

# **Competency Guidelines for Rare Books and Special Collections Professionals**

## **1. Understanding Special Collections, their Context, and the Purpose of the Competencies**

### *Introduction*

Libraries are the guardians of cultural memory and the preservers of cultural heritage. Libraries are also the catalysts for cultural change. Within larger libraries and as stand-alone repositories, special collections libraries are the specific sites where documentary and cultural heritage is preserved. Not only the information content of these handwritten works, printed texts, works on paper, audio-visual materials and artifacts deserves preservation, but also the objects themselves because of their historical and cultural significance. It is these collections that lie at the core of special collections librarianship. The collections mentioned in this document refer to the various cultural objects collected by libraries and institutions, regardless of format.

### *Purpose*

This document outlines the competencies that were developed as a guide for all library professionals who work with special collections materials, both analog and digital.

These guidelines provide direction and focus for special collections professionals to facilitate their own career development, as well as to manage their special collections in line with their institutional policies and user needs.

It is hoped that the guidelines can serve as a basis on which training programs can be developed to ensure special collections professionals develop core competencies relevant to their continuing professional development. The document also delineates the ethical framework within which special collections professionals are to perform their professional duties to uphold their positions as the trusted stewards of cultural heritage materials.

### *Scope*

It is understood that special collections professionals need to be familiar with their own institutional policies, practices and processes as well as have an overall understanding of various disciplines and subjects beyond general library knowledge, including emerging best practices worldwide and other related international guidelines.

As this is a document that recommends the skill sets and knowledge that a special collections professional need to acquire for their professional development and proper management of their special collections, it does not cover best practices or SOPs which are most likely institution specific.

It is, nevertheless, recommended that this document be read together with other relevant IFLA guidelines and policies that are listed in the bibliography.

## ***Target Audience***

These guidelines have been written for special collections professionals—be they rare book librarians, archivists, conservators or staff members—who are the stewards given the responsibility for the care and safe-keeping of these objects. The guidelines should also be useful for the managers of special collections professionals, and students aspiring to work in special collections. Special collections professionals accept these cultural materials as worth preserving, whether in analog or digital format, and this acceptance often will transcend the professional obligations to meet the immediate needs of current users. Therefore, special collections professionals must understand, respect and balance the needs of the objects in their collections while recognizing and respecting the needs of the users.

The IFLA Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) Standing Committee does not assume a single person will be expert in all of these competencies. Nor does the committee assume the full list of lifecycle stages and tasks will be relevant for every institution.

## ***Background***

*What are Rare Books, Archival Collections, Manuscript Collections, Special Collections, and Special Collections Libraries?*

The term ***rare book*** is a complex one, and one that is not easily defined. The concept originated not with educational or cultural institutions but with western book collectors and the rise of the antiquarian book trade in the seventeenth century. Early Dutch book dealers and collectors were the first to coin the term *rari libri* as evidenced by a sales catalogue from Delft dating to 1609.<sup>1</sup> The phrase was then adopted by German book dealers and later by French and British tradesmen to also describe certain books in their sale catalogues. It was a deceptive but effective advertising practice used by the dealers to sell books. The dealers provided no rationalization nor criteria for this unique label, and often sold contemporary editions alongside earlier works and identified all as rare books. It was simply a fabrication on the part of the dealers to make some of their wares decidedly more desirable and usually more expensive for the buyers.

In the last two hundred years, the field of rare book librarianship has evolved as has the definition of a rare book. In western libraries, there are several generally agreed upon factors which go towards determining whether a book is rare: its rarity (because few copies were printed or few survived); its condition (pristine, worn or soiled); its age (manuscript, proto-printing, incunables, or modern); format (fine printing) or copy-specific features such as bindings or ownership inscriptions. Rare books are also expected to hold historical, cultural, intellectual or monetary value, although ideas about what constitute these values have changed over time and may vary from secular, academic or religious institutions and from one country to another country.

Special collections libraries, like all libraries, have space, budgetary, staffing, policies, or other types of constraints that prohibit them from collecting every book, archival collection or cultural heritage item. In order to fulfill their missions to their home institutions, governing boards or government agencies, special collections libraries usually have collection development policies which outline the process of building collections over time within a set budget, based on assessments and the ongoing research of the needs of the libraries' users. For special collections libraries, the selection

criteria for rare books are often more specific and exclusionary than the selection guidelines for general library collections.

In this set of competencies, the term *rare book* is used to characterize a book based on any one or combinations of the following six broadly defined criteria<sup>2</sup>: 1) market value; 2) rarity and scarcity; 3) date and place of publication; 4) physical and intrinsic characteristics; 5) bibliographic and research value (historical, cultural or intellectual interest; and 6) condition (see Appendix 1). These six criteria should be used to assist special collections professionals in the determination, selection and identification of rare books in order to support their collection development decisions. The number of criteria and the type of selection criteria will differ from each institution. For some institutions, one criterion may be sufficient whereas for others two or more criteria may be necessary for selection. Perhaps most importantly, these criteria provide a common framework from which special collections professionals can use to build, support and maintain their collections.

