



Special at the Core: Aligning, Integrating, and Mainstreaming Special Collections in the Research Library

Lisa R. Carter, Associate Director for Special Collections and Area Studies, The Ohio State University Libraries, and Visiting Program Officer, ARL Transforming Special Collections in the Digital Age Working Group

As collections “generally characterized by artifactual or monetary value, physical format, uniqueness or rarity, and/or an institutional commitment to long-term preservation and access,” special collections are typically “housed in a separate unit with specialized security and user services [and] circulation of materials usually is restricted.”¹ By virtue of their particular nature, special collections have often been treated separately. And yet, as “distinctive signifiers of excellence,”² special collections offer abundant opportunity for the whole of a research library to achieve its teaching, learning, and research mission.

In “Rebalancing the Investment in Collections,” Tom Hickerson noted that “special collections can become an increasingly central element of our libraries—but special collections must first become a central element of our libraries. A new alignment is necessary, incorporating special collections, staffing, and expertise into the common asset base of the library.”³ He went on to cite the importance of “mission alignment both with the broader library and with the university mandate” and the need for “new organizational structures [to bring] librarians and archivists together to pursue common outcomes.”

Finally, he noted that special collections may have “a role as an integral leader in shaping the evolving 21st-century collection—but it will be as a component activity contributing to broad institutional goals.”

In its 2012 issue brief on calibrating investment and taking collaborative action, the ARL Task Force on 21st-Century Research Library Collections noted that the “wealth of [library] resources will only

In This Issue

Patron-Driven Acquisitions and the Development of Research Collections: The Case of the Portuguese Canadian History Project.....	6
“There’s a Great Future in Plastics”: Mainstreaming a Special Collection....	11
Integrating Special Collections into the Composition Classroom: A Case Study of Collaborative Digital Curriculum.....	16
The Eaton Collection and UC Riverside Libraries: A Study in Driving Alignment.....	21
The Confluence of Collections at Johns Hopkins’s Sheridan Libraries.....	26
Metastatic Metadata: Transferring Digital Skills and Digital Comfort at UMass Amherst.....	31

be realized through coordinated and effective advocacy, discovery, and creativity by research library staff” and that “the enduring need within the library for deep subject expertise will be increasingly met by teamwork and cross institutional partnerships,” suggesting the collaboration needed to leverage distinctive collections.⁴ While “stewardship of unique assets associated with an institution/library is an increasing priority,” this prioritization will take place within a more holistic view of research library collections as “components of the academy’s knowledge resources.”

A Call for Evidence

As the ARL Working Group on Transforming Special Collections in the Digital Age investigates models to advance coordinated efforts related to special collections, the group is compiling evidence of the incorporation of special collections more holistically into library initiatives. In 2012, the working group issued a call for proposals of case studies that demonstrated how special collections were being aligned, integrated, mainstreamed, or centralized into broader library operations. Twenty-six ARL institutions answered the call, offering a wide array of examples. From that group, six cases were selected to document a diverse set of models in this special issue of *RLI*.

Just as special collections are distinctive “trademarks”⁵ of institutions, the ways libraries are aligning, integrating, and mainstreaming special collections are uniquely suited to each local academic environment and the prevailing library culture. And yet some patterns emerged from the case studies, while other anticipated trends did not.

Mission Aligned

Alignment of collecting with university strengths and library mission was well represented throughout the proposals. Many of the submissions described how a specific, significant collection or a targeted collecting area was directly aligned with university priorities and the library’s mission to support research strengths and distinguished areas of teaching and learning. For example, Cornell University highlighted its Hip Hop Collection as an initiative that advanced many top institutional priorities and increased academic discourse on campus. The University of Southern California told of the inventive ways it uses special collections as points for engagement with students, faculty, and the community to enrich knowledge building. The case study from York University included in this issue of *RLI* describes how it responded to significant changes in its academic community by collecting in an area of interest to graduate students and new faculty; capturing an untold story of a local community; digitizing for wide, international access; and enabling cross-university collaboration to expose special collections. The working group also included here Syracuse University’s story of marshaling resources from across the library to drive the acquisition of and access to its plastics collection to support an area of developing research strength at the university.

Deeply Engaged

A majority of the cases reported on rich engagement in the classroom, in the research process, and with communities of interest. A great deal of evidence surfaced to indicate that many special collections units are involved in reciprocal partnerships that advance learning, inspire dialogue, and draw use. Intense use and curricular development served as markers of success. Given this response and in light of the recent publication of *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives*,⁶ it

is evident that the current gold standard is a special collections department that is heavily engaged with faculty and students. The working group heard about curricular-based collection development and class sessions tailored for active learning at Dartmouth College. Georgetown University created an intensive special collections–based research experience to develop lifelong academic habits of using primary sources, which is expanding across the university’s core curriculum. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign described its special collections as an anchor to the curriculum, a cultural center of campus, and an inspiration for academic discourse among faculty and students. University of Iowa leveraged social networking to enhance Civil War resources, an effort that has created a loyal audience, inclusion in classroom instruction, and donations. In this issue of *RLI*, the working group offers Ohio University’s story of a collaborative effort that combined a common technological platform and archival resources to teach writing in a way that reflects the changing model of knowledge construction and demonstrates the relevance of special collections in the digital age.

