

## Security in Special Collections

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# SPEC Kit 284

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Security in Special Collections

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## **SURVEY RESULTS**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

When libraries speak of security, they usually speak broadly and refer to “the safety and security of persons, library materials, physical facilities, furnishings, computer equipment, etc.” as in SPEC Kit 247, *Management of Library Security*. But what of security in Special Collections? What specific steps are taken to ensure the security of the unique books, manuscripts, and other materials that help make research libraries what they are?

This survey was distributed to the 123 ARL member libraries in March 2004 to gather information about security in Special Collections. The survey asked what patron registration information is collected, what limits are placed on the number of items used, how the reading room is monitored, and how returned items are checked before reshelving. It also explored experiences with theft and mutilation of materials in Special Collections and the willingness of administrators to pursue and charge the guilty parties. Sixty-eight libraries (55%) responded to the survey.

### Patron Registration

Only two of the responding libraries do not require patron registration in Special Collections; the remaining 66 (97%) do. All 66 require the patron’s name and all but a few (63 or 93%) require an address. The majority of respondents also ask for a phone number, affiliation with the institution, e-mail address, and ID number. A small number (8 or 12%) ask for a fax number. About half of

the respondents collect a variety of additional information, including the patron’s research topic/scope, signature, affiliation with another institution, publication plans, campus address, and time in/time out. Two institutions commented that university affiliates are only required to present university ID cards, perhaps because their information is already on record. Two others noted that more information is required of users of archival materials.

Fourteen of the responding libraries (21%) do not require patrons to show identification. For the others, acceptable forms of identification are a driver’s license (53 respondents or 78%), university ID card (77%), passport (63%), or non-driver’s photo ID card (57%). Thirteen respondents accept other forms of identification, including employee ID, high school ID, other library card, Friends of the Library card, and health insurance card. Fifty-five respondents (89%) photocopy the ID card.

Patron registration information is retained indefinitely by most of the respondents (51 or 76%). Eleven retain this information for a period of years, while four keep it for a period of months. One institution reported that they retain the patron registration information only until the patron has completed his/her research. Of those institutions retaining patron information indefinitely, several indicated that this policy was being reexamined, in part because of privacy issues. One respondent keeps registration information indefinitely, but keeps only name, affiliation, and address. Other registration information is not retained.

At the libraries that retain this information for years, the retention period ranges from one to fifteen years, with an average period of five years. At those that retain patron information for months, the period ranges from one to twelve months, with an average period of five months. One respondent indicated that records are not kept for a specific time, but are destroyed after statistics are gathered. Another stated that forms for patrons who request archives and manuscripts are kept indefinitely. Interestingly, only one respondent reported that they keep information according to a state records retention schedule.

Almost half of the responding libraries do not routinely inform patrons of the registration information retention policy. Though several respondents commented that they would inform the patron on request, it appears that patrons rarely ask this question. To quote one respondent, "Only one person has ever asked in my 13 years here!" The institutions that proactively inform their patrons either give the patron a handout at the time of registration, include a statement on the registration form, post the policy on the library Web site, or display the policy at the service desk.

### **Patrons' Personal Belongings**

Most Special Collections (56 or 85%) require patrons to leave coats, bags, and other personal belongings outside the reading room. Forty-seven survey respondents (71%) provide lockers for patrons, five (8%) provide a staffed coatroom, and four (6%) provide an unstaffed coatroom. The 12 Special Collections that do not require patrons to leave their personal belongings outside the reading room explained that the library is unable to provide space outside the room, but usually does separate patrons from their belongings within the reading room. Typically, there is a coat rack or a designated area in the reading room where patrons are asked to leave large items; a few libraries ask patrons to leave belongings at the reference desk where they register. Two libraries look forward to renovations that will provide lockers for patrons' belongings.

Almost all of the libraries that have lockers or a coatroom outside of the reading room do not allow patrons to bring overcoats, jackets,

sweaters, or other articles of clothing that are not being worn into the reading room. Several libraries that do allow them to be brought in provide a coat rack inside the reading room. One allows patrons to hang coats or sweaters on the back of their chairs. One respondent explained, "Patrons may bring in what they are wearing and carrying since untended clothing and/or personal belongings in this library are often stolen."

Among the personal belongings that respondents allow patrons to bring into the reading room are laptop computers (99%), pencils (94%), loose-leaf paper (85%), suit coats or similar articles of clothing that are being worn (87%), notepads (81%), notebooks (75%), and cameras (54%). Fewer than half of the respondents permit personal books, other library books, purses, and recording devices. Sixteen respondents (24%) allow other items, including personal digital assistants and scanners. Based on the respondents' comments, many Special Collections allow patrons to bring in a variety of items with special permission from senior staff. Often researchers must simply explain to staff why they need their notebooks or other items.

When asked whether library staff check patrons' belongings before they leave the reading room, one respondent answered "yes" and commented, "This is true in most reading rooms." In fact, according to responses to this survey, most institutions don't check. Only a third of the respondents answered that they do check and several indicated this is not done all the time. Some respondents commented that they would do so if there were suspicious behavior or if the "patron insists on keeping a large bag or personal item near them." Other respondents indicated that they check patrons' personal books or notebooks but refrain from checking any other personal items.

### **Use of Material**

Typically, patrons submit a call slip for material they wish pulled for their use. In several libraries this information is entered on the registration form. In some cases, the special collections staff prepares a list of materials during the reference interview; in others, the request is entered online and the computer generates a list. Two institutions

record only bibliographic information on the call slip; all the others include the patron's name.

