

## The Unique Role of Special Collections

### Special Collections: Statement of Principles, 2003

#### Research Libraries and the Commitment to Special Collections

Scholarly research depends ultimately on the availability of primary sources. Research libraries preserve and provide such primary resources as part of their fundamental mission. Manuscripts or printed books or other artifacts or objects "born digital" are tangible marks of prior cultures, literary growth and development, and turning points in history. They are the means by which scholars document, investigate and interpret all our histories and cultures.

Members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), like other research libraries in this country and internationally, embrace the complex set of obligations imposed by our mission to provide primary resources. We collect, organize, maintain and preserve these primary research materials to meet the needs of our parent institutions and, like them, to serve the needs of national and international scholarship. We view our commitment to primary resources as a critical component of our institutional mission and as an enduring contribution by research libraries to scholarship and learning.

As ARL libraries carry out these important functions, our Special Collections play a critical role. While many of our general collections are remarkable in their comprehensiveness or age, our Special Collections tend to be unique. They comprise manuscripts and archival collections unduplicated elsewhere and one-of-a-kind or rarely held books. They also include items precious through their rarity, monetary value, or their association with important figures or institutions in history, culture, politics, sciences, or the arts.

Special Collections extend beyond paper to other formats of cultural significance, for example photographs, moving pictures, architectural drawings, and digital archives. Special collections are also significant for their focused assemblages of published materials so comprehensive as to constitute unparalleled opportunities for scholarship. The development, preservation, support, stewardship and dissemination of major special collections thus becomes both a characteristic of the true research library, and an obligation assumed by all members of the Association of Research Libraries. Special Collections represent not only the heart of an ARL library's mission, but one of the critical identifiers of a research library.

Accordingly, in maintaining Special Collections members of the Association of Research Libraries should:

- Provide reliable funding for the support, staffing and preservation of Special Collections,
- Build Special Collections in keeping with institutional collection development policies, existing strengths, and regional or national commitments, and enter a new collection area only if there is a firm commitment to develop the collection and make it accessible to users;
- In communications, characterize Special Collections as fundamental to the mission of the Library;
- Make information about all Special Collections visible online within a reasonable

time period, following established guidelines for what constitutes adequate access;

- House Special Collections in secure, environmentally sound space;
- Provide functional, welcoming space for the use of these collections;
- Include Special Collections in overall strategic planning and library development;
- Work collaboratively with appropriate partners to build collections in emerging areas of scholarly interest, to enhance access to Special Collections, and to design the most effective, standards-based digitization projects;
- Explore the issues, implications, and promise inherent in acquiring primary materials that are "born digital;"
- Inform University administrators, boards of trustees, legislators, and other members of the community about the obligations and responsibilities an institution assumes when it undertakes the stewardship of Special Collections of international importance.

Prepared by the ARL Task Force on Special Collections December 17, 2002

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