



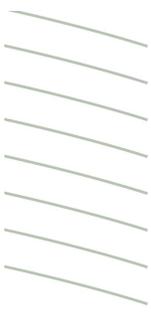
The Place of Special Collections in a Research Library

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Convergences and alliances between GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector institutions are becoming increasingly common and the world of research libraries is no exception. A research library may be defined as a library which develops and manages in-depth collections in one or more subject areas. They exist to support scholarship and higher education far beyond undergraduate level. To this end, research libraries will frequently contain special collections. ‘Special collections’ is a very broad umbrella term, but they have been defined by the University of Glasgow as “collections of books and archives considered important enough to be preserved...they are rare, unique or fragile, they have research or cultural value, or significant provenance.”¹ This useful definition covers many of the reasons that special collections are important, particularly rarity, uniqueness and provenance. Special collections can also represent the historical record of the library’s parent institution, although institutional business records and the management thereof lie outside the scope of this paper.

Special collections may include (but are not limited to) personal papers and manuscripts, rare books, ephemera, original audio-visual material, realia,

¹“What are special collections?”, University of Glasgow, 2018, accessed 30 June 2018, <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/specialcollections/whatarespecialcollections/>



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photographs (in any medium) and artworks. In many cases they have accumulated naturally rather than having been deliberately collected. The variety of formats which may comprise a special collection is an excellent example of the convergence of GLAM theory and practice, since anyone in charge of special collections would benefit from some familiarity with preservation both physical and digital, curation, and a range of metadata formats.

Assessing Significance

When considering how best to manage a special collection, one of the first steps to undertake is an assessment of the collection's significance. There are many aspects to the concept of significance, and a significance assessment can function like a resume for your collection – not just stating that the collection is significant, but explaining how and why. Winkworth and Russell explain that significance refers to the values and meanings that items and collections have for people and communities². This means that although a particular item may not have national significance, it may hold a great deal of meaning for a particular organisation, faith community or religious denomination. The main types of significance are historic, artistic or aesthetic, scientific or research potential, and social or spiritual. Secondary factors include provenance, rarity, completeness and interpretive capacity³.

² Winkworth, Kylie & Russell, Roslyn, *Collections 2.0*, 2nd ed. (Rundle Mall, SA: Collections Council of Australia, 2009) p. 1.

³ Winkworth & Russell, *Collections 2.0*, p. 10.



Analysing significance can help to demonstrate why special collections are important. Since primary sources are the ‘raw material of history’⁴, they can greatly enhance research. Unique history and memory are preserved, which consequently attract scholars, promote community engagement and can enhance the institution’s reputation. Additionally, they can assist with making decisions about funding priorities.

Access and Handling

Two of the main factors which make a collection ‘special’ are rarity and fragility, or in other words, items which are easily ruined and difficult if not impossible to replace. However the use of these collections by scholars is desirable. Rare book collections in particular have traditionally been closely guarded. Daniel Traister captures this phenomenon when he describes a rare book librarian thus: “He... at least as I (surely unfairly) remember him, he might as well have worn a sign about his neck reading *Noli me tangere* (or my books, either)”⁵. Apart from the fact that many rare book librarians are female, this attitude can discourage professional scholars from using the collection, let alone the curious student whose quest for broader reading may be stifled. Traister continues, “On the one hand, readers need access; on the other, our materials need protection... We can ignore neither side of these pairs, yet both have the constant potential to conflict”⁶. One important key to resolving this issue is educating the library users on correct handling procedures, including the importance of clean dry hands. The white cotton gloves should be discarded, and nitrile gloves worn for handling photographs and any object with a shiny surface. As Meredith Torre points out, basic book conservation and preservation principles do not need to invoke mystery and awe, but to be used practically, teaching early scholars the prudent care needed in their interactions with rare materials⁷.

