LIBRARY LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

# More Than Just Boxes and Lines on a Page: Stories from a Special Collections Department Reorganization

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## Abstract

Interested in leveraging a reorganization to bring about sustained and meaningful organizational and cultural change, the author developed a multi-step process anchored by three decision-making drivers that guided the work. These drivers helped the author articulate to herself and the department the “why” behind the reorganization and to keep focused on those drivers during even the messiest parts of the process. The case study presented here describes the author’s process, outcomes, and lessons learned.


## Introduction

The event of a new leader joining an organization is a natural time to assess current work practices, structures, and operations. This fresh pair of eyes often sees things differently. They bring their previous experience from other roles or institutions to bear on their new library and culture. After starting a new role as a library administrator, it became clear that the Special Collections Department in her portfolio was in need of redirection and evaluation. Applying the stages described in Stephen Heidari-Robinson and Suzanne Heywood’s book, *ReOrg: How to Get It Right*, and the change management content included in DeEtta Jones and Associates’ Inclusive Manager’s Toolkit series, the author developed and implemented a reorganization plan. Both resources emphasized the mistake most managers make when leading a significant change, like a reorganization: thinking that the focus of the process is to create a new organizational structure and chart, and once that work is done the process is finished and can be deemed a success. Rather, these authors argue that a successful reorganization requires planning how to work in new ways and to evaluate that implementation. Eager to avoid such a mistake, the author spent several months writing and rewriting a series of decision drivers to articulate to herself and eventually the department the “why” behind the reorganization.

With those drivers in mind, the author created a six-month timeline with the steps needed to successfully reorganize the department, including conducting informational interviews, data analysis, developing a staffing model, writing new portfolios for each staff member, finalizing the organizational structure, drafting new job descriptions, and writing a document that outlined the processes and other transition points that the department would need to put in place to fully implement the reorganization and achieve its outcomes.

The case study that follows describes the process the author used to plan this work, key steps in the process including a communication plan to department staff, their peers, and library administrators, and concludes with the outcomes achieved and lessons learned.

## Background

The author began working at a R-1 institution in the mid-Atlantic region in 2022. During the interview process the author learned that the Special Collections Department had previously comprised two departments reporting to two different administrators. In 2017 those departments merged and began reporting to a single administrator. Once she began talking with staff as part of a listening tour in her first weeks, it became clear that staff both within and outside of the department continued to think of themselves as two departments, each with a different identity and culture. For example, separate preservation treatment request processes remained in place for prioritizing items depending on whether the staff member worked with archival collections on one floor or with print collections on another. The term “Special Collections” was used almost exclusively to refer to those working on the second floor where the print collections, reading room, primary gallery space, and classroom were located. Those on the ground floor were often referred to by their previous department name, “Manuscripts.” There were also staff outside of the department who referred to the entire unit as “Specials,” denoting an elevated status for those staff members and the collections they worked with.

The author observed an almost crippling consensus-based culture that prioritized input from a wide variety of staff members before making a decision or taking action. More times than not, staff told the author, no decision or action was ever taken. Many staff members expressed frustration with this inertia and lack of clarity around department or unit goals and priorities, as those seemed to shift constantly. In addition to shifting priorities, staff members lacked distinct portfolios of work and most worked on a little bit of everything: collection development, arranging/describing collections, instruction, outreach, and research services. As a result, it was confusing both within the department and to key stakeholders who they should work with or ask questions of.

As the author finished her first semester working at the library, she determined that a significant change needed to occur to move the department forward with staff working together on specific goals as a single unit with a shared identity. The consensus-based culture and overloaded job duties limited the impact that the Special Collections could have on research and learning. The author began to explore how to best execute a reorganization of the department.

