ARL Special Collections Task Force
Final Status Report
July 2006

The ARL Special Collections Task Force was formed to advance an agenda on special collections that emerged at the Special Collections Symposium held at Brown University in June 2001 and was later refined and endorsed by the ARL Research Collections Committee.

The task force is chaired by Joe Hewitt (University Librarian Emeritus, University of North Carolina) and consists of library directors and special collections librarians. A complete committee roster is included at the end of this document. Meeting summaries, previous status reports, and other background documents are available at <http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll>.

The task force was charged with advancing a seven-point action plan, available at http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/tforce/charge.html. This final status report summarizes the task force’s activities. The charge elements are in bold, in the order that the task force has come to consider their priority. An addendum recommends further actions, which should be pursued by ARL and/or other organizations to address ongoing special collections issues.

Task Force Charge and Activities

**Promote special collections as fundamental to the mission of the research library.**

This element of the charge has been a framework for all task force activities.

The task force drafted a statement, "Research Libraries and the Commitment to Special Collections," that was adopted by the ARL Board of Directors in February 2003. This document underscores the individual and collective responsibility of ARL institutions to collect, preserve, and provide access to primary source materials. Copies of the statement were sent to all ARL directors with a cover letter from Joe Hewitt, encouraging its use in promoting a better understanding of special collections among academic administrators, faculty members, donors, and funding bodies. The statement was also sent to directors of libraries participating in the Independent Research Libraries Association (IRLA), the Oberlin Group, and the University Libraries Group, and to publications and scholarly associations with an interest in special collections. The statement is available at http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/principles.html

The task force is drafting a follow-up statement to address the implications for research libraries of a commitment to special collections. This statement will emphasize how special collections are integral to research libraries, explore their potential uses for research, teaching, and learning, and address their value as unique indicators of a research library’s quality.
Enhance access to collections and backlogs, surface "hidden collections."
Advocate for and administer funding for projects, and collaborate with RBMS to develop and endorse guidelines for what constitutes adequate access.

The challenge of providing access to uncataloged, unprocessed, or underprocessed archival, manuscript, and rare book materials has been a primary focus of the task force.

In 2003, the task force published a white paper, "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers," prepared for the task force by Barbara Jones, Wesleyan University, and sponsored a working conference, "Exposing Hidden Collections," at the Library of Congress. The conference explored the difficulties of providing access to uncataloged and unprocessed archival, manuscript, and rare book materials, and called for local and collective actions to address these challenges. A conference summary is at www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/ehc/info.html. The white paper and conference papers were published in the journal RBM (vol. 5, no. 2, Fall 2004).

Conference attendees generally agreed with the white paper's assertion that "it is better to provide some level of access to all materials, than to provide comprehensive access to some materials and no access at all to others." One of the major conference recommendations was the identification and promotion of a shared commitment to certain themes and subjects to encourage cooperative action among libraries and archives to process these materials.

Several related activities subsequently emerged. In Spring, 2004, the task force launched a "Survey to Identify Common Interests in Unprocessed Collections," eliciting descriptions of 466 discrete collections held by 99 institutions, including ARL, IRLA, and Oberlin Group libraries (responses are at https://db.arl.org/Scsurvey/search.html). At the same time, an Inventory Committee reporting to the task force developed a "Preliminary Record" format to describe unprocessed or under-processed collections. The format uses the MARC 21 Format for Bibliographic Data, with the expectation that records will be added to the OCLC WorldCat, and/or Library of Congress databases.

Using the survey results, Johns Hopkins University drafted a grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), seeking funds to provide collection-level processing and description of manuscript/archival collections in the broad area of U.S. social and political history. Twenty-seven libraries (3 IRLA, 4 Oberlin, and 20 ARL) with such collections agreed to participate in a coordinated access project designed to make use of a modified "Preliminary Record" format.

The grant was developed in consultation with other organizations to ensure that it builds on previous and current projects and efforts, including those at Columbia University, Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL), University of Wyoming, and the Archivists’ Toolkit, a Mellon-funded project led by the University of California, San Diego; New York University; and the Five Colleges. Among its goals was to assess the effectiveness of this level of processing; and, with the help of a team of scholars, determine the research value of the collections. This effort sought to lead the way for other
libraries to use and build upon the "Preliminary Record" tool. Such work is seen as a first step toward subsequent efforts to preserve and digitize the newly described collections.

Unfortunately, the grant was not funded. Some NEH reviewers raised concerns about the miscellaneous nature of the collections included and their research value. Others questioned the adequacy of the “Preliminary Record” format for researchers. The task force suggests that one option is to submit a similar grant to another agency, perhaps focusing on a more thematically-coherent set of hidden collections, and emphasizing more clearly the methodology of the processing approach and the value of making these collections visible. The proposal may need to argue more forcefully that hidden collections cannot be used, let alone evaluated, if they are not known to the research community.

