

PANDEMIC AT THE ARCHIVES

CHANGES TO THE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS SERVICE MODEL TO SUPPORT REMOTE LEARNING

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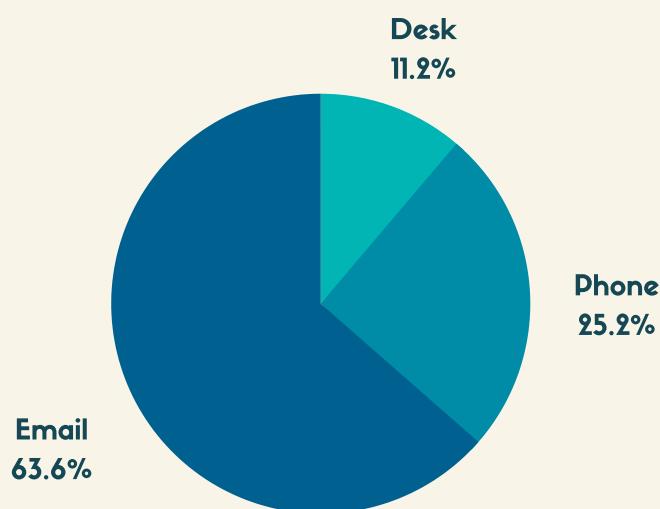
Towson University's Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) holds unique materials related to university and local history. We support Towson students, faculty, staff, and local community members with research related to these topics. Like most archives and special collections, a majority of our holdings have no digital presence, necessitating individualized, personal interactions with archival staff to facilitate discovery and access.

Prior to COVID-19, we provided these services by interacting with patrons through three main pathways – in-person, telephone, and email. The shift to remote services was detrimental to our ability to provide in-person access, and prompted SCUA to re-think how we can aid patrons in a remote learning environment.

Now that Towson University had begun to resume in-person services, SCUA can examine how we were affected by COVID-19, the efficacy of new services to facilitate remote engagement, and the potential for future services.

PATRON INTERACTION METHODS AT THE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS SERVICE POINT BY YEAR

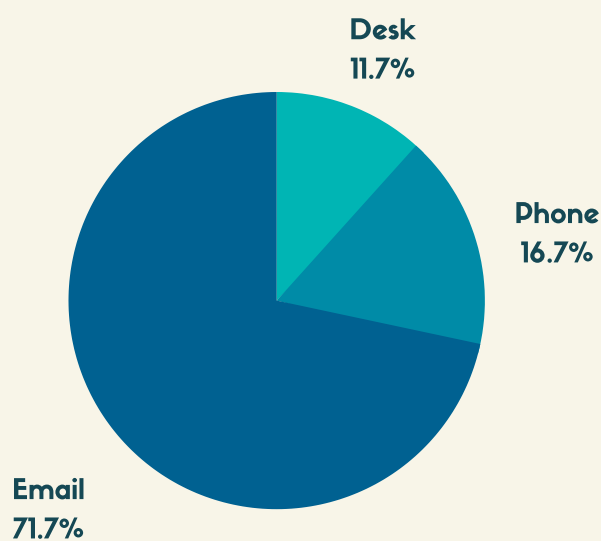
July 6, 2018 - June 30, 2019



In-person at desk: 12 (11.21%)
Phone: 27 (25.23%)
Email: 68 (63.55%)

Total Inquires: 108

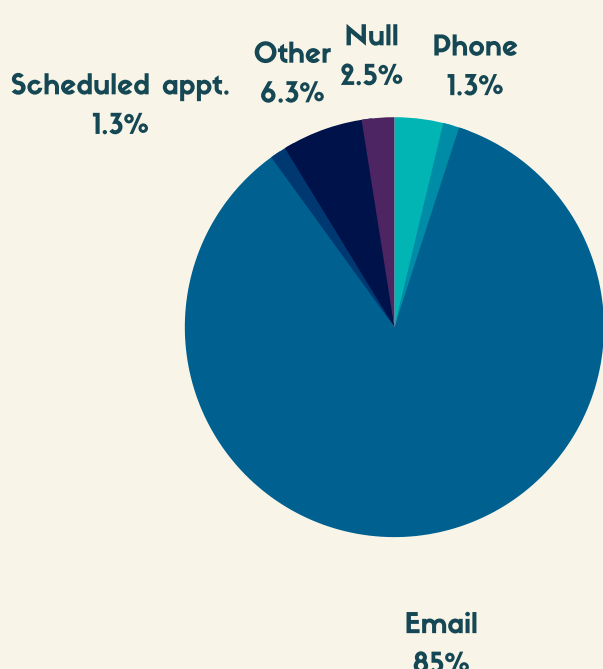
July 1, 2019 - June 30, 2020



In-person at desk: 7 (11.67%)
Phone: 10 (16.67%)
Email: 43 (71.67%)