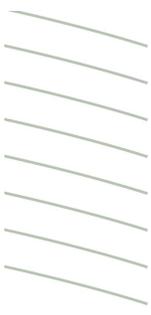
Metadata and Digitisation

The main starting point for enhanced access to special collections is, like any other collection, metadata. Any metadata is better than none, but good metadata which is appropriate to the collection is essential for discoverability. For rare book and formed collections containing published materials, data regarding provenance, annotations and binding details may be added to the catalogue record. This not only assists the library’s primary user group, but also – when added to national or international bibliographic databases – allows bibliographers anywhere to identify specific copies and collections. Institutions with substantial archival holdings may wish to consider an archives management system, and there are many options available, both licensed and open source.

⁵ Traister, Daniel. “Is there a future for special collections? And should there be? A polemical essay”. *RBM: A journal of rare books, manuscripts and cultural heritage*. Vol. 1, no. 1, (2000), p. 58.

⁶ Traister, “Is there a future for special collections?” p. 60.

⁷ Torre, Meredith. “Why should not they benefit from rare books?: Special collections and shaping the learning experience in higher education”. *Library Review*, Vol. 57 Issue 1, (2007), p. 38.



Since many special collections are unique items produced by the library's parent institution, part of the management of these collections may include digitisation. The copyright status of any particular item must be ascertained before digitisation, however since copyright law varies between nations it is not addressed in this paper. The process of digitisation must be carefully considered, even when the scanning process is outsourced. It is very important to remember that digitisation is not digital preservation. In other words, scanning something is only the first step in an ongoing process: systems and procedures must be implemented to ensure that the files remain uncorrupted and accessible into the future. This often means investing in a digital asset management system, which is a more robust and sustainable platform than a website. Digitisation should also only take place after the item or collection has metadata and any necessary conservation work has been completed.

Digital preservation has been defined as “The coordinated and ongoing set of processes and activities that ensure long-term, error-free storage of digital information, with means for retrieval and interpretation, for the entire time span the information is required.”⁸ The key processes involved in digital preservation include using sustainable file formats, standardised metadata, replication of data, refreshing the data and migrating it to newer hardware and/or software. Any data kept on portable storage media such as flash drives or optical discs should be transferred to a sustainable platform.

The professional associations and representative bodies of the GLAM sector in Australia have recently formed a new combined body called GLAM Peak, the main aim of which is “to clarify a shared vision and approach to digital access to Australia’s cultural collections through the development of a national framework.”⁹ Their online handbook Digital Access to Collections provides invaluable advice on how to properly manage a digitisation project, and this advice is relevant internationally.

For those institutions whose resources do not stretch to in-house digitisation or digital preservation, the option of outsourcing both to a larger institution exists, thanks to the respective National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand. Both institutions offer collaborative digitisation programs, with the resulting files being hosted and managed on a secure platform under a comprehensive digital preservation program¹⁰. Not all resource types may be eligible, but this is an option which small institutions should be aware of.

⁸ State Library of NSW, “Digital Preservation”, 2015, accessed 30 June 2018, <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/digital-practice-guidelines-public-libraries/digital-preservation>

⁹ “GLAM Peak” GLAM Peak. n.d., accessed 30 June 2018, <http://www.digitalcollections.org.au/glam-peak>

¹⁰ “For digitisation partners” National Library of Australia, accessed 30 June 2018, <http://help.nla.gov.au/trove/for-digitisation-partners>; “Collaborative digitisation”. National Library of New Zealand, accessed 30 June 2018, <https://natlib.govt.nz/librarians/national-library-services/collaborative-digitisation>



Conclusion

Special collections can include a wide variety of material which ends up in the custody of a library. They can become a valuable resource for researchers and boost the institution's reputation; however, they need to be managed appropriately. A significance assessment can determine how and why a collection is important to a particular region or community. When handling rare material, educating users can balance the rival concerns of preservation and access. One of the most important parts of managing a special collection is creating comprehensive metadata and making this available online. Digitisation is also important, particularly for collections facing format obsolescence, but this needs to go hand in hand with a digital preservation strategy. Fortunately, options for outsourcing both exist in Australia and New Zealand. Special collections require thoughtful management – requiring library staff to reach beyond the boundaries of librarianship into the broader GLAM sector for skills and expertise - but this can result in them becoming invaluable assets to a research library.

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