



RARE BOOKS AND THE COLLEGE LIBRARY: CURRENT PRACTICES IN MARRYING UNDERGRADUATES TO SPECIAL COLLECTIONS¹

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In this paper I wish to accomplish three things. First, I would like to theorize about how we bring students to our table, for I believe that we must have some understanding of this process in order to be positively committed to providing programs to undergraduates. Second, I would like to present the results of a recent survey I carried out investigating the current state of special collections in liberal arts college libraries. Then I shall describe briefly a few specific programs that have existed in the last several years—some rather innovative and some quite traditional—that have directly involved undergraduates with the special materials in our care as part of their normal educational process.

So, how do we bring students to our table?

Or, how do we bring undergraduates in particular to the materials in our special collections to enhance their educational experience? How do we make this vital connection? We are certain that doing so will be good for their education for we have seen the special power of enlightenment that our collections have on users. We all know that if students can be lured into special collections and exposed to the rare books, manuscripts, photographs, and other materials in our care, a certain

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kind of seduction will often take place. Paul Moser, vice-provost and director of Libraries at the University of Pennsylvania, has named the fundamental source of this seduction “sacro-power,” the power to attract which emanates from the very being of primary materials.

Imagine a silent, sleepy group of 18- to 20-year-old students herded into a special collections department at 8:00 on a Monday morning. The librarian or curator has placed a book of hours on a central table, and as the students are drawn to it and crowd around it, the silence is broken with pleased murmurs. There are some old folk riddles that speak about this experience from the book’s point of view. I quote a rare book speaking: “No principal or teacher, I can make everyone in the world talk without saying a single word.” Here is another book speaking, probably from the nineteenth century:

I open at all seasons of the year,
Sometimes more full-leafed than a double rose,
And frequently most beauteous I appear
When least of inward fragrance I disclose.

My leaves are mostly of pearly white,
Bespecked with ebon, and they oft impart
A mystic influence, when scanned aright,
Of wondrous power upon the mind and heart.

A book or any other object in special collections is nothing until a human being interacts with it. Yet the rare book does have an intrinsic quality that beckons to human beings to do just that. This is somewhat Aristotelian: the book is an immovable object that can just sit on that table at 8:00 Monday morning. Without moving an inch, it has within itself the power to “move” all the students in the room toward it, both physically and intellectually. This is what I believe Moser means by the “sacro-power” of books.

Figuratively, it is our work to set the table for this meeting and attraction to occur. This is not always easy. Nationwide, the education of too many undergraduates these days depends on large lectures and assignments that consist of reading a vast quantity of secondary literature. The lucky few of us from institutions whose mission it is to educate and nurture undergraduates in the liberal arts may find the task easier. However, even in liberal arts colleges, the special collections department is not always perceived or used as a humanities laboratory. I believe the key is the faculty.

When students, alongside their teacher, gain access to original materials, then a conversation of mythical proportions becomes possible. Students and their teacher can converse over these materials. When the “sacro-power” of books takes hold, they themselves will begin to converse with human beings of every other age without regard for the normal restrictions of time, culture, or language. The teacher is the leader and true facilitator of this dialogue. Therefore, it behooves librarians

and curators not only to charm faculty into collaborative efforts with them but to become master teachers themselves. I do not pretend to know how this may be accomplished. I do know that it is within the power of dedicated teachers who know the educational benefits of exposure to primary sources to bring students to rare books and manuscripts. They do this through their own enthusiasm and example, or, if more is necessary, through their coercive power within the educational system. Once object and student are brought together, they may be left somewhat on their own for the attraction to occur and the love affair to blossom. In other words, the teacher really must be a matchmaker.

What is the current state of special collections in liberal arts college libraries and what might it mean for matchmaking?

