

# Special Collections: Strategies for Support in an Era of Limited Resources

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*Special collections departments in academic libraries have been hit hard by the austerity measures of the last decade. With reduced budgets and the changing orientation of academic libraries, many special collections are having difficulty competing for resources with primary programs. This article examines the elements required to ensure the operation and use of special collections within an austerity context in order to develop a rationale for their continued support. Strategies for support are discussed, including the establishment of a strong rationale, the development of external sources for funding, and models for cooperative efforts.*



pecial collections departments in academic libraries have been hit hard by the austerity measures of the last decade. In some libraries these collections operate with reduced budgets and staffing; others have remained static.<sup>1</sup> This decline is especially painful in view of the active collection development that took place during the financially flush 1960s. In many institutions the care of and access to fine collections of rare and important materials are becoming more difficult to provide.

It is not surprising that special collections have fared poorly, because budget reductions are based upon curricular-based programs, user analyses, and other library priorities. By definition special collections serve a different purpose than do primary programs, and their justification and support cannot be based upon the principles used in austerity budgeting.<sup>2</sup> Materials budgets allocated by formula have not provided adequate support, especially since funding for off-the-top allocations has dwindled or disappeared. Staffing levels have dropped severely as the competition with primary library services for scarce resources stiffens.<sup>3</sup>

The changing orientation of academic li-

braries has also worked against the continuing development of special collections. In his 1973 article on the plight of special collections in British libraries, A. D. Burnett cites negative attitudes toward older materials and a shift away from the repository function of libraries as major elements in the decline of support.<sup>4</sup> Factors leading to this shift in emphasis that remain important for us include the explosion of information and the application of new technologies in information handling, the stress on current research publications, the need to maximize the use of resources, and gradual changes in organizational patterns to facilitate wider dissemination of information, e.g., provision for open access, document delivery, user education, and current awareness. In the absence of validation for the repository function, purchases based on past collecting patterns alone are difficult to justify.

In order to develop a rationale for the continuing support of special collections within the context of limited resources available to academic libraries today, we must look at the elements required to ensure their operation and use, as well as the preservation of materials. Without adequate provision for access and control, the

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special collection will revert to the status of treasure room, with no basis for justification or accountability.

### THE SPECIAL COLLECTION

#### *Definition*

The classic library definition for a special collection was put forth by William Randall and Francis Goodrich:

An assemblage of materials in some field of knowledge which includes at least some of the rare and more unusual items and a greater proportion of other titles bearing upon the subject.<sup>5</sup>

The most important part of this definition is the orientation of the collection to a particular subject area. The special collection should be built systematically so that all works by a particular author or on a particular subject are available in one place.<sup>6</sup> Ideally, it is built around special subjects that reflect the goals of the university's major teaching and research programs. However, the focus is often determined by a major donation from an individual, estate, corporation, or governmental body with a specific set of interests.

Special collections do not necessarily contain rare books and manuscripts. They may include many types of materials sharing certain attributes or relationships to each other. As a result they may need to be housed together. The range of formats has been categorized loosely as rare books; theses and dissertations; manuscripts and archival materials; university archives; current publications of books; monographs and serials that reflect regional interests and that might constitute the rare books of the future; fugitive materials or gray literature such as records of private firms, institutions, and societies; literary and personal papers; brochures, leaflets, broadsides, and posters; maps, music, microforms, and other nonbook materials.

For the purpose of this article, special collections will refer to departments, centers, or collections that function as units within academic libraries. The rare book collections of major university and research libraries are so large that they are libraries in and of themselves. They are not special collections within libraries, but special libraries made up of many special collections. Although they share some of the characteristics of special collections,

the size, scope, and complexities of their collections and programs affect the question of resource support in ways that will not be addressed in this article.

#### *Access*

Most writers agree that special collections should be working collections. Burnett puts this most eloquently:

A collection cannot be preserved like a fossil but rather like an oryx: its conservation and its value require that it should remain alive. It is unreasonable to suppose that a collection can survive in any meaningful sense if it is not used.<sup>8</sup>

Use is one of the most important elements in justifying the support of the special collection, but it comes at a high cost to the library.

A working collection connotes that patrons are aware of its contents. This means catalogs, indexes, and publicity. The cataloging of nonstandard items often falls outside the parameters of copy cataloging and may require special expertise for materials such as rare books and manuscripts. Additional access points, greater attention to detail in imprint statements and notes, and the creation of local finding aids are costly elements, although they may be essential for the effective use of the collection. Inclusion in national bibliographic databases or other forms of publicity for holdings is critical if the collection is to receive appropriate attention beyond the university community on which it is housed.

Adequate staffing is an essential element in promoting use of any library, but the specialized and idiosyncratic nature of special collections makes the quality and quantity of staffing especially important. Highly trained professional staff are needed to assist and advise patrons in locating information within the collection and in interpreting the findings. If the collection is known outside the university community, many inquiries will be received by mail and telephone; the complexity of such inquiries often requires hours of work to develop a single response. Patrons using rare and fragile materials must be supervised. The closed-stack arrangement used in most special collections necessitates paging services.

