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portal: Libraries and the Academy, Volume 15, Number 2, April 2015,
pp. 353-373 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/pla.2015.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2015.0017)



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Area Studies and Special Collections: Shared Challenges, Shared Strength

Lisa R. Carter and Beth M. Whittaker

abstract: Special collections and area studies librarians face similar challenges in the changing academic library environment, including the need to articulate the value of these specialized collections and to mainstream processes and practices into larger discovery, teaching, learning, and research efforts. For some institutions, these similarities have led to combining these areas of librarianship into a shared administrative structure. This article articulates the concept of “distinctive collections,” identifies the shared challenges of these programs, and enumerates some essential differences, as well as outlines some observations from institutions that have taken this step. It further suggests opportunities for these areas to build strength and significantly impact teaching, learning, and research together. Future research agendas that might propel further investigation of “distinctive collections” are proposed.

Introduction

In an environment where research libraries must increasingly articulate the value of their distinctive collections to the larger enterprise, certain imperatives loom large. These imperatives include intensive engagement with users, the need for cost-effective processes that drive meaningful outcomes, and the opportunities and challenges of collections strategically curated around an area of specialization. Special collections—usually encompassing rare, archival, or other primary source materials—are increasingly seen as the corpus that distinguishes one academic library from another. Many special collections develop in response to a localized enthusiasm for a topic or a specialization in research that reflects an institution’s strength or a community’s passion. The opportunity to dramatically inspire teaching, learning, and research by connecting faculty, students, and other scholars to these collections holds the promise of transformative impact.

portal: Libraries and the Academy, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2015), pp. 353–373.

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Similarly, area studies collections have developed as specialized accumulations of knowledge united by language, geographic region, cultural resonance, or all three. Area studies collections in the research library may contain rare materials alongside more commonly held resources, but these aggregations are distinctive as *collections*,

... the area studies librarian's intervention in connecting users with specialized collections is not unlike that of the special collections curator, and vice versa.

deliberately selected around specialized areas of expertise that are focused on related languages, regions, and cultures. Area studies materials are generally more easily discovered than special collections because they are cataloged and available for circulation, but access often requires mediation due to language, divergent access standards, or cultural sensitivity. Hence, the area studies

librarian's intervention in connecting users with specialized collections is not unlike that of the special collections curator, and vice versa.

For the authors, this resonance between area studies and special collections has been put in place operationally. Our libraries have placed these two types of distinctive collections under one divisional umbrella. For us, the associations are a matter of daily existence. As we make sense of the pairing to our constituencies, our staff, and our colleagues, the similarities and differences between the two types of collections impact our approaches to workflows, resource allocation, and advocacy.

In this article, we plan to further define the concept of "distinctive collections." We will identify some of the shared challenges of these types of collections, as well as some essential differences, which suggest opportunities to collaboratively build strength and significantly impact teaching, learning, and research. We will also discuss observations and lessons learned from our experience working with paired programs. We intend to identify future research agendas that might propel further investigation of these themes.

We do not mean to argue that libraries should organizationally combine area studies and special collections because operational solutions differ from library to library. Additionally, we do not suggest that special collections and area studies are the only distinctive collections that might exist in a research library. Instead, we hope to identify characteristics and opportunities of distinctiveness that may be helpful as other libraries consider how to increase the impact of collections that distinguish them from other institutions. Further, we do not intend to perpetuate any siloed or isolated approach to special or area collections, even in combination with each other. The future of distinctive collections is dependent on and critical to the whole of a research library. The convenience of organizational borders should not dictate separation of these areas from the libraries' workflows or from infrastructure that advances access to or engagement with all library resources.

Defining Distinctive Collections

The concept of distinctive collections originates in literature focusing on special collections. Nicolas Barker, in his introduction to *Celebrating Research*, argues, "Where once special collections were regarded as the top dressing on the solid cake of main library



management, they are now regarded as distinctive signifiers, almost trademarks." He adds, "ARL libraries want to be known for their distinctive collections, not by some characteristic shared by every other library."¹ This now common argument lays the foundation for the concept of distinctive collections as valuable accumulations of research material that set a library apart from its peers. Barker also notes that a hallmark of collection development for special collections is the need to "catch material in time" to preserve primary expressions of knowledge and make them accessible for use.

In her introduction to *Special Collections in ARL Libraries*, Alice Prochaska articulates an "ecumenical" concept of distinctiveness that envelopes area studies.² In addition to the typical rare books, manuscripts, archives, and other formats, she asserts, "'Special collections' also can be extended to include distinct collections of material relating to a particular subject or part of the world."

This report of the ARL (Association of Research Libraries) Working Group on Special Collections embraced an inclusive vision that highlights many of the distinguishing challenges both traditional special collections and area studies collections face. It explains, "Our thinking has embraced libraries' stewardship of any kind of vehicle for information and communication that lacks readily available and standardized classification schemes, and any that is vulnerable to destruction or disappearance without special treatment."³ This broadening of the concept of special collections suggests needed attention to the shared characteristics of distinctive collections.

