Laurie Henry

Evaluation: University of Connecticut Archives and Special Collections Web Site

Organization and Design

The Archives and Special Collections' home page is easy to find from The University of Connecticut's main site. From www.uconn.edu, I clicked on Academics & Research, then on Libraries, and finally on Archives and Special Collections, which I found under the Special Libraries heading on the site's left side.

The Archives and Special Collections' sparse home page reveals little, with only six linking buttons, two of which merely point back to the main Uconn library site. A third is a redundant meta-link Home button. (The other three are more useful: the invaluable Site Map, Collections, and AskArchive.) The phone number and mailing address of Uconn's Archives and Special Collections appear on the first page of the site-but not an email address.

It would be impossible to navigate the Archives and Special Collections pages without the comprehensive site map, although there are times when the site map is perhaps a bit too comprehensive: the "Facilities" link, for example, instead of describing the Dodd Center, where Uconn's Archives and Special Collections are located, provides information on how to rent one of the Center's auditoriums, which is not likely to be of interest to the researcher.

A more serious problem concerns the many dead links from the Site Map. Clicking on any of the twenty links under the "Collections" heading, for example, will lead one only to a "This page cannot be displayed" announcement. There are also pages where the typeface is impossibly tiny (6 pt., rather than the more usual 12 pt.)-on a page describing the mission of the
Dodd Center, for example, and on a page listing the names of Special Collections and Archives staff members. Clicking on the name of each staff member, however, leads the viewer to a useful home page for each staff member, making it easy for the researcher to know whom to contact with which questions and how to do so.

Otherwise, everything runs smoothly on this site. Images load quickly and do not require hard-to-find plug-ins or even PDF. Thumbnail photos are provided for the images in the Electronic Exhibitions part of the site, although the expanded versions of the photographs are not of high resolution.

The site could be updated more frequently. Under the Site Map's "Upcoming Events" heading, for example, there's a link to a November, 2002, conference.

**Access Information**

A click on "Parking Information" from the Site Map page will lead you to Uconn's main parking site, which is one of those annoyingly circular pages from which it is impossible to exit by clicking on the browser's "back" button. Like most state universities, also, The University of Connecticut is huge, and it would take some time for a person unfamiliar with the campus to wade through information concerning fines and semester-long parking passes to find directions and daily rates for the lots closest to the Dodd Center.

On the other hand, the Special Collections and Archives' own map (displayed under "Map" rather than under "Parking") is very clear and shows nearby public parking lots: I would suggest that the Special Collections and Archives webmaster eliminate the link to Uconn's student-oriented parking services site altogether.
Finding Aids

The A-Z index of finding aids for each collection, helpfully, appears on a single very long Web page, which makes it easy to use the browser's "find" function to search for any particular known collection. There are online finding aids available for roughly half of the individual collections. The descriptive writing in the online finding aids must often be very useful to researchers: it is clear that archivists have taken great care, in particular, to write comprehensive biographies of the people whose papers the archives holds. The online finding aids are also admirable in the way that they highlight the most interesting or important aspects of each collection and note significant omissions.

In other ways, however, the Collections page's organizational structure could be clearer. The archives' collections, for example, could easily be divided into two major categories: (1) University of Connecticut Records and (2) Other Papers. As it is, the headings for University of Connecticut records (like "Academic Affairs, Vice President for," and "International Studies Committee," alphabetized under "A" and "I") are not always easy to find.

Special Features

The most unusual service provided by the Uconn site is AskArchives, which features about 550 questions that people have emailed to the site, along with responses from archivists and librarians. Here, for example, is a very typical query and response:

Q. Where could I find a picture of the very first telephone?

A. Thank you for your query to askArchives of the University of Connecticut Libraries. SNET did not manufacture the first telephone, but I did find a poster in the collection that
had a picture of what I believe is the first. I've scanned the image and have it available for you at http://www.lib.uconn.edu/DoddCenter/ASC/SNET/firstphones.htm.

The list of questions and responses, which is searchable by topic, makes for interesting browsing and is also impressive insofar as it suggests the lengths to which Uconn's archivists and librarians are willing to go to assist their patrons.

The "Electronic Exhibitions" pages are mostly teasers—a few images designed to entice the viewer to head up to Storrs to see the actual collections. The Alternative Press pages, for example, include thumbnails and photos of the covers of '60s and '70s radical newspapers (Christopher Street, The East Village Other) but no text and no in-depth commentary that would allow site visitors to ascertain differences among the various underground newspapers. It's worth noting that the Electronic Exhibitions pages, while themselves rather unsubstantial, link to related sites at other institutions. "Going Beyond the Call: Southern New England Telephone's Response to Natural Disasters in Connecticut," for example, provides links to other New England telephone- and natural-disaster-related sites.

Conclusion

Uconn's Special Collections and Archives' policy statement is clear and sensible: "Since major growth in Archives and Special Collections began only three decades ago, decisions about what to collect took into account existing collecting strengths at other institutions." Web-site writers note that Uconn decided, for example, to acquire business records from the twentieth century, since eighteenth and nineteenth century records had already been collected elsewhere in the state. It's rare to see an archives' policy stated so frankly, and a scholar with an interest in a known
item at Uconn's archives would be very likely to learn enough about most of the collections to ascertain whether or not it was in her best interest to make a trip up to Storrs. Except for AskArchives, however, the site isn't meant for the casual browser: there's no real search function, and no way for the browser to see quickly the highlights of Uconn's Special Collections and Archives. Were I in charge of the Special Collections and Archives' Web site, I would certainly advocate a more informative home page, with more links to the great amount of available information regarding The University of Connecticut's intriguing archival collections.