Along with hidden archival collections, the task force is concerned about hidden collections of rare books and pamphlets. The 1998 ARL survey (see below) revealed such backlogs to be a very serious problem, and one that has not been sufficiently addressed. There is a need to illuminate the size of backlogs and the number of unique items, and to explore innovative cataloging methods using brief records to reduce those backlogs. As with the archival hidden collections proposal, a rare books project could be developed in light of the NEH response to the archival grant, as well as the ARL strategic priority of the library role in research, teaching, and learning.

The task force has also considered the particular challenges facing special collections at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), many of which lack curators and funding and have large unprocessed collections of valuable materials. Members of the task force met with Loretta Parham, library director at the Atlanta University Center and chair of the 78-member HBCU Library Alliance, to discuss how the task force might work with the Alliance on this issue. They agreed that collaboration held promise, but needed to begin slowly, developing a shared vision of principles and goals before moving into joint projects.

Subsequently, the HBCU Library Alliance and Cornell University received a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to build a national framework for digitization of HBCU library cultural heritage materials and address the full range of digitization needs at historically black college and university libraries. In a related development, ARL and the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity are working together in 2006 to identify hidden collections of the records of this, the first African American fraternity. Joe Hewitt, in his role as SCTF chair, sent a letter of encouragement to ARL members, urging their participation in this project.

The addendum to this report will address how these elements of the hidden collections agenda may be pursued by a future task force or working group.

**Define core competencies among special collection librarians and create training opportunities.**

Throughout the work of the task force, the need to develop the next generation of special collections librarians and administrators has been a recurring theme. An
invitational conference was held in November 2003 in Chapel Hill that brought together library directors, special collections librarians and archivists, and library and information science educators to discuss possible responses to this critical situation. Alice Schreyer, University of Chicago, composed a white paper for the task force, "Education and Training for Careers in Special Collections," [http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/index.html](http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/index.html). ARL has promoted the November 2004 white paper as a discussion document, sharing it with library directors and library school deans.

The task force hosted a second invitational meeting of representatives of the archival community with several task force members, held in October 2004 in Washington, D.C. The goal of the meeting was to review the task force’s evolving agenda in terms of its impact on the work of archivists. The meeting summary may be found at [http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/tforce/arch1004.html](http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/tforce/arch1004.html).

The meeting revealed that it was premature to define core competencies for work in special collections until the different approaches of archivists and rare books librarians are better understood. The principal professional organizations, already engaged with these issues, were identified as the appropriate locus for this work. Subsequently, in 2005, the American Library Association (ALA) Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) established a Competencies Committee to draft a statement on these issues. Two task force members (Mark Dimunation and Alice Schreyer) are members of the RBMS Competencies Committee. Drafts of their documents will be shared with RBMS, SAA, and the ARL Special Collections Task Force. The task force supports the RBMS effort, and suggests that future special collections working groups follow its progress.

The task force has been informed of a number of current education programs and workforce research studies, sponsored by ARL, the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), and several university libraries and library schools. (For an overview, see [http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/tforce/min0105.html#1](http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/tforce/min0105.html#1)).

The task force has also recognized the work of the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia as an important contributor to education for special collections librarians, and welcomed the December 2005 creation of a California Rare Book School at UCLA’s Department of Information Studies. The Task Force urges ARL libraries to support the Rare Book School through membership or subscription, should such support be needed to sustain its activities.

Encouraged by these training opportunities and the significant research underway, the task force suggests that any future special collections group continue to monitor these developments and to reassess ARL’s appropriate role.

**Gather data on special collections operations.**

The results of a 1998 ARL survey on special collections (available at [http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/panitch/index.html](http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/panitch/index.html)) created heightened interest in an ongoing statistical program designed to track the status and progress of special collections in ARL libraries. A 2002 poll of ARL directors revealed nearly unanimous support on the part of the 76 respondents for a pilot
project in this area. The task force reviewed the 1998 survey and consulted with others in the field, including the ARL Director of the Statistics and Measurement Program, but elected not to establish an ongoing survey effort.

However, the ARL community recognizes the need for improved measures of the depth and quality of unique and rare collections, which are the distinguishing aspects of a research library and the basis for its distinctive contribution to scholarship. In early 2005 ARL appointed a Task force on New Ways of Measuring Collections, charged to articulate current issues associated with traditional assessments of library holdings and to propose changes in how ARL measures research library collections. The group’s survey of approximately 100 ARL library directors indicated mixed views regarding the value and use of the ARL Membership Criteria Index in particular, and the scope of ARL statistics more generally. A dominant theme of the interviews was the distinctiveness of each library’s collection and how to capture its value. The Task Force on New Ways of Measuring Collections is now pursuing a series of research projects, including the development of a "profile" of a research library.

The Special Collections Task Force encourages any future special collections group to collaborate with the Task Force on New Ways of Measuring Collections or the ARL Statistics and Assessment Committee to identify key measures and benchmarks to describe, evaluate, and assess special collections.