Access hours must be sufficient for use by students and faculty during academic sessions and by off-campus researchers during intersession periods.

### *Acquisitions*

A working collection must grow and develop to remain viable. This requires a healthy acquisitions budget. It is necessary to acquire newly published material, retrospective material to fill in gaps and desiderata, and rare material appearing in the public marketplace for the first time if the collection is to be dynamic rather than static. Reference tools and secondary works are also essential. These should be available in the main collection if duplication for the special collection cannot be justified.

While decisions about the building of the general collection of a library can often be handled by professional staff with limited knowledge of the specific subject matter, specialized collections demand greater expertise to identify, evaluate, and select potential gifts and purchases. Extensive background in the subject at hand and the availability of scholars with an interest in the collection are also needed to determine the scholarly value of expensive items. Well-established relationships with booksellers and collectors in the field often lead to provident additions.

Accountability is an important issue when considering the potential purchase of an expensive item for the special collection. Some might argue that rare book and manuscript acquisitions funds are more effectively spent on current and possibly less-expensive material for use by more people. The justification of these acquisitions should, therefore, include many of the factors addressed earlier. Careful thought should be given to whether the purchase will give an adequate return in research and educational value.<sup>9</sup> Questions such as relevance to the university, suitable access for researchers, the ability to catalog, and the provision of proper housing and security must be also considered.<sup>10</sup>

### *Facilities*

If the special collection is to have a unique identity within the academic li-

brary, it must be housed apart from the main collection. The requirements for protected housing, special shelving, and environmental controls usually lead to this. Adequate space for a separate, controlled reading room, closely supervised photocopying facilities, closed stacks, and staff work space should be provided.

Security measures commensurate with the value of the collection must be provided if the investment in expensive materials is not to be lost or diminished. Insurance coverage should be considered if the material is to be exhibited or made available outside the library.

Attention to the preservation of materials is imperative for collections of significant value. Deterioration and destruction of rare materials through benign neglect is unforgivable. Conservation measures such as deacidification, encapsulation, and treatment of leather bindings are basic requirements. Environmental controls for heat and humidity and special fire-prevention devices using halon or other nondamaging substances are essential.

### *Organization*

The place of special collections within the organizational structure of the academic library varies. Centralization into one special collections department is desirable to conserve resources. This can, however, result in the gathering of several small, unrelated collections into a single unit. The identity of a research collection or center devoted to a specific subject or author can be an asset in publicity and fund-raising. This structure is appropriate when the special collection or center contains a research component and scholars from outside the library are involved in overseeing the collection and its use.

## **STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORT**

### *Rationale*

The special collection can make a significant contribution to the university, especially if the ties to the goals of the institution are strong. Formal connections to curricular and research programs can serve to place the needs of the special collection within the priorities of the library and the campus in matters of resource allocation. Special collections have an im-

portant role to play in promoting scholarship and research, and the image of the collection as a source for faculty development and a means to attract new faculty should be advanced. A survey conducted by the Association of Research Libraries showed that special collections departments in research libraries across the country are being asked to focus attention on materials related to present or anticipated university program needs.<sup>11</sup>

A major research collection can bring a significant increase in image and visibility to the institution. This is persuasively stated in Great Britain's Parry Report:

The strength of every university lies in its ability to achieve a just evaluation of mankind's past attainments. Nothing brings such attainments so vividly to mind, or forges such a purposeful link with the greatest figures of the past centuries, as a collection of the books which they themselves handled and read, or the letters and other papers which they actually wrote.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of a unique and well-developed collection on a small or medium-sized campus can, with proper use and publicity, serve to bring the scholarly community's attention to the university. In many cases, special collections are treated like family jewels and become a source of campus pride. Once established, the special collection can form the focus for research symposia, publications, and fund-raising drives. Visiting scholars drawn to use the collection can enrich the academic program through lectures, workshops, and other programs. However, this recognition is not automatic; it is the responsibility of the library to develop and use these arguments with the university's administrators, campus support organizations, and governments.

Once a special collection is established and its value recognized, responsibilities to the wider academic community for maintenance and growth should not be overlooked. Implicit in its development are obligations by the institution to the researchers who rely upon this resource. Formal and informal resource sharing agreements with other libraries should be considered. Accountability to the public for past investments in the collection includes providing for its continued use and growth. Lastly, the moral obligation to fu-

ture scholarship is worthy of attention.<sup>13</sup>

### *Resources*

If special collections are to survive, they cannot continue to compete for the majority of their funding with the primary programs and services of the academic library. Even with close ties to the instructional program, the dual impact of inflation and cutbacks on library budgets makes special collections a low priority if basic operations are struggling with limited resources. In a 1981 survey the Association of Research Libraries found that library budgets had nearly doubled in the previous decade, but that collection growth in volumes had decreased by more than 20 percent. Additionally, the report attributed this increase to three types of financial pressure:

