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A Response to Traister

IN DANIEL TRAISTER'S WELL-KNOWN ARTICLE, "Is There a Future for Special Collections? And Should There Be? A Polemical Essay,"¹ he states that his intention is "to propose that reconsideration of some of the essential assumptions our field operates with is overdue." Some, he writes, will find his remarks "offensive or disagreeable"; others will say that he has nothing to complain about, that the changes he proposes have long been in practice. In brief, Traister argues that rare book librarians—in their zeal to preserve their rare books, manuscripts, and other special materials—have sacrificed access to collections and convenience to users to the point where these very collections "cost too much for staff and housing and provide too little return in frequency of use to easily justify themselves in an increasingly tough library economy." He calls upon the managers of these collections "to seek innovative ways of increasing their functionality or expect to see these collections cease to exist."

Reading Traister's article generates a series of questions that each of us who manages special collections must ponder. Is there a problem with access in special collections? Are special collections librarians (who play a variety of roles, from public services to curatorship) able to agree among ourselves on what constitutes acceptable levels of access? Are issues pertaining to access and preservation universal to all special collections, or do differences exist between academic libraries, independent research libraries, public libraries, etc.? When do concerns of preservation prevail over those of access, and vice versa? And, finally, how have we used technology (online catalogs, digitization projects, and the like) to address issues of access? Have technological solutions met our need to provide access? What, if any, new challenges have they brought about?

1. Daniel Traister, "Is There a Future for Special Collections? And Should There Be? A Polemical Essay," *RBM* 1:1 (2000): 54–76.

Ultimately, however (and I will return to this point later), I do not think these are the questions on which we should be focusing our attention. That we are obsessing about these questions five years after this polemic was written strikes me as a sign that the profession is indeed marginalized, or at least struggling to redefine itself to a new generation of researchers.

Coming from the perspective of a large academic research library, I read this polemical essay as a pointed challenge to the attitudes expressed in my own institution. Was Traister referring to the Beinecke Library at Yale University when he related the story about his wife's discouraging experience at an "Extremely Ivy League University" of being barred because she was a woman? Do we convey to readers the sense that we are open and easy to use, or do we project the impression that their use of the Beinecke collections is a burden to the staff and poses an extreme risk to the collections? Have we taken full advantage of technology to promote the use of our collections—extending the special collections reading room in the same way in which the main library promotes the library without walls? Do we do enough outreach to the university community to advocate that the collections under our care should be incorporated into the research and teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate levels? How can we preserve the collections and still make them accessible? Traister (and others) suggests a variety of programming and outreach efforts that should go a long way toward increasing the use of special collections and removing the stigma of special collections librarians as, to quote a former curatorial colleague, "dragons at the gate."

Let me briefly consider the outreach efforts and programming that have been going on at the Beinecke (and at many other large research libraries, as well) for a number of years, and that began long before Traister's polemic was written. The Beinecke has only recently begun to enjoy a strong acquisitions and operations budget. In the mid-1980s, which were the early days of its financial stability, emphasis was being placed on retrospective conversion and gaining bibliographic control of the library's large printed and manuscript backlogs. When gopher (a pre-Web system developed by the University of Minnesota for displaying information) came along, the Beinecke soon thereafter made its finding aids available online, and it was equally responsive when EAD came along. All through the 1990s, significant progress was made on retrospective conversion and creating at least minimal records in the online catalog or acquisitions systems for all manuscripts and archival collections. Retrospective conversion of the card catalog of printed materials was completed in 1997. I describe these developments because I think they show that there has long been a strategy at the Beinecke to make known the collections it holds by including them in the most public access form available—and this effort began long before "hidden collections" became the mantra in the profession.