## Literature Review

DeEtta Jones and Associates provides framing for leaders to consider how they can best bring about change. The content from their Inclusive Managers Toolkit series emphasizes “managers have the responsibility of helping people navigate change . . . managers should understand the role they play in an employee’s ability to embrace change, maintain focus, productivity, and creativity” (DeEtta Jones and Associates 2022a, 57). The authors then define three main stages of change. The first is ending, losing, letting go; the second is the neutral zone; and the third is the new beginning (58). Not intended to be a strictly linear progression, employees may move between these stages throughout the change process. The authors encourage leaders to consider their “leadership commitment; ongoing communication; and long-term availability of resources and processes for alignment” (60) when pursuing change. The content from this series focuses on applying an inclusivity lens to change work, and communication strategies become an integral part of that work. A key part of that communication plan is coaching employees through the change. The authors explain: “in times of change, people need to know the scale and pace of change and have a clear understanding of what parts of change [that] will be within their control” (DeEtta Jones and Associates 2022b, 99). Specifically, leaders should be able to articulate to employees what is changing and perhaps more importantly, what is not changing.

Narrowing to a specific change, that of a reorganization, Heidari-Robinson and Heywood’s *ReOrg: How to Get It Right* (2016) provides leaders with a step-by-step guide for successfully bringing about organizational change. They divide the process into five steps:

1. Construct the org’s profit and loss
2. Understand current weaknesses and strengths
3. Choose from multiple options
4. Getting the plumbing and wiring right

5. Launch, learn, and course-correct

In the first step, the authors encourage leaders to explicitly define the value they wish to derive from the reorganization. The second step focuses on data collection and understanding the status quo. In their discussion of each stage, the authors describe the common pitfalls or mistakes leaders are likely to make. The balance of each chapter then provides alternative actions leaders should take to help ensure success. In step three, the authors warn against leaders who limit their thinking to “focusing only on lines and boxes” and instead encourage them to consider a variety of staffing, process, and structure models (Heidari-Robinson and Heywood 2016, 107). When introducing the fourth step, the authors argue that this step, which “detail the design and plan implementation—is always the hardest, because this is where paper plans come up against heard reality. In this step, people really have to change, and difficult conversations need to be had with colleagues affected by the reorganization” (144). With those plans in place, the authors conclude their book and encourage leaders to consider how they will assess the success of their reorganization and how they will make adjustments after initial implementation as needed. Applying these five steps from the business literature to an academic library context requires a bit of reframing that this author will describe in the next section.

Narrowing further to an examination of the reorganization library literature, several case studies serve as models for embarking on such work. In 2005, Higa et al. published their article about a medical library reorganization driven by “a growing gap between the staffing needs for the new organizational environment and allocation of staff; a problematic team approach that challenged traditional workloads; the absence of a clear vision to unify staff efforts” (44). To address these issues, the authors led an information-gathering process to determine how staff currently spent their time and how they should spend their time going forward. The authors committed to using an objective process for information gathering, solicited staff involvement throughout the process, and adhered to an agreed upon timeline (48). Of their lessons learned, several directly relate to the case study presented below. The authors encourage leaders to “incorporate transition planning to enable the timely transfer of responsibilities” and to “include a process for follow-up evaluation to ensure the desired outcomes are achieved” (51). The authors also remind readers to “recognize that not all problems inherent in a library can be solved by reorganization. Develop a plan to assess those problems separately” (51). Including a transition period and planning to evaluate the reorganization are critical steps that the author incorporated into the case study described below.

In his 2017 article, Hackman uses Kotter's Eight Stage Change Model to describe the reorganization process at the University of Maryland's Resource Sharing and User Services Department. Hackman applied each of the eight steps when leading the project. At the start, Hackman identified the key goals of the reorganization and then framed the actions in each of the eight steps to achieve those desired outcomes. The author found that the eighth and last step in the change model proved to be the most challenging. Similar to step four in Heidari-Robinson and Heywood's book, Kotter's "anchor new approaches to the culture" (12) shifts the focus from a series of changes on paper to changing how people work and the culture within which they work. Hackman concludes his article by describing several lessons learned, including, "Involve the Human Resources office in the process as early as possible . . . keep upper management informed at every step along the way . . . the process will take longer than expected . . . unexpected obstacles will arise" (15–16). Similar to the case study presented below, Hackman's work applies management theory and literature in an academic library context.

