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Bridge That Gap! Education and Special Collections

WHEN ASKED SOME MONTHS AGO if I would be willing to give the keynote address at the 2005 RBMS Preconference on the topic of education and special collections, I was both delighted and dismayed. The good news was that I would have a chance to sound off a bit about my most favorite and least favorite practices in the realm of special collections. The bad news was that the central trope—Bridging the Gap—was chosen for me and I was not at all sure I understood it. Despite my misgivings about providing what was wanted, however, the opportunity to pontificate was too great and I agreed.

But what kind of bridge did the organizers have in mind? The Bridge of Sighs? I hoped it would not be either one of those, and especially not the one in Venice with its history of condemned prisoners. London Bridge, which, according to the nursery rhyme, had fallen down, and then, according to tourist brochures, had subsequently been moved to Lake Havasu City, Arizona? Probably not—much too complicated. Euclid's *pons asinorum*, or “bridge of asses”? Not very promising either. Finding no further inspiration in my *Bartlett's*,¹ I decided to abandon the historical and literary possibilities and rely on the visual and metaphorical—both of which left enough room for ambiguity that I would feel safe in my allusions.

Before building our metaphorical bridge, we must spend at least a few minutes with that awkward question, “Why build bridges at all?” It is reasonable, but not sufficient, for us to reply, “In order that the public appreciate special collections and continue to support their maintenance and development.” Why, indeed, should there be special collections at all? It might be enough of an answer for some of us today to say, “So that I should have a job that I like.” But we know that answer also to be ultimately insufficient.

1. The reference is, of course, to *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* in any of its many manifestations.

So we must begin our considerations of *how* to build the special collections “bridge” with some basic principles—whether they be social, educational, psychological, financial, or aesthetic—about *why* we are doing this engineering at all. There is hardly space here to come to agreement on so complex an issue, and although also setting the scene for a new campaign of bridge building, so I will turn to expert opinion about the ultimate “why” just to get us started.

In his thoughtful text on rare book librarianship,² Roderick Cave characterized special collections as “keeper[s] of the records of the human spirit.” Noted Cave, “User studies in such fields as history, literature, botany and the fine arts reveal the extent to which research must be undertaken by going back to primary sources. From the user’s point of view, whether the book needed is old or new, rare or common is usually of little concern. Proper regards for library housekeeping, however, demands that rare and valuable material be given special attention for housing and conservation. To facilitate scholarly use of the library’s holding of this kind ... special services are required. They are not a luxury, an indulgence in pack-rat instincts, but a response to user needs.”³ Additionally, Cave proposes that special collections have a responsibility to make scholarship accessible and understandable for a general public. “If in concentrating on their service to scholars [special collections librarians] neglect their other purpose in the broader educational, popularizing field, they will,” warned Cave, “lose the support they need. They must be, and be seen to be, *relevant to society*.” Who should take on this job? According to Cave, benefactors of collections in their wisdom initially chose librarians, whether credentialed or not, who “were sympathetic with the humanistic and bibliophilistic motives behind their collections to carry on the humanistic traditions of librarianship.”⁴

Whether or not we agree with Cave’s attempts to establish objectives for special collections, we can find in his musings the identification of elements that must be accommodated on our bridge. They are collections, services, users, librarians, and a larger society. The emphasis of this issue of *RBM*—Education and Special Collections—allows us some scope for interpretation, indicating as it does both education *for* special collections and educational activities for users *within* special collections. How is our bridge to accommodate all these parts and these ideas? How will our bridge metaphor work?

2. Roderick Cave, *Rare Book Librarianship*, 2nd ed. (London: Clive Bingley Limited, 1982), 15.

3. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

4. Roseann M. Auchstetter, in “The Role of the Rare Book Library in Higher Education: An Outsider Surveys the Issue,” *College & Research Libraries* 51 (May 1990): 221, finds Cave’s rationale inadequate, as does Daniel Traister, “Rare Book Collections: The Need for Interpretation,” *Wilson Library Bulletin* 58 (Oct. 1983): 119. Few others have attempted to define first principles at all and so we turn to Cave who at least had the courage to attempt to explain the why of rare book collections.

