Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, Inc.

2024-2026 Strategic Plan

February 12, 2024
Message from the Chair

In 1985, sixteen special collections banded together under the broad umbrella of wishing to care for old books and manuscripts. In 1993, that hearty band incorporated as the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, Inc., (PACSCL). With part-time staff and support from a small board, PACSCL published a print newsletter for its members, and created its first exhibit, *Legacies of Genius*.

PACSCL now has 38 member institutions representing diverse special collections that run the gamut from the Independence Seaport Museum to Princeton University. PACSCL, through its institutional members, represents over 250 special collections workers whose contributions have included the incubation of 21 grants that have brought over $9,000,000 to the special collections community in Philadelphia.

Today, PACSCL is governed by an active board and both standing and ad hoc committees whose work ensures PACSCL’s sustainability and growth. PACSCL projects are built with creativity and designed to be extensible: [The Philadelphia Area Archives Research Portal](https://philadelphiaarchives.org) provides access to collections from approximately 200 libraries, archives, historic sites, and historical societies in the greater Philadelphia region; grant-funded projects such as [Bibliotecha Philadelphiensis](https://www.bibliotecha.com), [In Her Own Right](https://www.inherownright.org), [Chronicling Resistance](https://www.chroniclingresistance.org), and [For the Health of the New Nation](https://www.forthehealthofthenewnation.org) not only showcase the integration of individual special collections in story and truth telling, but also the dedication of the community to the role of rare books and manuscripts in public life.

The strategic planning process for 2024-2026 has allowed us to re-examine our priorities, assess our strengths, and look squarely at our challenges. This strategic plan will help members explore new possibilities for storytelling and community engagement. It will provide professional development opportunities for both seasoned professionals and folks new to the field. This plan will also ensure PACSCL’s sustainability as it nears its fourth decade.

Beth Hessel, Ph.D.
PACSCL Chair
Executive Director
The Athenaeum of Philadelphia
Executive Summary

For over thirty years, the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, Inc. (PACSCL) has served unique libraries in the greater Delaware Valley. During this time, PACSCL has grown from a group of 16 member institutions managed by part-time staff to a consortium of 38 current members representing the diversity that is special collections.

As PACSCL has changed, so has the world in which it works. Special collections workers engage in a world that continues to be impacted by the COVID pandemic as well as social and political unrest. Times of change can prove challenging, but such challenges provide opportunities for growth as well as sustainability.

A Strategic Planning Working Group was convened in July 2023 with the intent of drafting a strategic plan that acknowledges those challenges. The working group met in person via Zoom between July and January 2024 while also working asynchronously on different aspects of the plan. The process also included a survey of PACSCL member staff and allies.

PACSCL has proven that it can both serve the needs of the staff at its member institutions while redefining access to member collections. To both ends, this strategic plan will help members explore new possibilities for describing and making collections accessible, ensuring that the stories at the heart of those collections can be told. It will provide professional development opportunities that will not only enhance skills but build relationships. It will test ways to build PACSCL as a community. And it will continue the work of the past years in ensuring the sustainability of this organization.

Mission, Vision & Statement of Intent

Mission

PACSCL members collaborate to make their collections broadly available. PACSCL supports joint projects, promotes professional standards, and fosters the special collections community.

Vision

PACSCL and its member institutions are recognized globally for the depth and broad accessibility of their unique materials, and make the Greater Philadelphia area a preeminent center for engagement with special collections.

Four Key Challenges/Focus for the Future

1) Through sustainable consortial initiatives, strengthen members’ ability to preserve and provide access to an internationally-significant body of collections.
2) Sustain the PACSCL community, centering precarious workers and precariously funded institutions within a network of collegiality through effective communication, professional development, best practices, and other efforts.
3) Reach out to the worldwide community of scholars (in the broadest sense, from senior researchers through K-12 students, area residents, and lifelong learners) to provide increased awareness of PACSCL and PACSCL member collections and programs.

4) Build PACSCL’s organizational structure and funding in order to sustain project outputs and provide appropriate technological infrastructure.

Core Values

During the strategic planning process, members of the planning committee as well as members of the larger PACSCL community were asked to define what value statements can be made about the organization.

