



"The Use of Special Collections for Teaching and Learning"

Research, Teaching and Learning Steering Committee
Briefing Session
October 26, 2005
Meeting Summary

Discussion leader: Joan Giesecke, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

I. Background on the ARL Special Collections Task Force

Joe Hewitt provided background on the work of the Special Collections Task Force, from its origins in the ARL Research Collections Committee, the 1998 survey "Special Collections in ARL Libraries," and the Special Collections Symposium held at Brown University in June 2001. He noted that both the symposium and the task force included curators and special collections librarians as well as directors, which has proven to be very illuminating and useful. The Task Force has produced two white papers (on hidden collections and on education for careers in special collections); shaped a grant proposal to expose unprocessed manuscript and archival collections by test a "preliminary record" for cataloging; and promoted special collections as fundamental to the purpose of research libraries. The Task Force continues to work on issues of hidden collections of rare books and special collections at historically black colleges and universities, and expects to produce a final report that includes recommendations for ARL on special collections in relation to research, teaching, and learning. The July 2005 Status Report with more information on the work of the Task Force is available at <http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/tforce/status0705.html>.

II. Using special collections for undergraduate teaching and research.

How are ARL libraries using special collections to facilitate undergraduate research and teaching? What practices best engage undergrads? How do we make these collections a vibrant part of the undergrad experience, particularly for the net generation?

Directors and representatives from Chicago, Library of Congress, Cornell, Delaware, Emory, Georgetown, Nebraska, North Carolina, Syracuse, and Yale reported on programs that bring undergraduates from across the disciplines into their special collections for research and other course work. The students may work directly with originals, produce digital copies of material that is then more widely available, or create new resources such as oral histories and digital histories. These programs encourage a more proactive relationship between students and special collections and at the same time create new resources. Faculty are exploring new teaching methods, for example using more visual materials in new ways by enabling digital annotation of documents that can then be used for further teaching. These courses can serve as prototypes for undergraduate teaching that then become integrated into the campus-wide curriculum. Other examples mentioned: including special collections materials in all general library instruction sessions, and the creation of an online tutorial to introduce students to archival research. Programs featuring special collections may also engage communities beyond the university, with local residents participating as the subjects of oral histories, or experiencing exhibits and reading programs co-sponsored by public libraries and schools. Foundation support for many of these efforts has come from Pepsi, Mellon, the Davis Education Foundation, and the Teagle Foundation. These efforts require the focused work of special collections librarians and are very labor-intensive.

Visual representation

The group discussed the need to use visual representations of special collections to attract netgen students, rather than focusing mainly on catalogs and finding aids. Examples included using an "image ticker," which is an access mechanism that allows users to browse thumbnails as they move across a screen; putting an image from the "resources of the week" on the library homepage; and promoting special collections materials on wall screens throughout the library.

III. The ARL agenda for Special Collections

What is the ARL agenda on Special Collections and what should it be? What barriers do you see toward making special collections more integrated?

Finding mechanisms and interoperability

The group addressed the need to create better finding mechanisms, to connect special collections with the OPAC, and/or to create retrieval methods that will pull from finding aids and the OPAC. This was connected to the emphasis of the Special Collections Task Force on access, by supporting cataloging methods that will ease backlogs and make special collections available for use.

A related issue was making digital collections visible. It is an impediment when digital resources are buried below several levels of library search engines, perhaps to emphasize their connection to the institution. The structure of library web sites can

make it impossible for students to search across these collections. Similarly, digital information should be presented as findable across institutions, through links to important collections elsewhere, or the creation of inter-institutional portals to related materials, as is being done by Georgetown and others for researchers in Catholic studies.

Staffing

Opening special collections to more research and teaching requires a higher level of service and labor-intensive activities. Students exposed to new materials may expect to find many more in the library. Special collections are not heavily staffed and their staff's expertise is not generally shared elsewhere in the library. New staffing patterns and training may be needed. Yale has (with Mellon support) a collections collaborative program, where library staff are working with campus museums and ITS staff to enhance access to collections across these institutions. Such collaborations may be one way to address staffing concerns.

Born-digital materials

Materials that are born digital create other issues-not only how to handle these collections, but who will handle them? Special collections curators have understood that they were shaping the scholarship possibilities of the future by what they preserved. Digital and other evanescent forms create huge preservation challenges. Their curation requires special training. These are very complex issues that will have enormous implications for future scholarship. We need to promote the best practices of special collections curators to future staff who will be working on born digital materials that are not necessarily considered special collections.

Building collections, supporting new scholarship

Bringing new users into special collections can be a way of building the collections. There are ethnic and racial communities that are not well represented in our collections. The University of Washington had students using their collections for materials related to their own history (for example, on Carlos Bulosan, who worked in Seattle canneries). A student from the Philippine American community in Seattle became a conduit. He conveyed to his family that the library was a trusted place for their materials. One result of discovery is the creation of a community of scholars, based on material that libraries have revealed. How do we support that new scholarly community? How do we represent that new knowledge? Is there a relationship between that knowledge and the open access movement? Are there new derivatives that can be developed? This gets back to the staffing problem: how do we find the people to do this new work?

Summary prepared by Monica McCormick
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