

DePaul University Library
Assessment Project Report
Special Collections and Archives

Academic Year: 2024-2025

Date of Report Submission:

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Part I: Follow-Up on Last Year's Assessment Report Recommendations

Based on the recommendations and planned actions from the last assessment report you submitted, please discuss actions you took and/or follow-up, as well as their results.

In FY24, the Library participated in the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) statewide student survey concerning affordable course materials. 275 DePaul students, and 4,617 students statewide, participated in the survey. Answering questions about the effects of high-cost materials, students reported that they often don't purchase the required course materials, and have, as a result, earned poor grades.

In response, and as part of the Library's ongoing efforts to help students reduce the cost of attending DePaul and aiding in their retention, the University Library has recommitted itself to expanding and promoting our course reserve services.

During the Summer of 2024, the library implemented Leganto, an improved, user-friendly system for course reserves. One of the benefits of this system is a more seamless integration with D2L.

Our recommendations from last year's report were to continue promote the course reserves system to faculty. We achieved this with 13 training and Q&A zoom sessions for faculty, providing cross-training to our library liaisons in using Leganto so that staff were more easily able to help faculty with requesting course reserves, and sending direct emails to faculty over the course of the FY25 year to promote the service.

As a result, in FY25, we had:

- 514 faculty using Course Reserves

- 700 active courses using Course Reserves
- 7,649 students using Course Reserves
- 880 Course Reserve reading lists linked to courses
- 10,027 citations provided with Course Reserves

In addition to supporting Course Reserve, the Library's Scholarly Communication Librarian was awarded a \$149,000 grant from the Illinois State Library to support the creation and/or adoption of Open Educational Resources at DePaul. Three new open textbooks are being created across multiple disciplines (Communication, History, Theatre) and will save DePaul undergraduate students approximately \$100,000 each year.

Part II: Report on This Year's Assessment Project

Abstract

During the 2024-2025 academic year, DePaul Special Collections and Archives (SPCA) conducted an assessment project to assess search strategies. DePaul's HST 299 students contributed to this assessment by responding to pre- and post-surveys concerning their search strategies for primary source materials. Students were asked if they began searches with a research topic in mind, how they planned to locate materials in SPCA collections, and how successful they believed their searches were based on the materials they received. 38 students from 3 different HST 299 classes participated in the survey, answering questions about the types of online resources they utilized, which ones they found to be the most useful, and what they would do differently in future searches. In this group of surveyed students, 79% had no previous experience requesting materials from an archive, with 58% noting that they did not know what kind of source material they would need to conduct a research project. After receiving instruction on DePaul Library search tools and finding aids, 100% of students reported that the archival materials they received were what they expected, and 91% indicated that the requested materials could be useful for their chosen research topic.

SPCA instruction focused on DePaul Library search tools provides students with strategies and information they need to successfully locate and request archival materials. SPCA should continue to provide this valuable experience and instruction for HST 299 in the future. Results from the survey should also be shared with History professors to aid their understanding of how students search for and locate primary source material.

Learning Outcome Assessed

Students attending DePaul University Library instruction sessions, workshops, and engaging with its services will be able to develop effective search strategies for finding information.

Data Collection and Methodology

DePaul Special Collections and Archives developed an assessment project around its routine quarterly instruction sessions for the Department of History's HST 299 classes. HST 299 is a core course for all history majors and minors. In HST 299 courses, students are tasked with conducting original research with primary and secondary source materials of their choosing and writing a research paper of at least 10 pages. At the beginning of each quarter, an SPCA archivist meets twice with these classes to provide students with the opportunity to locate, request, and view primary sources from SPCA collections. The first instruction session involves the SPCA archivist visiting the HST 299 classroom to provide instruction on locating and requesting archival materials from SPCA, along with a tutorial on how to read and use a finding aid. Students then have an assignment to use online

library search tools to locate and request SPCA materials. A week after the first session, HST 299 students visit the library to view their requested materials in the SPCA classroom. Because of the specific search component of the HST 299 assignment, these courses provide a good opportunity for assessment. In FY25, 3 HST 299 classes visited Special Collections and Archives, and participated in a workshop led by the Instruction and Outreach Archivist. They were held in September 2024 (12 students), January 2025 (17 students), and April 2025 (17 students).