Let us begin with the structure itself. Imagine that the architectural form represents the special collection within the framework of its building and administration. The bridge is first and foremost a convenience for travelers in that it allows them to get where they are going more expeditiously than if they had to wade through the confusion below. For most, it provides an aesthetically pleasing, even thrilling, experience, though a few might feel anxiety or even fear. As with all bridges, security is a necessary condition, but by no means the purpose of the bridge. On either side of the bridge is the “outside world.” Travelers of the imagination need to move over this special bridge from time to time in order to get from where they have been to where they want to go. As part of the infrastructure, we have on-ramps and off-ramps to convey travelers of the mind to the collection and to allow them to move on, aesthetically enriched, to another place. Passing through and over the bridge, or special collections, are several categories of traffic, including the occasional user, regular users, and a wider public of casual travelers. These users might travel on separate lanes and at various speeds and with different levels of concentration. Whether the travelers’ motivation is practical, recreational, or aesthetic, their experience of using the special collections bridge can contribute to both their personal fulfillment and a larger societal goal of intellectual connectedness and mobility.

Librarians might be seen as the architects and engineers of this bridge, classes of individuals who require a high level of expertise and are periodically in short supply. Lest you think this assignment of librarians too far-fetched, I want to remind you that Keyes D. Metcalf in 1913 reported buying a pair of overalls before undertaking a task in the stacks of the Mercantile Library in New York at the behest of Harry Miller Lydenberg, then his boss at New York Public Library.⁵ Or recall Frederick R. Goff’s characterization of librarians as “temporary custodians of the world’s books and manuscripts.”⁶

One could label the parts of the metaphor differently, such as seeing special collections and their advocates (us) on one cliff edge and the potential audience on the other, with special collections and their services as the bridge between. That works, but it overemphasizes the notion of “us” and “them” as basically separate, facing off from opposite shores. And it reduces special collections to a tool or instrument for basically practical ends, simply to bridge the gap between staff and user or user and collections.

5. Keyes D. Metcalf, “Six Influential Academic and Research Librarians,” in *Libraries for Teaching, Libraries for Research: Essays for a Century*, ed. Richard D. Johnson (Chicago: ALA, 1977), 128.

6. Frederick R. Goff, *The Delights of a Rare Book Librarian* (Boston: Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1975), 1.

I prefer the interpretation of the special collection as the bridge over which the visitor travels from his earlier, uninitiated state to a later state of enlightenment. Though faulty in some ways, this interpretation gives increased importance to the bridge itself and suggests more dynamic images of comings and goings by way of the special collections structure.

With this image in mind, I want to introduce two sets of questions involving metaphoric traffic control that I hope will be answered by some of the other essays in this collection. The first set of questions involves users. These queries are: Who are the potential users of our bridge, how do we attract them to our bridge, how should they travel across it, and what should they take away with them by way of knowledge, memories, and impressions? The second set of queries involves librarians as architects and engineers: How do we find the best, how do we prepare them for the special demands of bridge building, and what kind of bridge should they build and maintain? Moving from Cave to bridge (if you'll pardon the pun), the list of questions to be considered begins with practical issues of user needs and then moves to the instrumentality of design and operation. Behind the entire conception, like the iconic Brooklyn Bridge, are humanistic concerns of design, spirit, and imagination.

Education of Users

Beginning with users, I would like to review some current practices and point to some extensions of those approaches. In many cases, I suggest looking beyond our own community to borrow techniques from allied professionals in fields such as museology and public relations. In moving on to the specifics of special collections issues, I have looked for help from both colleagues, whose responses to my queries I cite in the sections to follow, and a smattering of recent literature. Even a superficial review of sources reveals that we are by no means the first to consider these questions. I'd like to begin this review by looking closely at the component parts of this bridge, raising some questions and making some suggestions about how it might be solidified, expanded, and generally improved. What follows is a review of practices and issues, and a great many implicit questions.

The first set of issues involves how we get those users on the bridge, what they encounter when they get there, and how they are transformed by the experience when they leave: in brief, outreach and services. We are assuming throughout that we have the basic materials in the form of collections. It is the exploitation of these materials that concerns us here.

