Investing in Prevention: Collections Emergency Training at the Harvard Library

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Investing in Prevention: Collections
emergency training at the Harvard Library

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Introduction
The library of Harvard University is a group of over 70 local libraries around the city of Boston in northeast United States. Many are housed in historic buildings with equally historic mechanical systems. Failures of these systems and Boston’s extreme weather cause a water emergency on average once a month. Over the past 20 years, Harvard has documented 151 emergencies that affect library collections. To prevent collection loss, reduce staff stress, and hasten recovery, Harvard Library has created broad-based emergency training for library staff at all levels. Since 2001, over 500 staff have been trained in how to create and practice an emergency plan, how to initially respond to an emergency, and how to salvage specific collection formats. The training is improved by incorporating lessons learned during actual emergencies. Well-trained staff responses have resulted in minimal loss.

Harvard previously provided comprehensive emergency planning, response, and salvage training in one day-long workshop for library staff and administrators. Feedback indicated that participants were overwhelmed; they learned individual skills but did not internalize the concepts most important to their roles, such as safety (circulation staff), priorities (collection managers) and business continuity (administrators). The content was then divided into topical workshops focused on the needs of each audience.

Planning
Planning training consists of two programs: benchmarking workshops and tabletop exercises. For library managers and administrators, “Jumpstart Your Emergency Plan” training is separated from the other hands-on workshops and lasts just 1-½ hours. Offered in both spring and fall, the training coincides with budget and strategic planning. Each library benchmarks their current plan and sets goals for the upcoming year. For libraries that do not yet have plans,
a Harvard-specific collections emergency plan template provides a starting point. ([link](https://tinyurl.com/ybamcdn8))

Benchmarking is done in break-out groups, each library working with its own plan and team members, with coaching from various experts. The benchmarking checklist ([link](https://tinyurl.com/y975tt3h)) outlines goals in four sections. Planning outlines documents and procedures that help a library quickly return to full operation (Fig. 1). Communication assesses how information flows between those who discover an emergency and those who need to make decisions about it. Space & Facility looks at how to mitigate building-related risks. Staff Preparedness details recommended emergency supplies and staff training. Within each section the goals are prioritized into Basic, Good and Best Practices, with Basic being the most important (but not necessarily easy). Feedback from library directors and team leaders indicates that they highly value the structured opportunity to meet and think about their plan; if left to do it on their own, it may go to the bottom of the priority list and not get done in a timely manner.

**Figure 1. Excerpt from Harvard Emergency Preparedness Benchmarks**
Tabletop exercises offer local library emergency teams the opportunity to test and learn their plans. Templates for different scenarios (https://tinyurl.com/y7og9agh) include a hurricane, minor water leak, major pipe burst, construction dust contamination, and power outage. These templates can be customized by location to make it as realistic as possible.

A preservation expert facilitates the tabletop exercise. Projected slides alternate between Scenario slides that narrate the event in chronological order, and Question slides that prompt open discussion. The facilitator provides hints to encourage discussion if the group is reticent. Some participants feel awkward doing role-playing and have trouble suspending disbelief because the scenario isn’t perfectly realistic. But they are grateful when unanticipated issues are revealed, and they come away with tasks and questions to resolve. These exercises help staff internalize their plan and improve it.

**Response**

Two different response trainings include a full-day workshop for library staff and managers, and a one-hour basic training for temporary and student workers. Both are provided to the staff most likely to discover an emergency. They focus on what to do immediately when first discovering an emergency that affects collections.

The full-day workshop is logistically complex and requires planning several months in advance. Participants learn to execute basic response procedures, including health & safety risk analysis, damage assessment, communication, and protecting collections from further harm.

A mock emergency with non-collection materials on shelving is set up in an outdoor parking lot. The materials are doused overnight with hoses. Participants are divided into teams of people who do not normally work together, helping them build their professional network. Teams look for safety threats, assess the source and quality of the water, and note any structural damage. They quickly document the formats and amounts of collections that are at risk of damage (Fig. 2). They make a phone call to practice reporting the emergency. They protect collection materials by draping the shelves with plastic sheeting and learn strategies to safely remove wet items from the shelf.
Figure 2: Response training participants removing wet collections from shelving.

Hands-on activities alternate with presentations. A discussion panel features a facilities manager, an Environmental Health and Safety officer, and a Harvard police officer, who share different perspectives on communication, safety, and collaboration during emergency response. Library managers present case studies from actual emergencies, giving tips on effective communication and decision-making. A registrar discusses documentation and insurance issues. A mental health professional talks about managing stress during emergency response.

Participant feedback pointed to a need for short response training for student/temporary workers that condenses the full-day workshop into a one-hour session. (https://tinyurl.com/y9dlqec4) Participants learn site-specific communication protocols, rapid safety, building, and collection assessment, and methods for preventing further damage. After quick hands-on demonstration of wet, stained, and mold-damaged books, the group breaks into teams that procure emergency supplies and drape plastic over library shelving.

