

Becoming an effective advocate for your collections means becoming a proactive participant in the management and planning of their preservation and long term maintenance. The amount of work to do and the costs can feel overwhelming, but things will never change until you take charge, make a plan, and actively seek the resources you need. Here are 5 tips on how you can start to manage your collections rather than letting your collections manage you.

1. Learn a New Language

Every career field (and sub-field) has its own specialized lingo that makes perfect sense to those steeped in the relevant issues or intra-professional communication, but to outsiders much of that language sounds like nonsense or may have a different meaning within their own lingo-istic group. Take some time to think about how the person you're advocating to would best understand your concerns and issues so that you become a clearer, more efficient communicator...and educator.

2. Be Smart, Not Alarmist

Preservation has long tended to be a reactive field—there isn't the impetus to save something until it is on the verge of disaster. While this kind of approach has worked at times in the past, it is not 100% effective and tends towards a sky-is-falling attitude (Nitrate will explode for no reason and all film is on the razor's edge of decay...). At some point people become inured to this type of apocalyptic argument, and then we also end up having to spend a lot of time after the fact disabusing people of misconceptions (nitrate is stable if handled correctly, and film is an excellent medium). Instead, draw on the wealth of research into media longevity and decay, the effects of storage conditions, and means of access. The logical presentation of Issue, Solution, Result will ultimately create better support from grantors and administration, more success, and better piece of mind than merely vocalizing worry and woe.

3. Be Specific

General requests get a general response which are generally difficult to get follow through on. Like with history told from the bottom up, we tend to relate better to the personal or specific. Arm yourself with meaningful details—facts, stories about certain items or preservation efforts, or revealing problem areas—and meaningful outcomes—specific projects with discernible endpoints that can be more easily quantified. Quality is a necessary goal of preservation efforts, but facts, numbers, and specifics give a toehold to begin comprehending the scope of necessary work and the productive use of granted or allocated resources.

4. Plan Big, Start Small

Managing an archive is an ultra marathon, but like training for a marathon you can't just decide to pop out and run 20 miles one day. You need to plan the steps along the way that will provide the framework for the larger goal. Start off with achievable goals that produce a final result you can measure against and build upon so that you'll be ready for the big race when it comes. Successfully completing goals in smaller projects will get work done while also providing experience or acting as a proof of concept for a larger project. This will not only help you avoid frustration at not being able to immediately address everything in the collection, but it will also show grantors and development officers that you can establish, manage, and complete projects. This will help them trust you, and you trust yourself, with managing larger scale efforts down the road.

5. Be Confident

You are a trained professional. You know your collection and your field of expertise better than any administrator or granting agency. Speak with confidence and conviction, and present your concerns as quantified problems, solutions and plans rather than as complaints. No one else will believe in your projects if you don't, and people will react more positively to clear, identifiable actions.