## Preparing for the Reorganization

Beginning in December 2022, the author planned out the steps of the reorganization. During this initial planning phase, the author prioritized getting buy-in from her boss, the vice provost of the library and the deputy university librarian, who oversees organizational development. Recognizing that some staff may choose to leave the organization due to their new role or the department's direction, the author sought to gain initial buy-in to help ensure support throughout the process and after the implementation. Other than those two administrators, the author decided not to discuss any details of the reorganization process with others before the launch. At the same time, the author prepared to assume the role of interim department head for special collections. This role went into effect January 1, 2023. To build trust, as she had only been working at the institution since August 2022, the author began to meet regularly with staff and hold bi-weekly department meetings. The author launched the reorganization in February, one month after her interim appointment began.

What the author first envisioned as a new organizational chart with some changes to individuals' job descriptions soon became a much larger and intentional project, as she read *ReOrg*. The author brainstormed the key outcomes of the reorganization and fine-tuned those drivers until she could articulate for herself and eventually department staff the "why" behind the reorganization. Those outcomes were the following:

- provide low barriers of access for users to discover and use archival and print collections
- deliver innovative in-person and virtual services to researchers
- enrich instruction program to achieve the benchmark of at least 50% of classes having research assignments as a session outcome

When preparing to introduce the reorganization at a department meeting, the author wrote a script with key details and talking points. The script built off step one of *ReOrg* and the change management guidance of DeEtta Jones and Associates' Inclusive Manager Toolkit. The author underscored the experience staff had shared with her about their lack of capacity and the potential for burnout that could be a result, the impact of having a learner mindset without the processes or strategies to sunset obsolescent work and committees, and the value of special collections work and its impact on research and scholarship. The author then outlined the reorg process.

The first phase would focus on each individual's portfolios, job descriptions, and the overall organizational structure. As that phase continued the author would track workflows or other processes that would need to be revised or delegated to other staff members, which would inform the second phase of the reorg. The author outlined the timeframe to complete both phases and underscored both the participatory nature of the process and her role as the final decision maker when it came to job duties and organizational structure.

## Phase 1

### Collecting Data

In the weeks after the reorg's launch, the author met with each person in the department. Prior to the discussion, each staff member created a list called "the things I do." The intention behind using this tool is to highlight gaps between a person's job description, which often is not regularly updated, and the work they actually do on a daily, weekly, or occasional basis. Prior to the meeting, each staff member reflected on the following questions, which guided the discussion:

- How does your "things I do" document align or not with your understanding of the job you were hired to do?
- What aspects of your work do you really enjoy? What aspects do you not enjoy?
- What, if any, aspects of archival work are you curious or interested in learning more about or incorporating into your job?

Interested in hearing from staff about the department's work and priorities more broadly, the author scheduled a second set of meetings with each staff member to discuss specific aspects of special collections work. Prior to those meetings, the author sent the department's staff a grid with thirty elements of work listed. For example, "capacity to provide in-person instruction sessions" or "alignment among unit managers." The author adapted this grid from *ReOrg* to assess staff's perception of the department's work as a whole, specifically the capacity, organizational structure, and management's role in running the department. Recognizing that staff may think of other work elements, the author included five "wild cards" for use during the activity. During the meeting, each staff member selected the top five elements that they felt best fit into these four categories: not an issue for Special Collections, an issue, leave as status quo, and unknown to me (see appendix). The staff member then talked through their decision-making process with the author and shared any other relevant information about the department's work not included in the activity.

After conducting interviews about each individual's work and the department's work, the author analyzed the data and began to identify key themes to address through the reorganization. For example, most staff felt that digital exhibitions were a key strength of the department's work. Yet few felt there was capacity to do this work and so it largely fell to one person.

