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EXPOSING HIDDEN COLLECTIONS: INTRODUCTION

WE ARE HONORED by the invitation to edit this issue of RBM, and pleased to accept the opportunity to spread the word regarding the “hidden collections” project history and agenda. When Judy began background research several years ago for what eventually became the Association of Research Library’s 1998 survey on special collections in ARL libraries, the special collections professionals she consulted were nearly unanimous in naming unprocessed and uncataloged collections as one of the most critical issues they faced.¹ They were equally clear in lamenting the lack of urgency this problem seemed to inspire beyond those having to grapple with it on the front line.

How things have changed! Barbara recently returned from the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Boston, where she participated in a packed session on this topic with Tom Hyry from Yale University Libraries and Rachel Onuf from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The same enthusiasm was demonstrated at the RBMS preconference at Yale in June 2004, where she spoke at a similar session with Tom Hyry, Joan Swanekamp, and Nicole Bouche (all from Yale). These are just the most recent conversations in what has proved to be the groundswell of interest and action that we outline below.

The whole “hidden collections” topic has clearly hit a nerve. Our purpose in assembling the articles collected here is to document the origins of what we hope will be a sustained movement to think strategically about our hidden collections and to develop innovative tools and practices to improve access to them.

1. Judith M. Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries: Results of the 1998 Survey Sponsored by the ARL Research Collections Committee* (Washington, D.C.:ARL, 2001).

Background

The problem of hidden collections is one of the oldest and most vexing in modern archives and libraries. Unprocessed and underprocessed backlogs of special collections are, for all intents and purposes, unavailable and often unknown to scholars. They are demoralizing and frustrating to librarians and archivists. They prevent us from realizing to the fullest possible extent our professional commitments to public service, to teaching, and to outreach. Perhaps the timing was just right, or perhaps we finally just came up with the right label. Whatever the reason, when the Association of Research Libraries began exploring special collections as a possible major area of activity, the problem of hidden collections rose to the top of the agenda very quickly.²

The 1998 ARL survey made a first attempt to document the scope of the problem nationally, finding that, depending on format, significant portions of many special collections were uncataloged or unprocessed. Concurrent with publication of the survey results, a working symposium entitled “Building on Strength: Developing an ARL Agenda for Special Collections” was held at Brown University on June 27–29, 2001. Bubbling repeatedly to the top during breakout sessions was the hidden collections problem. When the ARL task force was convened following the Brown conference, members agreed that it was time to move from general discussion to the crafting of an action plan.

As a way to focus discussion and catalyze interest, Barbara agreed to write a white paper that would define the problem and offer preliminary recommendations for approaching it. Her paper, “Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers,” is included in this issue. You will note the collaborative nature of the document. Barbara felt it was of the utmost importance to solicit the opinions of a wide group of colleagues faced with this problem daily. Their timely and devoted assistance with this document made the work a labor of love.

One motivation for drafting the white paper was the idea that it could inform an invitational working conference dedicated to developing an action plan. The conference, Exposing Hidden Collections, was held at

2. For a brief history of the ARL's recent engagement with special collections, see Joe Hewitt and Judith M. Panitch, “The ARL Special Collections Initiative” *Library Trends* 52 (summer 2003): 157–71.

the Library of Conference on September 8–9, 2003. Keynote speeches by Carol Mandel and Stan Katz set the tone for the conference and laid out a suite of needs and considerations. We are delighted to be able to include their papers here because they so thoughtfully articulate many of the “big picture” issues that guide us. The success and energy of the conference on hidden collections was due in large part to its broad and varied attendance. Registrants included librarians from ARL and also from the Oberlin Group and the Independent Research Libraries Association. Library administrators participated, as did representatives of the major bibliographic utilities and of foundations and agencies that could eventually help move the agenda forward. Bringing together so many voices and perspectives in a manner that built upon the Brown conference was a real achievement that has had a lasting impact.

Action

The task force now had to decide how to organize all this enthusiasm and to strike while interest was high. Winston Tabb at Johns Hopkins University began work on a focused inventory of special collections rearranges that could serve as a database upon which to draw in formulating attractive collaborative projects. The results of this survey, available on the ARL Web site (<http://db.arl.org/SCsurvey/default.html>), are at once exciting and discouraging. It is amazing to see what treasures are still available for scholars to explore—when they are accessible. At the same time, the survey shows just what a vast problem we are facing. At the present rate, it would take hundreds of years to provide access to these hidden collections. We hope that librarians and archivists will look at the list, be inspired to coordinate with other institutions, and begin to tackle these hidden collections.

At the same time, another working group, appointed by the task force and headed by William Garrison of Syracuse University Library, has been working on ways to streamline cataloging and processing, with the philosophy that a minimal amount of access for all resources is better than comprehensive access for only a few collections. The group is particularly focused on the “preliminary record” as a way to expedite processing and still provide adequate access to users. Winston Tabb’s article in this issue describes both the survey he conducted and the way it is being used in conjunction with the work of the Garrison group to develop a project that will bring some of these collections to light and provide a potential model for future initiatives.

The challenge of exposing hidden collections does not end with a single project—or even with development of a viable method of expediting access. The problem, after all, is an enormous one that will be with us for years and will require both broad commitment and substantial funding. It also is directly related to concerns of security and preservation. Many hidden collections suffer from the “out of sight, out of mind” syndrome and are physically deteriorating. We learned recently of one promising exploration at the University of Illinois Libraries, where Jennifer Hain Teper and Sarah Erikson have undertaken a conservation needs assessment of the Rare Book and Special Collections Library’s backlog of uncataloged rare book materials. Results of the survey are being prepared for publication, along with a second publication proposing ways to incorporate preservation activities with other steps that improve access to these materials. Preservation considerations also are being incorporated into work that has been pioneered by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and adopted by other institutions. These projects need to be elaborated on and pursued, as the work is integral to the meaningful provision of full access.

Awareness of hidden collections has clearly come a long way after spending many, many years in the shadows. We wish to thank Joe Hewitt, who recently retired as University Librarian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; he has been a tremendous source of inspiration and leadership in this work. Thanks also are due to Merrily Taylor, who hosted the Brown Conference, and to ARL Executive Director Duane Webster and his staff, especially Jaia Barrett and Mary Jackson, for their commitment to, and support of, this issue. Finally, thanks to all of you for your encouragement and your many contributions as we have moved forward with the work of exposing hidden collections.