



Reclamation and Rehabilitation: Creating the Master's Thesis Collection at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near East Studies

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Citation: Madey, Vera. "Reclamation and Rehabilitation: Creating the Master's Thesis Collection at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near East Studies." *Bridging Fields*, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2025). <https://doi.org/10.33682/8wd6-6mma>.

ABSTRACT

Master's Theses occupy a strange liminal position for graduate departments at New York University. Since they are not kept by the university archives, this often renders them inaccessible, and no attempt is made to maintain or document student output. This article is a case study of work done to process and catalog a departmental collection of student Master's Theses. Methodology, use-cases, and intent is detailed in order to demonstrate the potential of the material, and the value in making it accessible to a wider student body.

As I began my graduate program at New York University, I was immediately impressed by the departmental library housed at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near East Studies. However, I found the space to be underutilized, and I began exploring ways to reinvigorate it. Upon learning that it was an acting home for a print collection of student master theses, I decided on a project which focused on the organization and cataloging

of these theses. I believed that this project could produce immediate, tangible results for students, while still contributing to a more significant effort to make the space conducive for both academic work and for the student community. The project was formed to create a shelf organization system and searchable catalog for the print collection of the Near East Department's Master Theses, aimed at servicing an audience of active graduate students.

Problems

Our department is home to a unique library space with a valuable and interesting collection. However, the material has not been properly assessed, documented, or shelved. Library resources are either considered inaccessible due to the mess, or in some cases, totally unknown—there have been instances of Graduate School researchers who have often come looking for items we didn't know we had. Our material consists mostly of things that have been “donated” by past professors, though no gift letter exists which would document material that has been left in this fashion. Half of what's on the shelf are materials which belong to professors using the library as storage space for their books and research. There is no administrative responsibility for the upper floors of the space, no staff is assigned to its maintenance, evaluation, and there is little institutional knowledge regarding its history, use, or contents. Previous evaluations of the collection are limited to deposited sticky notes labelled “keep,” “belongs to _” or “throw away.”

The condition of the student masters theses upon the outset of this effort were similar to that of the whole collection. While the administration had internal records listing authors, titles and year of completion for the material, there was no organization of the print theses—they were lined on the shelf without even chronological assemblage. They also had not been evaluated with regard to whether or not all objects should be accessible— professorial feedback and the presence of readers sheets with administrative information brought up student privacy concerns. So at the outset, problems of documentation, accessibility, and best practices were raised in order to accomplish the immediate completion of this collection.

Approach

To address concerns about the quality and maintenance of the space and its resources, I interviewed students and created a document where students can leave their requests. ^[1] I understood there was a unanimous desire for accessibility, which in the early stages I attempted to meet by clearing surfaces of the kinds of miscellaneous clutter that nobody had previously removed. Since I did not have the position to de-access library materials or return them to their owners, I focused on relocating objects to the third floor of the library, while focusing my operations on continuing to make the second floor usable. Non-archival objects which I removed from the second floor of the library may indicate the state of the floor. There were broken electronics, disused cables, remaining pieces from desktop computers that were previously removed from the building, scrap paper, cardboard boxes, and piles of ethernet cables. Since another frequent student request was “cozy furniture,” with the help of department administration, we sourced beanbags and standing lamps from NYU storage facilities, which I've since given warm temperature bulbs and diffuser shades to make the space more inviting. To accommodate these changes, I removed both furniture and the larger archival objects,

such as a series of 5x6 foot photography prints on posterboard of uncertain origin. Since then, I have noticed an uptick in student presence to the extent that even undergraduate students from our sister departments have begun visiting the building to work in the upstairs library. Even before completing the Master's thesis collection, I saw immediate returns on improving the library space, which was as much an intention of this project as improving access to materials.

To address the problem of access to the student theses, I settled on creating digital and physical catalogs which would be the basis of organization in the library. This brought with it the tasks of assessing the purpose of the collection, ascertaining existing protocols in handling the Master's theses, ensuring the continuation of the collection beyond my semester-long position, and understanding the ethical and legal implications of keeping student work. I again conducted a series of interviews. I spoke to departmental faculty to gather resources, such as prior documents about the collection. I reached out to and interviewed administrators from other New York University graduate departments to understand how they kept Master's theses and PhD dissertations internally. I also conducted interviews with NYU librarians and archivists at Bobst to understand whether any Master's Theses were kept by the school library, and if there were any protocols I could draw from in this regard. I reviewed Standards and Practices literature from The Association of College and Research Libraries in order to clarify my aims and project orientation. Once I had done this preparatory work, I collated my research and began sorting through the material.