But Traister is concerned with other kinds of access in his polemic. In 1997 the Beinecke Library embarked on a multimillion-dollar building remodeling project. The library converted part of the existing stack space from conventional shelving to compact shelving; it also converted storage space into classrooms and provided office space for new programmatic initiatives, most notably the Digital Studio. Although there were some voices advocating for a much needed conservation studio, Ralph Franklin, then director, was adamant that the library needed more classroom space specifically so that more faculty could use the Beinecke collections in a classroom setting. The two new classrooms that were created seat 20–25 seminar style or 70 auditorium style. Since their completion, the response has been a steady increase in both the number of classes taught entirely using the collections and in single sessions where the students may come only once or twice to see the manuscripts or early editions of the text they are studying. During the academic year 2004–2005, an all-time high of 260 classes were held in the Beinecke (the numbers were more typically around 100 in the 1990s). This choice to build classrooms in preference to both storage space and a conservation studio is a very concrete demonstration of the library's commitment to access, and not just to the preservation of collections.

As previously noted, during the renovation project in 1997–2000, the library also converted stack space into a larger Digital Studio. The library had embarked on its first digitization program in 1997—the scanning of 20,000 negatives and transparencies. It was more an experiment in digitization, more of a service tool for discovery than a research tool. But this experience led the library to develop more ambitious plans to use the technology to promote the use of the collections in the classroom, and it was perceived as an extension of the reading room. The first collection to be scanned in its entirety was the papyri collection, one that is used every semester in teaching. Since the summer of 2001, the library has been scanning thousands of images each year that have been selected by faculty who wish to use the Beinecke materials in their teaching. The scanning program, combined with the new classroom space, has allowed the Beinecke to make portions of its collections central to teaching and accessible to a greater number of students without posing any threat to the survival of the original materials. One of my favorite examples of the way in which technology has increased access to the Beinecke's special collections materials was an early project we completed for the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (not a department for which our primarily historical and literary collections generally had much relevance). The library scanned hundreds of cross-sections of wood that form the bulk of the plates in Romeyn Beck Hough's landmark work, *The American Woods*.²

2. Romeyn Beck Hough, *The American Woods, Exhibited by Actual Specimens and with Copious Explanatory Text* (Lowville, N.Y.: The author, 1888–1910).

While some library staff continue to express skepticism about scanning and are concerned that scanning only encourages use of the original, the fact is that materials that were not formerly available to undergraduates are now being used with no measurable increase in handling. Last semester a faculty member taught a semester-long course on the Medieval Book, showing many of the high points of the Beinecke collections—including “safe items” that until recently required curatorial permission before viewing. At the end of the term, each student picked one manuscript for in-depth study, so that each student had the experience of working hands-on with medieval and renaissance manuscripts, without the entire class handling every manuscript. The simultaneous creation of the Digital Studio and the new classrooms, then, was no accident, but instead a very considered effort to reach out to the faculty and students and promote the use of the collections in the teaching mission of the university.

The Beinecke Library has been offering noncredit courses that draw on the resources of special collections—“to bring library staff into close touch with instructional staff and students,” something Traister suggests should happen but implies does not. This is an important means of integrating special collections into the academic life of the institution. Beinecke offered the first of these “master classes” in 1994, followed by another in 1997 and two in 1998. Since 1999, master classes have been offered regularly in January and May, with as many as four to six offered each year. Topics include not only traditional special collections fields like descriptive bibliography and the history of the book, but also such classes as maps as historical tools, pictures as primary sources for American history, and editing Debussy, to name a few. These classes serve as a meeting ground for both graduate students and faculty to learn more about special collections materials in general and the Beinecke collections specifically and are the first step toward having special collections incorporated routinely in classroom teaching.

Another way in which Special Collections can aggressively and proactively encourage the use of the collections is to pay researchers and graduate students through fellowship programs. The Beinecke began a Fellowship program in 1999 to support visiting scholars pursuing postdoctoral or equivalent research using its collections. In the first year there were 16 fellows; by 2005 there were 26 fellowships awarded. Four years after the introduction of the Fellowship program for scholars outside of Yale, the library introduced a graduate and professional student program. During the summer of 2005 there were 35 graduate student fellowships awarded.

