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“ONE DAY...IT WILL BE OTHERWISE:” CHANGING THE REPUTATION AND THE REALITY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS¹

DAVID STAM AND SARAH THOMAS have set forth a number of ideas and suggestions for shaping the nature and the future of special collections in libraries belonging to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). From my perspective as director of the special collections operations in a research library, I want to comment on their recommendations and add a few suggestions that I believe are in line with the vision and strategies they have described. Like Stam, I feel that little, if anything, I say will be new. I know that many of you could offer more insightful observations and recommendations than I will be able to provide. I also recognize that circumstances and resources differ so greatly among ARL members that few, if any, suggestions will have universal applicability. Nevertheless, I hope these remarks will contribute to a stimulating and productive discussion about the role of special collections.

In my experience, the key to eliminating, or at least decreasing, the marginalization of special collections has been active promotion of access to, and use of, those collections. I agree with Daniel Traister's

1. This article consists of remarks made June 28, 2001, at "Building on Strength: Developing an ARL Agenda for Special Collections," a working symposium on the future of special collections in research libraries. The symposium was sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries and held at Brown University on June 27–29, 2001. David Stam, University Librarian Emeritus at Syracuse University, delivered the keynote address, "So What's So Special?" Sarah Thomas, Carl A. Kroch University Librarian at Cornell University, followed Stam with remarks entitled "Siberia, Shangri-La, or Center for Scholarship: Achieving the Vision for Special Collections." For more information on the symposium, see the ARL Web site at <http://www.arl.org/special/>.

observation that for special collections departments and libraries to thrive, it is necessary for them “to come to grips with [the] fundamental drive toward increasing openness” in research libraries.²

Sometime in the late 1980s, a colleague told me that in the special collections library of a major ARL institution on the West Coast, the research room seated thirty people and was often full and the staff handed out numbered tags to researchers waiting for a vacancy in the room. We adopted that scenario as a model. We have not, in fact, achieved quite that degree of demand, but our research room is normally busy, often full, and sometimes overflowing. I know the situation is similar for many other libraries. Encouraging, even promoting, use by students (undergraduate as well as graduate), scholars, and the general public is already standard practice in many special collections.

How do special collections encourage use by students? The staff members do not wait to hear from faculty who may wish to bring their classes to the library. Rather, they examine course offerings, visit academic departments, get to know the faculty, and request copies of syllabi so they can identify courses that might make use of the library’s special collections. They also identify particular holdings of the library that are relevant to those courses and provide information about them to the faculty. They invite classes to the library and offer to make presentations or provide displays of materials for the classes.

The best uses of special collections for undergraduate courses often require some selection and examination of materials in advance to be sure a particular assignment can be completed successfully. Since faculty often do not have or make the time to do this work, special collections staff do it for them. Assignments need not involve writing

2. Daniel Traister, “Is There a Future for Special Collections? And Should There Be? A Polemical Essay,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 1.1 (2000):76.

research papers or producing original scholarship. Some undergraduates are ready for such work, but others are not; and many faculty members are not willing to grade scores of research papers. Other types of assignments—choosing and editing a document from a preselected group of manuscripts, writing a brief interpretive essay or assessment about a primary document or text, and so on—serve the purpose of putting the students in touch with primary sources and providing them with opportunities to develop their analytical and interpretive skills. No, this is not scholarship, but it is learning—a powerful form of learning—and special collections exist to support teaching and learning as well as original scholarship.

Some special collections, for example, the Clark Library at UCLA, also encourage student use by offering competitive fellowships to undergraduates, with faculty sponsors, for doing course-related papers using special collections. Others offer annual awards for the best student papers produced on the basis of research in special collections. Different faculty members can be invited each year to participate in judging the submissions. Establishing and advertising the awards communicates to students that the library wants them to make use of special collections. Inviting faculty to participate in evaluating the papers gives them an opportunity to see how special collections are used in other courses and encourages them to do the same if they are not already committed to doing so.