I can relate lots of anecdotal information about special collections in college libraries, and years ago I had formed many opinions based on this anecdotal material. However, since I knew of no source of quantitative data to describe the current state of affairs of special collections in college libraries, in the fall of 1995 I surveyed the directors of those liberal arts college libraries who have loosely affiliated themselves for the past ten years with what is known as the Oberlin Group—composed of almost 75 institutions from the first three tiers of the “Best National Liberal Arts Colleges,” as defined by *U.S. News & World Report* in its annual rankings of “Best Colleges.”²

Of the 74 directors surveyed, 66 or almost 90% returned completed questionnaires that were usable. Most surveys had been completed by the college library directors themselves. A few directors passed the survey on to special collections staff for completion. There were nine questions about the types of material in their special collections; staffing levels; hours of availability; existence of endowed funds; and the ways in which special collections supported instruction, research, and history of the book instruction. Additional comments were invited.

Survey results

More than 95% (95.45%) of the liberal arts college libraries had rare book collections, about 82% (81.82%) had manuscripts collections, more than 95% (95.45%) had responsibility for the college archives, but fewer than one-quarter (22.73%) had responsibility for the college art collections.

Staffing is slim. Almost 30% (28.79%) of the colleges surveyed do not have any professional librarian staff time dedicated to special collections. More than 68% have no professional archivist on the staff. A little more than one half (54.54%) have one or fewer full-time professional librarians assigned to special collections. Only 16% percent (16.67%) of the institutions surveyed employ more than one professional librarian to manage special collections. Archivists do not fare as well: only 12% (12.12%) employ a single professional archivist and less than 10% (9.09%) employ more than one.

In spite of minimal staffing, almost half (45.45%) manage to make their special collections available 40 or more hours per week. Only about 10% (10.6%) can make their special collections available by appointment.

Slightly more collections are not endowed—54.55%—as compared to those that are—45.45%. At least four institutions have special collections endowment funds that amount to more than \$1 million, and these four were all on the top 25 “Best National Liberal Arts Colleges” list published by *U.S. News and World Report*. My analysis shows that in the *U.S. News* ranks 1 through 20—about 67% (66.67%) of the institutions listed—have endowed special collections. In ranks 21 to 40, only about 36% (36.36%) have endowed special collections. These ranks make up the first tier. In the second tier, about 36% (36.36%) have endowed special collections, and the third tier, about 40% (41.67%), have endowed special collections.

When asked about the instructional programs that special collections support, the respondents showed that drop-in visits and tours ranked highest, with about 87% (87.88%) reporting such activities. Exhibitions and class visits were reported just below this level at 86.36% and 83.34% respectively. Use of special collections for senior thesis research was reported by two-thirds (66.67%), and another third (36.36%) reported “Other” uses, which included publications and serious research by visiting scholars. Fewer than 20% (18.18%) reported that their special collections were used for a history of the book course. When asked whether their libraries held special collections that had the depth to support research, more than 80% (83.33%) of the respondents said that at least some of their special collections would do so. Almost half (45.45%) of the respondents also said that their special collections had the breadth to support history of the book instruction.

Beginning with the null hypothesis (that there is no correlation between special collections endowment and instructional programs supported by special collections), I did a chi square test to see whether the chi square was consistent with this hypothesis; this test was performed on the variables “endowment” and “number of instructional programs above or below three supported by special collections” ($n = 66$). The chi square number arrived at in this way was 2.62, or less than the critical value of 3.84 ($\alpha = 0.05$; $df = 1$). Therefore, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected and no relationship may be claimed between endowment and number of instructional programs supported by special collections.

I performed a second chi square test to examine the null hypothesis: there is no correlation between number of instructional programs in special collections and tier or rank as determined by *U.S. News & World Report*; once again, the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

The additional comments provided by respondents often lamented understaffing while supporting a strong belief in the usefulness of special collections in college libraries.

