Navigating the Mainstream: Key to Survival

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My assignment is to give you an academic library director's view of special collections. Should special collections be in the mainstream or on the margin of a university library's programs and priorities?

In my view, special collections in a research library must be in the mainstream. As collections become more homogenized because of serials cancellations and decreased monographic purchases, it is in our special collections that the distinctiveness of our research libraries will be maintained. Research libraries have an obligation through our special collections to collect and preserve some part of our intellectual heritage.

But I also think that because of increasingly limited resources, most university libraries must have "working" special collections; i.e., collections that support the instructional and research program of the university faculty and students.

In our current environment, it is easy for special collections to become marginalized. A library director faces many critical choices about where to place resources. As resources shrink, most directors will choose to put those resources into programs essential to the library's primary clientele—usually defined as the university's faculty, students, and staff. It is up to you to make sure that your director views you as essential. And in some cases you will need to work deliberately and strategically to insure that this happens. I will focus on strategies for special collections to survive successfully in the swift waters of the mainstream.

I am going to discuss strategic planning, user-centered services, and new technologies and suggest ways for special collections librarians to get into and to stay in the mainstream. I also will pose questions for you to consider.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

I once did a bit of whitewater canoeing. I quickly learned that one is not able to change the water flow in a river. One must instead know in which direction the water is going.
and go with it, paddling to avoid rocks and other hazards. A skilled paddler can avoid the hazards and at the same time enjoy the changing scenery along the riverbank.

As a special collections librarian, you should know where the mainstream is headed and steer in that direction. You do that through a planning process.

Academic libraries operate within the higher education environment and we all know what is happening there: budget reductions, close questioning by legislative authorities of faculty teaching loads, more accountability, and greater demand for assessment. A refocusing on the teaching mission of the university is required. Universities are being asked to justify their existence and the university library is feeling the same pressures. We all know the phrase “leaner and meaner,” though given the service orientation of most librarians the latter is a difficult concept to grasp. I prefer to think of it as “leaner and keener.”

Other environmental factors also are affecting libraries: a rapidly changing technological environment, rising costs of library materials, increased demands for library services, and the rapidly increasing numbers and formats of information resources.

All these factors make it important for a library to engage in strategic planning, which involves examining the environment, evaluating an organization’s strengths and weaknesses, and setting strategic goals that emphasize strengths and minimize weaknesses. Strategic decisions are made about opportunities that exist for the library in the organization’s external and internal environment. It requires an ability to be realistic about possibilities and to be willing to make changes.

If your library engages in strategic planning or long-range planning or planning of any sort, you must make sure that special collections are factored into the process. Remember, the library director needs the help of all the library’s staff to insure a strong position for the library on campus. Help your director to see opportunities to make the library a part of the campus mainstream. Be alert for opportunities for the library to shine or to contribute to the strategic directions of the university. Think of the strengths of your department and your staff. How can they be used in achieving library goals?

If the library does not engage in strategic planning, plan on your own. The resulting plan itself is less important than the habit one develops to look ahead, to assess the environment, to see the opportunities.

USER-CENTERED SERVICES
Work actively with students, faculty, departments, visiting and independent scholars, and others. And have them acknowledge your assistance, not merely to you but to your library director. Special collections librarians need their library directors to know what services they have been providing and how their users have benefited from and appreciate the services they have gotten. You should be doing everything in your power to see that the library director knows whom you have assisted. You should be providing user-centered services and outreach programs for the campus and the community at large. You need to be out on campus, vigorously promoting your
collections and services, seeking to understand the research programs of various departments, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

Before designing user-centered services, you need to know who your users are. Because of the need for individual assistance for special collections patrons, you often know more about individual users than do other units in the library. However, you do need to do some strategic thinking here. Who are your present users? Is it a small group of specialists who have found your collections? Are you drawing users from all segments of the university community? You need to think in terms of broadly based constituencies if you are to operate in the mainstream. If your special collections are being used by a small segment of potential users, how can you expand your market? Are parts of your collection undiscovered? Can you interest faculty and students in them?

Expanding your user base is important for several reasons. It increases your value to the university and consequently to your library administration. With administrative support, it enables you to offer better service to the university community.

User surveys are a technique you can use to gather information on the effectiveness of your current services and what unmet needs your users have. If it is possible, consider surveying non-special-collections users also, to discover how you might serve that segment.

Special collections librarians should not neglect the library's primary clientele in favor of community supporters. It is essential to serve the basic group first. It makes strategic sense.

NEW TECHNOLOGY
Much of my time as director is spent on issues related to new information technology. I find my time increasingly occupied with planning for the adoption and integration of technology into our service programs. There have been incredible changes and progress in the last five years. We have moved rapidly beyond the integrated library system. Suddenly we have become network navigators. In my own library we have introduced a campuswide information system with menus to guide users to distant resources. We have been challenged to educate ourselves and our users in this new world. It is important for special collections librarians, despite their focus on retrospective materials, to keep current with the technology, and to be able to help patrons search their collections using this technology.