In January of 2001, the library started offering evening hours four nights a week. The library hoped that the expansion of evening hours would increase the use of the collections, especially by undergraduates. While the evening hours were an immediate success with our regular users, they do not seem to have attracted the new clientele that we had hoped. In fact, while usage is high in the evenings—as many

as 15–20 individuals—they are usually the same readers who arrived that morning. After three and one half years we can count only a handful of visitors who didn't arrive until after 5:00 p.m. Still, to the fellows and other researchers using our special collections, the fact that the Beinecke's hours are usually longer than the main library during term breaks and all summer goes a long way in promoting the idea that the Beinecke is aggressively seeking to meet the research needs of its users.

I will note only briefly the variety of exhibitions, conferences, lectures, and readings that the library sponsors to reach out to students and faculty, along with special programs that are open to the university community as a whole and the surrounding nonuniversity community. The Beinecke has been particularly active in engaging the community of poets in the area, as well as offering lectures and musical events. These programs bring in literally hundreds of people who would not otherwise come to the Beinecke. For the past several years, the library has sponsored the Collegium Musicum, open to all members of the university community, which offers an opportunity to perform, among other works, the music housed in the Beinecke collections. One of the programs featured music written by students using lyrics from poems included in archival collections in the Yale Collection of American Literature.

One of the most successful programs in 2005 was the workshop celebrating "International Edible Book Day." The organizers estimated that there might be 30–40 participants and ordered food for 50 to be on the safe side. In the end, 120 guests showed up to enjoy the event and eat the books. Outreach programming has grown to such a degree that the number of staff devoted to running these programs has doubled in five years.

I hope that I have demonstrated that the Beinecke Library has for over 15 years been steadily promoting the use of its collections through direct classroom support, longer hours of service, digital scanning programs that support use of special collections materials outside the classroom, and a variety of programmed events.

But much of Traister's problem with the profession is that the actual face-to-face experience between special collections librarian and researcher appears to be all about protecting the artifact. Yes, we do stress the careful handling of the materials in the collection, and that may seem fussy to some. Yes, not all materials are either unique or expensive, but many, indeed, most (because half of the materials used in our reading room are manuscripts and archival collections) are unique and irreplaceable. Most readers appreciate the fact that they have these collections at their disposal and available for their use and respect the need for the added care and concern. Yes, we do occasionally have a grumpy patron with an attitude, but so do libraries with circulating collections. Yes, we correct patrons when they mishandle

materials, but then, so do librarians in public libraries. It is our job as librarians to care for the collections and tactfully provide instruction if the material is inadvertently mishandled. But when it comes right down to it, the issues surrounding the handling of special collections are really more about common sense and can be conveyed quickly and simply to readers in a manner that is instructive and not off-putting. There is a nice, tactful way to ask a faculty member not to put a manuscript in his mouth or to tell readers not to turn down pages to mark where they left off, without appearing to be the “dragon at the gate.”

A discussion about access should really be about teaching students and faculty how to use the catalogs and databases effectively to identify the important research materials in our collections. That is the first step. We then need to meet readers’ needs and expectations concerning how and when they use the collections. Supportive, responsive services for readers—paging, photo duplication, answers to reference queries—need to be as effective as the services in other campus libraries. Our users have learned to expect that documents will be e-mailed to them or books delivered from off-campus in a matter of hours. If, as special collections librarians, we do not want to offer self-service photocopiers or photography in the reading room to avoid damage to the originals, then we had better have services that can turn around requests for copies in a timely fashion. If we fail to meet readers’ need for copies, then we undermine our message that we are committed and invested in helping to make our collections central to the education mission. We are seen as an obstacle to access to the materials. Much as we would like our users to love the physical object itself, and much as we want to teach about the importance of the story that the artifact can tell us, sometimes our patrons just want a copy for the sake of its content. And that, too, is acceptable. It is the “librarian” part of being a special collections librarian.

