Core Competencies for Visual Resources Management

An IMLS Funded Research Project at the University at Albany, SUNY

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Introduction

Visual resources present a unique challenge to information professionals. Visual resources librarians can now be found as digital image specialists, art, architecture, film and video librarians, museum curators, slide, photograph, microfilm and digital archivists, information specialists, image system vendors, photographers, art historians, artists, and scientists. Institutions now count among their holdings a wide variety of artifacts and media, each with its own descriptive elements and needs in terms of care and preservation. By definition, visual resources collections include materials such as photographic, still and moving images, as well as objects and artifacts, microfilm and electronic media in all formats from analog to digital. Use of these items, and their reproduction in a digital medium also presents challenges to caretakers of collections. As a result of expanding employment opportunities, there has been a marked increase in the skill levels required and the technical expertise expected of visual resources professionals. Current library and information science curricula have not kept pace with developments in the field of visual resources. It is therefore necessary for LIS schools to offer coursework and training in the organization, care and access of visual resources

Background

An IMLS funded research project[1], conducted by Dr. Hemalata Iyer, the Principal Investigator and Project Director, has resulted in the development of a set of core competencies for visual resource professionals entering the field. The purpose of these

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competencies is to guide LIS programs in providing relevant and adequate coursework to meet the needs of those who desire to enter this field. The list can also serve as a checklist for those professionals who wish to enter the field with a firm understanding of the issues related to visual resources, or those in the field who wish to enhance their knowledge base or advance within the field.

Methodology

A content analysis based on categories such as qualifications required, skills required, familiarities required, degree requirements and background knowledge requirements was performed on qualification requirements for 394 position announcements for jobs in the area of visual resources over the past 5 years. The sources that were surveyed in the compilation of data were the Society of American Archivists (SAA) listserv, Archival Outlook, the Chronicle of Higher Education, Visual Resources Association (VRA) website and listserv, Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) website and listserv, Museum-L listserv. A similar analysis was performed on the descriptive sections of these job advertisements for skills and knowledge in the areas of communication/ collaboration, library theory/library based skills, managerial skills, and in those duties that dealt directly with some aspect of the care or use of visual resources. The competencies represent main duties, skills and knowledge areas that are required across different environments within the VR field today. The environments that require these competencies include:

- Academic Environment - includes academic departments (departmental libraries) and academic libraries
- Archival Environment – includes state and government archives as well as historical societies
- Museum Environment – includes independent organizations as well as museums attached to a university or library
- Private Environment- includes corporate and special collections
- Library Environment – includes public and state libraries

A web-based survey was also conducted in which current professionals reported requirements for performing job related duties. This survey was announced on the VRA listserv, the SAA listserv, the ARLIS listserv and the SAA Visual Materials Section listserv. The responses included answers to open ended opinion questions as well as questions involving the stating level of skill and ranking of skill areas.

The results of this survey were also subject to a content analysis. The categories for this analysis mainly addressed specific qualifications and areas of knowledge and skill that the professionals currently held, as well as benchmark skill and knowledge cores that professionals felt others in the field should attain at entry, mid- and senior level positions within the field.

Results

       The results of the two data sets were compiled into a list of skills and knowledge areas. These were developed further into the following competencies after eliciting feedback from selected LIS faculty and practitioners in the field. This represents a basic knowledge and skill set that professionals will be able to apply to any organization that holds visual materials as part of its collection. Although an analysis was done to determine if significant differences existed across different environments, the basic knowledge and skill sets remain the same, and competencies unique to a particular environment are noted as such in this document.

       This document is intended to help library and information science (LIS) schools develop a curriculum for graduate programs in visual resources management, as well as continuing education courses and workshops offered by LIS schools and professional organizations. The scope and coverage of the skill sets is very comprehensive and is meant to cover visual resources management in all information environments. This document can also help graduate students select the combination of skills necessary for a career in visual resources. Students will be able to better understand the competencies needed to work as a VR professional.

