

The link to our Special Collections site from the Belk Library homepage is located in the Collections dropdown menu at the top of the page.

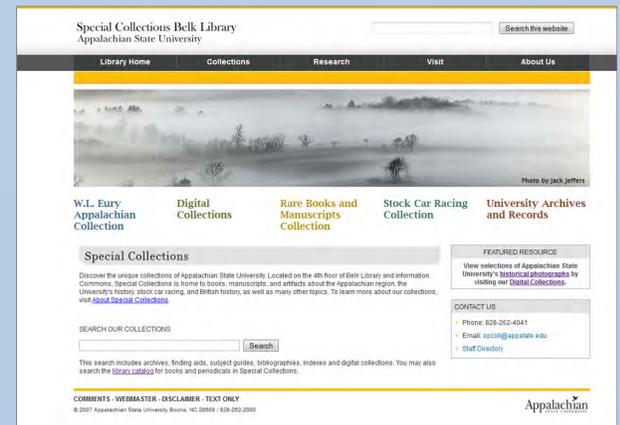
Usability Studies Uncover Excessive Archival Jargon

Our Purpose

Our main purpose was to test the current version of the Special Collections website to determine if students could successfully complete several key tasks on the site as part of our continuous endeavor to improve access to our resources. Additionally, we hoped to gain feedback about the formatting of our finding aids, or guides to our archival collections. We decided to assess the Special Collections website through usability studies in early 2012 in anticipation of the migration of Belk Library's website to Drupal, the content management system used campus-wide.

Our Methodology

In January-February 2012, we conducted two separate usability studies — one with undergraduates and one with graduate students. Students were presented with eight scenarios that asked them to complete specific tasks using the Special Collections website. Questions differed slightly between the two studies. To reduce bias when asking for feedback on our finding aids, we changed the order in which the last three scenarios were presented for each participant. Each student was observed by two members of the assessment team and the sessions were recorded using Camtasia.



Our Special Collections homepage was redesigned in late 2011 to include a prominent (and very popular) search box.

About Special Collections at Belk Library

Special Collections at Appalachian State University was formed in 2005 with the opening of the Carol Grotnes Belk Library and Information Commons. The formation of Special Collections united three major existing collections — the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, the Stock Car Racing Collection, and University Archives and Records — and added the developing Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection.

Currently, the Special Collections website, a sub-site of the main library website, maintains separate pages for each of these four collections. Searching across collections first became possible in Fall 2011 when we developed a new homepage (seen above at right) with a search bar. Anecdotal evidence suggests our current website's structure is difficult for students and researchers to use, which led to our decision in Fall 2011 to more formally assess the site.



Carol Grotnes Belk Library and Information Commons at Appalachian State University

The Scenarios

Scenarios for the Undergraduate Students

- From the library's homepage, can you find the Appalachian Collection?
- What are the hours of Special Collections today?
- You'd like to make an appointment to meet with a librarian in Special Collections. How would you do this?
- Assume you are doing a research paper and your topic is folksongs and Appalachia. Your professor has told you the library has digital collections related to this topic. Can you locate them?
- From the Special Collections homepage, where else would you look for information on folksongs in Appalachia?
- Your professor has told you need to look at Matewan Development Center Records. Can you find them? Can you describe what this page is? Say you want to look at these materials - what would you do?
- Your professor has told you need to look at Horton Family Papers. Can you find the collection? Can you describe what this page is? Say you want to look at these materials - what would you do? Can you find letters from Malinda Horton to J.C. Horton listed in this collection?
- Your professor has told you need to look at Dick Beatty Collection Race Sheets and Rules. Among the Matewan and Horton and Beatty Collections, which seemed easier to use? Do you have any comments about these three pages?

Scenarios for the Graduate Students

- From the library's homepage, can you find the Appalachian Collection?
- What are the hours of Special Collections today?
- You'd like to make an appointment to meet with a librarian in Special Collections. How would you do this?
- Assume you are doing a research paper for an Appalachian Studies course and your topic is women and the Civil War. From the Special Collections homepage, find three sources on this topic. Was the subject guide helpful? How would you improve the page?
- You would like to find information on Chapell Wilson Hall (a building on campus). From the Special Collections homepage, find three sources on this topic.
- Your professor has told you need to look at Matewan Development Center Records. Can you find them? Can you describe what this page is? Say you want to look at these materials - what would you do?
- Your professor has told you need to look at Horton Family Papers. Can you find the collection? Can you describe what this page is? Say you want to look at these materials - what would you do? Can you find letters from Malinda Horton to J.C. Horton listed in this collection?
- Your professor has told you need to look at Dick Beatty Collection Race Sheets and Rules. Among the Matewan and Horton and Beatty Collections, which seemed easier to use? Do you have any comments about these three pages?

The Results

The undergraduate students had a hard time finding materials on the Special Collections site and often did not understand how the different resources could be used once they located the correct pages. There was a great deal of confusion related to the terminology used in the finding aids and opinions were mixed when asked which finding aid was preferred. Below is a table listing the results from the undergraduate usability study.

