

Content Management Special Collections

Special collections is a gathering term for a wide variety of materials that includes rare books, manuscripts, and local history, in all formats. Special collections includes monographs, serials, images, audiovisual materials, unpublished papers, and realia. Most special collections materials have artifactual value in addition to their content. They often have added value because of rarity, scarcity, age, provenance, association, and/or monetary value, and, because of these factors, they require special physical care and security. Unique characteristics of individual copies often require special access, such as access to an important former owner of a book, as well as access to content.

On some level, this domain overlaps with most of the other categories identified by the Content Management group. The overlap is especially great with monographs, serials, images, and audio/video. University archives are not included in this category, although they share some of the same characteristics and issues; they are described in the University Records category.

Currently, Wesleyan has two full time professionals and one half-time paraprofessional who work with Special Collections. There is also a cataloging expert who spends approximately three hours a week cataloging rare books. The three main employees all spend part of their time working with university records. The practices related to special collections include acquiring materials, cataloging them, making them shelf-ready, providing reference service, and providing security and preservation for the materials. Because of the rare or unique nature of the materials, all of these practices require individualized attention and cannot be automated in most cases. The budget for these practices is the salaries of the employees. The budget for acquisitions is modest.

The strengths of the current practices are that they have provided a fairly high level of access for the Wesleyan community and others doing research. Through the work of Suzy Taraba to promote the collections, a high number of undergraduates and faculty use the collections as part of their coursework and to do additional research. Digital descriptions of special collections materials have been integrated with other library materials in the online catalog.

The weaknesses of the current practices include the recently reduced number of staff, which slows the process of providing access to materials and limits the amount of reference help that can be provided.

Opportunities include grant funding to provide additional staff to help process materials. Other universities are increasingly using special collections as a tool for fundraising and outreach to alumni, which is only beginning to be explored at Wesleyan.

Threats to special collections are related to the unique or rare nature of the materials in our collections. Because the stacks are closed and cannot be browsed, the staff must mediate between the materials and the users. In order to successfully mediate, proper

cataloging and description must be provided. Because of successful outreach, the special collections at Wesleyan are heavily used, necessitating more mediation despite the cuts to staffing. Without good description, we risk providing a less helpful and less successful service to our patrons.

Related to the demand for description is the need to carefully prioritize our goals. Careful planning will prevent a costly investment of time and money into materials that are not of high priority.

Short term recommendations for special collections include getting a new overhead scanner for scanning fragile books and other bound materials. Demand for scanning and digitization will continue because the materials in our special collections cannot be found elsewhere. Recent experience has shown that time-sensitive projects are best handled when equipment is adequate for our needs. Increased digital space is also needed to maintain our growing digital collections.

Long term recommendations would be to add a position in Special Collections which would be devoted to digital projects. Current special collections staff are intellectually prepared to work on such projects, but due to constraints on their time cannot devote the necessary attention to them. We also need to work closely with ITS to plan for increased digital space over the next decade.

Key Readings:

The Hidden Collections white paper, prepared by Barbara Jones, addresses the risks and threats inherent in lack of access to archival materials:

<http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/ehc/HiddenCollsWhitePaperJun6.pdf>