a public land-grant university in Tucson, Arizona, UAPC holds more than 50,000 volumes of poetry and hosts more than 100,000 in-person and online visitors each year. As the size and significance of UAPC’s collections have grown, the organization has begun to face significant space limitations, requiring staff and volunteers to maintain accessibility by frequently shifting collections. To address its increasingly urgent space concerns, UAPC installed a mechanical-assist high-density mobile storage system in its closed-stacks Archives Room with support from the NEH’s Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections program. In discussion with Hayri Yildirim, University of Arizona (UA) Libraries Director of Facilities Planning and Management, UAPC selected Phoenix, Arizona–based Interior Solutions to install a Spacesaver storage system in its closed-stacks Archives Room to increase available space for collections.

This project, led by Library Director Sarah Kortemeier, is the culmination of a major preservation initiative that began in 2014 with UAPC’s NEH-funded General Preservation Assessment. The 2014 assessment was conducted by consultant Randy Silverman of the University of Utah; with the installation of a high-density mobile storage system, UAPC has achieved all the goals and recommendations of the assessment, placing the organization in a strong position to preserve its nationally significant humanities collections for decades to come.

The project was carried out in three parts: preparation, installation, and dissemination.

Preparation

On receipt of funding from NEH’s Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections grant program in October 2019, Kortemeier worked with Interior Solutions Account Manager Scott Fero to order the high-density mobile storage system from Spacesaver Corporation. Since the system had to be built to order at Spacesaver’s headquarters in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, and shipped to Arizona by the first of the year to accommodate UAPC’s available installation window during a semester break, time was of the essence in these communications. The mobile storage system required about eight weeks’ lead time from order to delivery.

In the months before the official start of the project, Kortemeier also held regular planning meetings with Fero and Yildirim, along with Senior Information Associate Michael Mayer and General Maintenance Mechanic Hasan Sanli of the UA Libraries. Since the project would run on a tight timeline during a semester break at the UA, these planning meetings addressing project logistics were especially important: decisions made here saved valuable time later. The team was able to make adjustments to the original work plan that simplified the collection-shifting process, ensuring that all collection materials stayed in shelf order throughout the move.

At the same time, Kortemeier worked with colleagues to communicate news of the upcoming project to the public. The installation of high-density mobile shelving created permanent benefits...
for UAPC’s collections, granting the organization enough space for decades’ worth of acquisitions; however, the project also created temporary inconveniences for the public, since staff had to close the library for nearly a month during the installation process. Before installation began, Kortemeier worked with UAPC Publicity Coordinator Sarah Gzemski to write social media posts and a blog post explaining the closure and providing a behind-the-scenes look at the project for the Poetry Center’s online audiences.

Despite these preparatory efforts, library staff anticipated that the month-long closure would cause complex scheduling issues. UAPC is a public space, featuring a reading room that is open to the public, classrooms used for both UA and community classes, and meeting rooms. Some programs had to be rescheduled, and several accommodations had to be made for members of the public who had business with UAPC and needed access to the building during the closure period.

Transparency with the public was one key to this project’s success. UAPC staff posted project updates and photos to its social media accounts throughout the installation process. These updates were positively received:

Anecdotally, UAPC staff felt that their online preparations and communications about the project made it much easier to solve access problems when they arose: patrons who had such concerns approached staff with a positive impression of the project overall. Staff also observed that patrons enjoyed getting “behind the scenes” looks at the project as it progressed, both in person and online.

**Installation**

After the end of the Fall 2019 semester, UAPC closed the library to the public and began shifting collections out of the Archives Room in preparation for the high-density mobile shelving installation. This work was carried out by a collections-moving team of temporary workers from the UA Libraries under Mayer’s supervision; both Mayer and the team of temporary workers had extensive previous experience shifting collections. As the temporary workers moved collections, Sanli came in regularly to disassemble existing shelving in the Archives Room and set it up again in UAPC’s reading room, so that Archives collections could be stored temporarily on these older shelves during the installation of the Spacesaver system. This work was finished slightly ahead of schedule, thanks to the collections-moving expertise of the Libraries’ teams.