Rick Anderson discussed some of the characteristics of distinctive collections in his briefing paper "Can't Buy Us Love." He argues that the opportunity dichotomy in research library collections is not between print and digital, but between "commodity / non-commodity," further examining the critical difference of materials that are specialized.⁴ While Anderson sees that "the library's role as a broker, curator, and organizer of commodity documents is fading,"⁵ he articulates the importance of investing in the acquisition, digitization, and discoverability of "non-commodity" materials and suggests that the whole library's role shift toward that of broker, curator, and organizer of "non-commodity" or distinctive collections. While "many of the academic library's traditional roles are moving to the margins of the research experience," the opportunity in "non-commodity" collections lies in their very distinctive nature—libraries should embrace the *material* on the margins as core and invest in actions that make them relevant. Anderson also remarks, "Librarians will have to explain *clearly, concisely, and compellingly* why such a shift makes sense and how it will be beneficial in terms of both local and broader public good."⁶

Distinctiveness in Area Studies

Area studies collections in research libraries consist of both general, circulating, "commodity" collections and rare, ephemeral, "non-commodity" materials. Through the expertise of area studies librarians, specialized collections curated around languages, literatures, and cultures of geographic regions or ethnic identities offer distinctive opportunities for research, teaching, and learning.

Dan Hazen's "Area Studies Librarianship and Interdisciplinarity: Globalization, the Long Tail, and the Cloud" in *Interdisciplinarity & Academic Libraries* outlines the "distinctive" characteristics of area studies collections.⁷ Hazen asserts:



Non-Western collections work, for example, focuses on esoteric materials in unfamiliar languages that can be difficult to acquire. These “long-tail” acquisitions, and the staff to support them, draw upon structures that reflect both the interdisciplinarity of area studies and the high-overhead, low-use resources upon which it depends.⁸

Hazen observes, “Libraries’ support for area studies entails interplay between generalized procedures and systems, and the requirements of materials and services that fall outside the norm.”⁹ He also notes, “High usage is regarded as a primary indicator of collection success, and non-English materials rarely make the grade.” He further states that “area studies initially challenged both the traditional categories of discipline-based scholarship and established approaches to library operations” and consisted of “difficult materials and labor-intensive routines.”¹⁰

Deborah Jakubs’s extensive writings on the realities and futures of area studies librarianship further explore characteristics of distinctive collections. In “Modernizing Mycroft: The Future of the Area Librarian,” she notes how specialization in area studies is seen as “suspect” and asks, “Is specialization a luxury? Or is specialization a necessity?”¹¹ These are critical questions for a research library as it turns to emphasize its distinctive collections.

Jakubs notes that expert librarians who cultivate distinctive collections have a “rapport with faculty, the close association with and dedication to academic programs, part and parcel of the job, the broad subject knowledge and an intensity of engagement with the field.” She observes that the area librarian’s job “has evolved as a highly independent role.”

In her article “A Library by Any Other Name: Change, Adaptation, Transformation,” Jakubs asserts:

Area studies collections are special collections. Foreign-language collections are integral to research libraries. It is our duty to collect broadly, to support the needs of researchers, and to consider the scholarly record internationally. As libraries focus on expanding access to their distinctive collections via digitization projects, area studies will become more visible.¹²

The 2011 *ARL SPEC Kit 324: Collecting Global Resources* further provides evidence that area studies form a nexus of specialized resources and expertise with potential impact for an organization both in distinctiveness and in international reach. The *SPEC Kit’s*

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analysis of strategies for collection development highlights how expertise and distinctive collections operate in a self-sustaining cycle. One respondent remarked, “Because we are so engaged in instruction, being in the classroom puts us in direct contact with students and faculty. It is easy to spot research trends or changes within the curriculum.” Close relationships with vendors, specialized book

markets, gifts, and exchange programs are key to successful acquisitions and services in area studies. The SPEC (Systems and Procedures Exchange Center) survey also outlines the imperative to develop collaborative collections, along with the exciting possibilities



of sharing staffing and library services.¹³ The survey also notes how the preservation needs of international and area studies characterize their distinctiveness. Respondents had “an acute awareness of the special needs of these resources because of poor bindings, acidic paper, etc.” coupled with a complex relationship to the role of digitization as a preservation (rather than access) strategy.¹⁴

The *SPEC Kit* does not provide a complete sense of how libraries administer area studies units, saying, “The organization of those units ranges from an integration of special collections and area studies units to a structure where global resource collections units report to public services.” It does observe, however, that “balancing the identity and specialized workflow needs of individual collections with a library’s need for efficiency and cost effectiveness will always be a precarious undertaking, particularly when implementing reorganizations.”¹⁵

Several conferences have taken an intensive look at the future of area studies librarianship. While their agendas were much broader than the concept of distinctiveness, a few highlights are worth sharing. The International and Area Studies Collections in 21st Century Libraries conference took place in November 2012 at Yale University in New Haven, CT. The conference found shared issues among managers of specialized collections, including a “sense of urgency about the need to better position these library units so that they can continue to thrive” and the participants’ concern for “improving their ability to advocate” and “demonstrating their organizational impact.”¹⁶