To assess student search strategies, Qualtrics surveys were developed to gather information about what kind of pre-knowledge students had, the search tools they used, and which tools they found to be most useful. The first survey was conducted during the first SPCA instruction session before any instruction was provided. Students used their cell phones to scan a QR code that linked to an online survey containing 4 short multiple choice and open-ended questions. The goal was to gain a sense of the search knowledge and stage of research topic development that students were coming into the assignment with. Students were made aware that the online survey was anonymous and not mandatory or graded, with the results only being used to help improve SPCA instruction for future HST 299 classes.

After completing the initial survey, an SPCA archivist presented step-by-step instructions on how students could locate archival materials in SPCA online and request them for the next class meeting in the library. Students were provided with handouts explaining the process that included screenshots and hyperlinks. The handout was also posted to D2L for future reference. During the instruction session, the archivist walked students through these steps by actively demonstrating the steps of the process on a projected computer screen. Different search strategies were shared, including demonstrations on how to search SPCA's bibliographies for rare books and maps, online PDF finding aids, the ArchivesSpace database, and the DePaul Library catalog. Options were shared for searching using SPCA-created topics/subjects headings as well as keyword searching in the database and catalog. Additional instruction was provided for understanding the components of a finding aid to help identify and request boxes from archival collections.

During the second meeting with each HST 299 class, students worked with the requested archival materials. Near the end of that session, students were once again presented with an online survey containing 6 multiple choice, open-ended, and matrix questions. The final questions offered students the opportunity to reflect on their experience searching for primary source information and rank online search tools. Of the 49 students across 3 classes, 38 participated in the surveys. Survey questions and response data is available in Appendix A. Derek Potts conducted the surveys and used quantitative and qualitative approaches to compile the results for a conjoint analysis aimed at better understanding the choices students make when searching for materials.

Interpretation of Results

Results of the first survey show that most surveyed students (79%) do not have previous experience requesting materials from an archive. The majority of students do have a research topic in mind (63%), however over half (58%) do not know what kind of primary source material they need to locate and access in order to conduct a research project. When asked where they would start their search for primary source material in SPCA, half (50%) indicated that they did not know or would have to ask a librarian or an archivist. Others simply listed topics (18%), which may suggest that they do not know where to begin the search process, but could also simply indicate that they would plan to search for topics somewhere online.

The second survey offers student reflections on the search process after receiving SPCA instruction and working with their requested sources. Every student (100%) indicated that the archival materials they received were what they expected, and the overwhelming majority (91%) thought that the materials they engaged with could be useful for their chosen research topic (if they have one). These results show that the students met the learning outcome being evaluated – the ability to develop effective search strategies for finding information. All DePaul Library and SPCA online search tools (featured in instruction and utilized by students) received similarly high rankings across student responses. Over half of the students (55%) shared that the search process was not frustrating or difficult, with most others (41%) noting that searching takes a lot of time and/or that it is challenging to locate specific or anticipated topical materials. Responding to a follow-up question about what they would do differently next time, many students (32%) noted that they would spend more time searching for sources. Several other students (23%) added that they would spend more time refining their searches or chosen topics. A similar number (27%) would do nothing different or did not offer a response.

Recommendations and Plans for Action

Survey results show that while most students had no previous experience requesting archival materials, and many also did not know where to begin their search, all were able to successfully request materials after an instruction session. Additionally, while the majority of students did not know what kind of archival materials they would need for a research project, most thought that the materials they worked with could be useful in their research. These results indicate that SPCA instruction is successfully tailored to the needs of HST 299 students and professors for their introductory assignment. While students are not required to use SPCA materials to complete their final HST 299 research project, it is encouraging that many may ultimately return to the SPCA Reading Room based on the indicated fit with their research topics.

Based on student feedback that time was often an issue searching for archival materials, it is essential to continue to stress the need for students to block out enough time for the activity – sharing this as direct feedback from former HST 299 students. Additionally, it may

be helpful to revisit the information we share with students about keyword and topic searching in order to hopefully make their searches more efficient and useful.

These results can also be used to inform other SPCA instruction sessions beyond HST 299, reinforcing the current instruction practice of sharing multiple search strategies for locating materials in SPCA collections. For example, students in all class sessions are instructed that searching the Library catalog alone will not locate all of the materials and descriptions in ArchivesSpace. Distinctions will continue to be made between searching bibliographies, PDFs, ArchivesSpace, and the Library catalog to enable more comprehensive overall searches.