**Collections Salvage**

Salvage training is another full-day workshop for collections staff from all parts of the library. The goal of the day is for staff to learn practical collection salvage techniques. Because 97% of previous library emergencies involved water, our salvage training focuses on wet materials. The
training covers format identification, assessment criteria (scale and extent of damage), prioritizing for stabilization, air-drying techniques, and packing for transport or freezing. Four specialists demonstrate salvage techniques for books, unbound paper, photographs, and audiovisual materials. Participants practice the techniques during format-specific hands-on sessions. They learn firsthand the challenges of handling wet library materials. Participants also learn that a surprising amount of supplies, space, and logistics are needed to execute a salvage operation.

Many staff are not able to accurately identify specific audiovisual formats, which creates a barrier to salvaging them properly. A separate workshop focuses on audiovisual format identification coupled with salvage techniques (Fig. 3). This workshop also increases staff awareness of the importance of planning and prevention for audiovisual materials.

![Figure 3: Collections Salvage training participants assessing a bin of wet audiovisual materials](image)

**Overall Lessons Learned**

It is important to acknowledge that emergencies are stressful. They may impair one’s judgment and can cause injuries. In the all-day response training, a trauma specialist helps participants understand their physiological and emotional response to emergencies. In shorter trainings, emotional as well as physical stress impacts are discussed. The feeling of urgency during an emergency response can override common sense as well as physical symptoms of fatigue. Taking breaks and practicing mindfulness can help; looking out for co-workers’ needs is also key. These breaks are modeled during training.
Collaboration and teamwork are also highlighted. While developing training content, collection managers, facilities staff, and health and safety experts are consulted to ensure their responsibilities and expectations are represented. The training introduces concepts and teaches a few useful skills, but the most important thing to come away with is the sense that participants are not and should not be alone when dealing with an emergency. In the training, participants are encouraged to learn from each other and work as a team. They learn to trust their colleagues and call on their wider network when they need it. By expanding their network of local experts, they learn that they are more effective during emergencies when they collaborate.

Not everyone enjoys emergency training. But most participants increase their comfort level with unpredictability, appreciate the importance of good communication, realize how stress impacts decision-making, and recognize the challenges that others will be confronting during an emergency. Harvard has experienced many collections emergencies over its history. In more recent decades, this comprehensive training approach has prevented collection loss and kept staff safe. The training sessions have even inspired some libraries to stop procrastinating on their emergency planning efforts.
Many of Harvard University’s 70+ libraries are housed in historic buildings with legacy mechanical systems. HVAC failures and Boston’s extreme weather cause a collections emergency on average once a month. Over the past 20 years, Harvard has documented over 150 emergencies that affect collections. To prevent collection loss, reduce staff stress and hasten recovery, broad-based emergency training is provided to library staff at all levels. Since 2001, over 500 staff have been trained in how to create and practice an emergency plan, how to initially respond to an emergency, and how to salvage specific collection formats. The training is improved by incorporating lessons learned during actual emergencies. Well-trained staff responses have resulted in minimal loss.

Comprehensive emergency planning, response and salvage training started as a day-long workshop for library staff and administrators. Participants acquired skills but did not necessarily internalize concepts such as safety, prioritization, and business continuity. Subsequent training divided the content into topical workshops tailored to the needs of different audiences.

Six workshops are offered in a 2-year cycle. Planning workshops are offered to decision-makers with budget authority. Response training is for the public services, collection management, and operations staff likely to discover an emergency. Salvage skills are taught to conservation and curatorial staff who can then train others during an actual emergency.

**Planning**

Planning training consists of two types of programs: group benchmarking workshops to create and improve building-specific emergency plans, and customized tabletop exercises to practice them.

The 1-½ hour “Jumpstart Your Emergency Plan” workshop for administrators coincides with annual budget and strategic planning cycles. Each library brings their current emergency plan to the workshop. For groups that do not yet have plans, a Harvard-specific template provides a starting point. [https://tinyurl.com/ybamcdn8](https://tinyurl.com/ybamcdn8)

A discussion panel includes experts in risk management & insurance, facilities operations, administration, and health & safety. Staff from libraries with current plans inspire those who do not yet have them by talking about how they got them written. Participants then break into groups for a practical benchmarking exercise. Each group works with its own plan, and panelist experts coach the groups. They go through a benchmarking checklist which has four categories of goals. [https://tinyurl.com/y975tt3h](https://tinyurl.com/y975tt3h)

**Planning** outlines the documents and procedures that help recovery of full operation (Figure 1). **Communication** assesses how information flows between those who discover an emergency and those who need to make decisions about it. **Space & Facility** looks at how to mitigate building risks. **Staff Preparedness** addresses recommended emergency supplies and staff training. Within each section, the goals are prioritized into Basic, Good and Best Practices.
Checkboxes indicate if a goal has been met, partly met, or not yet met. Feedback from administrators indicates that they value the structured opportunity to meet and think about their plan; if left to do it on their own, it may not get done in a timely manner.