I would like to offer a few observations and conclusions from these data. First, there does seem to be an association between top-ranking colleges in the *U.S. News*

list and endowed special collections. That may come as no surprise. We all know that when there are endowed funds, it is possible to have the professional staff and collections to provide a truly fine educational program in rare books and manuscripts for our students, which in turn has a positive impact on their overall educational experience. However, since there is no correlation between endowment and number of instructional programs, and no correlation between number of instructional programs and tier or rank, one may conclude that even lower-ranked institutions without endowed funds manage to provide as many instructional opportunities supported by special collections as do their more wealthy and higher-ranked sister colleges. The quality of these instructional programs remains to be examined.

Second, archives in the liberal arts colleges studied here are woefully understaffed. While 95% of the libraries have responsibility for college archives, barely one in five (21.21%) employs one or more professional archivists.

My third and fourth observations are less obvious. Only about 18% (18.18%) of the colleges I surveyed offer students a history of the book course that is supported by the library's special collections. Yet, almost 50% (45.45%) reported having collections with the breadth to support history of the book instruction. Here is a missed opportunity that may become a grand opportunity. If librarians, curators, and archivists can make those important connections with faculty that I discussed earlier, then these collections can be put to good use, introducing students to and supporting them in the vital interdisciplinary study of books and their design, printing and publishing, reading, and other aspects of material culture. (For want of an appropriately schooled teacher, the special collections librarian may teach the course.)

Finally, if most special collections at liberal arts colleges can support research in some limited areas, then we must make every effort to be sure that these areas at least are listed in standard scholarly reference tools, such as *Ashe's Subject Collections*, where they will be found by interested scholars and possibly by our own faculty. Frances Smith Foster of Emory University observed at a recent Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)/Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) Preconference that collections in college libraries are often much easier and more pleasant for scholars to access than those in the major research libraries.

My only cautionary note would be that opening our collections to outside scholars must be balanced with sensible security measures to prevent exploitation by skilled rare book thieves. With the low level of special collections staffing in many liberal arts college libraries, we may be unable or hard-pressed to provide adequate security.

Programs involving undergraduates with special collections materials

There are real world librarians and scholars who have been matchmakers with undergraduates. I hope my following, necessarily brief, remarks will inspire others to

implement programs. Ruth Rogers has an excellent special collections program at Wellesley College, and there is a wonderful Smith College program—the legacy of Ruth Mortimer. And these are not alone.

Currently, most academic libraries provide some kind of instruction to undergraduate students. If special collections librarians and curators can establish good lines of communication with the other librarians providing these programs, then the programs can be reformulated to be of mutual benefit. A shrewd special collections librarian will note, whenever an instruction librarian meets with a class whose subject matter may connect in some way with the holdings in special collections, that special collections could be visited as part of the instruction. Appropriate texts and manuscripts may then be put on view for the participants. These are brief encounters, of course, but important nonetheless. The glimpse of a beautiful page, an intriguing manuscript hand, a gripping photo, or an important name may be all that is necessary to bring at least a few participants back on another day. Certainly, students will all be less intimidated when they meet with the special collections location code in the online catalog in their future academic years.

Matchmakers of note are a faculty member and a librarian at Millersville University. In the 1980s, they collaborated on instruction aimed at bringing history of the book issues to sophomore English literature majors who were required to enroll in the course “Introduction to Techniques of Literary Research and Analysis.” Two bibliographic instruction sessions were incorporated into the course. “The first provided basic introduction to such essential tools as the *MLA Bibliography*”³ and other standard reference tools in literature, and also provided a brief encounter with special collections. The second met in special collections for an in-depth look at the book as object with an emphasis on when texts end and formats begin.

It is also appropriate to develop instruction sessions independent of any instruction work being done by librarians in other departments or for specific courses. For example, Stephen Ferguson has for a number of years systematically initiated all Princeton University juniors (majoring in classics) in the mysteries surrounding the first printing of classical texts and the teaching and study of classics at Princeton. He uses incunabula from the rare book collection and some of the first books forming the Princeton University library to make his points. While Princeton is larger than most liberal arts colleges, often liberal arts colleges will have the incunabula and other resources to provide some of the same instruction.