Committee responses looked inward, framing those strengths of PACSCL that will sustain it going forward. Those values include

1. collaboration
2. accessibility
3. community

Responses from the larger community looked outward, proof of PACSCL’s role within that community. Community members cited PACSCL’s “vital purpose,” engagement, collegiality, and inclusivity.

Statement of Intent

Supported by its mission and vision, PACSCL commits to the following for the next three years:

By the end of 2026, PACSCL will have strengthened the special collections community through increased collaboration and storytelling, through specialized and intentional professional development, and through a sustained commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of our work and our collections.

Within this intent, PACSCL will focus activity over the next three years within four specific areas: access, support, awareness, and sustainability.

Current Context

Challenges

Our 30th anniversary in 2023 situated PACSCL as an integral part of the special collections landscape, not only in Philadelphia, but as a center of influence beyond its birthplace. PACSCL was the incubator for ground-breaking projects such as Bibliotecha Philadelphiensis, In Her Own Right, Chronicling Resistance, and Black Joy & Resilience, which created new standards of practice in collection access and storytelling. PACSCL is also an exemplar of sustainable growth and development built on a community that is unafraid to question and challenge the status quo.
PACSCL’s main challenges lie in maintaining that balance of innovation and sustainability to ensure viable growth.

During the planning process, the Strategic Planning Working Group identified these specific challenges in meeting strategic goals:

- **Capacity**

  PACSCL successfully transitioned to a full time Managing Director in 2020, a move that enabled the expansion of programming, project support, and member engagement. That work, however, is made possible by nearly 60 volunteers (almost 25% of all staff at PACSCL member institutions), who contribute their time to PACSCL’s standing and ad hoc committees, working groups, and grant-funded projects.

  PACSCL needs to be alert for its point of diminishing returns, the point at which commitments exceed the ability of staff and volunteers to complete. Burn-out of volunteers remains a persistent threat, one that needs to be eased through effective sharing of responsibilities, recruitment of new volunteers, and committee/project leadership.

- **Financial Stability**

  PACSCL’s only financial support comes from member dues. While membership has increased by 15% since 2020, those new members came in at the lowest dues level. To work beyond that capped income, PACSCL needs to begin leveraging endowment grants that can support specific projects or initiatives while freeing up current income to support other priorities.

- **Perceived Barriers to Participation**

  The working group noted a number of barriers that can limit participation. One is PACSCL’s unwieldy name and confused identity outside the local special collections community. Another is the legacy notion that PACSCL is an “elite” organization, in which staff at small organizations, or entry level professionals, feel unwelcome. While efforts to diversify leadership and service opportunities since 2015 have led to a Board of Directors that is more representative of the larger community, there lingers the idea that PACSCL remains an organization for some, but not for all.

- **Lack of Diversity**

  Lack of diversity has not only impacted PACSCL’s governance structure, but also the member institutions from which PACSCL derives its most important support - volunteers. [United States census data from 2018](https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/professional.html), the most recent American Community Survey by profession available, shows that, in Philadelphia County, there are just over 2270 self-described librarians, archivists and curators. Of that number, 29.3% are male; 70.5% are female; 5.5% identify as Hispanic; 19.2% identify as Black or African-American; 0%
identify as Indigenous; and 6.2% identify as Asian. 68.5% identify as white. While our profession has made strides over the past 20 years in attracting a more diverse workforce, much work remains to be done.

PACSCL can diversify through the overall diversification of the profession, but that is something over which PACSCL itself has limited influence. However, PACSCL can work to increase diversity through internships, filling all Class D Board of Directors seats, mentoring, diverse grant projects, promoting inclusive collecting and description, and skill-building through professional development.

About PACSCL

Founded: 1985

Incorporated: 1993

General operation funding: Dues, interest income

Project funding: Grants

Membership, 2024: 38 institutions

Current grant funded projects: Harmful Language Audit (SAA Foundation), Black Joy & Resilience (NHPRC).

Current PACSCL supported projects: The Philadelphia Area Archives portal (PAA); DEI initiatives; online exhibitions; collaborative OPAC; consortia-wide surveys; community engagement.

