CHAPTER 3

Dr. Greg Eow, Associate Director for Collections, MIT Libraries

Introduction
The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is often ranked among the world's top universities, with traditional strengths in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines. While known for its strengths in the sciences and engineering, MIT also has notable strengths in other disciplines, including linguistics, management, as well as visual and performing arts and humanities.

Since August 2015, Dr. Gregory Eow has been serving as Associate Director for Collections, MIT Libraries. Eow holds a PhD in American History from Rice University, an Master of Library & Information Science (MLIS) from University of Pittsburgh, and a BA from Hendrix College. Prior to arriving at MIT, Eow served as the Associate Director of Collections and the Kaplanoff Librarian for American, British, and Commonwealth History at Yale University, as well as Charles Warren Bibliographer for American History at Harvard University. During his time at Harvard, Eow was involved in a number of strategically important projects for the entire Harvard Library system, including exploring Harvard's relationship with the HathiTrust shared digital repository.

In the following interview, Greg discusses the changing and yet indispensable roles of a bibliographer in the context of collection development, as well as the values of diversity and inclusion in staff recruitment in academic librarianship—a profession that is increasingly driven by technological developments in a global context.

Could you introduce yourself? For example, your professional training, your educational background, and at what stage in your life did you decide to become a librarian?

I graduated from college in 1994, and I studied History. After that, I was working for a few years in Washington, DC in various positions. I worked on Capitol Hill and at the Smithsonian Institute\(^1\) as well in fundraising.

\(^1\) Smithsonian Institute—Homepage. Available from: http://www.si.edu/.
It was during my time at the Smithsonian Institute, where I came into contact with archivists who worked in the Smithsonian Institute Archives, and they told me about their work. As someone with a History background, I was interested in archives, and that led me to apply to library school—specifically to study archives. I must confess that at the time, I was not very familiar with the field of Library and Information Science, but I was interested in learning more. After being accepted into schools and being lucky enough to get a fellowship to study at the University of Pittsburgh, I went there and studied archival management with Professors Richard Cox and Elizabeth Yakel, who were both in the Pittsburgh Archives program at the time.

After graduating from library school in 1998, I worked for a few years in Atlanta in a small nonprofit, the DeKalb History Center, which had a library, archive, and museum all in one shop. While I enjoyed this work, my hope at the time was always to continue my History studies and earn a terminal degree in History—I always wanted to get a PhD. After a few years in Atlanta, I went back to school to do just that. I went to Rice University in Houston, where I spent a really fantastic 6 years working on my doctorate in History. When I finished that in 2007, that is when I became the Kaplanoff Librarian for American History at the Yale University Library for 6 years, more or less. Then I went to Harvard University where I worked in a similar position, as the Charles Warren Bibliographer for American History at the Harvard Library. Then, for the last year, I have been working in senior administration at the MIT Libraries, which is very exciting work, but also very different from being a bibliographer/practitioner. That is the trajectory so far.

Do you come from a family of librarians or history scholars?
No, I come from a family of (mostly) physicians.

Can you tell me about your career directory in becoming the Associate Director of Collections of the MIT Libraries?
Let me start with my career in 2007 after I finished my PhD at Rice University. I started working as a subject specialist bibliographer at Yale. At the time, I was absolutely committed to that position. It was a

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5 Yale University—Homepage. Available from: [http://www.yale.edu/](http://www.yale.edu/).
wonderful position to be in, because it brought together my academic training as a historian with my interest in libraries, collections, and also archives. But, it was early on in my career at Yale that the financial crisis hit. I had the fortune (or misfortune as you could say) of being appointed to a task force to explore how the Yale University Library could be as efficient as possible in a time when resources were diminished. It was working in that position that really broadened my awareness of administrative issues. At that time, I started to contemplate on what my ultimate career goal would be. The big question for me was whether I would remain a domain expert/practitioner, or would I move into a leadership role and administration. Since that time, I have been playing with the tension between these two paths because both directions have their great merits. It was about a year and a half ago when MIT reached out to me when they were looking for a new Associate Director of Collections, and we began a set of conversations that led me to the decision to move definitively into administration and leadership. That is how I got to the MIT libraries.

For the readers who are not part of the library field, could you tell us what a bibliographer does?