Teaching from the material is the most obvious way to bring a steady and manageable stream of visitors into special collections. We are beginning to see something

of a trend in using, or perhaps returning to, special collections and primary materials for teaching purposes. Whatever the reason—whether it be attributed to book history as tool or new teaching methods—the numbers seem to bear out this claim about the new popularity of special collections. Writing on this phenomenon, Stanley Katz noted in 2004 that a “new environment for teaching” uses a method that he and colleagues used thirty years before, that is, the “discovery method.”⁷

This method of teaching—discovery—can make use of digital materials as well as primary materials in the original, but we should be aware that in order to engender the kind of enthusiasm for primary materials we want to see, we shall have to let people handle and use things. “Show and tell” is not enough. Where handling is simply not possible, such as in the classroom or in geographical areas remote from collections, the instructor can use strategies that approximate the experience to some degree with facsimiles, samples, paper-folding exercises, and the like.⁸ Other promising opportunities for encouraging regular visits from students are new subject areas, such as popular culture, and new disciplines, such as material culture, where materiality is of the essence.

While we are on the subject of teaching from the collection, I want to draw attention to Stanley Katz’s admonition: “Don’t forget the scholars. Don’t forget the teachers. We are your primary users. We are not, but we should be, your primary advocates. You have some hard work to do in order to make us your advocates and collaborators, and unless we work together, the promised land of library-based research and teaching in the digital era will be long in coming.”⁹

Although the profession seems to consider teaching necessary and desirable, it has to date offered little to its members by way of useful advice about how to do it well. Until recently, professionals in higher education have had some disdain for the basic tools of pedagogy such as setting objectives, developing lesson plans, and evaluating outcomes. But lately, enlightened graduate programs have begun to teach potential faculty how to teach, and some “bibliographic instruction” practitioners in libraries have adopted the tools of the education craft. These techniques seem not, however, to have found their way into the teaching literature for special collections.¹⁰

7. Stanley Katz, “Scholars and Teachers: Hidden Partners for Hidden Collections,” *RBM* 5, no. 2 (fall 2004): 119.

8. Ann Hawkins, ed., *Teaching Bibliography, Textual Criticism, and Book History*, History of the Book Series (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006).

9. Katz, “Scholars and Teachers,” 122.

10. Susan M. Allen, “Rare Books and the College Library: Current Practices in Marrying Undergraduates to Special Collections,” *Rare Books and Manuscript Librarianship* 13, no. 2 (1999): 111.

Employing an unusually analytical approach to using special collections in undergraduate and graduate teaching, Ann Schmiesing and Deborah H. Hollis report on an exercise in teaching comparative literature, and specifically Enlightenment thinkers, at the University of Colorado at Boulder (UCB).¹¹ It is significant to note that in their model, the special collections staff does *not* show items, one by one, and tell students about them. Nor do librarians teach the history of the book. Rather the collaborators—librarians, professors, and students—use the history of the book to elucidate the intellectual questions at the heart of their research by structuring exercises to encourage active and collaborative learning through exploration where the pace of activities is determined by students themselves.¹²

Exhibitions can be viewed as a mixture of public relations¹³ and pedagogy, but usually and primarily function as a promotional tool. Or, more poetically, borrowing from Horace by way of Karl Dachs,¹⁴ the purpose of the written word—and exhibitions about it—is to be useful, to educate, *and* to delight. However attractive this objective, some colleagues tell me that they have serious reservations about whether exhibitions are worth the effort.

If they are to be done at all, exhibitions must be done with flair so as to have popular appeal. Dan Traister notes that exhibits of the work of creative writers have particularly strong appeal and that living authors provide more mileage than dead ones for purposes of publicity.¹⁵ Although enthusiasm runs high in some quarters, instructions on how to create effective exhibits are in surprisingly short supply and many special collections exhibitions that I have seen are less than impressive. Too often special collections exhibitions lack a clear message, a narrative arc, and/or labels that clearly relate the items to the theme. And too often they lack a hand list or catalogue that would prove helpful to both the user and the collection itself for future projects. That catalogue could just as likely be Web based as paper based these days; whatever the medium, a catalogue can serve as an effective map for return visits as well as a souvenir after the exhibition closes.

One could argue that good exhibition design is a concern more of museology than special collections librarianship. If the predictions about the future of special col-

11. Anne Schmiesing and Deborah R. Hollis, "The Role of Special Collections Departments in Humanities Undergraduate and Graduate Teaching: A Case Study," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 2, no. 3 (2002): 465–80.

12. *Ibid.*, 473.