The survey asked how many books, boxes, and manuscript folders a patron may use at one time. The vast majority of respondents reported a specific number of items that a patron may request or use on the table. The number of books ranges from one to fifteen, with an average of four. The average for manuscript boxes is two at a time, with a range from one to twelve. The average for manuscript folders is three, with a range of one to twenty. Twenty-six of the responding libraries bring out boxes of manuscripts and do not separate the individual folders from the box; six bring out only one to three folders at a time. Limits on other types of materials include one to five pamphlets; one drawing, map, or plan; one rare book; and one thesis.

Even though 17 institutions set no formal limits on the amount of books, boxes, or folders given to patrons, few of them allow patrons free reign to use numerous material at one time. Instead, they reserve the right to limit the amount of materials used on a case-by-case basis. Ten respondents specifically stated that the staff member in the reading room makes decisions on the amount of material allowed for use by a patron on an individual basis depending on the circumstances at the time. As one would expect, the value or rarity of materials seems to affect the number of items staff will allow patrons to use. For example, one respondent reported, "Whole boxes may be allowed if the material is not of significant intrinsic or extrinsic value, e.g., business records" and another explained, "[The] reading room supervisor decides depending upon specific materials being used: age/ value/ condition, etc. of printed material; what type of manuscripts or archives are being used and the degree of inventory available; need of the patron; and project underway." What was not expected was that two institutions with very different reading room situations would arrive at the same "no formal limits" policy. One respondent explained, "Because we have two monitors, plus the cameras, in the reading room at all times we can be flexible about this issue," while another answered, "Lack of staff to pull materials means

we try to pull as much as possible at one time."

Though the image of the Special Collections patron is of a solitary researcher, the policies at all but nine of sixty-seven responding libraries allow small groups to work with a collection of materials at the same time. Forty-three libraries (75%) require all patrons using the material to sign for it; fourteen allow one person to sign for the group.

Eighty-one percent of respondents report that library staff checks manuscripts, books, and other material at the time the patron returns them to the service desk. This, however, may be misleading. Of these, 14 check the materials on a limited basis. Some indicated that they simply match materials to the call slips rather than reviewing the physical condition of the item. Some institutions might inspect items more closely depending on their value. Other responses indicate that thoroughly checking every item is "impossible" and "impractical."

All but one library keeps a record of the material used by patrons. Sixty-two link the material used to the patron's name or other identifying information; three only identify the material used, not the patron. Forty-nine institutions (77%) retain the record indefinitely; twelve (18%) keep it for a term of years; and three (5%) keep it for a term of months. At those libraries keeping it for years, the term ranges from one to fifteen, with an average of four years. At those keeping it for months, the term ranges from one to three, with an average of two months. One respondent noted that its retention period is established by a state records retention schedule. Two others noted that they are reviewing their current practice.

Forty-three respondents (66%) do not inform patrons of these record retention policies. Those that do, either give the policy to the patron at the time of registration, display it at the service desk, or post it on the library Web site. Patrons may also be informed verbally or by a statement on the registration form.

### **Reading Room Security**

The survey asked how patrons are monitored while they are in the reading room. Sixty-five respondents (97%) report that library staff keeps

an eye on the reading room. Twenty Special Collections reading rooms (30%) have security cameras, while five (7%) have one or more security mirrors. At one library a security guard patrols the reading room; at others an archival officer or reading room monitor is with patrons at all times. In no cases are patrons unmonitored.

Responses to a question on whether staff ever leave the reading room unattended seems, at first, to contradict the responses on how patrons are monitored. Only 48 respondents (73%) report that staff never leave the reading room unattended; in eighteen cases (27%), staff sometimes do leave patrons alone. Eight attribute this to staffing shortages. In most cases this is rare; in others it is chronic. One respondent explained, "Since we are short staffed in full-time and student assistant personnel, the reading room is too often left unattended when retrieving materials for patrons. This is our greatest security flaw, but there is little we can do about it presently." Faced with similar staffing shortages, another respondent detailed their institution's solution to the problem. Rather than leaving the patrons in the reading room alone, "[We] will ask patrons to leave the reading room and it is locked while we retrieve the material. This happens maybe once or twice a year and our patrons are very understanding." Two respondents clarified that the reading room isn't actually staffed but that staff monitor patrons through the glass walls and windows that separate the staff offices or workroom from the reading room.

### **Theft or Mutilation of Materials**

Thirty respondents (45%) have discovered mutilation of Special Collections materials. In half these cases, the perpetrator(s) was apprehended. Charges were pressed in seven of these cases.

Thirty-eight respondents (95%) say that if a mutilation were discovered and the perpetrator were caught, the library would press charges. Comments indicate that respondents would rely on the advice of university counsel; that judicial proceedings within the university were possible if a member of the university community was responsible; or that responses would be on a case-by-case basis. One respondent stressed that the library would take all necessary steps in working with officials to insure the offender was prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, but that the final decision to press charges is up to the authorities.

Forty-nine respondents (72%) report that a theft of Special Collections materials has taken place. In 32 cases (67%), the stolen materials were recovered. Thirty respondents (64%) report that the thief was apprehended; charges were brought in 20 cases. Forty-three respondents (96%) say that if a theft were discovered and the perpetrator were caught, the library would press charges. The difficulty in determining whether materials were misfiled or stolen was noted by one respondent and another probably summed up the thoughts of many with the comment, "No thefts to our knowledge, but who can know with certainty?"

The survey respondents are generally well aware of the difficulties in providing security for Special Collections and the sometimes conflicting demands of security and access. One pointed out the difficulties in getting others to understand that security is an essential part of regular operations—that janitorial, maintenance, and even security personnel don't always take it seriously enough. Several recommended having a security audit performed by university security or by an outside vendor. And one respondent declared, "The best form of security is an attentive staff."