Grants and awards are useful tools for encouraging use by other researchers as well as students. At Duke, we offer modest research grants on a competitive basis annually to visiting faculty, graduate students, and independent scholars in three of our specialized collecting areas: women's history and culture, African American studies, and advertising history. Numerous other libraries offer similar grants. It is remarkable how many researchers can be brought in with very little funding. In each area, we offer small grants to six or eight researchers,

but meanwhile in the application process, perhaps 30 or so students and faculty members have had to make a case to us—and in the process, to themselves—about how essential our holdings are to their research projects. Consequently, many of the applicants who do not receive awards end up coming anyway.

Special collections also use public programs to raise visibility and encourage use. Staged readings, panel discussions, informal talks, exhibition openings—a steady stream of such programs can create a sense of openness and accessibility for special collections while exposing the student body and the general public to the library's holdings. At the Fales Library, New York University, for example, I believe special collections has hosted or sponsored more than 50 such programs a year.

With respect to exhibitions, I would suggest that, for most of us, the challenge is not to give them less priority but, rather, to make them more appealing and more relevant to university and community interests. Sometimes we in libraries speak of the danger of having special collections become “museums,” as though that were a pejorative term. Anyone who has observed hordes of people swarming through a blockbuster exhibition at a major art museum—or, for that matter, the recent exhibition on utopias at The New York Public Library—knows that exhibiting culturally or historically significant objects can be remarkably popular, entertaining, and educational.

Another way that special collections can promote—and have promoted—access and use is by expanding their hours. Evening and weekend hours are essential for extensive use by undergraduates and the general public. I say evening hours, but perhaps we should be considering late night or early morning hours. This past academic year, when the undergraduate members of our Library Renovation Committee wanted to show university librarian David Ferriero and me how undergraduates use the library building, they said we should meet

them at midnight or 1:00 a.m. Fortunately, they had mercy on us and scheduled the tour between 10:00 and 11:00 p.m.

I would suggest that the need for longer and later hours is a strong reason for consolidating special collection units, or at least their research rooms, in institutions that have multiple, small-staffed special collection operations. The greater the expectations are for outreach, use, and availability for special collections, the more inefficient and unrealistic it becomes to maintain multiple research rooms.

As Stam and Thomas have indicated, promoting access and use also involves dealing with the backlogs of uncataloged and unprocessed materials in special collections. One approach some libraries have taken is to catalog all manuscript and archival collections at the time of acquisition. The libraries establish basic physical and intellectual control by creating a preliminary container list for each collection without processing or organizing the collection and then create an online catalog entry on the basis of the accession record. Likewise with some printed materials, it is possible to provide access by creating searchable databases and archival-like cataloging at a collection or series level when item-level cataloging is not feasible. These approaches are not fully satisfactory substitutes for fuller processing or cataloging, but they do permit researchers to learn about all the collections a library holds and about the main topics documented in them. They also enable the library to consider actual user interest in determining processing and cataloging priorities for accessioned collections.

Encouraging student use, encouraging use by other researchers, expanding hours, eliminating backlogs—these are some of the steps that special collections are taking—and should take—to promote access and use and thus play a central, rather than marginal, role in the life of the research library. In addition to promoting access and use, it is essential that special collections reexamine their collecting focus. For special

collections in academic research libraries, it is critical that current collecting be linked to the sense of identity, goals, ambitions, and academic programs of the university.

For more than 50 years—from the 1930s to the 1980s—the main, though by no means only, focus of manuscript and, to some degree, rare book collecting at Duke University was the American South. By the 1980s, however, Duke no longer saw itself as a southern university but, rather, a national or international university; southern history and literature were no longer central interests for faculty in the history and English departments. Special Collections needed to change its focus or be increasingly marginalized. We were able to continue to build on our strengths by acquiring southern materials in the context of focusing on women's history and culture, African American studies, documentary photography, and other subjects tied to current academic programs at the university.