Likewise, I have led instruction sessions with undergraduate students that commenced in special collections, whetting their appetites for primary sources. These students, while still somewhat hungry from the experience, were then instructed by an able reference librarian colleague to search the secondary literature to learn more about the primary sources they had actually touched in the earlier part of the session.

Student-curated exhibits are another avenue to pursue. I have great admiration for my former colleague and matchmaker Professor Eric Haskell of Scripps College. A few years ago, he masterfully tutored his students of Humanities 140, "Power or Pleasure: Aesthetic Contexts of the French Garden," to construct four different exhibitions in as many locations. The exhibitions coincided with a colloquium entitled "Rethinking the Eighteenth-Century Garden," which attracted more than 200 participants to the Claremont Colleges. Haskell's aim was to allow his students complete freedom to develop exhibitions suitable for the colloquium from rare books collections across the Claremont Colleges campuses. He worked with the special collections librarians involved, getting the exhibitions on their calendars, with generic titles, well in advance of the academic year in which the colloquium was to take place.

When the actual semester of the colloquium arrived, he assessed the students who had registered for his course and divided them into nearly equal groups to carry out the exhibitions. After a brief but thorough orientation in which Haskell explained his expectations for the group endeavors, including exhibition brochures that were to be entirely student produced, the student groups were left on their own to sink or swim in consultation with the respective librarians. They all swam. They took his generic titles and developed more specific themes that fell within the purview of the colloquium topic and the collections to which they were assigned. They selected books for their exhibitions. They wrote exhibition captions. They did the actual work of mounting the exhibitions after instruction and with assistance from library and special collections staff. Finally, each group produced a respectable exhibition brochure. Of course all of these activities presented challenges for the normal security procedures in the special collections areas involved, but each special collections staff found ways to facilitate its group's activities in spite of these hardships. All were rewarded for their efforts. The exhibitions were stunning and educational. On the actual day of the colloquium, a time was set aside for participants to view the exhibitions. The student groups functioned as docents and answered the guests' questions.

And what was their educational experience? Besides the subject expertise the students gained from their involvement with these rare book collections, the students learned how to complete a project with a group, and they had the experience of "publishing" in the sense that their work in the exhibit cases, including captions, and their work in their brochures was available for a public audience to see. I acknowledge, certainly, that the Claremont Colleges are lucky to have such a professor as Haskell. He invested an extraordinary amount of his own time and effort in this endeavor. And yet a payback was there for him and for those who worked with him and the students. All experienced intense pleasure from the gains the students made and from the overall success of the project. There are other Haskells in academia who could create such faculty/student/librarian collaborations. This kind of joint effort will yield highly profitable use of our collections.

A project assigned as a class collaboration is another way to match the resources of a special collections department or rare book room with undergraduate education. Some of these projects, however, would be impossible with classes larger than 12 to 15 students. That is why small liberal arts colleges, with their smaller class sizes, are perfectly placed to link students with special collections.

I worked with a group of history students in writing a collaborative history of the founding of their college. They were to draw upon documents housed in the college archives. Art students under the direction of a member of the art department faculty can profit from using photographic resources found in some special collections to produce photo-documentary books illustrated by images of local areas. Collegiate presses often use special collections resources for idea-gathering in the production of innovative books that may become known nationally.

An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*⁴ mentions the "Seminar on Historical Evidence" offered at Haverford College every fall semester to junior history majors. This course was also written up by Margaret Schaus in *C&RL News*.⁵ In an effort to bring students closer to the work that historians actually do, this course was developed to give students authentic hands-on experience. Hence, the course has been called "Hands-On History." Students must complete two projects that bring them to special collections. First, they must study and write about an artifact, which may include a historical photograph. Their second assignment is to prepare an edition of a document. Schaus reported, it is not unusual to use manuscript materials to train students in scholarly methods and to demonstrate the gulf between a handwritten document and an edited, printed version. Haverford's approach, however, is noteworthy because each undergraduate works with an unpublished document that has never been used in the seminar. For the students, the feeling of discovery and the sense of scholarly responsibility are heightened because they are the only interpreters of these documents. Furthermore, their papers go on file in special collections with the documents, thus becoming part of the scholarly record.