Centrally Positioned

A smaller group of submissions demonstrated that, at some libraries, special collections are increasingly represented at the core. In these institutions, the move to bring special collections into the center of the organization is a driving force for change. University of California, Los Angeles, shared its effort to consolidate special collections silos in order to reduce redundancies, while pushing special collections work out into other library units to create efficiencies. At University of Utah, special collections sits as an equal partner on the library’s leadership team and a variety of library units share the work of surfacing special collections. University of Calgary’s reorganization merged special collections into the overall library structure to expose special materials for use and to streamline acquisitions, description, and processing activities. For this issue of *RLI*, University of California, Riverside, documents its long-standing strategy to incorporate its Eaton Collection of Science Fiction and Fantasy into the center of its mission, planning, budgeting, operations, technical services, outreach, and engagement activities.

Operationally Integrated

Other responses to the working group’s call offered exciting evidence that special collections has been integrated, coordinated, or blended into broad library functions. New organizational partnerships, staffing, and workflows result in efficiencies, synergies, and improvements for both the library as a whole and for special collections. At Pennsylvania State University, Special Collections and Interlibrary Loan worked together to appropriately enhance access to unique materials, testing the boundaries of efficiency, trust, and open access. University of Guelph’s cross-functional teams have woven special collections throughout the organization and the special collections unit contributes to the development of policies, best practices, and projects. University of Pittsburgh’s effort to enhance access to collections through the Documenting Pitt website required unified effort from, and resulted in shared benefit to, various library and university departments. Columbia University submitted case studies describing an organizational turnaround that repurposed staff lines while recasting curatorship as well as intra-library leveraging of efforts to highlight special collections. In this issue of *RLI*, the working group includes the example Johns Hopkins University provided of how to integrate special collections directly into collection development decision making and into the liaison librarian role.

Agents of Change

The working group also looked for evidence of special collections as change agent, where special collections has driven changes or provided solutions that lead to innovation across the whole library program. In some organizations, special collections leads movement towards a prevailing current of activity. This was evident at Vanderbilt University, where special collections curators trained bibliographers to curate exhibits and developed new workflows to digitize, describe, and present resources. The New York University case study told of special collections leading instructional librarians in re-envisioning engagement in the classroom and assessing impact on learning outcomes. Representing special collections as catalyst in this issue of *RLI*, University of Massachusetts Amherst documents how Special Collections and University Archives worked with the Digital Strategies Group to develop digital competencies, collaborative skills, teamwork, and workplace adaptability in colleagues across the libraries.

Areas for Further Investigation

In the responses to the working group's call, the cases did not provide enough evidence that special collections are aligned, integrated, or mainstreamed in several critical areas. Few submissions addressed assessment, although Rutgers University shared how its technical services unit worked with special collections to develop a metadata tool to document use events in the digital environment in order to measure impact. Unified discovery, which Hickerson describes as essential, did not surface meaningfully, although University of Utah indicated that digitized primary sources are included in their main discovery platform and presented on equal footing with books, journal articles, and other resources. Special collections' role in evolving "policies and functional support for acquiring, managing, and supporting use of society's born digital record"⁷ did not manifest, although Purdue University did reference the development of PURR (Purdue University Research Repository), which explores the issues involved in born-digital asset management. Bringing this last topic to the fore, ARL has partnered with the Society of American Archivists (SAA) to offer courses from SAA's Digital Archives Specialist Curriculum and Certificate Program to ARL communities in 2013–14, which should uncover concrete examples of where special collections are central to addressing the born-digital challenge on a campus.

This is not to say that stories on these matters do not exist. But the makeup of the submissions as a group suggests that, when asked about aligning, integrating, and mainstreaming special collections, libraries think about mission alignment and engagement first, integrating and mainstreaming workflows for efficiency second, and centralizing at an operational level third. Areas of greatest challenge for both libraries and special collections—assessment, unified discovery, and managing born-digital materials—remain as opportunities for further initiative, innovation, and articulation.

With the case studies included in this issue of *Research Libraries Issues*, the working group hopes that libraries will hear echoes of their own efforts to incorporate special collections into broader operations and initiatives. As research libraries envision how their distinctive collections might be better leveraged and promoted, the strategies described here might resonate with opportunities on the horizon. Further, with examples like these, research libraries may find that efforts to align, integrate, and centralize special collections can drive transformative change that enables the whole library to meet its teaching, learning, and research mission and become an effective partner in advancing the scholarly record.

Endnotes

- 1 Jackie M. Dooley and Katherine Luce, *Taking Our Pulse: The OCLC Research Survey of Special Collections and Archives* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research, 2010), <http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2010/2010-11.pdf>.
- 2 Nicolas Barker, "Introduction," in *Celebrating Research: Rare and Special Collections from the Membership of the Association of Research Libraries*, ed. Philip N. Cronenwett, Kevin Osborn, Samuel A. Streit (Washington, DC: ARL, 2007), 15, <http://www.celebratingresearch.org/intro/intro.shtml>.
- 3 H. Thomas Hickerson, "Rebalancing the Investment in Collections," *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 277 (Dec. 2011): 5, <http://publications.arl.org/rli277/6>.
- 4 ARL Task Force on 21st-Century Research Library Collections, "Issue Brief: 21st-Century Collections: Calibration of Investment and Collaborative Action," March 10, 2012, <http://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/issue-brief-21st-century-collections-2012.pdf>.
- 5 Barker, "Introduction," 15.
- 6 Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, Suzy Taraba, eds., *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012).
- 7 Hickerson, "Rebalancing the Investment in Collections," 6.

© 2013 Lisa R. Carter



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

To cite this article: Lisa R. Carter. "Special at the Core: Aligning, Integrating, and Mainstreaming Special Collections in the Research Library." *Research Library Issues: A Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 283 (2013): 1-5. <http://publications.arl.org/rli283/>.