Board/Committee Structure: 16 board members (2 Class A Directors, 9 Class B Directors, 3 Class C Directors, 2 Class D Directors). Each member institution has a designated representative. Two standing committees (Finance; Nominations & Governance). Four ad hoc committees (DEI, Communications, Tech Sustainability, and Program & Member Engagement).

Budgets, 2016 – 2023

NOTE: Expenses are exclusive of OPAC fees, which are paid for by participating institutions.
Core Future Strategies

Guiding the planning process for 2024-2026 is the statement of intent referenced earlier: *By the end of 2026, PACSCL will have strengthened the special collections community through increased collaboration and storytelling, through specialized and intentional professional development, and through a sustained commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of our work and our collections.*

Derived from the statement of intent are four areas of impact for actionable annual planning:

1) Access

Collections access is not only about researchers finding content via some kind of discovery layer. Access can be facilitated through new storytelling, engaging with new communities, and expanding inclusivity by reconsidering the language used in describing collections. Access can also be a matter of what is being collected by which institutions, and whether or not collaborative collecting or description can make content more visible and representative.

2) Support

The greatest asset available to PACSCL is the creativity, dedication, and knowledge inherent in the staff at member institutions. Support of our members will be evident in the ongoing development of best practices that are at the core of PACSCL projects, demonstrating PACSCL’s leadership in advancing professional standards in special collections. Support of member staff will come from professional development opportunities which will leverage the skills and knowledge of our peers.

3) Awareness

Awareness is a multi-faceted concept. We want researchers and other users to be aware of the wealth of resources at their disposal. We need to do a better job of promoting member collections. Awareness can help ease the legacy concept that PACSCL is considered too “elite” and unwelcoming. Low-key networking opportunities, as well as our standard social events, can work against the idea of elitism.

But awareness is more than making those obvious connections. Awareness means extending name recognition into communities where special collections seem truly elite.

4) Sustainability

PACSCL is nothing without its member organizations; sustainability lies in maintaining those existing relationships and building new ones. It also lies in sound governance, a
strong board that has community representation, and the ability to maintain content created.

**Business Model Goals and Objectives**

PACSCL serves the needs of its member institutions as well as the staff at those institutions. PACSCL provides professional development opportunities, supports shared services, develops grant funded projects, and drafts best practices.

The biggest expense for PACSCL is the Managing Director. Other significant expenses include financial management and member engagement. Income for these general operating expenses comes from member dues, which is capped annually.

As noted in the budget summary above, PACSCL has consistently operated with a year-end surplus since 2020. This is due to structuring annual planning prior to the creation of budgets which then reflect actual need. After three years of restructuring planning, budgeting, and investment policies, PACSCL is ready to test its ability to raise endowment funds and use them effectively for targeted goals. PACSCL will also seek to increase dues revenue as well as build a more inclusive membership through the addition of new members.

**Organizational Capacity Goals and Objectives**

PACSCL and its member institutions will work to maintain funding for its full-time Managing Director. The Board and committees will work to ensure that assets created during PACSCL sponsored projects remain accessible to all according to parameters established by PACSCL’s Technology Sustainability Committee. The Board will oversee the use of assessment metrics for all PACSCL projects and events in order to demonstrate its value within the community and beyond. PACSCL will work to the best of its ability within the current social media climate to leverage existing points of communication. Working groups will be created as needed to fulfill short term goals.

**Annual Planning**

The strategic plan has been translated to an actionable annual plan structure. Areas of intent, goals and activities are intentionally planned for 2024. Goals and activities for 2025 and 2026 will be determined annually in August/September through an established planning and budgeting process that begins with committee input with approval by the Finance Committee.
The Strategic Planning Committee

In August 2023, a Strategic Planning Committee was convened to craft a strategic plan for the years 2024-2026 as well as annual plans for the same period of time. Members of the committee include:

- John Anderies, William Way LGBT Community Center
- Sarah Augustine, Independence Seaport Museum
- Sara Borden, Rowan University
- Caitlin Goodman, Swarthmore College
- Bettina Hess, German Society of Pennsylvania
- Jessica Lydon, Academy of Natural Sciences
- Allison Mills, Bryn Mawr College
- Caitlin Rizzo, Institute for Advanced Study
- Synatra Smith, Philadelphia Museum of Art
- Heather Willever-Farr, LaSalle University