The Future (Imperfect) of Special Collections and Library School Education

MICHELE V. CLOONAN

Images now displace ideals.¹

Our culture is saturated with images of information systems: information superhighways which some policy makers fear will become toll roads congested with data glut, sabotaged by guerrilla hackers working for outlaw information services. Theodore Roszak has dubbed computer-generated systems the cult of information.² This cult is composed of generations of post-World War II Americans raised on Star Trek, Star Wars, The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, and, more recently, Nintendo and video arcades. The future of information technology is so alluring that university administrators cannot wait to ride (or be led to) the e-waves, and panicked library school deans are offering up electronic circuses as the revitalization of library and information science. Upper-level university administrators and others in charge of library budgets are digesting these new visions heartily. For example, Jonathan R. Cole, provost of Columbia University, recently described seven factors leading to the closure of the School of Library Service. Number 5 was “an evaluation of whether the School would move decisively into information science, a goal that had been set five years earlier.” Number 6 was “the possibility of students interested in traditional forms of library service obtaining a quality education . . . at other universities . . . .”³

More recently in the New York Times, Gerhard Casper, president of Stanford, but formerly a high-ranking administrator at the University of Chicago when its Graduate Library School closed, is quoted as saying, “Accomplishing selective excellence is immensely difficult. You try to close down a library school, for example, and there’s resistance. The people who oppose you don’t have to make the trade-offs. They can simply say, ‘It’s a good thing, so why are you trying to get rid of it?’”⁴ And as Cole also

Michèle V. Cloonan is Curator of Rare Books at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts; she is on leave from UCLA where she is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. This paper was originally presented at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section program session at the ALA Annual Conference in Miami, June 1994.
says, Columbia’s School of Library Service “was deemed not to be central to the future mission of the University.”

If library education is not the future of the university, how then can libraries survive into the future? And if there are no more libraries and no more librarians, what, then, is the point of writing about education for special collections librarians?

That, of course, is a rhetorical question because there never will be no more librarians and no more libraries. Regardless of what the future holds in other departments in libraries, the future as I see it will be only somewhat different for special collections departments. In fact, the special collections department of the future will hold remarkable similarities to that of the present, despite what today’s administrators are predicting.

If I am correct in this, then the educational needs of special collections librarians will not fundamentally alter much from what they are now except in the way in which all professional education needs to keep pace with changes. In fact, as a case in point, of the 28 courses offered at the 1994 Rare Book School in Charlottesville, Virginia, three courses dealt with electronic topics, an indication of the way in which a continuing education program can respond to changing needs as soon as those needs become apparent.

No discussion of the future of libraries or librarianship can ignore the recent persistent theme of the virtual library in which books become obsolete and all information can be accessed from computers. This is (for some) an appealing and promising vision; but it is only one vision. A visit to the 1994 American Booksellers Association convention showed a very different world: scores of thousands of recently published books were on display. Electronic publications may augment but will not replace the book as a physical object. The theme of new technologies and their place in special collections was thoughtfully considered by participants in the 1992 Harvard meeting “Rare Books and Manuscript Libraries in the Twenty-First Century” and at the 1993 Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) preconference in New Orleans. I do not wish to recapitulate here what was said then. But I would like to quote one particularly cogent passage from William Jones’s 1993 RBMS presentation. He cites a Forbes magazine prediction that “full-text retrieval, still very limited at this point, is around the corner. When it comes, the local library as we know it all but disappears. In lieu of librarians we will have programmers and database experts.” Jones responds,

These are not only lean libraries, they are invisible ones as well, with a concomitant disappearance of librarians to run them. Sensible analyses of computer technology and the digitization of texts argue that we are a long way from realizing these visions, but the recurrent circulation of forecasts that have the appearance of authority should cause us to be wary that those who should
know better will make policy decisions based on such authority. The consequences for the major cultural institution that is the library are disastrous. Libraries have sold special collections and have dismissed staff to pay for computers, and we would be foolish not to recognize the continuing appeal of these forecasts to budget-conscious administrators, whether these forecasts are misapplied or not.

In fact, there have been relatively few closings so far, but special collections librarians might do well to heed Jones’s warning since draconian budget cuts are becoming increasingly frequent at campuses all over the country. As to librarians disappearing, a perusal of the Chronicle of Higher Education, College & Research Libraries News, and American Libraries in 1995 does not indicate much change in the number of library jobs posted, even though job opportunities in general in this country are shifting.

There is a delicate balance between the appeal of new technologies, which can be genuinely useful, and the continuing needs of special collections. We cannot allow administrators who ultimately control library budgets to be seduced into thinking that the virtual library is the only library of the future, no matter how seductive such arguments are. As it is, there is already a tension in large universities between acquisitions budgets and all the different things that automation can bring us. Faculty may want faster, better document-delivery systems, but not at the expense of their favorite journal subscriptions or the monographs they need for their research. With the continued proliferation of books, most of which are not yet available online and not likely to be for some time, it is imperative for libraries to expend a major portion of their budgets on books and periodicals (even with the so-called savings libraries have with cooperative collection development agreements).