13. Auchstetter, "The Role of the Rare Book Library in Higher Education," 228.

14. Karl Dachs, "Is there a Future in Library Exhibitions?" in "Rare Book and Manuscript Libraries in the Twenty-First Century: An International Symposium, Part One," ed. Richard Wendorf, *Harvard Library Bulletin*, n.s. 4, no. 1 (summer 1993): 63.

15. Daniel Traister, "Public Services and Outreach in Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Libraries," *Library Trends* 52, no. 1 (summer 2003): 96.

lections as a museum are true,¹⁶ a shift in approach—to something more visually sophisticated—would be entirely appropriate. In any case, we can collectively take a cue from exhibition designers in museums who manage to inject an element of interactivity and play into their installations and still protect the material from hands-on damage. Although such exhibition material is sometimes peripheral to our own interests, we should recognize that curious and wonderful bindings, ephemera, realia, memorabilia, and book arts make for far more eye-catching exhibits than a more-or-less uniform series of run-of-the-mill printed pages. An exhibition is an exhibition; let's face it.

In addition to the planned and structured exhibition, the library can offer within its reading area an informal display consisting of an array of materials on a table that do *not* lie under glass. The material need not be handled for a visiting group to feel that it has had special access. The librarian can manipulate the material for the patrons, pointing to interesting features that make clear the importance of the materiality of the objects. This approach is particularly important for material where three-dimensional aspects, or a multiplicity of pages, are a necessary part of the story. Such displays are suitable for the wide range of individuals likely to visit the modern special collection, from schoolchildren to collectors.

Before leaving the subject of the “group visit to the library,” I feel compelled to say a few more words on the subject of handling materials. All the goodwill built up during a visit can be undone by the librarian's giving the impression that he or she thinks the visitors too dirty, stupid, or careless to handle materials properly.¹⁷ A single reprimand—“please don't touch”—can undo a semester's worth of effort in trying to win over a class and its instructor. Dan Traister urges that the librarian make clear beforehand to the group leader exactly how the visit will unfold. If material is for eyeballing only, state that fact before the visit. If material can be handled only with white gloves, have students forewarned.

While we are on the subject of white gloves, I once took a rare book class to a research library where the librarian had ready a cart of books that he alone planned to handle and show, one by one. He somberly donned the requisite gloves, removed a complex artist's book from the cart, and ceremoniously opened the elaborately worked wooden box in which the artist had set the book itself. The librarian then

16. Fleur Cowls, “Opening Remarks,” *Libraries & Culture* 37, no. 1 (winter 2002): 8; also, Richard Wendorf, “Special Collections Libraries: Looking Ahead by Looking Back,” *Libraries & Culture* 37, no. 1 (winter 2002): 22; Peter Hirtle, “The Impact of Digitization on Special Collections in Libraries,” *Libraries & Culture* 37, no. 1 (winter 2002): 49; Terry Belanger, “Afterword,” *Library Trends* 52, no. 1 (summer 2003): 191.

17. Traister, “Public Services and Outreach in Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Libraries,” 98.

removed the book, turned slightly to put it on the table, and knocked the artist's box off the edge of the table, whereupon it fell into pieces. The students could not help themselves—yes, they laughed.

It was the view of the great Keyes Metcalf that oil from readers' hands, in fact, kept the leather of New York Public Library bindings in flexible shape.¹⁸ Although there is room for skepticism on this point, we might alleviate the threat of dirty hands with the solution—almost never seen these days in special collections—used by librarians in the children's rooms of the New York Public Library around 1912 when my mother was a child. NYPL installed sinks, supplied soap and towels, and required all visitors to wash their hands before touching the books.¹⁹ My mother at aged six felt resentful then, and our readers might now, but it's not a bad preventive measure. About the white-glove requirement: well, yes, of course, in some circumstances, but never should the librarian him- or herself imitate the solemnity and pretentiousness characteristic of the "surgeon" on daytime TV as he or she dons professional hand wear.

As early as 1965, John Parker pointed out that rare books could be used effectively in public relations efforts through alumni magazines, local magazines, newsletters, TV, and radio.²⁰ Such outreach happens, but not often enough at the instigation of the special collections staff itself and seldom with the necessary pizzazz to be immediately useful to media outlets. Here, as elsewhere, special collections administrators may have to contract with specialists to design programs with sufficient polish to compete in the "marketplace" of informal educational offerings.