We have begun to see the impact of the distributed information resources that we are making available on the campus. We have realized that a patron in the Philosophy Library can access Medline as easily as can a patron in the Health Sciences Library. And we have begun to see what this means for the skills and training our librarians must have. Should we expect all of our librarians to be expert in all the online databases? What training is necessary in Internet resources? What guidelines should be given to our public service staff for referring questions on to other locations? How patient will our patrons be when they are asked to go to another location for assistance with an
online resource? The more each librarian knows about all the resources available in the library, the better she or he will be in serving the public.

In examining implications of distributed access to information resources for our special collections units, one must consider two issues. First, as I discussed above, patrons in special collections can access all information resources. So we must be sure to include special collections staff in the training given to the "regular" public services staff. More cross-training, service on other reference desks, and participation in planning for services are standard techniques to use.

Second, as we have increasing information distributed throughout the library about our special collections holdings, we must make sure that other libraries' staff are knowledgeable about special collections. They must know more than in the past when patrons would be referred to special collections, to manuscripts, or to archives. Patrons in the future may expect more assistance at the initial contact point.

Technology is bringing special collections into the mainstream. Better bibliographic access to special collections is being provided in many libraries through retrospective conversions of special collections materials and as more and more collection-level records appear in our online catalogues. Special collections librarians need to see to it that their own cataloguing backlogs are being worked upon as well as those in other parts of the library.

Special collections is coming to the digital revolution through the preservation door, in some cases. As Billy E. Frye, Chairman of the Board of the Commission on Preservation and Access, notes in the Commission's May 1993 Newsletter, the work being done on preservation of our cultural heritage is contributing to the realization of the virtual library.¹

The Yale Project Open Book to convert microfilm to digital format has demonstrated that items filmed for preservation purposes can be economically digitized.

Many of the imaging pilot projects under way involve special collections materials. For example, Cornell and the University of Southern California, working with the Eastman Kodak Company, are experimenting with the use of Kodak's Photo CD product to archive, retrieve, and distribute images from their library collections. Cornell will be scanning images from its collection of ornithological drawings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes while USC will scan materials from its California Historical Society Photographic Collection.

I recently heard a presentation by professor Edward Ayers of the University of Virginia, an award-winning historian of the American South. He spoke of his next publication, an electronic history of a southern community—Staunton, Virginia—and a northern community—Chambersburg, Pennsylvania—through the period of the Civil War and after. An integral part of this history will be a digital archive with hypertext links to the text. This archive will include legal and family records for town residents, photographs, cartographic and topographic information, church records, census information from 1860 and 1870, and many other primary sources gathered
from a variety of locations. Professor Ayers is assembling a veritable special collection
about these two communities. It is this kind of research that special collections
librarians must become familiar with so that they can facilitate it and even draw upon
it for their other patrons.

Many of the technical issues for digitizing images and text have been solved. The
more difficult economic and legal policy issues remain. Copyright, authenticity,
ownership, and cooperation concerns will be much more difficult to address. So will
retrospective conversion—not the cataloguing kind, but the conversion of printed and
manuscript texts to other media. Someone will need to decide what to convert and into
what medium. And others will need to figure out how to fund it all. These are just a
few of the problems that the new media present.

But let us assume that all these problems will be solved. Assume that the materials
from your special collections—text, photographs, manuscripts, and other nonprint
images—are digitized and distributable in high resolution on the network and that
some way has been found to pay for all this. Adequate directory services, catalogues,
and gopher services exist to get researchers to your collection. What effect does this
have on the way you do business? Could all your present users be served remotely in
this way (assuming they had the needed hardware and connectivity)? How would you
be spending your time? What skills will you need?

It seems to me that this might open the way for what I will call “virtual special
collections.” That is, a scholar or a special collections librarian might assemble a
virtual special collection. Digital resources might be taken from many places on the
world network and reside in a computer somewhere, on the scholar’s desktop or in the
special collections computer. Such a collection might be used to supplement an
existing print-based collection at a university library. I believe it would meet the
definition of a special collection: a group of materials with a common subject or theme
maintained separate from a larger collection. What would this mean for you and your
collections? What would it mean for libraries in general?

To survive in the electronic mainstream, you must think about such questions and
begin to provide answers. Scenarios such as I have created are not as impossible as they
seemed even two years ago. Very rapid changes in technology, in user expectations,
and in research techniques are making them possible.

Library directors are being forced to make difficult decisions about the collection
and service programs in their libraries. Units that will do well are those that are
forward-looking, user-centered, and adept in the use of technology. They must see the
primary clientele, i.e., the group that pays the bills, as the group with first call on their
services. It is up to you to insure that the director understands what you do, whom you
serve, and how well you do your job.

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