## New Work Assignments

After reviewing the data, the author presented a summary at a department meeting and outlined the next steps, which included drafting portfolios for each person with high-level breakdowns of new core job duties. The author reviewed these draft portfolios with the deputy university librarian as two changes resulted in the reclassification of staff members to new ranks. She then met one-on-one with each person and discussed their new portfolios. For most staff, their core areas of work did not change. Rather the scope of each portfolio narrowed to enable staff to have the necessary time to accomplish their work, in support of the three key drivers of the reorganization. The author also adapted a strategy from the tech industry and gave each staff member the opportunity to decide how they would spend 10 percent of their time. Staff could pick a project, tasks, or new skill that fell outside of their portfolio. For example, someone who worked in research services and did instruction chose to use their time to participate in collection development work in a particular subject area. Another person chose to be the department's website administrator. The author recognized that given the department's existing culture, staff would best respond if each person had some autonomy to determine their work assignments.

Encouraged by the deputy university librarian to make the writing of job descriptions as participatory as possible, the author started a draft for each person and added comments and left portions blank that she then assigned to each staff member to fill in. Staff members decided on their new job titles, articulated how they would spend 10 percent of their time, and fleshed out their responsibilities and job qualifications. The author encountered the most questions and concerns when working with each person to write their new job descriptions. Understandably so, these documents were detailed and so painted a more complete picture of what each person's new job would look like. Saving decisions about organization structure until this stage, the author first considered various staffing models as described in step three of *ReOrg*. Ultimately, she made several changes to reporting lines in an attempt to increase efficiency and reduce the number of direct reports the new head of the department would manage. In addition, the author established four teams and team leaders to guide that work: curatorial, instruction and outreach, archival processing, and research services.

Once the author had discussed these changes with the impacted staff members, she presented the new organizational structure to the library's administration group and then to the department. Getting support and buy-in from the senior leaders also gave the author a chance to practice how she presented these changes before speaking with the department.

## Phase 2

With the new job descriptions written and the new organizational structure determined, the author transitioned her focus to writing a process document or what is referred to in *ReOrg* as a "cookbook" in their step four, "Getting the Wiring and Plumbing Right." Described by the authors as the most complex and overlooked step in a reorganization, this step focused on how to implement the activities necessary to achieve the outcomes of the reorganization. In this case, questions were considered, such as, What training would be needed to ensure people could be successful in their new roles? Who would be responsible for providing that training? How would the changes identified by the reorganization, like a new service model, be implemented? What timeline would be used to make these changes? Are there any exceptions?

The author drafted a vision statement that illustrated the ways this reorganized department would begin working. The purpose of the statement was to help staff see themselves in this new organization and imagine what their work experience would feel like. The next section outlined critical, nice to have, and out of scope work elements to achieve the goals of the reorganization. Each element in the critical category included details for implementation, which staff would be responsible for implementation, and the timeline for completion. For example, part of implementation involved piloting a student-staffed service point, which gave staff more flexibility to work on a greater variety of complex tasks. This transition involved writing new student job descriptions and hiring students, writing a training manual, and developing a new desk schedule. The author then sought feedback from several of the most impacted staff members and refined the document before sharing it with the rest of the department for broader input. The author charged the team leaders with completing the tasks in the process document that fell under their new portfolios. Those managers talked with their staff members and others in the department as they drafted new workflows and expectations for their units.

Eager to keep the momentum of the reorganization going and clarify the iterative nature of the implementation, the author held a department meeting to officially mark the end of phase 1 and to explain the steps involved in phase 2 of the reorganization, namely, implementation. During that department meeting, the author acknowledged the challenges of the reorg process and her appreciation of each staff member’s participation and contributions. She set a date for announcing the new job descriptions and organizational structure to the rest of the library. The author chose to communicate these changes in two ways. The first was a brief article in the organization’s e-newsletter and then a presentation at an all-staff meeting the same month.