Total Inquires: 60

July 24, 2020 - June 30, 2021



Phone: 1 (1.25%)
Email: 68 (85.0%)
Scheduled appointments: 1 (1.25%)
Reference Desk referral: 3 (3.75%)
Null (unspecified): 2 (2.50%)
Other: 5 (6.25%)

Total Inquiries: 80

DATA SOURCES

- To understand trends in patron interaction during COVID, we examined pre-pandemic data documenting the methods patrons used to interact with SCUA.
- Pre-pandemic information was collected during the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years. Data from 2018-2019 is the earliest information available documenting the SCUA service point and is also the most indicative of SCUA services in a pre-pandemic academic year.
- Data was gathered using Springshare (2020) LibInsight tracking forms. Forms were filled out by SCUA staff after patron interactions.
- The 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 form was designed to track patron interaction at all library service points. The information used in this analysis only includes interactions at the “Special Collections” service point.
- The most recent data from the 2020-2021 academic year was gathered using a new LibInsight form designed specifically for use at the Special Collections service point. This form includes additional categories for scheduled appointments, referrals from reference services, and other contact methods.

ANALYSIS

FACTORS AFFECTING DATA:

The spring of 2020 constituted a major change in work and life for patrons and staff alike, with very high rates of anxiety and stress. This is a major factor to consider in changing patrons interaction data.

- During and after Spring 2020, Student-patrons may have turned to more familiar sources to complete assignments. SCUA sources are traditionally unfamiliar and less accessible to students, both physically and intellectually.
- Non-TU patrons, like community members and outside scholars, may have put off research projects during the pandemic.
- SCUA offices closed in March 2020 and were not accessible for walk-in inquires until July 2021.
- A majority of SCUA staff worked remotely from March 2020 to July 2021, with limited access to in-office phone lines.
- There may be inconsistency reporting interactions to the LibInsight form as SCUA staff changed their work routines.

TRENDS IN THE DATA:

- Among all three years, there is an increase in email contact.
- Among all three years, phone and in-person interactions decreased.
- Between 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, phone interactions decreased by 8.56%, a much greater relative decline than in-person interactions (~0.5%).
- During the 2020-2021 academic year, “Other” contact modes accounted for 6.25% of interactions. Looking more closely into this data, the SCUA chat queue accounted for 4 interactions (5%) and Facebook messenger accounted for 1 interaction (1.25%).
- SCUA chat services saw more interaction (4%) in 2020-2021 than phone and scheduled appointments combined (2.50%).

CONCLUSIONS:

- Patrons want to interact via digital communications, rather than more traditional phone and in-person contact.
 - Email and Facebook Messenger are asynchronous communication services, which may better align with non-traditional working hours during remote learning.
 - SCUA may see higher engagement by promoting other forms of synchronous and asynchronous digital communications.
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NEW SERVICES

SCUA CHAT

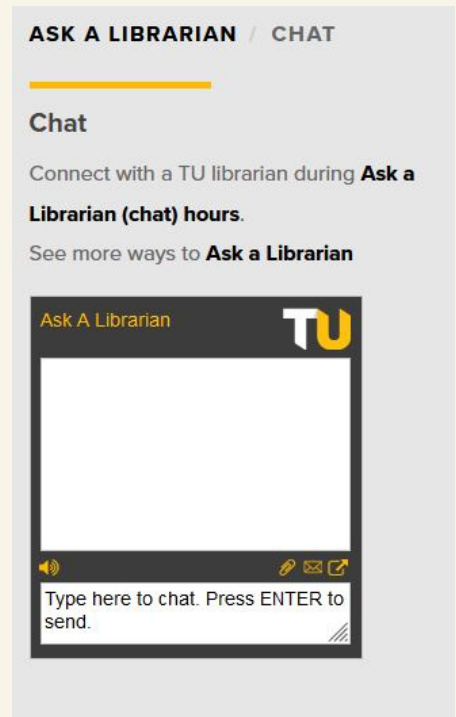
The Research and Instruction (R&I) department at Cook Library utilizes the LibraryH3lp (Hub Games, Inc., 2021) live chat service to facilitate remote research and help-desk support. R&I utilized chat during COVID-19 to both supplement the lack of in-person services and provide an after-hours service for live help.