The Center for Research Libraries (CRL) hosted Global Dimensions of Scholarship and Research Libraries: A Forum on the Future, at Duke University in Durham, NC, in December of 2012.¹⁷ The literature that emerged from this conference emphasized the effects of “globalization” on campuses and is worth examining particularly where “distinctiveness” seems to be in play.¹⁸ Charles Hale discussed the work of the University of Texas in Austin with archival collections abroad as part of its Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI) and the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive. Both collections create models of “noncustodial archiving,” where distinctiveness in area studies led to curation of born-digital primary source material with global impact. Betsy Wilson discussed the involvement of the University of Washington in Seattle in international research areas that create a challenge for libraries as they “balance the need for national collections as well as distinctive local strengths, to provide core material for undergraduate teaching and research, as well as ‘reasonable access’ to less-used research resources.”¹⁹

In her preview of the Collaboration, Advocacy, and Recruitment: Area and International Studies Librarian Workshop held at Indiana University in Bloomington in 2013, Christa Williford hints at a significant change in approach to area studies as well as specific mention of possible overlap with special collections.²⁰ “Without some sort of large-scale coherent approach to curating and making accessible our global collections,” she says, “we risk losing the richness and depth our academic libraries offer to students and scholars.” Specifically, she asks:

What about opportunities for closer collaboration between area and international studies specialists and those working in special collections and archives? Since these professionals serve many of the same researchers, it stands to reason they could find common interests



and promote one another's work. Many recipients of our Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grants have had success in engaging faculty and students in their efforts to describe collections. Might their strategies translate to better engagement with the work of area and international studies librarians?

In the documentation of the event at Indiana University, "provocations" included concepts such as "archiving" Web resources, sharing area studies librarians among institutions, and demonstrating value and impact.²¹ A "response" by Peter Zhou states unequivocally that area studies collections are marks of distinction important in positioning research libraries. He asserts, "Virtually no university can aspire to world-class status without a strong international studies program and supporting collection."²²

Leveraging Distinctive Collections

Jakubs sees the future of area studies in moving "from relative isolation into a new role that still recognizes the value of specialization,"²³ and Hazen notes the "interplay between generalized procedures and systems, and the requirements of materials and services that fall outside the norm."²⁴ Along the same lines, recent literature on mainstreaming special collections into the research library enterprise indicates new opportunities for distinctive collections.

Lisa Carter, in her article "It's the Collections That Are Special," argues, "Libraries can embrace their special collections and archives as a locus of distinction, experimentation and core value. The time has come for libraries to integrate special collections into the flow in every aspect of our work." She also issues a call for change:

It is time to integrate the selection, description, research service and technological activities in every library with those needed to connect users to our most distinctive, unique collections. Libraries must recognize that while the collections are special and even have special needs, the talents and skills needed to expose them are found library-wide.²⁵

ARL's *Research Library Issues* 267 Special Issue on Distinctive Collections further explores the complex relationship between distinctiveness and integration. In "Special Collections at the Cusp of the Digital Age: A Credo," Clifford Lynch observes, "Each great research library has its own unique character; special and distinctive collections

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have always been central to shaping this character."²⁶ Anne R. Kenney's appeal to heed the "collaborative imperative" echoes the calls from area studies thinkers on the need to collaboratively build collections.²⁷ Donald J. Waters examines the changing role of special collections in scholarly communications, critiquing the "value proposition" of special collections. He acknowledges that special collections "can be a

source of pride, expertise, and excellence" but adds, "Taken to an extreme, the argument about institutional distinctiveness can also limit scholarly productivity by provoking the impulse to protect silo-like boundaries around collections."²⁸



ARL's *Research Library Issues* 283 on mainstreaming special collections highlights cases where research libraries are integrating their distinctive collections into broader library practices and systems.²⁹ Drawing on Tom Hickerson's observations in "Rebalancing the Investment in Collections," Carter introduces the theme of *Research Library Issues* 283 by noting that if special collections are to become central to the research library, they need to be integrated into what Hickerson calls the "common asset base" of the overall research library. This means aligning special collections with the broader mission of the library and its institution as well as creating new organizational structures and workflows. Such changes will position archives and special collections in lead roles in the evolution of the twenty-first-century academic library. But this realignment needs to be viewed as "a component activity contributing to broad institutional goals," not merely a forefronting of special collections.³⁰

In discussing how his institution has integrated distinctive collections, Michael B. Moir describes the development of the Portuguese Canadian History Project at York University in Toronto, Canada. Echoing Hazen's arguments, Moir asks:

At a time when the availability of potential donations far outstrips the resources available to preserve this material and make it accessible, how do libraries ensure a reasonable return on the investment of diminishing funds through collections use by the burgeoning ranks of new faculty and graduate students with new and sometimes unpredictable research interests?³¹