       This document is intended to be inclusive, and cover core competencies for VR management in any of the multitude of environments in which it is currently practiced. Individuals or schools interested in VR competencies specifically in a museum environment will also find this document useful.

Competencies

Area I – Format Knowledge

Definition of visual formats and processes: Images in any number of physical formats, produced by a variety of possible processes. Examples include photographic prints, slides, moving images, drawings, paintings, prints (intaglio and relief), and digitally produced images.

The visual resources professional will be able to:

1. Differentiate among a variety of visual formats and processes.
2. Provide preservation and conservation measures for visual formats and processes according to archival standards.
3. Show competence in the proper handling, care and storage of materials.
4. Identify best practices for format conversion and delivery.
5. Create high quality study images and reproductions using photographic techniques (film and digital) in support of organizational needs.

6. Provide adequate conservation measures and care in the mounting of exhibits which provide collection access to the public. (Museum and Archival environments)
7. Understand differences among historical visual formats and processes and apply this knowledge to dating, contextualization, and interpretation of pictures. (Museum and Archival environments)

Area II – Collection Development

The visual resources professional will be able to:

1. Create collection development policies.
2. Understand and assess the information needs of the user population.
3. Evaluate the collection and determine its current strengths and weaknesses.
4. Show a knowledge of appropriate sources for acquisition of visual materials (such as ARTstor, Digital Sanborn Maps, and other image based resources).
5. Identify and cooperate with consortia and other organizations in arrangements that will result in resource sharing.
6. Understand issues relating to contracts, licenses and acquisition techniques.
7. Identify trends in the field of visual resources and develop strategic plans to promote the collection and services of the organization.
8. Develop, justify, administer and evaluate a budget for visual materials collection.

Area III – Classification and Cataloging (Description and Access)

The visual resources professional will be able to:

1. Perform copy and original cataloging activities for visual materials according to the needs of the organization.
2. Identify and use information sources to provide proper classification/ cataloging of visual materials.
3. Authorities:
    a. Perform authority control using Union List of Artist Names (ULAN), Library of Congress Name Authority Files (LCNAF), or other authorities appropriate to the needs of the organization.
4. Vocabularies:
    a. Assign proper and relevant subject headings/ descriptors to visual materials using standards such as the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT), Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), Thesaurus for Graphic Materials (TGM), Thesaurus of Geographical Names (TGN) and Thesaurus of University Terms (TUT) or other authorities appropriate to the needs of the organization.

5. Metadata Standards:
   a. Show working knowledge of various applicable metadata standards such VRA Core, Dublin Core, MARC format.
   b. Show working knowledge of Encoded Archival Description (EAD). (Archival environment)
   c. Exhibit an understanding of XML concepts and their application in the VR environment.
6. Cataloging Guidelines:
   a. Demonstrate knowledge of approved standards of descriptive cataloging, such as Anglo-American Cataloging Rules (AACR) and Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO).
   b. Demonstrate knowledge of Describing Archives: a Content Standard (DACS). (Archival environment)
   c. Apply archival principles of collection arrangement and description" (Archival environment)
7. Classification:
   a. Apply classification schemes such as Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), Library of Congress Classification (LCC), Iconclass, as appropriate to the needs of the organization.
8. Bibliographic Utilities:
   a. Perform copy and original cataloging activities for visual materials according to the needs of the organization using bibliographic utilities such as Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN).

Area IV – Technology

The visual resources professional will be able to:

1. Database Development and Management:
   a. Develop, implement and manage collections through the use of digital asset management software specific to visual resources.
2. Digital Imaging:
   a. Carry out digital imaging processes such as copy and original (digital and film) photography, scanning, manipulation, image correction, editing, storage and dissemination in support of the organization, using appropriate software in accordance with best practices.
   b. Make decisions for format conversion, and storage, in collaboration with staff and patron needs.
   c. Identify long-term needs for preservation of digital assets.
   d. Maintain awareness of ongoing technological advances and their potential relevance to visual resource management.