Talk of public relations inevitably leads to discussions of fundraising, and although that uncomfortable topic would seem to be beyond our concerns with the informal education of users, we should recognize a possible connection. But first, we may want to complain that we never signed up for this kind of work. All right, let's vent. But then we need to remember that users and supporters can become one and the same group of people. If we can think of fundraising as a positive way of engaging a larger public in our collections and activities, and making them feel that they have a stake in our success, we might consider the task of development more to our taste than it might first appear.

18. Metcalf, "Six Influential Academic and Research Librarians," 136.

19. As part of its current renovation, the Pierpont Morgan Library is installing a sink for the use of rare book room users.

20. John Parker, "The Rare Book Library and the Public," in *Rare Book Collections*, ed. H. Richard Archer, ACRL Monograph 27 (Chicago: ACRL, 1967), 109.

Yet another strategy for bringing visitors into the collection is the lecture, preferably illustrated—a medium that seems to be making a comeback among library friends groups, collectors' clubs, and academic community members. And finally, according to Prosser Gifford in an essay presciently entitled "The Bridge Beyond," bribes work to bring in users.²¹ He describes an array of programs to bring both established and new scholars to collections; these include conferences, fellowships at several levels, and invitations to deliver talks to library enthusiasts.

Before leaving this short list of techniques for getting travelers onto the special collections bridge, I want to dispel any notion that I advocate totalitarian traffic control. To quote Gertrude Himmelfarb on the subject of the class visit to special collections, "It is not a matter ... of exactly anticipating curriculum needs, but rather of having available representative volumes in diverse fields to document an historic progression in book history. The visit to Special Collections itself should carry a certain part of the message ... The rare book room should possess some of that aura [of Sean Connery in "The Name of the Rose"] ... to convey a sense that books and their ideas are worthy of being preserved."²² We want to leave room for the delight of chance discovery, described by Richard Schuchard as the "scholar's half-muffled yelp of sudden insight and private ecstasy."²³ Having been in special collections as a user quite intensively in the past few years, I have come to the conclusion that special collections staffs generally should lighten up in their oversight of the reading room. Frowning and fussing won't make visitors more careful or honest; it just makes the whole experience more irritating for everyone, staff and readers alike.²⁴

It is clear that special collections librarians are very busy with a variety of activities to attract and instruct users of their collections. Many successes are reported in the literature. And yet some special collections librarians have told me—in response to an informal e-mail survey conducted in the spring of 2005—that they still feel that their efforts in their area fall short in making a general public interested in, and sympathetic to, special collections. What else can be done? We can find some answers to this knotty question among the other papers in this volume that address specific projects and initiatives.

21. Prosser Gifford, "The Bridge Beyond," *Libraries & Culture* 37, no. 1 (winter 2002): 77.

22. John Ahouse, "Using Older Materials in Support of Teaching," in Judith A. Overmeier, *Out-of-print and Special Collection Materials: Acquisition and Purchasing Options* (New York: Haworth Information Press, 2002), 55.

23. Ronald Schuchard, "Excavating the Imagination: Archival Research and the Digital Revolution," *Libraries & Culture* 37, no. 1 (winter 2002): 58.

24. Lest there be any suspicion about which collections staff I am referring to, I want to state for the record that the Fales Collection at NYU, which I use most often for teaching purposes, strikes, to my mind, the perfect balance between care and user accommodation.

Education of Librarians

At this point, we have a steady stream of visitors passing across the special collections span. But what of the bridge builders themselves, those able librarians who develop and maintain the structure, the collections, who make all this use possible and meaningful in the first place? Where do they come from, how are they prepared for the job, and how do they keep their skills up to date?

Surveys of existing programs in library education have a fairly long tradition. Gordon Ray addressed the problem of a paucity of qualified candidates for rare book jobs in 1965. After looking at educational programs, he concluded lugubriously that students in library school are “for the most part not the sort to have much inclination towards rare books.”²⁵ One of the respondents to Ray’s questionnaire, seeming to reject the MLS²⁶ requirement, noted that “the more exacting you make the requirements, the more vexing you make the recruitment program.”²⁷ And David Randall was even more forthright in his condemnation of the “library school” path in calling the professionalization of rare book curatorship “a cancerous thing.”²⁸