As phase 2 continued, the author asked each team leader to give a brief and informal presentation in subsequent department meetings to “introduce” the teams to the rest of the department. These presentations gave each team leader the opportunity to share the priorities and work of their respective teams, while also underscoring their leadership roles. These sessions proved to be critical as they invited questions and discussion, which helped to clarify and keep focused on the expected outcomes of the reorganization. By the end of the summer, staff had completed the essential tasks outlined in the process document. The author marked the end of phase 2 and began to assess the outcomes of the reorganization.

## Key Outcomes

Using the key drivers of the reorg as benchmarks, the author assessed the outcome of the project.

### 1. Provide low barriers of access for users to discover and use archival and print collections

With rebalanced work portfolios, processing staff could begin to devote significant time to this complex work. Reducing committee assignments, changing the supervisory structure for managing student employees and allocating a percentage of two other staff members' time has increased the productivity of this unit and in the long-term will result in greater access to collections.

### 2. Deliver innovative in-person and virtual services to researchers

Implementing a student-staffed service desk, a new workflow for answering researchers' questions, and cross-training across the Research Services team has laid the foundation to achieve the expected outcome of the second driver. Considering the summer pilot a success, the unit manager's assessment of the new service model led them to expand the student staffing model for the fall 2023 semester.

### 3. Enrich instruction program to achieve the benchmark of at least 50 percent of classes having research assignments as a session outcome

The concentration of Instruction and Outreach staff devoted to teaching has led to a slight increase in research assignments. This is the outcome with the least documented success to date. It became clear to the author that proactively contacting faculty and partnering with them to create research assignments was new for many staff and so impacted the time in which this outcome could be realized.

### Further Assessment Insights

Drawing on feedback from staff and personal observations of work performance and efficiency, the author concluded that the short-term impact of the reorganization has been mostly successful. (The author anticipates that to fully realize the outcomes of the reorganization will take several years.) For example, one staff member whose reporting line changed, commented that they now feel listened to and that their new boss is a strong advocate for their work. Another staff member shared that as a result of their narrower portfolio and clearer understanding of others' job duties they feel more focused and have more time for deep work. The author also observed improved morale, particularly among those staff members whose jobs duties changed to better reflect their expertise and/or offer more challenging assignments building on their interests. For example, a staff member characterized their new duties as breaking up the monotony of their other work and provided them with a deeper understanding of the collections. Another staff member co-curated an exhibit with colleagues from other units, an opportunity not previously part of their work.

The author has also observed increased efficiency when making decisions. For example, when offered an opportunity to host open houses as part of a prospective students program, the author knew to contact the members of the Instruction and Outreach team, who then discussed the potential benefits and made the decision to participate. Prior to the reorganization, the author might have emailed the entire department, as nearly everyone had outreach-related duties. Reaching a decision would have been difficult and would have likely required multiple communications.

The culture shift the author sought to bring about has not been entirely successful. Staff continue to identify with being part of “Special Collections” or “Manuscripts”, as do staff working in other units in the library. The author anticipates that it will take a number of years and possibly hiring new staff as others leave to bring about that part of the culture shift. In addition, the increased productivity and efficiency gained because of the reorg has been stunted by the perhaps natural inclination to seek help from the staff member previously responsible for a task or area of work, like converting AV materials or developing an online exhibition. Though documenting these workflows has helped, the author anticipates that changing such behaviors is likely to take significant time and may never come about. Going forward, the author intends to revisit these work assignments with the new department head to ensure that staff continue to develop their own skill sets as part of a broader succession planning and work efficiencies strategy.

## Lessons Learned

Throughout the reorganization process, the author identified many lessons learned that can hopefully inform how practitioners go about this work in the future. First, leaders should expect that there will be negative reactions to some aspects of the reorganization process. Leaders will need to decide if adjustments can or should be made and how to communicate those decisions to staff. In this author’s experience, one staff member responded negatively to their new portfolio. To better understand the staff member’s reaction, the author talked more with the staff member and the person’s supervisor and ultimately made several changes to the portfolio.

Listening and taking action based on the feedback she received went a long way toward building trust in the process.