The terms *archival collections* and *manuscript collections* refer to historically valuable unique, unpublished materials created and accumulated for their own purposes by an organization, individual, or family and preserved with other records from the same creator that document the same activities. Materials of historical interest may be collected over time by an institution's own archives or acquired as a collection of organizational records or personal papers by an unrelated collecting organization, such as a special collections library. Examples of archival materials might include official correspondence, account books, agreements, and documentation of meetings and special events. Examples of personal papers might include private correspondence, diaries or journals, working papers such as drafts of a book in an author's papers, and a wide variety of other materials that an individual creates or receives in the course of his or her activities. The word manuscript implies handwritten and unpublished documents, but many recent personal papers in special collections will also contain unique materials produced by typewriter or personal computer.

The term *special collections* refers to a collection or collections of materials such as incunabula, rare books, printed books, manuscripts, archival records and materials, ephemera, photographs, prints, maps and other graphic works; audio-visual material in all formats; born-digital and digitized media; art objects and three-dimensional (3-D) objects<sup>3</sup> deemed irreplaceable or considered to be unusually rare and invaluable. The selection criteria for these materials are comparable to that used for rare books. Special collections are usually managed separately from general library collections because their preservation needs and the methods of providing access are different from the circulating book collections that make up most library holdings. Special collections are often housed in secure and environmentally controlled locations.

The phrase *special collections library* is used to encompass rare book, manuscript, archival or other types of special collections housed together as a distinct unit. Usually, special collections libraries are located in or associated with a home library or institution. They are staffed with skilled and trained professionals who are responsible for managing the collections. Special collections libraries often invoke stricter rules for the use and access of their collections. They have secure

and monitored facilities with climate-controlled environments to preserve and protect the collections.<sup>4</sup>

The names or titles for these special collections libraries will vary depending on language, cultural history, and institutional organization. Examples of such libraries include:

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- Biblioteca Palácio Nacional de Mafra (Mafra Palace Library)
- The Cultural Heritage Collections (University College Dublin)
- Les Collections de la Réserve des livres rares (Bibliothèque nationale de France)
- Alte und seltene Drucke (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek)
- Livros raros e coleção de manuscritos (Biblioteca nacional de Portugal)
- The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library (Yale University)
- Sezione Archivio Storico (Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna)
- Special Collections and Archives (Southern Methodist University)
- Coleção Memória da Biblioteconomia-FBN/UNIRIO (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)
- Colección Especial Maestro Luis Iglesias (Universidad Nacional de Luján, Buenos Aires, Argentina)
- Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Città del Vaticano).

However, it is not unusual for special collections libraries to exist as personal or family libraries (e.g., The Brenthurst Library, South Africa), stand-alone institutions (e.g., *The Casa de la Literatura Peruana*, Peru), in museums (e.g., The Smithsonian Libraries), or as private research organizations (e.g., The Library of the General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen, United States).

#### *How Could These Competencies Be Used?*

These competencies may be useful for--but are not limited to--all types and levels of managers and staff, special collections professionals, educators, and individuals interested in special collections librarianship careers. Managers and staff can use these competencies to assist with the recruitment of new employees, the creation of job descriptions, to provide guidance for non-expert custodians of special collections, or to advocate for qualified staff in their libraries. These competencies can also be used by special collections professionals to assess the skills and training needs of present staff, to improve practices within their organization, or as a guide to help with individual professional formation or development. Library and information schools can use the competencies to assess their curricula and pedagogical programs in relation to current trends or future needs. Library school students can use the competencies as a general overview of the field of special collections librarianship and the skill sets required to work in it.

As the library profession increasingly focuses on content or information, regardless of format, there is a need to ensure that those responsible for the preservation, description, and access of the physical and virtual objects identified as cultural heritage materials understand the significance of such objects and are qualified to care for them. One irrevocable tenet in special collections librarianship is the need for professionals to have an intimate connection to their collections and their context. Examples of such contexts include the general historical and cultural background of objects or collections and the history and provenance of the collections themselves, the knowledge

for their access, discoverability, handling, treatment, storage and preservation, and the knowledge of current professional standards, guidelines, and best practices concerning the objects or collections under their stewardship.

The competencies set forth here do not focus entirely on professional formation nor do they create an unachievable exemplar of the special collections professional, but rather they are to serve as guidelines for the types of knowledge and expertise expected of professionals working with rare books and special collections at various stages of the items' lifecycles. The IFLA RBSC model aligns with the competencies guidelines recently adopted by the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) for special collections professionals.<sup>5</sup> The IFLA RBSC model differs, however, as it is international in scope and recognizes the global diversity of routes into special collections librarianship, with some countries and sectors emphasizing scholarly expertise while others emphasizing general professional qualifications. The IFLA RBSC competencies model describes best practices and explains the necessary skills required, but it also allows for countries, sectors and regions to develop their own more focused and detailed competency guidelines reflecting specific requirements and practices.