It is important to distinguish between research interests of current faculty and ongoing institutional commitments to academic programs. Of course, it is not always easy to determine what the latter are, and they too have a way of changing, but not as rapidly as the interests of individual faculty members. At Duke, for example, we had acquired the records of numerous businesses in the course of documenting the American South, and from time to time there were faculty members in history or economics who taught business history. However, there was no ongoing commitment to that field in either department. In contrast, the economics department has several faculty members who conduct research in the history of economic thought and has had an ongoing commitment to that subfield of the discipline of economics. Consequently, the history of economic thought is a much more viable and institutionally useful concentration for us than is business history.

In rethinking collecting focuses for special collections, it is desirable to find areas of congruence between these ongoing institutional commit-

ments and opportunities for regional, national, or international distinctiveness. Serving the former ensures the usefulness of special collections to a primary clientele from the home institution, whereas responding to the latter attracts visiting researchers and makes the library a center for scholarship in its field. As Werner Gundersheimer pointed out in his keynote address at the May 1999 ARL meeting, special collections offer an opportunity to combat the increasing duplication or overlap in research libraries. He quoted the Council on Library and Information Resources report, *Scholarship, Instruction, and Libraries at the Turn of the Century*, which expressed concern about the "trend towards collections which resemble one another to the detriment of amassing collections of unique materials, manuscripts, archives, and rare books."³ But special collections are useful in avoiding this homogenization only to the extent that their holdings are distinctive. Of course, distinctiveness can be achieved even in collecting areas shared with other institutions by emphasizing different aspects of the subject or focusing on manuscript or archival materials, but it also is true that special collections can shortsightedly build duplicative collections in areas already well documented elsewhere.

Perhaps this is what Stam has in mind when he refers to twentieth-century books that should be moved out of special collections into the open stacks. I trust that his concern is with lack of distinctiveness rather than with lack of age. A former director of the Bodleian Library once told me he thought the best way to build extraordinary special collections was to acquire contemporary materials and then keep them for a long, long time. Generally speaking, I believe special collections need to focus on the acquisition of twentieth- and twenty-first-century materials, but again with specialization and distinctiveness based on geography, language, ethnicity, subject, or other collecting criteria.

3. Werner Gundersheimer, "Against the Grain," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 1.1 2000:18.

Actions taken to promote access and use and to reexamine and redefine collecting focus in conjunction with institutional priorities will go far toward repositioning special collections on the library playing field. There are other actions that heads of special collections or library directors can take to break down barriers between special collections and the libraries in which they function. Both parties can seek to increase the involvement of special collections staff with the rest of the library system and library staff. Special collections staff can develop partnerships with general reference librarians or bibliographers for conducting bibliographic instruction and outreach programs. Special collections librarians can participate in discipline groups or other forums for bibliographers or subject specialists throughout the library system. Collecting responsibilities can be shared across boundaries of format and chronology so that individuals or teams have responsibility for both special and circulating collections in particular subject areas.

There are, I believe, ARL libraries (though perhaps none represented here) in which special collections remain isolated and marginal because the heads of those units are not interested in increasing access, promoting use, or reexamining collections and because the library directors are not willing to commit additional resources or staff to special collections under those circumstances. Of course, it is possible just to ignore the problem and wait for a retirement or a death; there are certainly plenty of other issues demanding attention. Another approach would be for the library director to take the initiative to add a new staff position, not by exiling a problem employee to special collections but, rather, by transferring or recruiting an energetic, service-oriented librarian who understands the larger library's mission and goals. Often the quickest way to change the dynamics of an operation is to add a different person to the mix.

Stam suggested that another step toward breaking down barriers would be to eliminate use of the term *special collections*. I agree but am not aware of a satisfactory replacement. Cultural heritage collections,

distinctive collections, historical collections, primary sources, and other such terms have both advantages and disadvantages. Individual institutions have found more useful names for their own special collections operations—as historical libraries or research centers—but a satisfactory generic term for these types of collections and operations eludes us.