Moir also underscores the need to tie the workflows and practices of distinctive collections to larger institutional work (including digitization): "Such endeavors must be brought into the mainstream of annual budgeting and departmental work plans if the libraries' objectives based on leveraging unique research collections are to be achieved."³²

Liz Mengel specifically addresses the need to break down silos in her discussion of "blended librarians," who cross organizational boundaries, at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. The integration of special collections into the mainstream of that library extends to the cooperative management of the collection budget.³³ Robert Cox and his coauthors further articulated this blurring of the lines with a user focus in their discussion of how the University of Massachusetts Amherst brought resources across the library to bear to make special collections more accessible:

Libraries know patrons are not interested in understanding the arcane internal structure of the library in order to do their research. Finding ways to blur or eliminate the boundaries between two departments that are providing similar service is a great way to move away from a siloed environment to a more holistic user-centered environment.³⁴

The growing frequency and intensity of focus on distinctiveness demonstrate clear parallels in the challenges and attention of the two communities.

Commonalities of Distinctive Collections

Common ground between special collections and area studies lies in their positioning in the research library, their identification around specialization, and the need to integrate these areas more centrally into the core of the research library enterprise. Shared features include:



- a high level of expertise in a distinguishing area
- highly focused collection development
- special handling and processing concerns (languages, fragility, format)
- a targeted but international user community (in addition to a more generalized group of local users)
- existing elements of the desired intensive liaison model
- shared history of positioning as outsiders, as siloed, or as different from the larger library system.

Zhou's suggestion that international and area studies are distinguished programs and contribute to distinction mirrors Barker's articulation of special collections as "distinctive signifiers, almost trademarks."³⁵ A shared overarching challenge for distinctive

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collections is that they tend to fall into what Hazen calls a "long tail" of low-use resources that are expensive to acquire, process, and maintain. The authors believe that the future of both areas is dependent less on the stockpile of unique treasures they hold or the carefulness with which collections are cultivated and more on the library's success in actively connecting these remarkable resources to local users and a global community of scholars.

As Hazen indicates, "Changing modes of access, the evolving economics of cooperation, and the impact of the cloud now allow different approaches to acquisitions,"³⁶ management, discovery, and use.

Interdisciplinarity and Breaking Down Silos

Both special collections and area studies have existed in a space between defined academic disciplines and have long fostered interdisciplinary scholarship. While they do not "belong" to specific academic departments, both areas often have close ties with

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faculty and students that connect around a specific identity (for example, Middle East studies, medieval scholar, Latin Americanist, or comics historian). Within the library, the specialized nature of primary source and rare collections and language-based materials has meant that the special collections and area studies librarians' efforts evolved as what Jakubs calls "a highly independent

role"³⁷ managing acquisition, description, arrangement, and service within a silo because the nature of the materials required specialized mediation.

As distinctive collections have come to be understood as central to the future of the research library, as their description and processing become more normalized and

ubiquitous, and as discovery and delivery of all research materials increasingly happen online, both area studies and special collections are revisiting the ways they work. They have been encouraged to break out of their silos and their restricted reading rooms to emerge into the broader library and information environment. Jakubs articulated this critical transition:

It is time to move from relative isolation into a new role that still recognizes the value of specialization. The future of area librarians depends on our adapting and modernizing, integrating our skills into the library in new ways, and therefore changing our image. Unless we do so, redefining our core responsibilities, we will continue to be misperceived and undervalued, and hence, endangered.³⁸

In this way, area studies and special collections professionals must tap into their abilities to see connections and relate across areas of expertise to more effectively engage functionally throughout the library. Interconnected thinking is both an advocacy strategy and a potential answer to reduced resources, enabling specialists to integrate with broader library workflows. Yet as they act interdepartmentally, specialists have the shared challenge of creating understanding about the distinctive needs of their communities and collections. In addition to pushing work beyond departmental borders, area studies and special collections can share strategies for inviting in functional specialists to deal with specialized materials.

Global Audience, Local Relevance

Area studies and special collections engage with audiences that can be international, visiting, and dispersed by their very nature. If a research library intentionally develops “destination” collections, it must be prepared to support an audience broader than the faculty and students on its campus. Further, the general library user population often dwarfs the numbers of specialized on-campus users of distinctive collections. But those specialized users will likely engage more intensively, for longer periods, and with longer-term outputs. To demonstrate the importance of distinctive collections, libraries need to determine how to measure impact for and value of these two audiences—distant but discipline relevant, local but with intense needs and extended timelines. This need is a shared challenge fraught with issues of qualitative assessment.

Further, distinctive collections must be made relevant for the general population that is critical to the parent organization. How do you catch the passion of the local business donor? How might you advance a university’s drive toward technological and medical innovation with distinctive materials? What commitment should special collections or area studies have to the undergraduate studying in a relevant area, but who lacks language or paleographic skills? These shared challenges are, at their base, difficult because of the specialized nature of the collections. Can examples of bridge building in area studies advance special collections’ efforts toward relevance, and vice versa?

