



Managing Archives and Special Collections



The Hazel H. Ransom Reading Room
Courtesy of the Ransom Center.

AEON[®] Special Collections Management Software

*an interview with Richard Oram, Associate Director, Harry Ransom Center,
The University of Texas at Austin*

Ransom Center Bids Adios to Paper Callslips

The central mission of the Harry Ransom Center is to advance the study of the arts and humanities. Its collections range widely, from James Joyce to Norman Mailer, from *Gone with the Wind* dresses to original manuscripts of plays of Tom Stoppard and Arthur Miller. The diversity of formats encompassing film, photography, visual collections, performing arts, rare books and literary manuscripts presents many management challenges.

As with most special collections repositories, patrons used to have to submit their requests to view materials on handwritten slips. To go back and find the record of a given request, staff would sort through hundreds of slips. The slips took up space and had to be stored offsite. Meanwhile, to use the collections, scholars had to register onsite and there was no way for them to easily track the items they used.

“Basically, we were using the same system that had been in place since 1918, when we got our first rare book collection,” said Richard Oram, Associate Director of the Ransom Center. “We were handling all requests manually, relying on patrons to read and transcribe information from catalog records. There was a lot of room for error, between incomplete information from the patron and hard-to-read handwriting. For some of our collections we use discrete location codes, so if the location wasn’t recorded accurately, a staff member could go off to retrieve items from the wrong part of the stacks, wasting time for both staff and researcher.”

The opportunity to automate the tracking of requests and provide better patron service led the Ransom Center to become one of the first special collections libraries to adopt Aeon.

Aeon Improves Patron Service and Reduces Manual Tasks

Oram points to the following efficiencies Aeon has brought to the Ransom Center:

Patron Registration

With Aeon, patrons register online, eliminating the need for the Ransom Center receptionist to keep the researcher waiting while information is entered into the patron database. This saves time and reduces data entry errors.

Security

The ability to track who is using what materials and which staff member has been involved in serving the patron provides valuable information for maintaining the security of the collections. Fortunately, the Ransom Center has not had to deal lately with any theft investigations, such as the widely publicized case of Edward Forbes Smiley III, who was convicted in 2006 for stealing maps from several major libraries, causing them to sort through thousands of callslips to find what Smiley had used.

But, Oram noted, staff have had occasion to look for misplaced materials, which used to involve poring over stacks and stacks of paper slips. “Now with Aeon,” he said, “if we had a security breach or trouble locating any given item, it would be very easy to go in and look at a patron’s record of use.”

“All aspects of Aeon’s tracking capabilities have been an improvement for the Ransom Center.”

Staff Time

With all requests handled online, staff no longer have to file paper slips. If patrons need to check on what they have used at the Center, that information is readily available in their personalized accounts. This has saved time for both reception and circulation staff.

Class Presentations and Exhibits

The Ransom Center responds to numerous requests to include special collection materials in instructional presentations, exhibits, tours and other special events. The requested items are now tracked in event groupings in Aeon, making it easier to retrieve them and generate statistics. For repeat classes or events, staff can simply pull up a list of what was requested before, rather than having to go back through paper forms.

Service to Researchers

Oram says that feedback from researchers has been overwhelmingly positive. Aeon has helped them make better use of their research time onsite by allowing them to register and save requests in advance from home. Staff can review these requests and work with the researcher prior to the visit to be sure materials will be available. Researchers can place requests directly from the Center's catalog and maintain their own record history in their personal web-based account. This makes it easy for them to quickly assess which materials they have used at the Center and having all the information available online helps ensure they record the right information so they get what they want.

"All aspects of Aeon's tracking capabilities have been an improvement for the Ransom Center," Oram said. "It would be difficult for one library to put together all the pieces and parts that Atlas has developed in this one system while still allowing libraries to customize fields and transaction processing queues to mirror their own workflow."

The Bottom Line

Oram said the Ransom Center was the first institution to offer its patrons the ability to place online requests with Aeon. From the beginning he was confident that Atlas would deliver a solid product to meet their needs because of the company's strong and stable history with its ILLiad interlibrary loan system. He has been pleased with the service and support Atlas provided during the implementation process.

"The Ransom Center has a diverse collection encompassing all formats of material. The registration and tracking capabilities of Aeon have made us more efficient. If Atlas can make Aeon work for us (and they have), it will work for any institution that wants to maintain better control of its special collections and improve service to researchers."

This case study was developed based on an interview conducted with Richard Oram by Judith A. Michaelson, MLS, principal of JAM Marketing, LLC. JAM Marketing is a marketing consulting firm focused on helping organizations design and implement short-term marketing strategies that yield long-term results.

About Atlas and Aeon

Atlas Systems, Inc. is a software development company headquartered in Virginia Beach, VA dedicated to serving libraries. Founded in July 1995 with the mission of "promoting library excellence through efficiency," Atlas is best known for creating the ILLiad interlibrary loan management system now exclusively distributed by OCLC and used by more than 1,000 libraries worldwide. Focused on bringing the benefits of automation to library processes that have not been addressed by other software services, Atlas has introduced Ares, an electronic reserves solution, and Aeon, an online request and workflow management system specifically designed for special collections libraries and archives. Aeon improves user service and maximizes staff efficiency while providing unparalleled item tracking, security and statistics.

About the Harry Ransom Center

The Harry Ransom Center advances the study of the arts and humanities by acquiring, preserving and making accessible original cultural materials. With extensive collections of rare books, manuscripts, photography, film, art and the performing arts, the Center supports research through symposia and fellowships and provides education and enrichment for scholars, students and the public through exhibitions and programs.



For more information, visit www.atlas-sys.com or email aeon@atlas-sys.com.