

A Special Issue on Distinctive Collections

Introduction

In spring 2009, the ARL Working Group on Special Collections released a discussion report that identified key issues in the management and exposure of special collections material in the 21st century. The report adopted a broad definition of “special collections,” encompassing distinctive material in all media and attendant library services. The main focus was on 19th- and 20th-century materials, including emerging digital materials and media, but most of the report applies with equal force to collecting and caring for materials from previous centuries. While the report focused on special collections in North American research libraries, it has potential application more broadly.

The report provides overviews of and makes recommendations in three areas:

- Collecting Carefully, with Regard to Costs, and Ethical and Legal Concerns
- Ensuring Discovery and Access
- The Challenge of Born-Digital Collections

Overall the report highlights the need for research library leadership to support actions that will increase the visibility and use of special collections and promote both existing and developing best practices in the stewardship of special collections.

In releasing the report, the working group invited discussion among the many professionals who are charged with the perplexing challenges of handling rare, unique, or unusual material about the extraordinary challenges they face as collectors and stewards of special collections in libraries and archives in the 21st century. To stimulate these discussions, ARL hosted a Web conference, a blog, and—in partnership with the Coalition for Networked Information—held a forum in which some 200 people participated.¹

To sustain the growing momentum of community interest in rethinking the roles of distinctive collections, this issue of *Research Library Issues* is devoted to the topic. Included are a few of the outstanding papers delivered at the forum along with pointers to the forum proceedings available on the ARL Web site and other

resources identified by speakers. Also presented is an excellent synthesis of the major themes that emerged at the forum in presentations and audience questions that was written for ARL by North Carolina State University's Lisa Carter.

CNI's Clifford Lynch writes in his essay, "special collections are a nexus where technology and content are meeting to advance scholarship in extraordinary new ways." The papers included here, as well as those referenced, describe some of the "extraordinary new ways" that librarians, archivists, and scholars are coming together and using technology to identify and steward distinctive collections while simultaneously expanding their visibility for use by a worldwide audience. In publishing this special issue of *RLI*, ARL hopes that it will serve to inform and inspire yet more innovative initiatives, and underscore the working group report's key message that this is truly a time of great opportunity to grasp the challenges before us and help shape a glorious future for the extraordinary resources found in special collections in North America.

¹ The working group report, the archive of the Web conference, and the blog are available online at <http://www.arl.org/rtl/speccoll/SCwebcastjuly07.shtml>. The proceedings from the ARL-CNI forum are available at <http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/fallforumproceedings/forum09proceedings.shtml>.