Beth M. Whittaker

Editor's Note

AS I SURVEYED THE ARTICLES in this issue of *RBM*, I realized that they happen, completely coincidentally, to revolve around a theme. The word “outreach” is used so frequently, and with so many different meanings, that it is difficult to nail down what we are really talking about. As a profession, we have tended to use “outreach,” sometimes dismissively, to speak of work that we do that does not directly relate to supporting individual researchers who use our collections.

“Outreach,” then, tends to be used for “everything else”: the engagement with potential and actual donors, the relationship building with long-term hopes of acquiring collections, the occasional visit from community members, open houses for undergraduates, and the vague, nagging sense that we could be doing more. Without additional resources, it is difficult to balance the research mission of our institutions with “competing” goals, and yet we are asked to show impact beyond users in reading room, outside our buildings, beyond our campuses. If “outreach” is used to indicate offering tours for community groups AND speaking to undergraduates at our parent institutions, it’s no wonder it sometimes seems overwhelming.

Lori Lynn Dekydspotter and Cherry Dunham Williams explore a program for cultivating primary source literacy with elementary school students, including bringing students into the academic special collections space. Lesley Brown discusses the development of a collaborative exhibit on a controversial topic that serves multiple communities. Sarah Passoneau and Michele Christian examine how their desire to improve outreach to fraternities and sororities led to the complete revamping of their program, using an evidence-based approach. Finally, in our irregular “Notes” series, Jae Jennifer Rossman discusses how both education and outreach were enhanced by redesigning physical spaces in a renovation project.

The authors in this issue are quick to point out that they are not the first to propose these kinds of initiatives, nor are they the only writers discussing them. I do believe, though, that bringing them together for the *RBM* audience will help drive discussions that help us to clarify our audience and our mission.