Next steps for this project include sharing results of the assessment with DePaul History professors, particularly those who teach HST 299. Assessment findings may expand faculty understanding of how students search for and locate primary source material. Derek Potts will begin sharing this information in January 2026 during the first HST 299 class visit of winter quarter. Responding to student reflections in survey results, additional information will be shared regarding efficient keyword and subject search strategies for archival information and materials. Acknowledging that many students may already have a chosen research topic or collection, volunteered topic examples will be used as exemplars for searching for archival research materials. Feedback will continue to be solicited at the end of HST 299 classes to inform instruction content and strategies for future classes.

Beyond the History program, results of the assessment will also be shared with library colleagues during a Library All-staff meeting in 2026. Assessment findings may provide colleagues in other library units with a better understanding of student search strategies and inform future library resources and services. The assessment report has already been shared with colleagues in Special Collections and Archives.

Appendix A: Survey Questions and Response Data

Survey 1

Question 1: Have you had experience as an individual requesting physical materials from an archive? (multiple choice)

- No – 79%
- Yes – 21%

Question 2: Do you already have a HST 299 research topic in mind? (multiple choice)

- Yes – 91%
- No – 9%

Question 3: Do you have an idea of the kind of primary source materials you would need to conduct a history research project? If yes, what are some examples? (multiple choice, free text)

- No – 58%
- Yes – 42%
 - Examples noted (free text)
 - Newspapers/articles – 26%
 - Records – 26%
 - Diaries/journals/speeches – 18%
 - Correspondence – 11%
 - Photographs – 11%
 - Audio/film/video – 8%
 - Books/publications – 5%
 - Ephemera – 3%
 - Maps – 3%

- Poems/lyrics – 3%
- Secondary/tertiary sources – 3%

Question 4: Where would you start your search for primary source materials in Special Collections and Archives at DePaul? (free text)

- Responses
 - Don't know – 29%
 - Ask a librarian/archivist – 21%
 - Topics listed – 18%
 - SPCA website – 13%
 - Online – 11%
 - In SPCA – 5%
 - Books – 3%
 - D2L – 3%
 - In the library – 3%
 - Library website – 3%

Survey 2

Question 1: Were the materials you requested for this session what you expected? (multiple choice)

- Yes – 100%
- No – 0%

Question 2: Do you think these materials (or the collections they are contained in) will be useful for your chosen research topic (if you have one)? (multiple choice)

- Yes – 91%
- No – 9%

Question 3: Which of these tools did you use to locate materials? [check all that apply] (multiple choice)

- DePaul Special Collections and Archives database (ArchivesSpace) search – 77%
- DePaul Special Collections and Archives database (ArchivesSpace) “Topics and Themes” – 64%
- DePaul Special Collections and Archives "Finding Aids and Guides" (PDFs on website) – 55%
- DePaul Library website search bar – 55%
- Google / general online search – 9%

Question 4: Rank these tools in order of usefulness for your search. [rank by moving to bottom (best to worst)] * (matrix)

- DePaul Special Collections and Archives database (ArchivesSpace) search bar – 29%
- DePaul Special Collections and Archives database (ArchivesSpace) “Topics and Themes” – 24%
- DePaul Special Collections and Archives "Finding Aids and Guides" (PDFs on website) – 24%
- DePaul Library website search bar – 24%

*Tools listed above by #1 ranking percentage

Question 5: What was frustrating or difficult in your search for archival materials? (free text)

- Topically combined responses
 - Nothing/no response – 55%
 - Finding specific things/lack of selection – 27%

- Volume of materials to choose from/time needed – 14%
- Locating bibliographies on SPCA site – 5%

Question 6: What would you do differently in your next search for archival materials? (free text)

- Topically combined responses
 - Spend more time searching for results/more specific searches – 32%
 - Nothing/blank – 27%
 - Spend more time developing a search strategy/better research question/less or more specific topic – 23%
 - Take better notes during search – 5%
 - Spend more time with physical materials – 5%
 - Look at more books – 5%
 - Talk to a librarian – 5%
 - Go to the archives to search in person – 5%