In August 2020, SCUA partnered with R&I to launch a new chat queue for special collections and archives services. This queue allows patrons to chat directly with SCUA staff and faculty, and is staffed during standard office hours (9am – 5pm). A button to connect to the chat is featured on a banner on the SCUA homepage, and linked from SCUA’s “Virtual Services” page.

CHALLENGES:

- Distinguishing the SCUA chat service from the R&I chat service was difficult, since both retained the same branding. Confusion was also generated by a chat pop-up that appears on all library pages - including the SCUA homepage - but links to the R&I chat queue. This resulted in patrons asking the R&I chat questions meant for SCUA. However, these chats are easily transferred between the queues.
- When evaluating usage of the chat we discovered an error in statistics tracking, which resulted in losing information about the number of chats, duration, time, and transcript. This error was resolved once it was discovered, and going forward more specific chat data will be retained.

Textbox for the SCUA chat queue with library branding.



VIRTUAL VIDEO CONSULTATIONS

The shift to remote learning also prompted SCUA to implement virtual video consultations as a substitute for the lack of in-person browsing. For these remote live sessions SCUA staff were in the office and able to present materials to users via Zoom or WebEx meetings. Patrons viewed materials live, browsed over video with staff assistance, and located desired materials in real time. Relevant items were then scanned in high resolution and emailed to the patron.

This allowed patrons greater access to the entirety of SCUA holdings. The live consultation and ability to view in real-time eliminated the need for staff to scan and email large volumes of material that may not be specific to the user’s need. Video consultations also supported individual safety and eliminated the need to travel on-site.

SCUA only conducted one virtual video consultation between March 2020 and July 2021, but the response from both the staff member and the patron were positive.

CHALLENGES:

- Virtual consultations required a staff member to be on-site and involved coordinating office hours to avoid other staff who might be in the space. Staff also had to set aside time to locate and pull relevant materials.
- Virtual sessions involved a higher level of real-time assistance from staff than in-person visits, however they were more expeditious than email communications and the low demand for virtual sessions meant this work was not overwhelming.

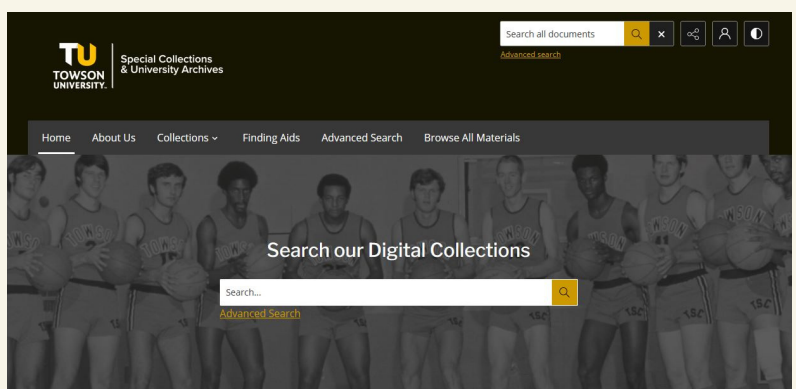
ONLINE COLLECTIONS

SCUA relied heavily on its existing digital collections during remote learning, since they were the most accessible resources and many patrons were already familiar with the system.

However, from November 2020-February 2021, SCUA underwent a planned migration from CONTENTdm to the Quartex digital collections platform (AM Digital, 2021). The migration aimed to better support unaided remote research, with the goals of greater search capabilities, easier asset management, better analytics tracking, and a more intuitive interface. Quartex succeeds in this by allowing greater freedom for SCUA to create contextual landing pages, compelling visuals, interactive exhibits, and embedded links to specific resources.

CHALLENGES:

- Issues developed when migrating large collections - such as student newspapers - which caused some images or transcripts to not display. This reduces full text searchability and overall usability of popular collections, and users have to contact SCUA to receive direct staff assistance.
- Initial results were mixed. Many users were more familiar with the CONTENTdm system and had specific websites bookmarked. This was mitigated by a two-month overlap wherein both systems were live concurrently, but issues still arose when CONTENTdm was sunset in April 2021.
- CONTENTdm did not support robust analytics tracking, so usage statistics during remote learning (March 2020-February 2021) are not known.
- Initial plans for the migration did not factor in remote work and smoother and more timely communication between staff may have been possible without social distance needs.