Usage

I decided to orient the collection primarily around servicing students in the process of writing their thesis, and secondarily as a resource for departmental memory which would allow for a "collections as data" approach to tracking research trends and historical tendencies in the field of Middle East and Area Studies. I settled on a user-centered approach which emphasized the American Library Association's core principle of discovery.^[2] The practical components of this principle I attempted to integrate were in "organiz[ing] information for effective discovery and access... develop[ing] resource guides to provide guidance and multiple points of entry to information... facilitat[ing] access from preferred user starting points." In this case, I took an approach of thoroughly recording object metadata, and creating multiple catalogs to provide different mediums of research that would service different user needs.

While the Near East Department of the Kevorkian Center is itself small, it offers concentrations in advanced languages (Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Turkish, Hindi/Urdu, and ancient Near Eastern languages), international relations, public humanities, digital humanities, and museum studies, while also supporting dual degree programs for either journalism or library studies. Any given cohort has a wide range of research interests and disciplinary backgrounds, all of which produce a diverse scholarly output. The value of this thesis collection is that it creates a supplement for students to connect with work and with individuals in a context where their scholarly niche may otherwise feel isolated.

The objects in the Master's Thesis collection offer much to students in the process of writing their theses. The collection offers wonderful bibliographic resources. Any given

thesis's bibliography denotes material deemed highly relevant by a professorial committee, while also being very likely useful to another NYU student. The benefit of sourcing bibliographic material this way is that it provides an example of how the research could be integrated into a student's thesis. This is especially true for the wide range of theses that provide examples of integrating research in specialized mediums, like ethnographic fieldwork, journalistic interviews, or in one case, creative autofiction. The collection also can aid students formulating an advisory committee- the Kevorkian Center's interdisciplinary position means that many students seek advisors from other departments, and so locating a relevant thesis can be a great resource for finding professors working in your field, and understanding the kinds of contribution they might make to your thesis if they joined an advisory committee. It is with the use-cases in mind that I approached building the collection's catalog.

The Catalog

The Master's Thesis Collection catalog consists primarily of metadata fields adopted from DublinCore, used to document each object in a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet is intended to be used to record data from newly submitted Master's Theses but will also be the basis for all resources by which students will navigate the collections. I attempted to simplify it as much as possible for the sake of usability. The fields that I used were selected based on three-part criteria: What information would students find most valuable for navigating the collection, which fields would generate unique object entries, [\[3\]](#) and could these fields be easily integrated into the process of thesis submission? I decided upon the following for my metadata fields: Identifier, Cohort, Author, Title, Advisor, Reader, Description, and Subjects. [\[4\]](#)

IDENTIFIER (YEAR, FOLLOWED BY AUTHOR INITIALS (first name, last name), AND ADVISOR INITIALS)	YEAR/ COHORT (Date)	AUTHOR (Creator)	TITLE	ADVISOR (Contributor)	READER (Contributor)	DESCRIPTION	SUBJECT (Geographic)	SUBJECTS Contd. (Library of Congress Subject Headings)
2025-VM	2025	Vera Madey	Sample Article: For the Purposes of Demonstration	n/a (none listed)	n/a (none listed)	This thesis is one which is created for the purposes of presenting to the reader the collection's accompanying catalog. It is an example which hopefully elucidates clearly how the relevant information is presented.	United States	Bibliographic description; Descriptive cataloging; Libraries and information science

Above Image: The digital form of this catalog is a downloadable spreadsheet, made available to students through the department's website. Source: Screenshot, Vera Madey.

The Identifier was to be the basis of shelf organization and was premised on information that could be located with sole reference to the physical object- the year of publication, followed by author initials, and advisor initials. As there is no permanent faculty oversight or official commitment to the department library, I hoped that basing the identifier on the most easily locatable information concerning the print object would provide the most resilient basis for organization and replication.

With the other fields, students can browse the catalog according to their needs. The chronological sorting through the use of the identifier is best suited to intellectual trends and development. The value of the advisor and reader column would be in building an advisory committee for your thesis. The individual geographic subject field would allow students to search by locality and scope, to find who's worked on a given research

subject, who was on their advisory committee, and what work has been produced.

In addition to the geographic subject, every item was assigned keywords about the paper's disciplinary and historical subjects. I formatted these subject headings according to the Library of Congress convention to make them uniform with our wider university library's practices. These geographic and disciplinary tags could be the basis of searches through the collection when students are looking to find work or advisors in their niche.