Nonetheless, “library schools” have persisted in teaching aspects of special collections curatorship. The results of surveys are, however, somewhat contradictory. In 1972, Ann Bowden surveyed fifty-three accredited library schools and found that more than half offered the history of the book, but only seven listed courses in rare book librarianship.²⁹ As late as 1977, according to Antje Lemke, twenty-two library schools still offered a concentration in rare book librarianship.³⁰ Larry McCrank took a close look in 1976–1978 and found that only eighteen schools offered a “History of Books and Libraries” course, with additional advanced courses available in several institutions.³¹ In 2003, I found that the number purporting to offer a “History of the Book” course stood at forty-four out of fifty-seven accredited programs, although several institutions admitted that the course had not been

25. Quoted in Michele V. Cloonan, “The Future (Imperfect) of Special Collections and Library School Education,” *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* 10 (1995): 68.

26. In the interests of simplicity, I use the abbreviation for master’s of library science to stand for all the variations (e.g., MSLIS, MLIS) representing master’s-level programs that are accredited by the ALA as appropriate for professional employment in libraries.

27. Gordon N. Ray, *Books as a Way of Life* (New York: The Grolier Club; Pierpont Morgan Library, 1988), 61. Ray returned to the issue in 1975 in “The World of Rare Books Reexamined,” *Yale University Library Gazette* 49 (July 1974): 77–146.

28. David A. Randall, *Dukedom Large Enough* (New York: Random House, 1969), 14.

29. Ann Bowden, “Training for Rare Book Librarianship,” *Journal of Education for Librarianship* 12, no. 4 (spring 1972): 223–31.

30. Antje B. Lemke, “Alternative Specialties in Library Education,” *Journal of Education for Librarianship* 18 (spring 1978): 285–94.

31. Lawrence J. McCrank, “Education for Rare Book Librarianship: A Reexamination of Trends and Problems,” *Occasional Papers, University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library Science* 144 (Apr. 1980): 17.

given in some time. Courses in special collections administration were listed much less often, with only thirteen out of fifty-seven offering anything in that area. Only four institutions seemed to have anything approaching a concentration in special collections. Hands-on book-arts courses had practically disappeared, with only seven schools offering such opportunities. By way of contrast, teaching of archives courses seemed to be quite vigorous, with thirty of fifty-seven institutions reporting at least an annual course.³²

What is happening in library education today by way of preparation for special collections training? In this context, we should not forget the independent New York Public Library School, begun in 1911 (it joined Columbia's school in 1926), where all librarians learned about their craft by working directly with special collections materials. We seem to be returning bit by bit to a replication of that model with several current projects both within schools of library and information science and beyond the confines of those institutions.

The most significant development in recent decades, in my eyes, was the establishment of Rare Book School (RBS), which began in 1983 at Columbia University in the School of Library Service (my alma mater) as a center of activity that included presswork, lectures, and course work. The whole program was given in a kind of continuing education mode to both students and practitioners in the field by world-renowned experts, most of whom were drawn from founder Terry Belanger's international circle of colleagues. When Columbia's School of Library Service (where Belanger was both administrator and faculty member) closed in 1992, RBS moved to the University of Virginia where it flourishes today—still under Belanger's leadership—as a noncredit program for serious adult students.

Rare Book School has had a ripple effect on the field and one can find several small-scale imitations, or tributes, in the form of programs elsewhere. Among these are: institutes at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; the Institut d'histoire du livre in Lyon, France; Texas A&M in College Station, Texas, in the form of the History of Books and Printing Workshop; the Australasian Rare Book School in New Zealand; and Rare Book School North, which took place for the first time at the Grolier Club in New York City in January 2005, with Belanger and Eric Holzenberg as instructors. RBS also has influenced programs in library schools (including the rare book and special collections concentration that I direct, which is administratively part of the Palmer School of Long Island University but located physically

32. Deirdre C. Stam, "What Rare Book and Special Collections Courses Are Taught Currently?" Report for the Association of Research Libraries Task Force on Special Collections Meeting on November 10–11, 2003, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

in the Bobst Library of New York University); and courses in many other kinds of academic departments. A significant number of librarians whose own MLS programs offered little by way of special collections training regularly attend RBS courses and individually achieve a synthesis of general library theory with hands-on rare book training.

