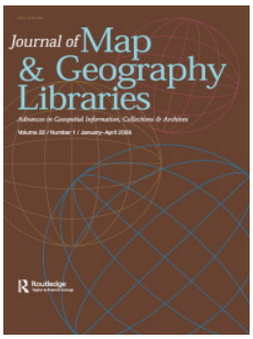

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Pursuing Map Collection Collaboration: A Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Map collections in academic libraries represent a rich but underutilized resource, often excluded from large-scale collaborative initiatives due to their complex formats and cataloging challenges. This article explores the opportunities and barriers to deeper collaboration in managing born-on-paper map collections, with a focus on multi-sheet sets. It outlines the unique characteristics of map collections that affect collaboration and proposes a research agenda to advance knowledge relating to collection description, sharing and collaboration sustainability. By addressing issues of metadata, scanning, copyright, and user engagement, the article advocates for closer collaboration that unlocks the full potential of map collections for research and public access.

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Libraries; maps; collection management; collaboration

Introduction

Library professionals learned long ago that collaborations can result in greatly improved service for their populations and advancement of institutional goals. A report exploring the idea of deepening collection collaboration among Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA) libraries outlines the benefits of collaboration as:

1. To extend the reach of materials available to users beyond those available at one library
2. To make their management more efficient (by sharing costs, responsibilities, and expertise)
3. To coordinate collections above the individual library level, allowing individual libraries to specialize and contribute more extensively within a defined network of responsibilities
4. To collaboratively steward the scholarly and cultural record (Dempsey, Malpas, and Sandler 2019, 12).

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4. Primary graphic and geospatial data files only; does not include GIS support files such as *.shx, *.prj, *.tfw, etc.
5. Foundational to any such technology is a need for geographic coordinates of the 4 corners of each map encoded in digital form. Once created, platforms and technologies can come and go and the coordinate data can migrate forward. The coordinate data must be expressed for every piece, not a single set for an entire map series as we often see in library catalogs and Worldcat. A variety of tools have arisen that ease the process of georeferencing scanned paper maps, notably GEODEX described below. Newer initiatives that focus on transforming paper maps into digital geospatial data certainly exist, notably Allmaps (Meijers and Schoonman 2025), Klokan's MapRankSearch (Klokan 2025) and Machines Reading Maps (Vitale et al. 2022). Further research is needed for a clearer picture of the current state of map sheet description and its uptake by map libraries.
6. See the WAML Map Librarian's Toolbox "Date Codes" section: https://waml.org/resources/toolbox/maps/date-codes-for-maps/.
7. This article uses the term 'scanning' to indicate creation of a static digital file from an analog map such as an un-georeferenced TIF or JPG. It reserves the term 'digitize' for the transformation of analog or raster files into vectors, such as tracing road networks on a paper map into a vector file for use in a Geospatial Information System (GIS).
8. As of 12 Sept 2025: Library of Congress 57,923; National Library of Scotland: 420,000; USGS: 170,653; Perry Castaneda Library at the University of Texas: 70,000; David Rumsey: 142,359.
9. The literature on controlled digital lending focuses primarily on books. Maps, especially internationally published maps, can present new levels of bafflement concerning copyright and further discussion and research on this topic is worthwhile to inform projects relating to sharing scanned map files.
10. Membership of the BTAA library initiatives consists of the institutional members of the Big Ten Athletic Conference plus University of Chicago (BTAA, Member Libraries: https://btaa.org/library/who-we-are/member-libraries). Membership in the BTAA-GIN Program is slightly different (BTAA-GIN, Institutions: https://gin.btaa.org/team/institutions/).

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Kathleen W. Weessies**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).