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As librarians address the needs of each audience, they must refocus on, improve, and articulate the skills experts often excel at but need to deploy broadly across audiences and situations. For example, special collections curators may regularly succeed at cultivating relationships with donors or subject-specific scholarly communities, while area studies librarians have close ties to faculty in their language and geographic areas. Either way, excellence at relationship building sparked by shared passion and sustained through regular, empathetic interaction propels discovery through long-term dialog and shared insights. Area studies specialists and special collections curators often serve as intensive, long-term research partners with the scholars who use their collections and the communities who have a direct interest in them. Both curators and area studies librarians are often deeply embedded in specific academic departments or centers and seen as trusted colleagues and peers. In this way, they play key roles in what Janice M. Jaguszewski and Karen Williams call “the hybrid model of liaisons and functional specialists [which] requires a team approach as well as a strong referral system.”³⁹ The aspects of relationship building that are shared or different between special collections and area studies can provide inspiration for how to engage more deeply with users. Distinctive collections professionals, then, may be models in this area for colleagues in other areas of library practice.

Achieving such intensive relationships at scale is a critical challenge for both special collections and area studies. And yet, the digital environment offers opportunities for special collections and area studies libraries to connect more efficiently in scholarly

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communities as trusted knowledge brokers and sources. Just as members of the Internet community gravitate toward a specific blogger because of shared tone or interests, area studies and special collections librarians can turn distinctive collections and expertise into opportunities to be “followed” and to spark connection and discussion. CRL, through its study on electronic human rights documenta-

tion,⁴⁰ identified an important role for libraries to monitor what information is available and serve as a trusted partner in connecting information with long-term scholarship. Librarians are needed as aggregators and “understanders,” as people who know how knowledge is or was produced and distributed and how to express and preserve it. With their high level of expertise, area studies and special collections librarians share the ability to interpret, select, aggregate, and authenticate in distinctive areas. Together, special collections and area studies people can navigate the needed expansion of their reach by sharing strategies and cross-pollinating online offerings.

Hidden Collections and Discovery

Area studies librarians have collected primary sources and ephemera that complement their “commodity” materials back to beginnings of their collections. Just as special collections have a role in preserving primary sources to enable new research, area studies



similarly collect documentation from and about areas of the world, often capturing information that may not survive a shifting political or social environment. Their special collections colleagues can offer advice on stabilizing and providing access to these materials and possibly offer a safer home for fragile items. Similarly, special collections have collected foreign-language materials in their subject and format areas since the collections were established. Area studies colleagues can assist with processing, access, and use of these collections.

Distinctive collections jointly share a need to revisit collecting strategy in the context of decreasing resources. Librarians and curators need to find ways to scale their collecting in both areas to the environment of their parent institutions, whether in the areas of budget and storage, the ability to get the materials processed, or the relative priority such materials might have to the core research agenda of the institution. Once librarians and archivists have right-sized their collecting activities to their organizational context, they must learn to articulate the value of using the remaining focused collections to transform teaching, learning, and research. And librarians and archivists need to make their impact go further through cooperative collecting and collaborative collection efforts such as HathiTrust, UBBorrow, BorrowDirect, and the various digital collection environments, which require interoperability and openness.

In area studies, languages and non-Roman scripts create barriers for nonreaders of the language and for the application of descriptive standards, requiring expert mediation in discovery and use. In special collections, original order, context, and format require interpretation. Even as librarians embrace colleagues who have expertise in description, preservation, and technology to help them get materials out there, they must work side by side with their colleagues to mitigate these distinctive challenges. Innovations in large-scale Web discovery, linked open data, and crowdsourcing can only be leveraged if translational metadata are effectively structured and created. And yet, having libraries' distinctive collections available at that scale is critical to knowledge building on a global level, and ultimately, to the authority and relevance of their institutions.

In the past, distinction in collections was determined by the uniqueness or sheer magnitude of materials. Increasingly today differentiation involves how libraries connect these remarkable resources to users and

a global community of scholars. How can the shared strengths in area studies and special collections overcome some of the challenges of exposing hidden collections to a global audience in a networked environment? Ownership and copyright of government publications and primary sources are joint areas of exploration as more and more distinctive collections move online. Connecting disparate sources in a subject area

(whether it be human rights or Samuel Beckett) requires international collaboration. The interplay between distinctive collections and vendors who can digitize and repackage them is also a shared issue for special collections and area studies. In vendor negotia-

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tions, there is room to articulate the value of the original, the intellectual property in aggregation, and the shared benefit to the holding institution and the aggregator. Standards and sustainability for Web archiving are of shared concern, regardless of whether the Web site that needs to be preserved is a wiki about manga or a university's complex self-representation on the Web.

It is exactly in the changing context of today's research library and these potential areas for shared solutions where distinctive collections and expertise can have broader reach and greater impact. As Hazen says, "More robust solutions will require specialized acquisitions that are also aggressively cooperative, better tools for discovery, and fluid mechanisms for access."⁴¹

Important Differences

In our examination, we found key areas of divergence for area studies and special collections that should be acknowledged and can be used to advance the whole organization. By embracing and investigating differences, special collections and area studies can grow stronger.