Traditionally, bibliographers are the library staff who build collections through their purchasing decisions, relying on their subject expertise to inform their curatorial vision. As such, bibliographers have been a key part of collection development operations in academic libraries. I worked as a bibliographer in two different institutional contexts that administratively worked quite differently. At Yale, I was a subject specialist liaison/selector, where the full title was Kaplanoff Librarian for American History. It was an endowed position for a history librarian. The responsibilities for that position included public services, working with faculty and students, teaching bibliographic instruction classes, being involved in information literacy, etc. That librarian also stewarded restricted collection budgets for developing collections. So, at Yale, it was very much a hybrid model, and I think it was very much the trend to really find a way to maximize the amount of time the librarian spent on outreach, and really engaging with faculty and students.

At Harvard, a very similar institution in many ways to Yale, the organizational model was actually quite different. I was a part of a department which was called the Widener Department of Collection Development. It had curators and bibliographers that would be regarded under the rubric of “Area Studies.” Their responsibilities were definitively to build
collections as opposed to performing public services activities. There would be some contact with faculty and students, but that was not the focus of the position, which was to build collections for current use and for prospective, future use. There was a separate department in the organization for public services, reference, information literacy, and engagement with faculty. There was a history liaison in that department that I collaborated with, but there were two positions: the liaison for history and a full-time bibliographer in the collection development department. Yale and Harvard had different models for how to build collections and how to engage with faculty and users.

*Do we need bibliographers in the digital age?*

This is an important question. With approval plans and other procurement models, such as demand-driven acquisition, the bibliographer model has come under a lot of questions over the past several decades. Some conclude that bibliographers are in some ways passé, relics from a previous age of librarianship, and that we can rely on other selection models and workflows to build just-in-time collections to meet current user needs without having dedicated collections staff. I am skeptical of this model. We will always have some form of selection, I think. The question is, what does that mean? Are we outsourcing selection functions to vendors via approval plans? Are we outsourcing selection functions to patrons through demand-driven acquisitions? While there are advantages to be gained by doing so, especially in terms of efficiency and cost savings, this sort of selecting is only appropriate for building curricular collections. In the organizations that I have worked in, there is a commitment to build collections not just for current curricular use, but also for purposes of capturing and preserving cultural memory and cultural patrimony. I don’t think that the selection function traditionally done by the bibliographer has been superseded or supplanted by other means while still being able to fulfill the goal of building and curating collections—especially for the long term. There are also concerns about outsourcing selection to commercial entities and the effects such decisions have on the larger scholarly communications ecosystem. As an administrator, I can definitely see the appeal of trying to maximize efficiency and selection, outsourcing selection, but as a former bibliographer, I am aware of the elements of selection that simply don’t lend themselves well to that kind of outsourcing. That is where the really interesting questions come into play—how can we build rich, long-tail collections, but do so in ways that are efficient and strategic.
Since you have a PhD in History from Rice University, do you think your studies have contributed to your work as a librarian?

I think having that background in History was invaluable to my work at Yale and Harvard as a subject specialist and bibliographer. It really helped me understand the needs of history faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. Going through the process of writing a dissertation, I really understood the resource needs for graduate students. Having an intimate understanding of the pressures that they were facing and when they were feeling them really helped me build relationships. That really informed the public services and collection-building that I could do in support of their work.

As an administrator—especially at MIT—at an institute that has excellent Arts and Humanities programs, but really known for its outstanding Science and Engineering, how does my background in History relate to my current work? That is fascinating, and I think that it does relate. I think that the question “what are library collections in the digital age?” is a great existential question. The field of scholarly communications, publishing, and library collections is currently full of ambiguity, and the stakes are high. Being a historian and understanding the past and being steeped in the history of the book, and the history of print culture, really helps bring a long-view perspective to the changes that we are now experiencing in the current scholarly communications environment. In many ways, the field of publishing and library collecting resembles the first century after the invention of the printing press in the 1440s. It took nearly a century for a market to grow and consolidate around the new technology of printing, and I see similarities with how the current information landscape is developing in response to digital media. I find that long-view perspective to be incredibly useful and, at times, comforting. I would say that my perspective as a historian allows me to appreciate the great continuity rather than discontinuity in a postprint environment. I am deeply appreciative of this perspective.

At your current job, could you describe your area of responsibility and roles?

At MIT, I am the Associate Director of Collections, and I report to the Library Director, and I am one of four Associate Directors in the library system. There is an Associate Director for Academic and Community Engagement, which would be our public services portfolio, there is an Associate Director for Technology, and there is an Associate

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Director for Administration. Within Collections (my portfolio) there are three departments that report to me: (1) the Institute Archives and Special Collections, (2) Scholarly Communications and Collections Strategy, and (3) Acquisitions and Discovery Enhancement. I also have a fourth direct report to me, which is the Head of Digital Preservation Program. She reports to me directly because digital preservation informs how all of our collections work.