(a) inflation in the cost of published material, especially from other countries; (b) rapid growth of information, requiring libraries to acquire a larger number of more expensive materials; and (c) increased demand from faculty members and students for more material and more professional assistance.<sup>14</sup>

Coupled with the reality that libraries have been more liable than other areas to feel the general financial constraint affecting universities in the last decade, the dilemma facing academic libraries becomes clearer.<sup>15</sup>

External sources of funding must be found in order for the special collection to flourish. Such funding usually cannot provide full support indefinitely, but it can go a long way toward supplementing the limited recurring support available from the institution. However, a commitment and an investment of staff time must be made by the library if these funding sources are to be found and developed.

A good collection has the potential to attract donations and bequests from scholars and other benefactors who see the library as an ideal home for their treasured collections. The development of a gift program that goes beyond the acceptance of serendipitous donations requires long-range, organized commitment and effort to succeed, but the resulting gifts can be substantial.<sup>16</sup> Ideally, the donation of materials should not be seriously considered unless there are accompanying

funds for storing, cataloging, and preserving. When these funds are not available, as is too often the case, the library's ability to provide for the future of the materials should be weighed against their potential scholarly worth.

Funding through grants from public and private sources has been particularly successful for aggressive special collections librarians. The federal government, through such programs as the National Endowment for the Humanities and Title IIC, has provided a significant amount of support to existing collections for their cataloging and preservation. Foundations have also been involved in this area. Peter Spyers-Duran prepared a list of selected foundations that contributed to academic libraries in 1981, and special collections were the second largest target for funding. Library construction was first.<sup>17</sup> Local government agencies and foundations should also be tapped, especially for collections with a regional or archival focus.

Fund-raising efforts at both the library and campus levels can effectively use the special collection as a focal point for publicity and targeted donations. It is the role of the library to bring special collections to the attention of campus development offices and to create a place for special collections in large campuswide fund-raising efforts. Building special collections is one of the major activities of Friends groups in academic libraries.<sup>18</sup> These groups can also be actively involved in large campaigns.

### *Alternatives*

With the high costs of developing and operating a special collection, the issues of cooperation and coordination must be examined as possible strategies for continued support. It may no longer be possible to maintain cherished collections in every academic institution, but pooling resources may allow for their continued availability to researchers in a region or subject area. The balance between what is essential to each library and what resources can be and should be pooled is difficult to attain. Its attainment is complicated by many political and technical problems.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, several different models for cooperation exist.

Formal, shared collection-development

activities form the basis among large libraries for cooperative efforts in specialized areas. The Research Libraries Group and the Association for Research Libraries support programs to identify collection strengths and weaknesses from which primary collection responsibility may emerge. In England and Scotland, as well as in several regions of the United States, universities have joined together in cooperative acquisitions programs to purchase expensive, specialized material. These programs are most successful when automated cataloging is in place and money is set aside in advance.<sup>20</sup>

Cooperative programs may also be developed on a smaller scale, and many informal agreements exist between libraries to share and build collections in specialized areas. Instances of the actual transfer of materials in an effort to pool resources are more unusual, but they do exist. The Owens Collection of ten thousand jazz recordings that was transferred by the University of Wisconsin-Madison to the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers is an example of the "permanent loan" of materials to a geographically distant library that offers better support for the collection.<sup>21</sup> An example of a regional effort is the consolidation of several theological seminary libraries into a new Graduate Theological Union Library as part of the joining of academic programs. In both cases, the institutions have put their local pride of ownership behind their commitment to the needs of scholars in general.

### CONCLUSIONS

In considering these issues in the context of today's fiscal climate, we must ask, Can we afford to continue to support special collections? The days when we could fund them comfortably within basic institutional allocations are gone and unlikely to return. Given budget realities and the combined pressures of new technology, it is no longer possible to justify support for special collections with funds intended for primary programs.

However, with adequate support the special collection can play an important role in helping the parent library to meet the short-term goals of the university and in making significant contributions to fu-

ture scholarship and research. This role, the past investment of university resources, the obligation to a body of researchers, and the responsibility to future scholars also lead us to ask, Can we afford to abandon special collections?

Libraries must take a strong stance if special collections are to survive. Support must be sufficient to cover staffing, acquisitions, cataloging, space, and preservation, or the resources will be wasted. Special collections must become a priority for the library and the university, and the library must take the lead in establishing this as a priority. The current plight of special collections in many academic libraries is as much the result of library passivity as

of university neglect. Aggressive fund-raising activities, publicity and political lobbying both on and off campus are necessary to develop both the needed resources and the increased status for the special collection. Cooperative relationships with other institutions should be seriously considered if the investment of staff time necessary to develop funding sources is not possible.

The wealth of material housed in special collections is enormous. We owe it to the research communities of today and tomorrow to continue efforts toward the full development, accessibility, and preservation of these unique resources.

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