

WHAT RARE BOOK AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS COURSES ARE TAUGHT CURRENTLY?

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Background

In January of 2003, I joined the faculty of the Palmer School of Library and Information Science with the assignment of creating a concentration in Rare Books and Special Collections. During the spring and summer, I informally reviewed programs elsewhere to gather ideas and advice. In the spring, I also attended a meeting of the Task Force in New Haven and learned there of the concern about perceived lack of opportunities in appropriate education in the rare book and special collections area.

When invited to participate in this meeting, I realized that I had only a hazy impression of the larger topic – that is, “library” education in North America focusing on rare books and special collections – and that I needed a clearer picture in order to describe adequately the place of the Palmer School program in the greater library scene. Further, this information seemed to me to be necessary for a general assessment and discussion of the adequacy of this and other programs to meet educational needs in this area. (For simplicity, I shall refer here to schools of “information” and/or “librarianship” as “library schools.”)

To gather very basic, factual data for this purpose, I designed and administered a simple survey. I also consulted the related data previously gathered by the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of ALA

(http://www.rbms.nd.edu/committees/membership_and_professional/educational_opportunities/directory.shtml Note that spaces in this URL are underscores.)

The survey

The survey consisted of four questions:

Can you tell me

1. Whether your program teaches courses in the “history of the book” broadly conceived? If so, how frequently?
2. Whether your program teaches courses in rare book and special collections librarianship? If so, how frequently?
3. Does your program have a hands-on component for rare books, such as type setting or binding?
4. Does your program have a joint program that is particularly pertinent to rare book and special collections librarianship? With which departments?

These questions were sent by email in October to 57 “library schools.” The list was drawn from the RBMS list and from the online ALISE list of accredited programs in the United States and Canada. Responses came from 29 schools. Data for the others were drawn from the RBMS data (see above) which were based on fewer questions. (When the RBMS data were compared with the email data in some test comparisons, the data proved to be consistent. This source was thus judged to be appropriate for the study.)

The results are presented below. The responses were, in many cases, quite extensive. In many cases, they corresponded only generally to the questions asked. Many listed all of their courses that might conceivably relate to rare books and special collections. Of the 57 schools, 25 added information about their preservation courses, noting often that the “hands-on” component fell there. The data about preservation courses can be considered an unanticipated bonus from this modest exercise.

The findings

In sum, courses in rare books and special collections are still offered, albeit infrequently and irregularly, in most “library schools.” There is a pattern of courses consisting of some form of the history of the book; then, less frequently, a librarianship or curatorial course; often a preservation course that might have a hands-on component; very rarely a hands-on course by itself; and in a few cases a joint program with another department or institution. “The numbers” follow.

1. A high proportion (77%) of “library” programs include courses in the **history of the book**, broadly conceived. Where book history is taught, students will find a history of the book course available 2.7 times over a two-year¹ period. (I do not differentiate here between those schools that offer one course several times, and those that might offer several courses, each less frequently, over the course of two years.)
2. **Administrative courses**, such as Rare Book and Special Collections Librarianship, are fairly unusual (25% of the total). Where one is taught at all, it is offered, on average, 2.5 times over a two-year period.
3. **Preservation courses**, many with hands-on components, are offered by 44% of the “library schools.” Where these courses are taught, they appear 2 times in 2 years.
4. **Hands-on courses** (e.g., binding, printing, paper-making) are unusual, occurring in only 7 of the 57 schools.
5. **Joint programs** vary considerably in type, from transfer credits from other institutions to full masters-level programs, often with English or history departments. They are relatively rare, occurring in only 13 of the 57 institutions.

Information summarized in points 1-5 above is presented in tabular form below and in graphic form as an appendix.

¹ The “two-year” convention has been adopted to bring together the many variations in schedules, ranging from annually, semi-annually, summers only, special institutes, biennially, etc.

RARE BOOK/SPEC. COLLS. COURSES 10/03

Total number of schools in U.S. and Canada	57	
Number of schools with history of the book courses	44	77%
Number of schools with rare book librarianship courses	14	25%
Number of schools with preservation courses	25	44%
Number of schools with hands-on components	7	12%
Number of schools with joint programs	13	23%

FREQUENCY OF RARE BOOK/SPECIAL COL. COURSES

(Average over a TWO-YEAR period where taught at all)

Some history of the book course	2.7
Rare book/spec. coll. librarianship course	2.5
Preservation course	2.1

Variations in approach to the “History of the Book”

The titles of “book history” courses vary widely indicating a broad range of approaches. Notable is the frequency of the related terms “print” and “printing” that turn up in course titles. (This breadth of approaches was apparent also among my fellow students in a course that I took last summer at Rare Book School in the pedagogy of the history of the book. Students at Rare Book School – who were teachers in “real life” – seemed to show a preference for “print culture” when describing the focus of their book history courses.)

VARIATIONS ON “HISTORY OF THE BOOK” COURSES

Courses cluster around the following approaches with the more frequent listings toward the top of the list.

- History of the book
- History of books and libraries
- History of books and printing
- History of the book in America
- History of the book to 1450
- History of the book 1450 to the present
- History of information
- History of the book: print culture and society
- History of the book: the book as artifact
- Early books and manuscripts

Transition from manuscript to print
 Rare books
 Books, libraries, and civilization
 History of printing
 History of music printing and publishing
 History of books, printing and publishing
 History of information transfer and information agencies
 Icons of power: The evolution of the book
 Descriptive/historical bibliography [here considered “book history”]

Work to be done

This survey answers only the simple question, “What is taught?” Responses generally were objective in nature; for that reason the survey was reasonably simple to administer and to analyze. Still to be explored are more complex qualitative issues such as 1. Why do students take these courses, 2. Are students adequately prepared by this training for jobs in the field, 3. Can these courses be interesting and satisfying to those who might not intend to work primarily in curatorial roles, 4. Could “library schools” do more separately, and 5. Could collaborations among institutions improve the situation for students, “library schools,” and employers?

Appendix [N.B.: A spread sheet including fuller data will be available at the meeting.]

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