**Coordinate planning for collecting 19th and 20th century materials and those in new formats.**

At its May 2003 meeting, the task force agreed that further activity related to this point ought to be deferred. The topic is massive and poorly defined, and much preliminary conceptual work must be accomplished before moving ahead with practical efforts to coordinate activities in this area.

However, the need to address this issue remains. The task force believes that this issue should be addressed by ARL in collaboration with other organizations, perhaps in conjunction with an analysis of collection gaps and identification of hidden collections. The addendum to this document will elaborate on the task force recommendations.

**Coordinate information sharing about digitization efforts.**

Also at the May 2003 meeting, the task force agreed that the development of a registry exceeded the charge, especially in light of registries established by OCLC and the Digital Library Federation, as well as the development of standards and best practices for digitization projects being pursued by other organizations. As a result, the task force decided a direct role in coordinating information about digitization efforts need not be a task force priority.

**Incorporate some of these issues into agendas of RBMS, SAA, and other ARL standing committees (especially the Collections & Access Issues Committee but also possibly Preservation, Scholarly Communication, Statistics & Measurement, Intellectual Property, and Diversity).**
This point of the charge has been interpreted all along as a mandate to work collaboratively and has been incorporated into all activities of the task force.

**ARL Special Collections Task Force members:**
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Nancy Baker, University of Iowa
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Others who have made significant contributions to the work of the task force:
Peter Graham, Syracuse University
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Addendum to SCTF Final Status Report

Recommendations to the ARL Research, Teaching, and Learning Steering Committee

The Special Collections Task Force believes strongly that special collections are fundamental to the mission of research libraries, and that ARL libraries can provide leadership on supporting them. The task force suggests that the Research, Teaching, and Learning (RTL) Steering Committee consider the following recommendations that may be addressed by future ARL groups. We also encourage continued collaboration with Oberlin, IRLA, and other libraries, as well as with related professional organizations such as ACRL/RBMS and SAA.

Task Force on Hidden Collections

Create a small time-limited task force, including some from the original SCTF and possibly also from other organizations (Oberlin group and IRLA libraries, HBCUs) to continue work on strategies that accelerate the identification and accessibility of hidden collections (i.e., uncollected, uncataloged, unprocessed, or underprocessed archival, manuscript, rare book, and other materials and formats.) The current task force urges that such work address all types of hidden collections: archival, rare books, audio, video, and other media.

Recommendation 1: Encourage the testing and use of a “preliminary record” format to speed the exposure of hidden collections. To enable this, the task force strongly encourages an approach (by ARL staff or a future special collections group) to IMLS, NEH, NHPRC, the Mellon Foundation, and other appropriate agencies to establish a fund for the surfacing of hidden collections. Another approach may be to develop new grant proposals for hidden collections of rare books, archival materials, and other formats, in light of what has been learned by the unfunded NEH proposal made by Johns Hopkins with the support of the task force, as well as the grants awarded to PACSCL (for archival materials), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (for rare books), and others.

Recommendation 2: Support collection mapping to reveal the existence of special collections strengths and gaps, as well as to identify hidden collections. This might be undertaken with the OCLC collection analysis tool.

Recommendation 3: Connect the exposure of hidden collections to ARL’s strategic priority for Research, Teaching, and Learning, by demonstrating how such projects can provide opportunities for faculty and student collaboration, as well as training for library school students.

Recommendation 4: Support collaboration with HBCU libraries, both to expose their hidden collections and to support training and education in special collections.
Working Group on Special Collections

The task force also supports the creation of a working group to advise the RTL Steering Committee on special collections issues on an ongoing basis. Some of these issues include:

Recommendation 1: Coordinate planning for collecting 19th- and 20th-century materials in all formats (rare books, archives and manuscripts, audio, and video).

Recommendation 2: Develop criteria and strategies for collecting born-digital and other new media material.

These first two recommendations are closely linked. The task force believes that regardless of format, an enormous amount of valuable material remains uncollected and risks being permanently lost. Coordinated strategies for identifying and collecting these materials are greatly needed. As Lynne Brindley noted at the May 2006 ARL Membership Meeting, international efforts are underway — and more are needed — to support the digitization of 19th- and 20th-century newspapers and books. Even before such digitization is possible, strong efforts must be made to identify and acquire culturally significant materials from these periods. While individual libraries must ultimately take action to acquire such materials, ARL can provide leadership for collective activities including collection analysis, identification of gaps, and coordination.

Recommendation 3: Promote the RTL Steering Committee’s priority on enhanced environments for teaching and learning by providing evidence on how special collections contribute to innovative research, teaching, and learning.

Recommendation 4: Work with the ARL Task Force on New Ways of Measuring Collections to develop qualitative and quantitative measures for the evaluation of special collections. These might include a target for surfacing hidden collections, and tracking the percentage of hidden collections exposed each year.

Recommendation 5: As a follow-on to our work on education and training, remain attentive to the work being done by the ACRL/RBMS Core Competencies Task Force to define the skills needed for work in special collections. A future ARL special collections group should review the document they are producing and endorse it, if appropriate.