At the same time that we—and I do not mean here just Beinecke staff, but also so many of my colleagues who have been active for many years in trying to change the stereotype of the rare book librarian—are engaging in these ambitious and expensive programs to promote access to the collections, the stereotype about the exclusiveness of special collections is alive and well in the minds of people. Many such individuals have no direct experience with special collections—and theirs are the minds that are so difficult to change. Special collections are still housed in forbidding-looking rooms and intimidating buildings. The history of the origins of these collections is in fact one of a privileged, moneyed class. Collector and curators historically have been mostly male. Early in my own career, I heard a leader in the profession say, in front of a class at least half of whom were women, “Rare books is a man’s field.” The last of the generation of “collector-as-curator” is still with us—or at least the experience of encounters with these die-hard advocates of limiting access to the anointed few burns in the memory of the current generation of faculty and graduate students.

In 2004 the Beinecke formed its first Faculty Advisory Group, which met three times a year over lunch with Beinecke senior staff, including department heads and curators. In the first meetings the library posed a series of questions to invite feedback on such topics as services, relevance to the curriculum, and communication about collections. Initially, the feedback was very positive—wonderful facilities, efficient services—but as the conversation progressed, we heard the opposite as well from one or two members who hated the fact that they need to register once a year. We all heard about an incident when one faculty member felt that the desk staff was too prescriptive about how she should call for materials.

But more disturbing than the few anecdotes about bad public service encounters or stories about curators brushing off requests from faculty to team-teach a class was the acknowledgment by the faculty that they simply did not know what the Beinecke held and did not know how to find out. Very few knew that the library published lists of “highlights for new acquisitions” twice a year. When asked if they wanted the library to mail copies of the *Library Gazette*, or at least e-mail information about recent acquisitions, there were a few expressions of interest, but mainly the feeling seemed to be that they were already drowning in information and were not eager for more.

So what are we to make of this feedback? It looks as if we are doing everything that we should be doing programmatically. So how do we measure success? While the number of classes held in the Beinecke has more than doubled in the last four years, readership and the number of items used has remained fairly constant or shown only a small increase. All this programming to increase use of the collections, and yet these efforts have not resulted in any significant increase in usage of the collections in the Reading Room.

Let us look outside special collections for a moment. The reference transactions in the main library have decreased in the last five years from almost 160,000 to just over 103,000 last year—a decrease of 35%. In the same period, the number of interactions at the Beinecke remained constant. Can't we call that success, given the trends in other parts of the library?

But I want to go back to comments from our Faculty Advisory Group about not knowing how to identify what is in the Beinecke collections, not knowing about the finding aids database, leaving aside the questions of how to talk about special collections materials to their students. It seems to me that we do ourselves no service moaning about how we are perceived and wringing our hands about preservation and access when, instead, we should be more engaged in the basic issues of bibliographic instruction that are so central to the discussions of our “nonspecial collection” reference colleagues.

If our faculty and students can't use the catalogs effectively to get to our special collections materials, then we need to be invested in bibliographic instruction along with librarians in nonspecial collections units. General instruction sessions offered by the main library include audiences who are being taught how to do research. Special collections librarians need to be involved in the process of library instruction to ensure that the research value of special collections is discussed in the same context as other library resources. We need to be proactive in reaching out to faculty, to show them how resources in our special collections departments can enrich the classroom and research experiences of students.

Robert Byrd, Director of the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library at Duke University, makes many of these same points.³ He argues, as I have at my home institution, that we need public services librarians in special collections units whose efforts are devoted exclusively to outreach and instruction. If special collections materials are going to be fully integrated into the classroom and research, then this needs to be someone's full-time job, and not something that is squeezed in between other duties.

The discussion has moved beyond the series of questions posed at the beginning of this article. We should not be asking each other if we are providing adequate access; rather, we should be talking to faculty, students, and independent researchers who use our research collections, and, more pointedly, to those who could use our collections but don't. The discussion should be less about handling the artifact and more about discovery, instruction, and training.

3. Robert Byrd, "One Day ... It Will Be Otherwise: Changing the Reputation and the Reality of Special Collections," *RBM* 2:2 (2001): 163-74.

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