Special collections did not emerge at some singular point in library history, and there was not an overarching thought process behind their creation. In this essay, special collections are defined as departments, libraries, historical societies, or similar settings in which rare books, other rare print materials, manuscripts, and sometimes film and photographs are held. This is important to note since any non-standard library, such as a corporate library, could potentially be referred to as a special collections library.

To put it simply, rare book and manuscript departments and libraries grew out of necessity. Special collections find their roots in America at the end of the 19th century, as noted by William Joyce in his 1988 article concerning special collections in American research libraries. Though today special collections can be found in public libraries or in independent institutions, special collections in the United States developed first in the university library system. As university library systems changed and grew, special collections began to take shape and acquire meaning. The first separate university library in the United States was not built until 1840 at the University of South Carolina. Many others followed, and library systems became increasingly complex.

The special collection was often initially established to provide protection to rare or expensive items within the university’s growing print collection. The segregation of rare books away from other items in the library system occurred in the 1890s at Yale University, and many

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2 Ibid, 21.
other universities, including Princeton and Columbia, followed suit for a variety of reasons.\textsuperscript{3}

Some of these rare book collections were established through gifts by donors, oftentimes alumni, whose book collections had been established due in part to the increasing popularity and status associated with book collecting. By the 1930’s ‘treasure rooms’ and rare book reading rooms were in existence in many university libraries. These early iterations of special collections were very focused on rare books, and had not yet begun to collect the wide array of materials we expect in special collections today.\textsuperscript{4}

When special collections departments first came into being, they were often elitist institutions and were generally run by men. Access to the collections was limited, as were outreach efforts, and the librarians’ time was spent building collections. By the 1980’s, the practices of special collections had changed substantially. There had been a shift towards collection management and away from collection building. This was due to a variety of factors, but two intermingled reasons were the inflation in prices in the book trade and the shrinking budget of libraries. By this time, there had also been significant changes in access to collections, and outreach efforts by special collections departments were increasing. As noted in a 1987 Library Trends article written by Daniel Traister, special collections had become much less exclusionary and sought to welcome in a wider audience than ever before.\textsuperscript{5} This was the case in the 1980’s, and the trend has only continued in the last two and a half decades. Today more than ever, special collections seek to bring in a wider audience and engage the public.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, 24.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
Through reviewing current literature and looking back at literature from the 1980’s and before, we can see the trend of the opening up of the special collection. Certainly everyone in the field has not wholeheartedly embraced this trend, and many institutions choose to maintain their insular practices, but, in general, special collections are more open today than at any other point in history. How and why special collections got to where they are today is the result of many factors. One such factor is the explosion in popularity of higher education in the United States. Special collections have traditionally served an educated class, and, as such, the opening of the special collection has coincided with the opening up of higher education. In 1945, only 15% of high school graduates went on to pursue higher education; by the 1960’s this had jumped to 40%, and in 2011 over 68% of high school graduates were enrolled in a college or university program. Graduate school enrollments have similarly grown, increasing the student body to be served by the special collections department or library.

Two other related factors that have contributed to the need to open up special collections are the assessment and funding of the special collections library. Today, universities, and by extension their libraries, and other cultural institutions that may support a special collections department are strapped for funds. This has led to the close scrutiny of many items on the budget. In order to understand the worth of something, it must be assessed. In the library world assessment generally comes in the form of circulation figures or patron counts. These metrics put special collections at a distinct disadvantage as their collections generally do not circulate, and they do not often attract the general studier or inquisitive wanderer as their policies and

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atmosphere, even in the most liberal institutions, do not offer an environment of comfort and ease.\(^8\) For example, a student or faculty member may wander into the university library today to browse the shelves, or get a coffee and study; both of these activities are not possible in most special collections libraries.

The university library, or public library, is a catch-all space today, while the special collection is, by nature, specialized. To bolster usage numbers and receive favorable assessments, and to continue to receive funding and support, special collections need people walking through their doors or otherwise using their resources.\(^9\) Today more than ever before, special collections libraries need their public; this need has spurred on the creation of increasingly large and creative outreach programs. Though special collections are more open than ever before, they are still the guarded, conservative bastions within the library system. A culture of learning and outreach is percolating, but still has some way to go. Special collections are moving towards inclusiveness, however, and, as many suggest, it is their duty to do so. “If special collections are billing themselves as ‘custodians of culture,’ they have an ethical obligation to make their collections accessible to any who are interested.”\(^{10}\)


\(^9\) Ibid, 89.

\(^{10}\) Michelle Visser, “Inviting in the Rabble: Changing Approaches to Public Services and Access in Special Collections,” *Public Services Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2003): 38.
Bibliography


Additional Resources
