

# A Holistic Review of Special Collections

## Executive Summary

The Rutgers University Libraries have thirteen special and/or archival collections located in seven different libraries across the library system: Art Library; East Asian Library (Archibald S. Alexander Library); History of Medicine in New Jersey (George F. Smith Library); Institute of Jazz Studies (John Cotton Dana Library); Paul Robeson Library; Performing Arts Library (Mabel Smith Douglass Library); Special Collections and Archives: Archives, Camoes, Maps, Newark Collection, Seminar Room, Special Collections Room (John Cotton Dana Library); and Special Collections and University Archives (Archibald S. Alexander Library). Special Collections and University Archives, the largest collection, has 150,000 printed volumes and an equally large number of items in other formats; while the Performing Arts Library, probably the smallest collection, has 50 printed volumes and 250 audio materials.

During academic year 2015-16, conversations were held with librarians responsible for each collection, with the exception of the Institute of Jazz Studies and Special Collections and University Archives, and the managers of all collections completed a survey modeled after one developed by OCLC[[1]](#footnote-1).

Although our collections are distinctive, most special collections and archives at Rutgers are fairly traditional. All collect printed volumes; and most collect archives, manuscripts, visual and audio materials, and artifacts. Few are collecting cartographic, moving image, and digitized materials; and only two are collecting born-digital materials, in a limited way.

Special collections and archives at Rutgers are universally needy for more and improved space and better support for acquiring, organizing, and preserving collections. Five collections reported space for growth as an imminent or current problem. One or more of our special collections and archives are losing ground in their preservation program. The most ground is being lost when it comes to temperature/humidity control. Conservation has been handled primarily by simple in-house repairs and some digitization projects. Only three special collections have permanent faculty and/or staff positions, and only one has a full-time conservator. At other locations, special collections are managed on a part-time basis by a professional librarian, each of which has many other duties.

The majority (85%) of the printed volumes in our various special collections and archives have online catalog records. Nearly 15% of the printed volumes are not discoverable online. The situation is worse for all other formats.

When reporting on the number of onsite visits by users over the past year, survey responses range from 2,500 for Special Collections and University Archives to two for the Performing Arts Library. Most special collections and archives do not have separate reading rooms where they can tally traffic, or oversee collection use.

Special collections and archives vary in the types of services that are available. For example, the majority of, but not all, collections and archives permit use of uncataloged and/or unprocessed materials. Interlibrary loan of printed volumes is allowed by four out of eight special collections and archives, and two allow interlibrary loan of materials in other formats. Five out of eight respondents indicated that the use of digital cameras in the reading room by users for copying collection materials is allowed. Of the four special collections and archives that offer a digital scanning service, three provide scans at no charge while one charges.

The Rutgers Community Repository (RUcore) is well suited to providing stable digital surrogates and replacements for special collections and archives resources. There is potential for taking advantage of RUcore much more than is being done at present. For example, tools and services that enable faculty to work with students on digital humanities projects could be expanded for use of special collections and archives resources. A key advantage to use of RUcore is for preservation – either as surrogates for use of the originals or as insurance in case of a disaster. EAD finding aids in RUcore can be linked to digital representations of the described materials.

Of the four collections that make archival finding aids Internet accessible on a local website, only two have made them available to web crawlers for use by search engines. Only one responded that finding aids are contributed to ArchivesGrid or a consortium database or catalog, and only one indicated that their finding aids will soon be in RUcore.

Five collections indicate that responsibility for management and preservation of born–digital archive materials has not yet been addressed. The Institute of Jazz Studies indicates that the responsibility resides with RUcore and the Institute together.

A strategic plan for digitization of our special collections and archives is needed. We have excellent special collections and archives personnel, who are moving forward slowly with the digital; but they are hampered by our not having a unified vision for, or the unified will to, make our treasures known. Only four collections have completed one or more digitization projects. Special collections staff in the various locations are involved in digitization projects primarily for project management and digital image production. They also at times work on selection of materials and cataloging/metadata creation.

The various special collections and archives in the Rutgers University Libraries that are comprised of our rare, unique, and specialized resources exist as dispersed treasuries. We have no organizational mechanism for personnel to work across collections either to share solutions and processes or to articulate effectively common problems. Different services are offered, and different practices followed. Scopes for collecting have at times been dependent on individual interests and are not currently being developed. A book that is in an X collection at one library may be in the stacks at that same library or at one or more other Rutgers libraries.

It is time to rethink our special collections and archives work. We should seriously consider consolidating collections in New Brunswick and developing stronger relationships between and among our special collections and archives and the rest of the Rutgers University Libraries. It is tempting to focus on either the analog or the digital; but we need to do both, and do them now. A resource with a digital surrogate still needs to be acknowledged somewhere and preserved, and resources with digital surrogates will more widely announce our treasures.

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1. Taking Our Pulse: The OCLC Research Survey of Special Collections and Archives, by Jackie M. Dooley and Katherine Luce. OCLC Research, 2010*.* Reviewed 6/1/16: www.**oclc**.org/research/publications/library/2010/2010-11.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)