3. Presentation Technologies:
    a. Demonstrate skills in presentation technologies to support faculty and organization educational programs.
    b. Be familiar with concepts of Information and Communication technologies including course management systems.
4. Understand networking concepts such as Peer-to-Peer and Client- server architecture, and server management.
5. Exhibit awareness of emerging community based technologies and software and the ability to relate their relevance to the organization.

Area V – Reference and Research

The visual resources professional will be able to:

1. Provide high quality research and reference services to patrons.
2. Maintain familiarity of relevant reference sources that directly relate to the collection.
3. Identify and use resources from subject areas relevant to visual materials collections.
4. Develop finding aids and tools that maximize access to collections and information.
5. Respond to patron requests in a timely and professional fashion.
6. Maintain a strong knowledge of the collection, including historical and physical attributes, as well as associated relevant subject knowledge.
7. Serve as a resource expert and a consultant for database searching and use.
8. Instruct patrons in the use of the facilities and collections of the organization and in the restrictions of copyright governing the use of these images.

Area VI – Communication, Collaboration and Outreach

The visual resources professional will be able to:

1. Effectively communicate with fellow staff, patrons and constituents information about programs and policies.
2. Collaborate effectively with other departments within the organization, as well as across organizations in projects that promote and exhibit the collection or larger organization.
3. Participate in committees, task forces and other groups whose collection-related activities will have an impact on the organization.
4. Communicate effectively with academic faculty and students to ensure that the best service is provided and needs are met. (Academic environment)

5. Act as a liaison between the collection and outside organizations and appropriate internal units to best provide service to students and faculty. (Academic environment)
6. Promote awareness of the collection through exhibition, implementing proper identification and display standards. (Museum and Archival environments)

Area VII – Planning and Management

The visual resources professional will be able to:

1. Develop policies and procedures based upon and reflective of the needs of the organization for the efficient operation of all technical functions, including acquisition, processing, circulation, collection maintenance, equipment supervision, and resource sharing of visual materials.
2. Maintain knowledge of current copyright, licensing and intellectual property laws and issues, and develop practices to insure compliance with these laws, with special reference to access, use, ownership and replication.
3. Monitor and perform quality control in the production of visual resources for use by patrons.
4. Develop and support policies for excellence in patron services.
5. Develop policies for disaster prevention and recovery of visual materials in the collections.
6. Design, implement, and evaluate ongoing public relations and report programs and projects.
7. Promote awareness of projects and collection assets and services collaboration with outside groups.
8. Plan and coordinate exhibits.
9. Oversee implementation of new technologies and policies.
10. Identify and seek external sources of financial support, including grant opportunities.
11. Personnel management:
    a. Contribute to the recruitment, orientation, training, supervision and evaluation of other staff members.
    b. Design, implement and evaluate an ongoing program of VR professional development for all staff, to encourage and inspire continual excellence.
    c. Manage workflow patterns for delivery of services.

Area VIII- LIS Theory

The visual resources professional will be able to:

1. Exhibit professional knowledge of current issues in LIS, and maintain this knowledge through professional literature and participation in professional organizations.
2. Exhibit knowledge of information seeking and user behavior patterns and their application in the visual resources environment.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of basic information architecture and delivery systems for on-line collections.
4. Demonstrate a conceptual and theoretical knowledge of the foundations of knowledge organization and representation, classification and indexing theory and awareness of seminal level works in the field of LIS.
5. Show knowledge of theories of perception, cognition and visualization and their impact on information seeking and interpretation.
6. Perform information needs assessments.
7. Demonstrate knowledge of research methodology and research proposal writing including issues in ethical considerations.
8. Apply theories of collection management.
9. Apply issues in information ethics in a changing information environment.
10. Show awareness of trends in Entity- Relationship models for bibliographic records.