As the Associate Director for Collections, can you describe your typical day at work at the MIT Libraries?

Like most administrators, my usual day involves a lot of meetings. In fact, I find that I could spend nearly all of time either in meetings or writing email. Therefore, each day I reserve a couple of hours for reading and quiet reflection. By doing this, I try to avoid the danger of using my email inbox as a “to do” list, which would result in my not appropriately focusing on long-term strategies and progress.

What is the current size of the collection at the MIT library? Could you also describe what you would call the highlights of your collections?

The print book holdings size is just over 1.3 million. We also have just over 1 million items in print journals and approximately 23,000 linear feet in archival materials.

At MIT, in our collections, we have an active rare books and special collections program. We have some terrific rare books on the history of science and engineering, and we also have an exciting artists’ book collection held in our Rotch Library, which houses our art collections. The artists’ book collections are typically exciting, because they bring together the visual arts and the engineering and construction of the book as a format in ways that really represent MIT.

I would like to highlight some other collections as well. One is the Aga Khan Documentation Center, which is a collection of print materials and manuscripts and visual materials that document the architecture and visual culture from the Middle East. This is a very exciting program that would fall under the category of Area Studies collections. The other collection I would like to highlight is our Open Access Article collection. Since 2009, MIT Libraries has been deeply involved in operationalizing the MIT faculty policy on open access. We are proud to say that since the

enactment of that policy, 44% of the faculty have produced journal literature captured and opened to the global community through our institutional repository. If I had to pick a collection that I really want to highlight above all of the others, I think it would be our open access collection because it really represents our commitment at MIT to build collections, foster healthy scholarly communications environment, and make access to information as broadly available as possible on the global scale.

*Can you describe your management and leadership style?*

Leadership is something I think about a lot, especially as I have made the transition from being a bibliographer/practitioner to being in a senior leadership position. The difference between being a domain expert and a leader is that the domain expert actually does the work, and excellence in work is something that you do immediately and through your own efforts. In a leadership position, work is accomplished through others and empowering them to succeed. It is about listening and learning. It means hiring fabulous, talented, creative, and engaged people, and giving them the tools and creating the context and organizational culture in which they can be successful. It means providing a vision for where collections are going, and then building an appreciation for how everyone’s work is playing a role and realizing that vision. That is my view on leadership, and by extension, that is why mentoring is so important. If leadership is about empowering others and that you get work done through others being successful, mentorship is a critical part of that. How do you develop talent? How do you coach talent? How do you create a context so that your staff are in a position to be successful?

I would also like to make a very important point. Leadership is NOT management. These are very different roles, though they are similar. Both managers and leaders need to understand what it means to succeed through others being successful. Both managers and leaders need to know how to recruit and nurture talented staff. But leaders also have to supply a large vision and narrative—where are we going and how does everyone fit into that larger story and context? Leaders need to articulate not just what the work is, but also why it is important. Another way I like to say it is that managers will get the work done right, but leaders determine what the right work is.

*Which parts of your work as an MIT librarian do you find most rewarding and which do you find most frustrating?*

I think this follows up really well with the previous question. What I find most rewarding is seeing those around me be successful. When I
made the transition from a bibliographer to an administrator, one of the things I was concerned about was, as about any bibliographer would say, how much I would miss building collections. Of course, I miss building collections and I miss being engaged with collections on a day-to-day basis, but it is safe to say that the joy I take in empowering others to be successful is what I find most rewarding. I am delighted that I have made this transition.

What do I find most challenging? I love the work that I am privileged to do at MIT. There are a bit of challenges in the role that I am adjusting to in terms of the time commitments, meeting schedules, the day-to-day rhythms of a senior administrator, which are very different from that of a bibliographer. I think that it’s safe to say that, at least after a year at MIT, the joy I take in watching other people be successful far outweighs any of the challenges I have. There is nothing I can find that I find to be really frustrating.

I understand that the values of diversity, inclusion, and social justice are becoming increasingly important at the MIT Libraries. Could you talk more about these values and how they inform your work?

Diversity and inclusion are important values at MIT, the larger institute. How are we recruiting a diverse student body? How are we recruiting a diverse staff? We are a global institution. We believe that an inclusive environment is going to lead to the best research and teaching and further our mission.