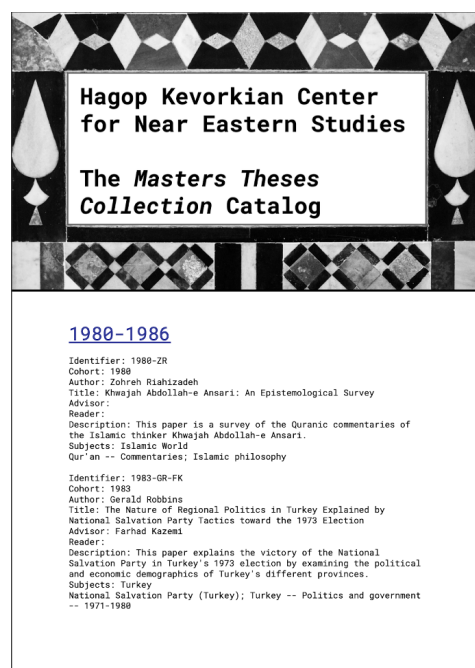
[5]

I also believed students would find great use-value in short descriptive fields for the theses. Abstracts have rarely been printed with the theses in the collection, so I tried to supplement this valuable resource with descriptions that could assist the researcher in browsing material which tends to be difficult to immediately ascertain the argument of. I tried, between descriptive fields, subject heading fields, and geographic subject entries, to include all important subject information with the understanding that students should be able to navigate with the search of keywords.

[6]

Collection Maintenance

I wanted to ensure that this cataloging process could continue after my student tenure. To ensure continuity, the submission process for the theses will include entries for these metadata fields. I have created a submission form with this integrated approach, which also includes consent forms for students to sign. These forms allow students to accept or refuse to have their material kept in the accessible collection, and inform them transparently about what information is being collected, what information is protected, and who has access to the collection. I have also created an "upkeep guide" for departmental circulation, which includes all concerns related to preservation or student privacy that, while important to the integrity of the collection, do not appear in the student copy of the catalog.



Above Image: A sample page of the collection's print catalog Source: Screenshot, Vera Madey.

The Collection

The collection is currently housed on the second floor of the Hagop Kevorkian Center Library and is accessible to the students and faculty of the department. Individual objects are sorted chronologically, according to their identifier, and are grouped by year in labelled standing folders. Alongside each of these folders, I have included modified print copies of the catalog alongside the theses. These print catalogs detail the contents of each academic cohort contained in the grouped folder. Two digital catalogs also exist—one catalog for administration use has Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act-related concerns and conservation notes, while the student copy omits these backend details. The space will remain formally as a designated quiet space for research and study, and my hope is that through continued use, the department can realize its value and encourage further efforts towards its restoration.

Conclusion

I hope that from the creation of this collection, students will have the immediate benefit of streamlining the process of writing their thesis, and connecting to an intellectual network beyond the immediate scope of their peers. In a broader sense, this project is aimed at reinvigorating a space that, with some attention, could become a resource for both research and community. I hope that this revitalization can be accomplished both by utilizing the space, but also by encouraging the kind of continued student use that will generate a demand for library access. In addition, I intend for this to be integrated, appropriated, or adjusted according to any future university efforts to catalog Masters Theses. These objects unfortunately occupy a strange limbo which has rendered them inaccessible at New York University, but I hope my work can serve to demonstrate the worth in making this kind of data and material available to their student body.

References:

"Standards for Libraries in Higher Education", American Library Association, August 29, 2006, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/standardslibraries> .

"Information Literacy Standards for Anthropology and Sociology Students", American Library Association, February 6, 2008, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/anthro_soc_standards .

[1] The *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*, published by the Association of College and Research Libraries, suggests this strategy for answering questions of collection access.

[2] *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*, The Association of College and Research Libraries (2018), 10-11.

[3] For example, if all objects are of the same "Type," I omitted "Type" as a field for user clarity.

[4] Cohort here is used in place of the field "Date", Author in place of "Creator", and Advisor and Reader both correspond to the "Contributor" fields.

[5] The institutional-departmental value of this could be in research which can take this data, and identify research trends as well as what in the department is oversaturated or underserved. This type of report would be an ideal way to extend this project if I had the chance to do so, as I think it could greatly inform departmental practice.

[6] To accomplish this, I drew heavily from the Key Behaviors for Success as outlined in the ALA's *Information Literacy Standards for Anthropology and Sociology Students*, which stresses the importance of being literate in scholarly methods. I attempted to detail methods as often as possible in cataloging these objects, to highlight both diversity in approach, and to cater to students looking for specifically methodologically relevant work.

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