Special collections staff may find that teaching assignments in bibliography and history of the book complement their work as managers and curators. Workshops or seminars on book collecting or book structures and their care may attract other undergraduate audiences to special collections. These students may not be involved in curricular areas that normally use rare books and manuscripts, but they may have acquired the collecting bug from other experiences. Book collecting contests are a traditional lure for a wide variety of undergraduate students. And college and university archives, if well publicized, may become an important source of historic material for students currently active in student government and student publications, such as newspapers and yearbooks.

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My survey of matchmakers and existing programs reveals one traditional way of drawing students to special collections: the exhibition or display. Year after year,

we spend many creative hours mounting such exhibits, and as we do so, we may wonder sometimes if it is worth all the effort. (Remember, 86% of the institutions I surveyed used special collections to produce exhibitions.) Does anyone ever look at these exhibitions and get moved by them? Some dramatic events took place at Johns Hopkins University in spring 1993 that demonstrate the power of exhibitions. During Black History Month that year—my source of information about this event is the *Chronicle of Higher Education* again—an exhibition was mounted in the library on the subject of the nineteenth-century American abolition movement. Minority students noticed that the pictures and writings of only white abolitionists were in the display cases. They were outraged. Their outrage led to a demonstration that threatened to shut down the university library. Exhibitions do move people.

Knowing this, we should plan exhibitions with balance and sensitivity and with undergraduate interests in mind. What topics are they currently discussing that may connect with special collections holdings? The special collections librarian can find this out by contacting faculty. How can archives and local history collections teach students about their college or university and the community in which it is situated? How can exhibitions instruct those who peer into the exhibit cases, showing viewers dignified pictures of women and men of all races and walks of life? This is the challenge for an exhibition program in the late twentieth century. Such a program can serve as a teaching tool and function as a matchmaker between students and the library.

We hear from time to time of students graduating from college who have never used the library. This problem, and I do think it is a problem, is one of student motivation. When we learn that they have graduated without knowing of or using the resources of special collections, that is a different kind of problem. It is our problem. We know now that at least within liberal arts college libraries associated with the Oberlin Group, there are substantial rare book, manuscript, and archival resources waiting for student use. We also know that the most heavily endowed collections are associated with institutions known for the high quality of the educational experience they offer. But we must remember that in spite of the resources that liberal arts colleges have, most undergraduate students will still need to be wooed into special collections. However, once we have them there and the “sacropower” of our wonderful collections begins to play on their “minds and hearts,” then we matchmakers can sit back and relax. From that moment we can enjoy watching bibliophiles in the making.

As Ruth Mortimer said in her article titled “Manuscripts and Rare Books in an Undergraduate Library,”⁶ “Free to look at what interests them, [undergraduate students] are not under the pressures of time and subject matter, as they will be when they are graduate students. They are learning historical perspective and a sensitivity to the past. And they can hold the past, in book form, literally and carefully in their own hands.”

Notes

1. This essay is a revision of remarks made at the meeting "Books Illustrated: A Symposium Celebrating the Work of Ruth Mortimer," sponsored by the Friends of the Smith College Libraries, Northampton, Massachusetts, April 12 and 13, 1996.

2. *U.S. News & World Report*, September 18, 1995.

3. Stephen Max Miller and Marjorie Markoff Warmkessel, "Bibliographic Instruction, History of the Book, and Post-Structuralism: An Unlikely Combination Helps to Expand the Critical Thinking Skills of Undergraduates," *Research Strategies* 8.2 (Spring 1990): 59-65.

4. February 9, 1996.

5. "Hands-On History," October 1990: 825-31.

6. *Wilson Library Bulletin* (October 1983).