The project hit its first roadblock at this point. The concrete subfloor in the Archives Room had been covered in carpet when the building was finished in 2007. The carpet and underlying glue
had to be removed before the high-density mobile shelving system could be installed: the new shelving system would operate over a new plywood subfloor and set of rails, all of which needed to be secured to bare concrete. By the end of 2019, however, the existing carpet had been sitting underneath thousands of pounds of books for more than ten years, and it was not possible to remove it using hand tools. To make matters worse, Sanli made this discovery on Friday, Dec. 20, as UA was preparing to shut down for its winter holiday break.

UAPC was very fortunate in its partners for this project. Sanli reported the problem to Yildirim, who immediately persuaded a team from the UA Facilities Management’s floor shop to bring extra manpower and specialized equipment over to UAPC approximately two hours before everyone was due to go on a two-week vacation. Thanks to good fortune and good partners at the University of Arizona Libraries, UAPC managed to have the Archives Room emptied of collections, shelving, and carpet on schedule, ready for the installation of high-density mobile shelving in the new year.

On Jan. 2, 2020, Interior Solutions began work to install the new shelving system. Here the project hit its second roadblock: the components of the shelving system required the use of a semi-trailer truck for transport. The truck’s size created a problem for loading and unloading, because UAPC has no loading dock (or nearby parking spaces) big enough to handle a vehicle that large. However, since the installation took place during the UA winter break, when students, faculty, and staff were largely absent, Kortemeier was able to secure a special permit for the semi-trailer truck from the university’s Parking and Transportation Services, allowing the truck to park beside UAPC daily for the duration of the installation.

In the week that followed, the Interior Solutions team worked quickly to assemble and install the high-density mobile shelving system in UAPC’s Archives Room. Interior Solutions has a great deal of experience with this kind of installation, and this part of the process went very smoothly.

Mayer’s team returned the following week and shifted collections back into the Archives Room. Once this process was complete, Sanli disassembled the old Archives Room shelving, leaving it outside UAPC for pickup by the university’s surplus materials department. The project experienced no major delays or problems during this phase.

Throughout this project, UAPC benefited greatly from the experience of its partners at Interior Solutions and the UA Libraries. The speed and accuracy that characterized all phases of this operation were due to their expertise. Having seen the process up close, UAPC staff can attest that a project of this nature entails a surprising number of moving parts, and it is enormously helpful to enlist partners with deep experience in the necessary tasks. Lacking staff with experience shifting collections or installing machinery, UAPC is grateful for the partnerships that made this project possible.

**Adjustments**

After collections were shifted back into the Archives Room and UAPC re-opened its reading room to the public, UAPC staff worked intermittently to move collection items from the Reading Room into Archives Room storage. The shelving in the Archives Room is now optimally
positioned to absorb new acquisitions gradually for at least the next decade of collections growth.

Dissemination

UAPC discovered quickly that dissemination efforts were needed before, during, and after project activities to minimize disruption to library patrons and build public enthusiasm for the project. As mentioned in Preparation, above, Kortemeier worked on publicity with Gzemski in the months leading up to the closure of the library, so that the public knew what to expect and who to contact with concerns. Kortemeier and Gzemski also collaborated on Instagram/Facebook photos of the installation as it progressed (see Fig. 1, above).

After the compact shelving system was installed, UAPC’s library staff made frequent informal presentations to the public and to stakeholders (including donors, docents, staff, and administrators) to demonstrate the success of the project. The College of Humanities also prepared a press release and covered the grant project in its newsletter.