Since special collections will not evolve into virtual libraries, but will maintain essentially the same kinds of materials and provide the same kind of services as at present, the nature of education for special collections librarians will not markedly change, though there will need to be a sensitivity to the emerging new emphases in the research of various fields, and the tools (both paper and electronic) necessary to carry out such fields of inquiry. Preservation problems will also prove more perplexing to special collections librarians as scholars donate personal “papers” which include not only paper, but floppy disks, cassettes and videotapes, and other new media.

**LIBRARY SCHOOL EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARIANSHIP**

Thirty years ago Gordon N. Ray noted that there was a shortage of rare book librarians and

... no established pattern for training them once they have been recruited. A casual observer might assume that this was the proper business of the country’s
numerous and thriving Schools of Library Science. But in point of fact only marginal attention is paid to such training in these schools, the students in which are for the most part not the sort to have much inclination towards rare books.\textsuperscript{11}

Even in an era when library schools were plentiful and prosperous, not everyone felt that they provided adequate training grounds for special collections librarians. Indeed, Ray was not the only one to hold that view. His views were based in part on the results of a questionnaire he sent out to collectors, librarians, and dealers.\textsuperscript{12} Ray reported that “it was the general belief that the best foundation for a career as a rare book librarian is a B.A. degree in the humanities, preferably in literature or history. This should be accompanied or followed by immersion in books, either through book trade or library work experience.”\textsuperscript{13}

In 1972 Ann Bowden responded to Ray’s observations by undertaking her own survey.\textsuperscript{14} She queried 53 accredited library schools about their training programs for rare book or special collections librarianship (she used both terms). There were 42 responses in which 37 library schools reported offering courses on the history of the book, but only seven courses specifically in rare book librarianship.\textsuperscript{15} Bowden mentions a mere three library schools that offered a rare book specialization within the master’s degree programs: the University of Western Ontario, the University of North Carolina, and Columbia University. A fourth school, UCLA, offered a certificate of specialization in rare books and manuscripts as a post-MLS program.\textsuperscript{16}

Although Bowden set out to demonstrate that Ray’s view was not reflective of opportunities for special collections training in 1972, she inadvertently underscores his point. Four specialization programs out of 42 library schools hardly constituted a widespread interest in rare books. But then again, perhaps both Bowden and Ray were failing to grasp the bigger picture. Special collections, like law, medical, art, or music librarianship, is a specialization. There are far fewer librarians practicing in these areas than there are catalogers and reference librarians. It is possible, then, that supply and demand were about equal.

What about now, nearly 25 years after Bowden’s survey? What does a special collections librarian need to know, and where can he or she receive that knowledge?

In a nutshell, special collections libraries hold the range of materials we are all familiar with: books, pamphlets, broadsides, manuscripts, diaries, photographs, artifacts, and, more recently, magnetic media. Programs that have best prepared special collections librarians have included such courses as cataloging, reference, management, and collection development (the core of librarianship), as well as the more specialized study of bibliography in all of its branches, preservation, archives, and occasionally such courses as codicology, paleography, library history, or publishing. Sometimes these courses are supplemented by internships
in special collections or archives. Add to these *other* courses important to librarianship such as automation. This already yields a burdensome—if not impossible—course of study, even in a two-year program.

Since most library schools have only one-year programs, and since some of the "essential" courses for special collections librarianship are not even offered in most schools, the education that will fill these gaps will come from on-the-job learning, workshops taken at professional conferences, and from courses taken at such venues as Rare Book School.

Designing a course of study to prepare students for employment in special collections is problematic. In addition to the fact that courses in the area of special collections librarianship differ markedly from one library school to another (and some library schools have no courses at all in the field), the students themselves enter library school with a variety of backgrounds. Also, many students now want to specialize in more than one area in order to make themselves more marketable. And students sometimes change their minds about their specialization in mid-program and enter a specialization track too late to get all the courses they should have. For all these reasons it is inevitable that students will need to learn a great deal more after they finish library school.

Alice Schreier drafted a document for RBMS which outlined the competencies necessary for special collections librarians. If disseminated to library school educators and students, this document would provide both groups with a clear understanding of the practice of special collections librarianship.

Since library school curricula are necessarily specialized, students may not get the educational breadth they need in working with special collections materials. This raises the additional issue of whether it is important for students going into special collections to have graduate degrees in other fields, particularly in the humanities. But then again, should special collections librarians be scholars? administrators? both? This has been debated for some time, and there is still no consensus. Few individuals are talented as both scholars and fundraisers, for example. These days librarians are likely to spend more of their time carrying out administrative duties than they are in scholarly endeavors.

