

Northwestern University Library
Institutional Profile for Collections Conservation

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The Preservation Department provides direct service to the Main Library and three branch libraries containing approximately 3 million volumes. The antecedent to our current repair program existed prior to the formation of our Preservation Department. When it was formed in 1985, the "mending section" was immediately put under its direction. Money was allocated the following year for the construction of a conservation lab and the hiring of a collections conservator. At every stage of development, the Preservation Department has integrated the assets of its repair program into its organization. Presently the lab has permanent funding for its collections conservator and 1.5 staff technicians, grant funding for 0.5 technicians, and recurring funds for 20 part-time work-study student assistants during the academic year, as well as 8 full-time assistants during the summer quarter. Frequently a volunteer will also contribute work for experience. There is no union for any of the above. Only the collections conservator is classified as professional.

Outside of two small repair units in branch locations, our collections conservation program is located in one centralized lab. Our work-flow is intentionally managed as a single integrated program to continually examine collection needs and priorities, staff skill optimums, and treatment range and effectiveness. Rare book and paper conservation is classified as "complex treatments" and treated primarily by staff technicians and the collections conservator, though not exclusively. Certain simple repairs and enclosures are at times relegated to experienced student staff. All lab staff work under the direction of the conservator.

Grant-driven treatment is sporadic – a small percentage of total work done. Aside from these occasions (which are sought) about 79% of the materials treated are use driven and 21% targeted by selectors. In general we allow our first priority to be directed by use (material that is receiving use and requires treatment to withstand continued use). Material arrives in the lab in a number of ways: via the circulation desk, the commercial binding unit, the preservation office, directly from the collections, and from the branch libraries. Treatment specifications are ultimately made by the collections conservator, though standardized treatment specification is often discussed with or referred to other preservation staff and, when appropriate, selectors. The decision for withdrawal of any physical item is ultimately made by the selectors. This is done only in

conference with the preservation staff in light of possible treatment and reformatting options, and usually occurs only after the item has been reformatted.

There is no work quota system in the lab. Most material is repaired and returned within four weeks (average four week backlog); rush material and recalls are returned within 24 hours. Complex treatments often require more time. Work is completed between 8:30 and 5:00 Monday through Friday plus two 4 hour evening shifts (variable) which student supervisors oversee.

Training for staff is primarily done in-house, though outside opportunities are often used by the conservator and technicians. To a limited degree, library policy allows for development opportunities. As much as possible, staff members learn all the techniques used in the lab for their skill level – specialization is infrequent. Pay ranges from approximately 5 to 12 dollars an hour in the lab. The collections conservator is expected to serve the broader library community as a professional, and sits on various committees.