For example, as Dan Hazen wrote, "External mandates and support have been crucial in establishing the footings for area studies."⁴² Area studies centers and academic departments have traditionally provided special funding to support area studies library collections and initiatives. As government funds (Title VI) become less secure, area studies in libraries must examine the symbiotic relationship they have had with their centers. This evolving dynamic requires reenvisioning area studies' importance to society writ large. What place should they have now in a society that is globalized but still has need of greater cultural understanding? As research institutions develop global campuses, the corresponding area studies have the opportunity for a high profile on campus. The importance of distinctive collections in those areas is critical for the deep research that can transcend borders.

On the other hand, special collections have grown up locally with donations from passionate people and operational funding sourced primarily from the library. That special collections have an international audience is incidental to the fact that the collections are distinctive. Having been bred locally, special collections have sometimes been distracted by the international community craving access to the unique materials. They need to refocus on the local connection that made the collection relevant to an institution in the first place. Research interests at a university evolve over time, but the evolution of a university generally follows a recognizable trajectory—as a land grant institution, as a flagship university, as an intimate liberal arts college, or as an intensive science and technology school. In a time of limited resources and the need for the library to align closely with the broader institution, special collections may need to focus more intently on an institution-based context to sustain support for the resource-intensive activities needed to expose their distinctive collections.

Special collections and area studies directions might also diverge around their changing relationships to the role of custodian versus monitoring facilitator. Because special collections' distinctiveness is grounded in the existence of primary artifacts, special collections and the libraries to which they belong will always have a custodial



role in preserving and protecting original, unique, or rare objects. Because the bulk of area studies collections comprise “commodity” collections (albeit difficult to acquire in the international market), they might consider turning over the custodial role for their “non-commodity” collections to special collections, leaving them free to take on the role of connector, broker, or knowledge conduit.

A further difference in approach to custodianship is that area studies collections reasonably exist in an environment where not all materials on a related topic can be found under the “area studies” umbrella. Few Jewish studies collections, for example, would hold all the material related to Judaica or Jewish culture in a large research library because some material is appropriately administered as part of other collections. By their nature, Jewish studies materials can be anywhere. At the same time, special collections libraries sometimes find themselves, despite collection development policies and the best of intentions, becoming a home for library materials that fall outside their collecting area, but just happen to be old, fragile, or otherwise vulnerable. In this way, area studies librarians can be purposefully explicit in their collection building, whereas the special collections curator must manage the realities of providing specialized custody.

With these and possibly other unexplored differences, area studies and special collections librarians’ separate expertise can inform each other, improving the overall library’s ability to tackle the challenges of internationalization, local relevance, advocacy for funding, and the nature of custody. Even in their difference, a shared attention to distinctiveness can advance the whole.

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Organizational Considerations

An examination of the reasons for bringing these two areas of the library together and the practical realities of those implementations help us understand how distinctive areas can work together to advance the impact of the research library. These dynamics play out uniquely in each library, and examples from libraries that have organizationally joined these programs offer concrete insight into the concept of distinctiveness. To determine the character of the “distinctive collections” pairing, we relied extensively on informal communication with colleagues who were aware of our interest in this area.⁴³ We also consulted readily available organizational charts⁴⁴ and searched ARL’s Position Description Bank.⁴⁵ Given the nature of academic libraries, it was impossible to examine every institution, but we believe this sample provides some interesting points for discussion.

At the University of Chicago, an associate university librarian for area studies and special collections administers a division that also includes the humanities and social sciences. The position grew out of a 2012 library reorganization, which created this new administrative unit to facilitate a unified collection and service philosophy that



encompasses special, distinctive, and general collections throughout the library. The focus in the first years after the merger was to improve communication and collaboration between area studies and general collections, as well as between area studies and special collections. Divisional meetings allowed bibliographers and curators to learn about one another's collections and explore areas of overlap and possible cooperation in areas such as instruction, outreach, digitization, and collection development. As collection development for general collections shifts toward building a "collective collection," local and unique resources are the focus of increased attention. Further, the library has identified special collections and area studies as priorities in a new university capital campaign, giving these areas greater institutional visibility.

In 1987, the University of Florida Libraries in Gainesville merged archives, manuscripts, rare books, the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature, and Florida history collections to increase professional standards, in alignment with other ARL institutions. Prominent area studies collections that had acquired significant holdings of rare material joined the department in 1998, forming the Special and Area Studies Collections Department (SASC). The Map and Imagery Library was added to SASC in 2014 to expand opportunities for linking area studies, special collections, and digital scholarship. A chair currently oversees the Special and Area Studies Collections Department, working under an associate dean for scholarly resources and services in the George A. Smathers Libraries. In addition to a traditional special collections reading room, two area studies programs maintain separate reference desks in the same building, and some area studies staff provide reference services for and maintain circulating collection in the main undergraduate library. This environment creates informal connections between special and general collections. SASC has forged an identity that maintains the specificity of content management, access, and preservation required by distinctive collections while creating a collaborative culture that contributes to the institution's capacity to gain and successfully manage large projects and grants. Merging the units has created opportunities for collection and funding development that did not exist earlier. The department also promotes research across collections and encourages interdisciplinary scholarship.