One of the problems of trying to educate someone for a position in special collections concerns the nature of those departments which assist in selection and acquisition, which deal with preservation and conservation, which supply information for catalogers (or perhaps do the cataloging), which are responsible for reference and other public services, and, in general, are a microcosm of the entire library. Paradoxically, it is necessary to educate students broadly and narrowly. This is the approach that special collections education has taken thus far—or should have. In fact, as already mentioned, few library schools even have a single course specifically on special collections librarianship, and, where such courses are offered, adjunct professors often teach them. Adjuncts usually have little to do
with the design of the rest of the curriculum, and only occasionally do they advise students. (Adjunct professors taught special-collections-related courses even when Bowden was writing. She listed several adjuncts, including Richard Archer, Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, and H. P. Kraus.18) Courses in bibliography are about as close as most library schools get to teaching the discipline, and these courses generally focus on artifacts and theory rather than on the practice of librarianship.

For courses on practice, Rare Book School has offered two: Introduction to Rare Book Librarianship, and Advanced Seminar in Special Collections Administration. This suggests yet another issue that raises the hackles of librarians and library educators: should we be teaching students theory or practice? My own view is somewhere in the middle: library education is not trade school—the classroom is for theory; internships and independent studies allow students to apply theory to practice; and the best professional librarians will continue to supplement their knowledge through continuing education offerings.

Now, back to the library.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS IN THE FUTURE
At the Harvard Symposium to which I have referred, Terry Belanger raised two issues, one of which I am in complete agreement with, the other of which needs to be examined closely. He first pointed out that we must understand how provosts, presidents, and boards think, because their perspective is not the same as ours. (Those of us who are veterans of library school closures have had demonstrated to us the truth of that assertion.)

Belanger also took a provocative stance. He said that “we are dealing with the twilight of the book, old or new, in its present codex format.”19 I agree that we are moving in the direction of electronic texts. But there are two issues relevant to this stance. First, the new technologies have made desktop publishing—and publishing in general—increasingly easier, so we have a proliferation of books in their physical manifestations.20 Second, the existence of the hundreds of millions of books that are already in the world necessitates that they be stored somewhere. They will not all be converted into electronic formats. And many of them will continue to reside in special collections. The fact that we are in the “twilight” of the book as we know it does not mitigate the fact that there will be a need for special collections departments for some time to come.

Some librarians have compared special collections departments to museums. If we think of the warehouse function of museums, then the comparison is unfortunate. A more interesting way to compare ourselves to museums is in the way we can interpret our collections to patrons. Many museums interpret their collections quite successfully through exhibitions, some of which are interactive. Special collections librarians can also publicize the multifaceted aspects of their collections.
THE FUTURE OF LIBRARY SCHOOLS

Having looked at the future of special collections, I would now like to return to library schools. Is their future as secure as I think the future of special collections is? As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, library school deans have employed a number of strategies to try to save their schools. Some schools, such as Syracuse, have tried to appeal to “progressives” by dropping “Library” from their name. Others, such as Indiana, are making major changes in their curricula away from traditional librarianship. Some of these schools, with their increasing emphases on information science to the exclusion of historical courses, will simply not have the programs that will be able to produce special collections librarians. In fact, at some schools (Indiana and Berkeley, to name two) retiring professors who taught bibliographical and historical courses are being replaced by information scientists. Fortunately, there are a few schools like Alabama, Texas, UCLA, and Wisconsin, among others, that have retained traditional courses in their curricula. But at all library schools, fewer faculty are teaching greater numbers of courses.

Each university operates in a different political climate. If library schools (or any other school, for that matter) do not understand the thinking of the administration, their survival is in jeopardy. The same is true for special collections. Both must be seen as central to the present and future of the university.

It is possible that more library schools will close. Therefore, courses which will prepare special collections librarians will be offered at a diminishing number of schools. Internships and continuing education opportunities will become even more crucial for the training of special collections librarians.

My point is that special collections departments do not seem to be in imminent danger of being eliminated. What is in danger is the availability of courses in library schools to prepare special collections librarians. In the next five years, most of the professors teaching those courses will have retired and some will probably not be replaced by faculty in their areas. And this danger comes from the so-called “forward thinking” of those who want to change library school programs into training grounds exclusively for information technologists.

NOTES

5. Cole, 8.
6. They were Introduction to the Internet, Electronic Formats in a Rare Books Environment, and Introduction to Electronic Texts.


9. With the steady increase in serials and monograph prices, these “savings” are not real.

10. For example, see Michael Vinson, “New Ranges for Western Americana: Is It Time to Put the Old Bibliographies Out to Pasture?” *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* 9.2 (1994): 87–93. He points out that there is now a historiography which focuses on such new areas of inquiry as women and minorities, environment, and technology in Western Americana studies.


12. Ray does not state the number of people to whom he sent his questionnaire. He does report that there were 49 responses. The names of the respondents are listed in his Appendix I.


15. Bowden, 226.


20. The number of entries in *Books in Print* has gone up steadily from its inception.

---

**KENNETH KARMIOLE, BOOKSELLER, INC.**

**Antiquarian & Rare Books**

**Catalogues Issued**

TEL 310 451 4342  FAX 310 458 5930

509 Wilshire Boulevard, Santa Monica, California 90401