One useful way to summarize some of the recommendations we have heard at this symposium may be to think in terms of what library directors should expect from special collections and what special collections should expect from library directors. Creating the centers for primary research and training that Stam and Thomas described requires collaboration between library directors and heads of special collections. I believe that library directors should expect the following from their special collections:

- outreach to students, faculty, and classes;
- collecting that is tied to institutional priorities and academic programs;
- distinctiveness in collections;
- public programs that contribute to making the library a center of intellectual activity on campus;
- goals that support the library's strategic plan.

Heads of special collections, if they are providing these things, should be able to expect the following from library directors:

- budgetary support for acquisitions, not just the occasional special request for opportunistic purchases but, rather, a regular portion of the materials budget (If special collections are, in fact, building distinctive collections with enduring value that are actively promoted for use in teaching and research, they deserve reliable support from the materials budget.);

- adequate staffing (Thomas suggested that as libraries are increasingly known for their unique holdings and their service effectiveness, “staff to support the growing use of special collections will expand.” The increased access and the expanded use that both she and Stam have called for will not occur without adequate staffing.);
- opportunities to participate in librarywide planning, programming, and leadership.

Many of the actions that I—and others—have proposed at this symposium can be carried out in particular libraries by individual directors and heads of special collections. What is ARL’s role in changing the reputation and the reality of special collections? I would like to offer a few suggestions.⁴

1. ARL might develop a program similar to the collection analysis project developed in the late 1970s by what was then, I believe, the Office of Management Services to assist individual libraries in reviewing, describing, evaluating, and analyzing their collection programs. Self-study materials already are available, at least for archival and manuscript programs, through the Society of American Archivists, but I believe a self-study process tied to on-site consultations and developed for special collections by ARL could have a transforming effect.
2. ARL might initiate further study of special collections in the context of the global resources program. What role should ARL libraries play in preserving and promoting access to international research resources such as ephemeral publications and manuscript collections?
3. ARL might increase the emphasis on special collections within its preservation program, working to stimulate and coordinate conservation activities for distinctive collections.

4. See also the Action Agenda presented later in the symposium, available from the ARL Web site at <http://www.arl.org/special/action.html>.

4. ARL might establish or support programs for collaboration in digitizing distinctive collections so that digitization efforts lead to a critical mass of complementary materials.
5. ARL might develop a management training workshop for special collections, perhaps as a module associated with its management institutes. For a number of years, Merrily Taylor and Sam Streit of Brown University have taught a weeklong course on the management of special collections at Rare Book School at the University of Virginia. Their experience would be useful if ARL were to take action in this area. Recruiting staff and developing the needed skills for special collections leadership, as Stam pointed out, are critically important for implementing the vision he described.

I am sure there are numerous other possibilities for coordinated action by ARL that many among you will suggest as we begin to discuss these matters. Together we can reinforce the already emerging reality of distinctive collections as research centers. Together we can change the lingering reputation of special collections as Siberia or Shangri-La. One day, it will be otherwise.

The poet Jane Kenyon wrote a poem entitled "Otherwise." It appeared in her book *Constance* in 1993 and then, after her death in 1995, was included in a book of new and selected poems published by Graywolf Press under the title *Otherwise*.

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.

I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

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The poem reminds me that everything changes, even that which is so ordinary and commonplace that we fail to appreciate or notice it. This fact reinforces my commitment to documenting the recent past and the present because the future will be different in ways we cannot entirely imagine. You may hear in the poem a fear of change. I think otherwise. I believe Kenyon realized that the future emerges, in part at least, through the death of the present and that she was willing to greet that future. One day, the perception of special collections as a backwater of inactivity will be replaced by the reality of distinctive collections as centers for learning and scholarship.