Second, leaders should be prepared for questions about any part of the reorganization at any time during the reorganization (and after). The author emphasized the participatory aspects of the process and encouraged questions and discussion in bi-weekly department meetings, one-on-one meetings, open office hours, and by email. Yet as the process went on it became clear that because people react differently to change, their response time also differs. There were several occasions when staff asked questions about previous steps in the reorg, and those questions sometimes surprised the author since such questions had not been raised earlier.

Third, leaders should be prepared that changes identified during the reorganization may take longer than originally projected, specifically those related to reclassifications. Although the author started the reclassification process in March, what was required to complete the process changed several times and was not finalized until August. It behooves leaders to communicate frequently with impacted staff members and be explicit about what is within their control as the leader and what processes or decisions are external and therefore, outside of their control.

Finally, leading (and participating in) a reorganization takes a tremendous amount of time. Though the author had blocked off time on her calendar early on to conduct the individual meetings and discussions about the department's work, by the time it came to writing and discussing the process document, summer vacations and conference travel impacted the pace and timing of those conversations. Though there is no perfect time to execute a reorganization, the author strongly suggests that practitioners carefully consider the timelines and steps that will best meet their desired outcomes.

## Conclusion

Looking back on the process the author used and the outcomes of the reorganization, the author believes the time and work involved were ultimately worth it. Staff want to feel valued, and they want their work to have an impact. A reorganization process can help leaders to surface such areas of impact and give staff a feeling of empowerment and value. The staff members in the Special Collections Department were then well positioned to focus on specific areas of work and contribute to department-wide priorities established by the new department head. Relying on both library and non-library literature to guide the planning process proved to be critical. Though her peers had led reorganizations of their divisions, the author found that either their processes could not be applied to this department or, in some cases, these other leaders had not initiated the scale and scope of change that the author sought. For practitioners considering any sized reorg, the author strongly encourages them to consider what models and resources will best support them as they plan and lead this work. Regardless of the model or resources, any reorganization process should be more than just moving boxes and reporting lines around on an organizational chart.

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## Appendix

The board below is intended to help us think through 1) what elements of work function well, as is, and should be carried forward as is- or close to as is- 2) what potential work issues exist in Special Collections that we should prioritize addressing during the reorganization, and 3) identify existing strengths to maintain through the reorganization process. The fourth column recognizes that not everyone will be familiar with or be able to evaluate each element.

Each card you've been given has 1 element of work listed. Please review the cards and decide which, based on your experience or role in Special Collections, are the top 5 elements. Then place each of those elements in the appropriate column.

| Issue for SC | Not an issue for SC | Strength of SC | Unknown to me |
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| Staff capacity to arrange/describe collections | Staff capacity to provide research services | Appropriate balance between decision making and consensus building |
| Staff capacity to do instruction sessions | Staff capacity to do outreach (events, community engagement) | Organizational structure in place to deliver arrangement/ description of collections |
| Staff capacity to curate physical exhibitions | Alignment among SC managers | Organizational structure in place to deliver instruction |
| Staff capacity to install physical exhibitions | Staff capacity to participate in donor relations | Organizational structure in place to deliver research services |
| Staff capacity to purchase collections | Staff capacity to receive collection donations | Organizational structure in place to execute in-person exhibitions program |
| Staff capacity to curate digital exhibitions | Clarity on accountability of SC managers | Organizational structure in place to pursue/complete digital exhibitions |
| Staff capacity to complete metadata for digital exhibitions | Staff capacity to participate in LMP committees | Staff capacity to steward born-digital or e-records |
| Staff capacity to accession to archival collections | Wild card! | Wild card! |
| Staff capacity to help with technical aspects of digital exhibitions | Clarity on accountability of SC committee chairs | Organizational structure in place to pursue/complete outreach (events, community engagement) |
| New initiative prioritization | Finance processes | Safety |
| Staff retention | Performance management process | Work planning |
| Staff development | Performance assessment process | Facilities management |

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