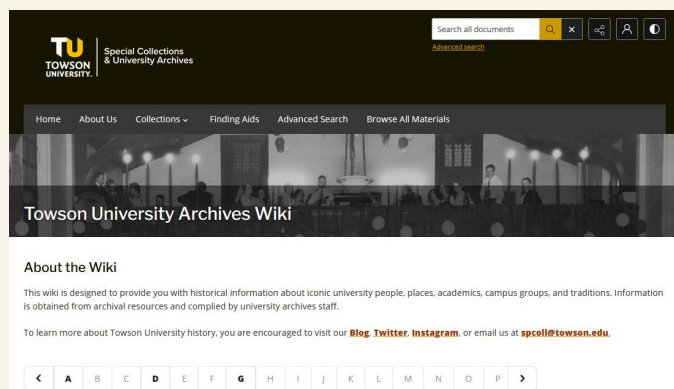
Homepage for SCUA's Digital Collections, hosted by Quartex: archives.towson.edu

FUTURE SERVICES

TU HISTORY WIKI

The newly launched Quartex digital collections platform allows SCUA greater freedom to build webpages that showcase digital materials. As more materials become accessible through the platform, SCUA is working to launch a Towson University History Wiki.

Based on the model of other online wiki sites, such as those run by Baltimore Heritage (n.d.) and Old Dominion University (n.d.), the wiki will provide basic information about TU locations, historic events, campus groups, departments, and notable individuals. Links to digital collections, specific digital items, and outside resources will provide an entry point for users to interact with SCUA materials. The wiki is designed as a low-barrier way for patrons to interact with primary source materials.

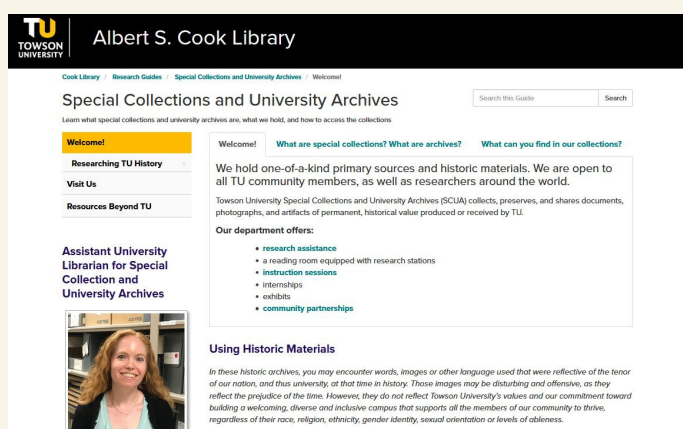


Draft of Towson University Archives Wiki webpage

SCUA LIB GUIDE

TU LibGuides have been widely used by TU's R&I librarians to provide research help, search tips, and resource links to students. Students are familiar with these guides, how to navigate them, and the support they offer. LibGuides links are easily emailed or sent to students through chat interactions, and like the wiki, they provide an entry point for research within any given department.

SCUA is currently creating a Special Collections and University Archives LibGuide to serve as a reference for learning basic archival terminology, beginning primary source research, using SCUA's specific online systems, and finding other special collections and archives resources.



Draft of SCUA LibGuide page

VIDEO TUTORIALS

In the Fall 2020 and Spring of 2021, R&I librarians and access services staff created a series of video tutorials to guide students through the research process using the library's digital tools. These videos helped fill the gap of in-person services by providing accessible, visual references for information wayfinding.

With helpful advice from the faculty and staff who created these videos, SCUA is creating two videos to help patrons understand and effectively navigate our Archives Space, Quartex, and Archive-It online tools.



Title slide for a SCUA video tutorial

CONCLUSION

SCUA experimented with a number of new services during the remote learning period, some more successful than others. Virtual video consultations saw little use, but SCUA may continue offering the option for remote researchers. The chat feature also saw limited use, but without a firm record of interaction it is hard to evaluate its success. SCUA will reevaluate the usage of chat at the end of 2021 when it has gathered more robust data. The new digital collections system shows the most promise, and SCUA continues to refine metadata, build new webpages, and add new materials for digital access.

Future services are currently in development and scheduled to be live by the start of the Fall 2021 semester. Each of these tools also has built-in analytics that will help SCUA track usage over the next year and provide data as we reevaluate what services are effective and what services are not being utilized. While the university is planning for on-campus learning, these asynchronous digital resources will continue to benefit students by providing a way for them learn at their own pace and in their own time.

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