Field Study Pilot Program: Proposal for an MLA/UMD Collaboration
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Problem Statement:

The Music Library Association Records held at Special Collections in Performing Arts is a large collection comprising 150 linear feet and growing. It has been subject to a number of organizational systems. As a result, individual boxes are labeled under two or three metrics. Currently the archival organization is largely intellectual with new accessions added to the end of the collection and their contents described appropriately in the finding aids. The finding aids are more complete than in the past, but are still not detailed enough to enable accurate discovery in many series and sub-series. The current archivist is an experienced researcher, a former employee of SCPA, and a trained archivist, and she still has trouble navigating the collection, sometimes struggling to answer questions for MLA leadership. This is an untenable situation. The collection needs steady attention at a high engagement level. The current processing subvention to SCPA ensures that new accessions are filed, but given the state of the collection, it does not allow for the sort of familiarity and organization required.

Certain series and sub-series are in need of more attention than others. The most notable and urgent issue is an assessment and integration of new accessions with rigorous intellectual processing, so that all new material is truly discoverable. After that, the series for all officers excepting the president are in need of attention. The intellectual processing work should be recorded meticulously in ArchivesSpace, and barcoded box numbers attached to every box and populated to the correct series and sub-series. That update will allow users to request specific boxes, which will make the collection enormously more discoverable. This would require someone looking at every box in the collection, especially more recent accessions, to make sure that they are appropriately labeled and integrated into the collection. If done well, it should allow future accessions to be handled more efficiently and accurately, increasing discoverability for years.

Possible solutions:

1) MLA could increase their subvention to SCPA to pay for a part-time Project Archivist position dedicated to the MLA archives. I would suggest a two-year term with possible option for renewal—enough to entice talented students, but not so long that MLA commits more expense than necessary. Currently there are three such positions at SCPA attached to other archives.

This would be costly, perhaps the most costly of the options, but would also provide the very best chance of steady attention culminating in true discoverability. Both the term of the appointment and the cost would need to be negotiated with SCPA, but the current project archivists are paid between 15 and 20 dollars per hour. Given the precedent, this should be a straightforward process. If the Board selects this option,
I would be involved in a liaison role during the negotiations and would participate in the training and mentorship of this employee, although John Davis would be the direct supervisor.

2) MLA could make the Archivist position a part-time professional position with payment through the Association. There is some precedent for this at SCPA, as the National Orchestral Institute has a paid intern archivist for a few weeks every summer. That position functions well because the NOI is housed in the same building as SCPA and the term is quite short. Creating a long-term position of this nature would be a new model at SCPA and might require extended planning and negotiation. Conversations with Steve Henry and John Davis suggest that HR at UMD may have liability concerns preventing a partnership on this model.

If it worked, MLA would retain maximal control of the archives—including how much to pay for how many hours, what the deliverables would be, how the reporting line would be structured. One hesitation around this model is that if the processing is done well, there might not need to be someone paid to manage the collection for several years until it gets unwieldy again, so it might commit MLA to an unsustainably high cost structure.

3) MLA could arrange for a yearly part-time or full-time field study opportunity to be offered once-a-year through SCPA. Because of the rules around student employment at UMD, the field study could only be offered to UMD students. This should not present a problem, as all students in UMD’s MLIS program are required to complete a field study, and paid opportunities on campus are rare and desirable. UMD students would be paid through the Libraries, and receive course credit through the iSchool, provided they enrolled in the Field Study class and completed their assigned work.

The Field Study would be structured so that John Davis would serve as the direct supervisor for employment purposes, and I would participate in a consultant role. Davis would select from among the applicants, unless MLA and SCPA formed a joint committee of some sort. During the term of the field study, the recipient would be Davis’s direct report, but I would be available to work directly with the student for a few hours every week.

John Davis and Steve Henry are supportive, and there are models to follow on campus. MLA did something similar when it hired Melissa Wertheimer as an intern several years ago. My recommendation is that the Field Study be an in-person opportunity for the first year with possible expansion to a virtual model in later years. This ensures that the crucial physical and intellectual processing is prioritized.

Participants would commit to at least ten weeks of work to be completed on the semester schedule (Sept.-Dec, Jan.-May, May-August). The intern would be paid at
student worker levels; given the assumed education and training of the field study participant, Davis recommends beginning at $14.00/ hr. Although the course requirement in the iSchool is for ten hours a week, I would recommend twenty hours a week so that the student gets through a substantial processing agenda. 200 hours at $14.00 an hour comes to $2,800, plus whatever UMD adds for oversight. Asking for that much time may limit the applicant pool, however, so we might want to make the number of hours negotiable. In that case, I suggest that the remainder of the field study funds be used to increase the processing subvention so that a student work might be tasked with MLA processing as well.

Proposal:

I propose that the Board adopts option #3, although I think there are also strong arguments for option #1. The third option is the most flexible, least expensive, most sustainable, and most in keeping with MLA’s mission. The flexibility of option #3 comes from a limited commitment to one pilot program, with the time to change the arrangement if the field study proves to be unproductive; similarly, if the field study needs to change shape or emphasis over the years, it can do so. It is the least expensive because it is budgeted for only a single season rather than a whole year (or years). Both the flexibility and low cost mean that the program can probably run for many years without straining the MLA’s budget. The field study will cultivate promising talent in the MLIS/ Archives field, and create early-career relationships between MLA and MLIS students, responding to MLA’s mission to “promote the profession of music librarianship.”

As with any proposal there are disadvantages, especially when compared with option #1. Although the cost is lower, the field study will be far less efficient at responding to the processing crisis listed at the top, and if the goal is to rectify that situation as quickly and completely as possible, option #3 is not ideal. Furthermore, although not slatted specifically for an MLIS student, there is a strong likelihood that the Project Archivist of option #1 would, in fact, be an early-career professional. The Board will have to weigh priorities in order to arrive at the ideal solution.

Next Steps:

1. After the Board issues its recommendation, I will meet with John Davis and Steve Henry along with any additional MLA representatives the Board deems necessary. We will decide on the term, pay structure, level of collaboration, etc.

2. We will advertise the position, listing specific deliverables and terms (esp. important for field study so that applicants know the type of work experience available and so that MLA has metrics to evaluate success), select/ interview candidates, have someone in place by start date.
3. Field study will occur over ten weeks. It will include weekly meetings with me as well as training/advice from John.

4. During the last two weeks of the field study, student will meet with me to summarize and assess their work. Documentation will go to SCPA and MLA.

5. After the first field study term, we will revisit the idea and choose a path forward.