In August 2020, Kortemeier wrote a final blog post for UAPC’s website to disseminate news of the project’s completion and direct interested members of the public an exhibition that illustrated the installation process for one year after installation of the new shelving system. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic forced UAPC’s entire exhibition program online by May 2020, however, so UAPC used Omeka software to create this exhibit online instead. By placing “Making Space for Books: Mobile Shelving in the Archives” online, UAPC has expanded this exhibit’s reach. UAPC hopes the experiences documented there will be useful for peer institutions and the public alike.

Finally, in November 2020, Kortemeier submitted a case study to the College & Research Libraries News to disseminate project results. The article was accepted for publication and will appear in Spring 2021.

Grant Products

Spacesaver Mechanical-Assist High-Density Storage (Equipment)

Press Release from the University of Arizona’s College of Humanities: https://humanities.arizona.edu/news/neh-grant-will-support-poetry-center-collection

Blog Posts:
https://poetry.arizona.edu/blog/our-winter-closure-making-space-books
https://poetry.arizona.edu/blog/making-space-books-finishing-job

Online Library Exhibit:
https://poetrycenter.omeka.net/exhibits/show/mobileshelving

Case Study:
Accomplishments

This project has created urgently needed on-site storage space for UAPC’s expanding humanities collections. For the past decade, UAPC’s collections have been growing at a stable rate of 1,200 books and 600 periodicals a year. As collections grew, available shelving grew more and more limited; in 2019, just before the Spacesaver system was installed, staff estimated that less than 20 linear feet of shelf space remained in the Archives Room.

UAPC’s stable rate of acquisitions allowed Fero of Interior Solutions to estimate the capacity and growth of the new storage system over time. Fero calculated that that the new system would give UAPC a gain of 1,149 linear filing feet, a figure that represents a 73% gain in total storage capacity over the shelving system previously installed in the Archives Room—and enough space to accommodate 15 to 20 years of acquisitions at the current rate.

After the Spacesaver system was installed and collections moved back into the Archives room, UAPC library staff measured nearly 1,200 linear feet of available shelf space: the installed system created slightly more free storage space than Fero had projected, a welcome surprise.

Audiences

UAPC is housed within the College of Humanities at the UA, which a public land-grant university in the sixth most economically distressed state in the country. UA serves more than 40,000 students, all of whom have access to UAPC’s collections and programs. Thirty-five percent of UA students are students of color. UA is a Hispanic Serving Institution and an American Indian and Alaska Native Serving Institution.

UAPC’s humanities collections also serve regional, national, and international audiences for poetry: UAPC makes collections freely accessible to students, members of the Tucson community, and the public at large. In the Fall of 2018, UAPC undertook a comprehensive audience survey delivered in Spanish and English. UAPC learned that 66% of its audiences identified as female; audiences served ranged with consistency from youth to 75+ years of age; 64% of UAPC’s audience identified as White/Caucasian, and the remainder predominantly identified as Latinx. In the year before the pandemic, UAPC served more than 107,000 people across its physical and digital programs.

UAPC was closed to the public for the 2020-2021 academic year, delaying the public benefit of this project to some extent. However, collections continued to grow throughout the pandemic closure, and UAPC’s need to secure adequate storage space for physical collections in climate-controlled spaces remained an urgent priority for the institution. By creating extra space in UAPC’s Archives room, this project ensured that acquisitions were able to progress without interruption through the pandemic year. UAPC now has space for its next 15-20 years of acquisitions, ensuring that its library collections will remain accessible for its diverse and growing audiences.
Evaluation, Continuation, and Long Term Impact

This project did not undergo formal evaluation, as the focus was on the installation of new shelving equipment rather than new humanities programming. The project did, however, meet all of the quantitative goals UAPC set in its initial grant application: the new Spacesaver mobile shelving system increased UAPC’s available shelf space by 1,200 linear feet, consistent with predictions made in Fero’s initial estimates. At the current rate of library acquisitions, the new shelving system provides space for the next two decades of book purchasing, placing UAPC in the strongest possible position to preserve its humanities collections for generations to come.