There are some new patterns of training available in library schools themselves in addition to courses that are part of the regular curriculum.³³ Through a special arrangement with RBS, for example, Palmer School students can take RBS courses, with the addition of a final project, for credit toward their Palmer degrees. A small number of students from UCLA and Simmons have taken RBS courses for credit through an independent study mechanism. You'll forgive me for mentioning that the Palmer School and New York University are embarking on a dual-degree program that will allow students to attain two master's degrees with reduced credit requirements for both. Some of those students may choose to pursue the Rare Book and Special Collections concentration within this program. They also will be able to complete an archives certificate program at the same time, as can all of our Palmer students, if they choose their courses carefully.

Another approach to attracting potential special collections librarians is represented by two small-scale, postdoctoral internship programs. In each case, students who do not hold the MLS undertake professional-level work in research libraries. The first of these programs, the Yale Special Collections Humanities Fellowship, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, places one student each year as an intern at Yale University where he or she conducts research and participates in undergraduate teaching for a two-year period. The fellowship pays a salary in the mid-forties. The second program operates under the auspices of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). It, too, places "postdocs" in research libraries, though not necessarily in special collections, at more or less full salary, and involves a month of intensive training at the Billy Frye Institute at Emory University. The internships are for one or two years. When the program began in 2003–2004, it involved fourteen to fifteen libraries but was reduced this year to five institutions because of limited funding. The future of both these programs depends on raising sufficient funds to support them. Yet even while such endeavors are laudable in the ingenuity they bring to the question of attracting talent to the field, in my darker moments I wonder whether the field, the employing libraries, and the students

33. The Association of Research Libraries in collaboration with selected schools of library and information science has received funding for a three-year program, 2004–2006, to attract candidates for the MLS with specialized skills of various kinds who wish to train for work in research and academic libraries. This program, the ARL Academy, provides enhanced internships and other opportunities. See www.arl.org/olms/arlacademy.

themselves are best served by bypassing the MLS training and experience. In particular, I wonder whether these alternative paths will diminish the move toward co-operation that the MLS has fostered in special collections circles in recent decades.

Do these programs, when considered together, offer adequate preparation? The answer depends on what you think adequate preparation might be. Although I read the occasional list of necessary skills with interest,³⁴ and would certainly agree with Abby Smith³⁵ that digital as well as traditional skills are *de rigueur* these days, I find that the requirements for jobs advertised today vary widely, depending on the holdings and setting of the special collections library that is doing the hiring. Beyond basic bibliography and an introduction to the standards and institutions of the field, I would be hard-pressed to identify a core set of skills that I consider to be utterly essential for everyone entering the field. John Bidwell observed that precision is essential; I would begin with that and probably add something about responsibility, energy, and enjoyment of the material and its users—and end the list there. It is too obvious to say that if you plan to work with a collection of medieval literature, you need some Latin. But much beyond that, I cannot say with certainty that a particular body of knowledge or set of skills is *always* needed for special collections jobs. In our Palmer School program in New York City, we routinely encounter students who know Mandarin, Spanish, Russian, or Hebrew; last year alone, I taught students who were native speakers of Arabic, Bengali, French, German, Hungarian, Japanese, and Ukrainian. Many students are accomplished musicians or have experience with programming languages. All sorts of potentially useful knowledge is “out there” in the applicant pool. It is more a matter of matching existing skills to opportunities than piling on more skills “just in case.”

Hands-on experience in the book arts, a factor that seems to have been important in the training of many current curators, is difficult to come by. Excellent programs exist at the University of Iowa, University of Alabama, Wells College, the Center for Book Arts in New York City, the Texas A&M Book History Workshop,³⁶ and other centers. But most of these programs are not directly connected to MLS programs and students cannot therefore get credit toward their library degrees for this kind of experience. There is a limit to the amount of money that students can spend on their education, and noncredit, hands-on book arts courses seem to be more of a luxury

34. Alice Schreyer, “Education and Training for Careers in Special Collections; A White Paper Prepared for the Association of Research Libraries, Special Collections Task Force,” November 2004. It can be found at <http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/SCTFED.pdf>.

35. Abby Smith, “Authenticity and Affect: When Is a Watch Not a Watch?” *Library Trends* 52 (summer 2003): 172–82.

36. Peggy Price, “That Old Book Thing: Continuing Ed Opportunities in Rare Books,” *Mississippi Libraries* 67, no. 4 (winter 2003): 124–25.

to many than a necessity. We at the Palmer School are taking tentative steps toward making hands-on experience available within the master's program by bringing students into studios for printing and papermaking sessions within the framework of regular courses on more general topics. A recent grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services gives us the flexibility to provide payment to professionals who help to teach a course but are not technically adjuncts. We are hoping to work with the Center for Book Arts in the future if we can overcome the tyranny of the three-credit course structure and the complexities of interinstitutional cooperation.