In the library’s context, I believe we are keenly aware that our demographics are somewhat out of step with the rest of the student body. We do not have as racially or ethnically diverse a workforce as our student body. That is something that we are actively pursuing in progressing in terms of recruitment and retention and staff development. Those are important issues for us. Diversity, as I see it, is recruiting an ethnically and racially diverse workforce. Inclusion, I think, is something different. It is about building a culture and a context such that we are proactively welcoming different viewpoints and perspectives and experiences. It is not enough to just recruit a diverse workforce—we also want to be actively creating a culture where everyone is welcome and in a position to thrive.

Social justice, for me, is about power and having an awareness of how nexuses of power inform our organizational work, our collections, and our activities within scholarly communications. It is being aware of commercial interests within a scholarly communications environment. If we
are purchasing content that has licensing terms or is gated in ways that we find divergent from our commitment to open access and democratized access to information, then we need to be aware that our spending is actually incentivizing models that are at odds with our values. Having a social justice mind-set is bringing awareness of our values of democratizing access to information, democratizing access to knowledge on a global scale, and really bringing that awareness to all of our activities. For instance, we recently submitted a letter to the Library of Congress asking for a subject heading for a catalog change. One of the subject headings was for “illegal aliens.” We stated that we wanted to change that terminology. We found that terminology to be problematic, possibly offensive, and we worried about the message such terminology sends to users about our values. That social justice, diversity, and inclusion perspective informs what we buy, how we catalog and make available items, and really bringing awareness to all of our work.

A number of world-renowned scholars and scientists are affiliated with MIT. How does it feel like to be working with them under the same institution and knowing that you play an important part in supplementing their research and scholarly activities on a daily basis?

It’s exciting! It is inspiring and stimulating, but it also informs us of our sense of mission. MIT, as an institute, is committed to solving the world’s great challenges. The library is a resource, a partner, to help our students and researchers be as successful as they can be. Increasingly, in a collections context, the library is an open access platform through which MIT can share the fruits of its research with the global community on an open access model. While it is inspiring working with the students and faculty here, overwhelmingly, I think the sense in the library is that it is a big responsibility to serve as a platform to disseminate the research and the knowledge production at MIT for the global community. We are not just producing research for MIT, but we’re creating it for the world. We want to make sure that the research and the resources here at MIT are readily available to people outside of MIT as they are available to people on-campus.

What would you say to current students working in Library Science and other students considering joining the field?

I would like to use a quote from a prominent scientist, Richard Feynman, who was a graduate of MIT. In addition to being a brilliant scientist, he was just a wonderful personality. He has this wonderful quote where he would introduce a lecture, and he would say to his students, “I
can’t wait to tell you about this absurdity because I find it so delightful!” I love that quote because I believe that libraries are in a place where they are facing existential questions. What is the purpose of the library in the digital age? What are collections—do data sets and preprint count the same as books? What is the future of the book? What are the copyright and intellectual property contexts that will foster creativity and innovation? One reaction to all of this ambiguity could be confusion and a lack of morale, perhaps even frustration. But, for me, as we face these challenges in the postprint world, I am reminded of Richard Feynman. I would welcome everyone to come in because these questions we are wrestling with matter and they are important. They are just delightful! I love coming to work.

**Do you have any regrets about your career? If you got a second chance, would you have done things differently?**

In terms of career trajectory (deciding to go to library school, deciding to go to Yale, then Harvard, then MIT), no. I have been very fortunate in my career and my decisions. I am very happy with my career trajectory. If there were anything specifically about something I have done within this trajectory, then yes, of course! If I were to give you one example, it took me a few years in building collections to understand that access is not preservation, and that the full appreciation of the full lifecycle of collections is crucial to the collection-building process. I think that in the wake of the financial crisis, when we were looking to do things as efficiently and effectively as possible, those pressures led me to overestimate the value of licensed e-resources. If you purchase them effectively, you can minimize selection, but if you do so in ways that don’t always take into account the long-term preservation needs of collections. Spending increasing proportions of the collections budget on licensed e-resources can also have unattractive implications for the larger scholarly communications landscape. That understanding took me some years to develop. If I could do it again, I would have come to that realization earlier. But, it’s all a learning process!

**Anything inspiring you would like to share to conclude this interview?**

Libraries and, certainly, library collections are in the midst of existential questions. These questions are important. How we answer them has consequences. This is why I love our work—the questions are important and open and the stakes are high. Archives and libraries are exciting and important places to be at the moment, and I encourage those interested to join the conversation.
Barker Engineering Library, MIT.

Greg Eow, Associate Director for Collections, MIT.
Hayden Memorial Library, MIT.

Rotch Arts and Architecture Library, MIT.