Guest Editor's Note

ARE THOSE ECHOES DOWN the hallway, or other voices talking about the same things? Over the past several years, a national conversation has been building around how best to assess the quality and impact of higher education and the contributions that libraries make to research, teaching, and learning. The Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Association of Research Libraries, the Association of College and Research Libraries, and other organizations have been funding studies and initiatives around these important issues, which are becoming increasingly urgent as institutions struggle to adapt to altered and uncertain economic environments. A growing body of literature and practice relating to assessment has been emerging on the library landscape, but it has tended to fragment over the usual organizational and disciplinary boundaries.

Special collections and archives in general have not been well integrated into the strategic planning and core operations of academic libraries, and it has been particularly the case with regard to assessment. Symptomatic of this fact has been the almost complete absence until this year of presentations related to special collections at the biennial Library Assessment Conference sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries in conjunction with the University of Washington and University of Virginia Libraries, which has served as the fulcrum for promoting a culture of assessment in academic libraries.¹

Yet, as the contents of this themed issue of *RBM* clearly show, special collections librarians and archivists have become mindful of the need to gather and analyze evidence concerning the effectiveness of their services and the efficiency of their operations. The 2011 annual preconference of ACRL's Rare Books and Manuscripts Section featured a plenary session on assessment that included Sarah Pritchard, Lisa Carter, and me as panelists, with Jennifer Paustenbaugh, associate dean for planning and assessment at the Oklahoma State University Libraries, serving as moderator.² Positive responses to the session led *RBM* editor Beth Whittaker to

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1. For more information on the biennial Library Assessment Conference and the 2012 conference program, which for the first time includes a session dedicated to special collections, see: <http://library-assessment.org/>.

2. Sarah M. Pritchard, Lisa R. Carter, and Christian Dupont, "How Special Is Your Library? Special Collections and the Value of Academic Libraries," plenary session panel moderated by Jennifer Paustenbaugh, 52nd annual preconference of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries, June 21–24, 2011, Baton Rouge, LA. An audio recording of the session is available from the RBMS website at www.rbms.info/conferences/preconfdocs/2011/2011docs.shtml.

invite me not only to work with Sarah and Lisa on preparing essays based on their remarks for publication but also to solicit contributions from other colleagues who have been developing and applying methodologies for conducting assessment activities across several areas of special collections and archival practice.

While it was of course not possible to cover every topic or angle on assessment, I aimed for a broad and representative sampling. The array of accomplished contributors includes librarians, archivists, web design specialists, information studies professors, library administrators, program directors, and project managers. Several essays are jointly authored, thereby combining different perspectives and expertise.

All contributors were charged with the challenging task of writing for two audiences simultaneously. On the one hand, they have sought to provide special collections librarians and archivists with theoretical and practical guidance on how to conduct various types of assessments to help them enhance their operations and impact on the communities they serve. On the other hand, they have endeavored to acquaint library administrators with a range of efforts to bring the culture and discipline of assessment into special collections and archival management and to promote awareness of the potential benefits and opportunities for integrating special collections and archives into larger institutional planning and assessment efforts—in short, to bring conversations that have been happening down various hallways into the same room.

To ensure that this issue of *RBM*—a journal for practitioners and scholars who work with rare books, manuscripts, and cultural heritage materials—in fact reaches the larger library assessment community, ACRL's Rare Book and Manuscripts Section provided funding to cover the supplemental costs associated with producing an expanded issue size and print run so that all 2012 Library Assessment Conference attendees would receive a complimentary copy. In the last year, RBMS has also formed a metrics and assessment task force that is currently examining needs for standardized definitions and metrics and best-practice guidelines for assessment activities in special collections—a call sounded by several of the essays in this issue, and one which we hope will rally creative and collaborative engagement across the library and archives community.³

This issue of *RBM* represents a pioneering effort in another arena as well. In keeping with ACRL's commitment to open access, ACRL and the *RBM* editorial board have introduced new content licensing terms to contributors, enabling them to select from a variety of Creative Commons and other licensing options.⁴ I am grateful for the privilege of sharing in this initiative and bringing *RBM* to an expanded readership.

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3. Information about the RBMS metrics and assessment task force is available from the RBMS website at www.rbms.info/committees/task_force/metrics_assessment/index.shtml.

4. More information about ACRL's commitment to open access is available at www.ala.org/acrl/publications/oafaq. Details concerning the licensing terms for the contents of this issue are available at www.ala.org/acrl/publications/publicationsfaq.