At The Ohio State University (OSU) Libraries in Columbus, combining Special Collections and Archives with Area Studies reflected a steady move of specialized expertise into cohesive departments and an increase in centralized support from the broader infrastructure of the libraries. Special collections, including the university archives, rare books, and other special collections, were consolidated in 2000 under an assistant director for special collections and archives. An extensive library-wide reorganization in 2010 provided an opportune moment to reevaluate how best to distribute administrative oversight while considering appropriate combinations of approach. With technical services (acquisition, description, preservation, and similar processes) and technology development consolidated in other divisions, OSU Libraries took the opportunity to reorient on increasing use and engagement with distinctive collections and specialized expertise. The pairing intended to more effectively make use of support from across the libraries and better enable an interconnectedness that would benefit users and the research community.

At the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries in Lawrence, the larger reorganization that led to the creation of the Distinctive Collections division was explicitly focused on



scalability and sustainability. The KU Libraries reorganized to provide services and support to a larger number of users than the previous departmental liaison model, as well as to respond to compelling developments in higher education. A significant previous consolidation in the early 2000s brought all of the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, including the university archives, regional history, and special collections, under one administrative head, combining staff, reading rooms, and policies. A similar combination took place in 2008 with the creation of the International Area Studies department under a department head. Therefore, when the KU Libraries created the position of assistant dean for distinctive collections in 2013, they combined two areas with some experience of working together with common goals.

Observations from Paired Programs

Both OSU and KU are navigating the shift of technical services work to more centralized workflows and are negotiating the efficiencies of production-oriented processes alongside the input of specialized expertise. OSU had a long history of siloed approaches to both area studies and special collections, where some units managed their own processing, description, and digitization. Such silos resulted in a wide and inconsistent variety of hidden collections challenges. The OSU Libraries had centrally supported such processes as conservation, preservation, special collections cataloging, and some area studies cataloging. In 2011, the OSU Libraries made a concerted effort to enhance infrastructure support in these areas and in processing, digitization, and digital initiatives. The expectation was that Special Collections and Area Studies would redirect specialized materials into mainstreamed technical services functions. Addressing vacancies across the organization centrally, the OSU Libraries shifted or broadened several technical services positions from general collections activity to distinctive collections needs. The number of language expert staff in the Description and Access unit grew through reassignment of student worker funds (for example, the addition of Korean, Japanese, and Hebrew catalogers). Positions in Special Collections Description and Access were added as well (such as a processing coordinator to apply best practices and standards to archival and manuscripts materials). Other functional positions were added to the OSU Libraries that particularly benefited Special Collections and Area Studies, such as a head of digital initiatives, application developers, and exhibits staff. These shifts in organizational structure and workflows have increased creation and enhancement of metadata for distinctive collections across the board, initiated a plan to address backlogs in Special Collections, and enhanced the exhibition of distinctive collections to the academic community. OSU Libraries hope these changes will systematize the processing, description, digitization, and online delivery of collections that can only be found at Ohio State.

Combining area studies and special collections into one division at KU has advanced collaborative goals by improving KU Libraries' digitization flows. Access to unique resources figured prominently in the KU Libraries' 2012 strategic plan, which included as Strategy 2.A "Enhance discovery, access, delivery and preservation of the institution's distinct resources and assets."⁴⁶ The KU Libraries placed new emphasis on encouraging and fostering these kinds of projects, going beyond previous successes, which included an on-site digitization laboratory and grant funding for special collections and archives.



Libraries-wide staffing was added not only to manage digital capture but also to provide metadata and system support. The first “test” project involves collaboration between

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the librarian for Latin American studies and a special collections librarian, exposing Guatemalan materials in the custodial care of Spencer Library but of great interest to Latin American scholars. This project highlights another potential outcome of closer collaboration between area studies and special collections librarians—smoother engagement with issues of cultural repatriation made possible by digital technologies. KU Libraries anticipate broader ownership of digitization activities within the librarians

when more people perceive them as not just the purview of rare books specialists.

In another example of collaboration that improves engagement with distinctive collections, OSU’s Japanese librarian and Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum jointly assessed and reconceptualized their collaborative collection development of manga materials. They had long shared responsibility for acquiring manga before libraries widely collected the art form, striving to build a distinctive destination collection that would support OSU curricular strengths in both visual studies fields and Japanese studies disciplines. Recently, a broad range of faculty expressed interest in assigning these materials in their classes if the OSU Libraries did not restrict access to a special collections research room. The Japanese librarian, using expertise in international information production and a deep understanding of community use, worked with the Cartoon Library and Special Collections Description and Access to identify which material should circulate and which should remain protected. Mainstream technical and collection services then collaborated with special collections catalogers to implement the revised collection access and development plans. The result is enhanced use of these materials in the curriculum, which supports the embedded relationship the Japanese librarian has had with East Asian Studies Center, the Institute for Japanese Studies, and the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures. The long-term collaboration between curators and librarian combined with the librarian’s deep embedding has also resulted in an upcoming international symposium to be held at OSU on the history of manga research. This is just one example of how distinctive specialists can model intensive engagement that truly advances transformative teaching, learning, and research.