Results from the Usability Study with Undergraduates			
Task	# Successful	# Partially Successful	# Unsuccessful
Find Appalachian Collection	3		1
Find Hours	4		
Make an Appointment		4	
Find Digital Collections on Folksongs	2		2
Find Other Information on Folksongs	2		2
Find Matewan Records	3	1	
Find Horton Family Records	4		
Find Dick Beatty Collection	4		

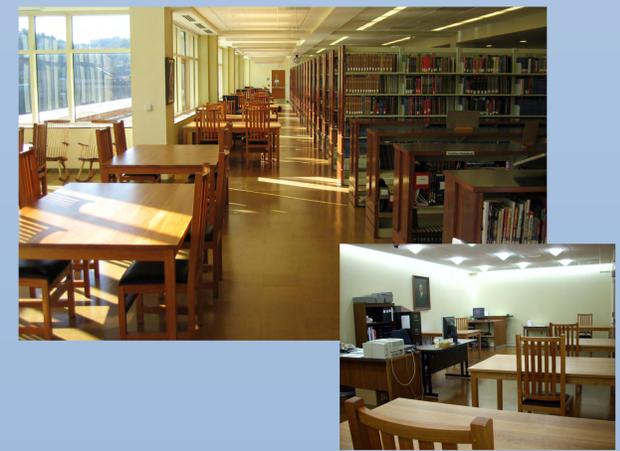
The graduate students were more familiar with Special Collections and had much less trouble locating relevant pages for each scenario. However, they were also confused by the terminology used in the finding aids and by the different formats used to present the same type of information. Below is a table listing the results from the graduate student usability study.

Results from the Usability Study with Graduate Students			
Task	# Successful	# Partially Successful	# Unsuccessful
Find Appalachian Collection	2		
Find Hours	2		
Make an Appointment	2		
Resources on Women and the Civil War	2		
Find information on Chapell Wilson Hall		2	
Find Matewan Records	2		
Find Horton Family Records	2		
Find Dick Beatty Collection	2		

Archival Jargon Impedes Access

Our findings overwhelmingly suggested that many students did not understand the term "Special Collections" so that the use of archival terminology in finding aid headings created an additional barrier for students trying to access archival materials. Using archival jargon such as Scope and Content, Access Restrictions, or Acquisitions Information in finding aids impeded the students' understanding of Special Collections resources.

After completing the usability studies, we began to ask ourselves if there was a better way to present the same information. Researchers become familiar with archival terms used in finding aids, but would more people (particularly students) use Special Collections if the website was easier to navigate or if finding aids were somehow easier to understand? These are the questions we are keeping in mind as we continue to build our new Special Collections website.



The Open Stacks (top) and Dougherty Reading Room in Special Collections on the 4th floor of Belk Library

Special Collections Website Assessment

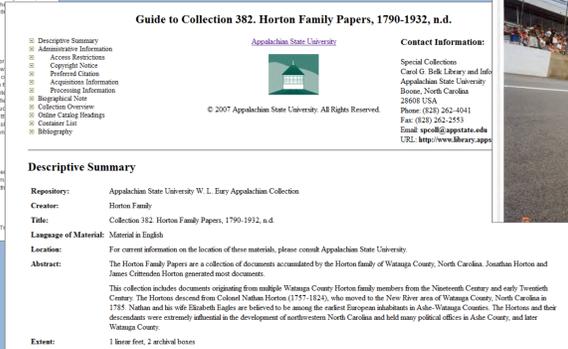
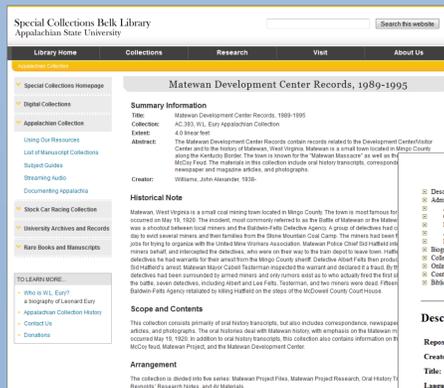
Our overall project was to assess the usability of the Special Collections website in preparation for the site's migration to a new Drupal-hosted site. Rather than copying the current site into Drupal, we wanted to make changes to the Special Collections website during the migration process to increase the accessibility and functionality of the site.

An assessment team of three archivists and two librarians met to determine how to assess our current Special Collections website focusing on four user groups: undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and off-site researchers. Our primary approach was to perform usability testing with two users groups: undergraduates and graduate students. The usability studies were conducted in January-February 2012 with a total of six students. Each student received a gift certificate to the University Bookstore in appreciation for their participation in the study.

Assessment Team

- Greta Browning, Reference Archivist
- Jennie Goforth, Web Librarian
- Cynthia Harbeson, Processing Archivist
- Megan Johnson, E-Learning & Outreach Librarian
- Norma Riddle, University Archivist

Our Finding Aids: Three Different Formats



A Look to the Future

As we create our new Special Collections website in Drupal, we are using the results of our usability studies to inform decisions such as the overall structure of the site, how different types of resources are presented, and how we format our finding aids. Due to the unique nature of the materials, there are arguably intrinsic barriers involved in using Special Collections such as more limited hours and food/beverage restrictions while using archival records. We must be careful not to create additional barriers with our use of professional terminology on our websites.

Moving forward we hope to eliminate as much jargon as possible from our finding aids and make our entire website easier to navigate by responding to how participants expected to find information as determined in the usability studies. We plan to complete usability studies with the new Drupal site once completed.

Possible Alternatives to Archival Jargon

- Guide to the Collection instead of Finding Aid
- About the Collection instead of Scope and Content
- How to Use This Collection instead of Access Restrictions
- Collection Size instead of Extent

What term would you use instead of **Acquisitions Information**?

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