**Figure 1: Excerpt from Harvard Emergency Preparedness Benchmarks**

Tabletop exercises help to test and learn the plan. Templates with different scenarios include a hurricane and construction dust contamination; a minor water leak, a major pipe burst, and a power outage are under development. A facilitator guides the exercise with projected Scenario slides narrating the event in chronological order, alternating with Question slides to prompt discussion. The exercise reveals unanticipated issues and questions to resolve. Tabletops help staff to internalize their emergency plan and improve it. Use a Google Chrome browser to view the templates in this Google Drive folder: [https://tinyurl.com/y7og9agh](https://tinyurl.com/y7og9agh)

**Response**

To teach people how to respond to an immediate situation, two different hands-on trainings are offered: a whole-day workshop for full-time staff, and one-hour basic training for temporary and student workers.

The full-day response workshop is logistically complex. A mock emergency with securely braced metal shelving is set up in an outdoor parking lot, with a water source and a storm drain. Non-collection materials are put on the shelves and doused overnight from above with soaker hoses. The next morning, participants are divided into teams of 5-6 people each. The goal is to learn basic response procedures. They look for safety threats (e.g. an electrical cord trailing through a puddle), assess the source and quality of the water and note any structural damage to the shelving or adjacent space. They document the formats and amounts of collections that are at risk of damage (Figure 2). Then they make a phone call to practice reporting the emergency. Finally, they protect collection materials by draping the shelves with plastic sheeting, and they learn strategies to remove awkward items safely from a top shelf.

**Figure 2: Response training participants removing wet collections from shelving.**

Hands-on activities alternate with presentations. Local first responders share different perspectives on safety and collaboration during emergency response. Curators present case studies and lessons learned from actual emergencies, giving tips on effective communication and decision-making. A registrar discusses documentation. The day concludes with a presentation by a psychologist who helps participants understand physiological and emotional response to emergencies.
For student workers and temporary staff, the response content is condensed into a 1-hour session that can be taught inside a library. A local manager goes over site-specific communication protocols. A 15-minute presentation covers rapid assessment of safety, building and collection risks, and how to prevent further damage. [https://tinyurl.com/y9dlqec4](https://tinyurl.com/y9dlqec4) Students handle a few wet books that feel surprisingly cold and heavy. They then locate emergency supplies and drape plastic over library shelving. Students who have taken this training feel more confident about their public services duties, now that they know how to handle potentially dangerous situations.

Collections Salvage

Two types of salvage training address how to stabilize damaged collections: a full-day all-formats salvage workshop, and another workshop specifically for audiovisual materials. Since 97% of Harvard’s emergencies involve water, the focus is on wet materials.

The all-formats salvage training is delivered via short lectures, demonstrations, detailed handouts, hands-on practice, and group debrief after each hands-on session to share questions and key takeaways. Content includes identification of various formats, criteria for assessing the scale and extent of the damage, and prioritization of different formats for quick intervention. Four conservators demonstrate how to handle wet books, unbound paper, photographs, and do just a brief introduction to digital and audiovisual materials. Then participants practice handling and salvage techniques during format-specific hands-on sessions which cover how to air-dry a limited amount of material on-site, and how to properly pack items for transport or freezing. Participants learn that surprising amounts of supplies, space, logistics, and staff are needed to execute a salvage operation, as well as the importance of consulting the conservation team any time they encounter wet collections.

Many staff are not able to accurately identify historic audiovisual formats, which makes it difficult to set priorities and determine appropriate salvage techniques. Separate training for audiovisual materials teaches audiovisual format identification to the level of detail needed for prioritizing, then demonstration and hands-on practice of format-specific salvage and packing techniques (Figure 3).

Lessons Learned

Over almost two decades of providing training, overall lessons learned include the importance of managing stress, building a solid team, collaborating with various experts, and focusing on specific audiences.

Emergencies cause stress which may impair our judgment or result in injuries. That dire feeling of urgency can override common sense, causing people to dismiss established protocols
and ignore symptoms of fatigue. To prepare for this, staff are encouraged to practice mindfulness techniques. Taking breaks and finding things to laugh about, as well as being aware of coworkers’ well-being, are explicitly modeled during training. Participants also learn that they will be more effective during emergencies when they work with others.

In developing training curricula, advanced input and then detailed feedback is requested from participants, instructors, and panelists from within and outside the library. This rigor has resulted in more audience-focused training so that participants thoroughly learn skills that are appropriate for their roles, and perspectives of Operations and other partners are included.

Through training, participants increase their comfort level with unpredictability, appreciate the importance of good communication, realize how stress impacts decision-making, and recognize the challenges that others will be confronting during an emergency. Harvard has witnessed many collections emergencies over its history. Its investment in a comprehensive training program has prevented substantial collection loss and kept staff safe for two decades. It will grow and change with the needs of the institution.