Integrating special collections and area studies operationally while highlighting distinctiveness comes with inherent challenges. Combining areas of library practice, just as with any organizational change, requires transparency and communication. Broad conversations about what it means to be “distinctive” and how this characteristic benefits other parts of the library are essential. The KU Libraries developed their consultant model in the wake of the 2013 reorganization, focusing on serving types of users instead of perpetuating a dedicated subject liaison relationship with particular academic departments and schools. Acknowledging that there is, in fact, something particular about primary source formats, some foreign language skills, and other types of specialties means finding a balance between providing the best possible service to a



variety of users with differing needs and making peace with the fact that not all consultants will be doing the same kinds of work to the same degree. Content development, for example, which depends on knowledge of language, vendors, and formats, has remained an essential duty in Distinctive Collections while most consultants in the KU Libraries no longer have responsibility for that activity. At the same time, special collections librarians and archivists were never the sole point of library contact for faculty and students in a given discipline, and area studies librarians have always worked across academic disciplines and departments. In this way, the consultant model, in the context of the Distinctive Collections division, has undergone an easier transition to the more scalable and meaningful engagement KU Libraries sought to create.

The dynamic of highlighting distinctive collections while balancing the need to align with the larger environment is also highly relevant as libraries navigate development and external partnerships. Both area studies and special collections cultivate niche commu-

nities that provide funding, enthusiasm, and international recognition, but these intimate relationships can create tension with the broader mission of the research library. For example, at OSU, gifts from the external comics community provided the majority of funding for a new facility and an operating endowment for the Cartoon Library. The Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute operates under a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Theatre that speci-

fies engagement that impacts resource allocation for both parties. In the meantime, Title VI funding from area studies centers for acquiring library collections has decreased, even while expectations from the local and international community for providing increasingly specialized resources grow. A coordinating administrator guides curators and librarians in balancing the needs of external stakeholders with the core direction of the broader academic library to successfully navigate these tensions.

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Forging a Path Together, Celebrating Distinctiveness

In considering these two discrete areas of librarianship, we found strong evidence that if special collections and area studies are to have significant impact on the future of the research library, understanding the shared challenges and solutions is key. To us, you can switch the terms “area studies” and “special collections” in much of the trending literature and still have a valid, resonating message. Comparing the organizational decision-making of our individual institutions with others that have combined area studies and special collections indicated further resonance around the opportunities for both distinctive areas.

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This resonance suggests to us that elevating the research agenda about how distinctive collections and specialized expertise engage with the broader organization holds rich possibilities for addressing the challenges in these two areas. Specifically, a united distinctive collections approach to the following issues may advance the impact of the overall research library, as well as the area studies and special collections units they contain:

- In what ways can librarians integrate and mainstream operations that connect distinctive resources to users, while sustaining the distinctive identities that hold value?
- How do librarians break down silos (without undermining distinctiveness) to specifically advance interdisciplinary inquiry and scholarship?
- How might area studies, special collections, and other distinctive collecting areas share strategy, advocacy, and outreach opportunities?
- How can librarians help resource allocators navigate the dichotomy between the low-use, highly resource-intensive nature of distinctive collections and the opportunity of integrating them into transformative teaching, learning, and research?
- What is a fruitful balance between the renown that comes in exposing distinctive collections to a global but specialized audience and the return on investment that is needed for a generalized local constituency?
- How do academic institutions measure the qualitative impact of these distinctive collections when use is disparate, long-term, and prolonged?
- What is the essence of the expert's skill in relationship building and how can that inform the evolving role of the liaison librarian?
- How do librarians achieve such intensive relationships at scale?
- How do librarians revisit their collecting strategies in the context of decreasing resources, and how might cooperative collecting and investing in the collaborative collection increase the impact of resources?
- How do librarians shift from being collection-oriented to user-oriented, shifting their mediation role from gatekeeper to connector, broker, and aggregator?
- Do the commonalities in the opportunities and challenges of distinctive collections define a critical leadership or management role in research libraries?

While we do not have answers to these questions, we believe that investigating them in collaboration will likely be more fruitful than discussing them in separate communities. We advocate for increased frequency of conversation between special collections and area studies communities and for collective interrogation of these issues with the broader library community. Initiation of this conversation is particularly challenging given that, until recently, there has been no venue that spans area studies as a whole.⁴⁷ Similarly, the special collections and archives communities participate in multiple professional organizations and meetings. Further, the broader library community allows conversations about distinctive collections to be relegated to these varied, specialized venues. We recommend a concerted effort to address these questions. If distinctive collections are central to the future of each research library, then this is a conversation worth coordinating.



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