But how about further training in all aspects of special collections work for those already on the job? In 1996, Richard Cox reviewed the situation systematically and concluded that opportunities had been—and still are—few and far between.³⁷ Exceptions include short courses, often offered on a one-time basis, in handling new or unusual formats such as film, DVDs, etc. Little is offered relating to rare books, archives, and historical manuscripts beyond the fine courses the RBMS makes available. Mechanisms for curriculum and course evaluations that might lead to improvement are virtually nonexistent (RBS is a notable exception here). Most interestingly, Cox noted that needs assessments for continuing education courses have rarely been exploited in relation to the few programs and opportunities that have been available.³⁸ It might be time for a systematic study of the situation.

Pending the outcome of such a survey, I would like to speculate about what might be missing by way of continuing education opportunities for librarians who already have the MLS. We seem still to lack:

- Adequate support for continuing education for employed librarians wishing to move to special collections or for those already in special collections who want to expand their knowledge and skills.
- Flexibility in institutional policies that will recognize noncredit programs, such as RBS, as eligible for continuing education support.
- Release time for courses, research, and visits to other collections.
- Entry-level jobs in special collections so that a promising candidate can get a foot in the door. (It is curious that entry-level jobs are so few, given the profession-wide claim that a crisis in future staffing looms.³⁹ Those students who do enter special collections directly from library school seem to be doing it currently by stepping into archives jobs that are usually funded by “soft money.”)

37. Richard J. Cox, “Continuing Education and Special Collections Professionals: The Need for Rethinking,” *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* 10, no. 2 (1995): 78.

38. *Ibid.*, 92.

39. See also Terry Belanger, “Afterword,” *Library Trends* 52, no. 1 (summer 2003): 193–94.

- A broader view of who “works” as a special collections librarian and therefore would benefit from special collections training. The assumption that rare books/special collections courses are for future curators only is shortsighted. Peter Hirtle predicts⁴⁰ that in the future, as more special collections materials become digitized, general reference librarians will answer most questions dealing with the content of special collections materials. If that is true, familiarity with special collections materials will be appropriate even beyond the secured doors of the inner sanctum.
- Educational and training programs *within* institutions themselves, as William Joyce suggested in 1995,⁴¹ as well as local peer guidance, formal mentoring programs, and workshops.
- And finally, the pattern of continuing education whereby librarians pursue advanced degrees in traditional academic subject areas. According to Richard Wendorf,⁴² the purpose of such study is not just the more obvious one of increasing subject knowledge, but the more practical one of understanding the research process and entering into fellowship with users in the research community.

These are paths not yet taken. The reasons for these omissions may be due as much to lack of support as to lack of interest on the part of curators. When we better understand what is wanted and needed, we can cast that information as a standard for special collections librarians to cite when negotiating with their general library administrators for support for continuing education. I leave it for RBMS to consider whether these are good ideas and, indeed, if the list of “lacks” that I cite is meaningful at all. Stepping back—a potentially dangerous thing to do on a bridge—I also leave it to RBMS to figure out how we structure the *cooperative* solutions to these and all the issues of bridge building, for both users and librarians, that are needed to strengthen special collections.

This has been a long and exhausting, if not exhaustive, journey to, over, and away from our metaphorical bridge. But before answering that profound and perennial question of the traveler—“Are we there yet?”—I want to give my peers an opportunity to criticize, complain, and hijack the debate. Are we headed in the right direction? What have we forgotten? For that I turn to my colleagues in special collections and the bridges they propose to cross in these published articles. But first, I suggest that this driver retire, with thanks for a first turn at the wheel.

40. Peter Hirtle, “The Impact of Digitization on Special Collections in Libraries,” 47 f.

41. William L. Joyce, “Educating and Training Special Collections Librarians,” *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* 10, no. 2 (1995): 75–76.

42. Richard Wendorf, “The Scholar Librarian,” in *The Scholar Librarian: Books, Libraries, and the Visual Arts* (New Castle, Del.: Boston Athenaeum and Oak Knoll Press, 2005), 34.