
CULLINGFORD, A. *The special collections handbook*. London: Facet Publishing, 2011.

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This handbook arrives at an opportune time. New technologies are re-shaping the ways that special collections are used, while perspectives on user services are shifting with the development of new audiences, behaviours, and expectations. At the same time, traditional skills, such as cataloguing and collections care, remain as relevant as ever. This handbook is an admirable and very successful attempt to guide the reader through the various aspects of working with and managing special collections in this challenging and exciting environment. Reflecting the diversity of contemporary special collections, the handbook discusses the management and description of a wide array of information formats and media. Although especially useful for those who are relatively new to working with special collections, this work will be useful for anyone who has an interest in the subject – including seasoned professionals, library administrators, librarianship students, conservators, and archivists.

The handbook is divided into ten chapters. Early chapters address the more ‘traditional’ skills associated with special collections librarianship, such as cataloguing and collection development. These sections should be extremely useful for practitioners who are new to working with special collections; whether they are working in a dedicated special collections repository, or if they are working in a non-specialist institution that is trying to get to grips with its special collections. There is plenty of practical advice here about how to understand, preserve and describe the range of special collections material. Note, however, that this handbook should be used as a stepping-stone to more in-depth resources, such as DCRM(B), rather than as a one-stop-shop for everything you need to know about special collections cataloguing. These chapters will serve as an excellent primer for library and archive students who need an introduction to the basics of special collections management. While much of the material in these first chapters will be familiar to experienced special collections librarians, it is laid out in such a clear way that it will nevertheless prove to be an invaluable reference tool.

Later chapters tackle areas that are emphasized much more today than they were in the past. For example, while user services have always been a feature of special collections, they have grown in importance in recent decades (as this book makes clear). Every aspect of a user’s interaction with special collections can be dissected and evaluated in pursuit of the best experience. The chapter is full of practical suggestions on everything from how to organize and invigilate the reading room, to how to arrange a fetching service, or manage group visits.

The final chapters contain a wealth of context and ideas regarding issues such as marketing, advocacy, and audience development. These sections do a great job of explaining subjects that can sometimes sound alien and even threatening. Reading these chapters should be enough to make anyone feel confident about communicating with marketing or communications staff, and understanding their thinking and concerns. For example, the author explains why audience

development is more important (and easier) than it has ever been for special collections; and why it is relevant for university special collections as well as for public libraries. With the informational content of works becoming ever more accessible via digital technologies, the coming years will witness a growing need to attract new audiences to use material in new ways. All special collections librarians can benefit from reading these chapters.

While highlighting the pressures on, and threats to, special collections care and services, the author continuously emphasizes that there are opportunities as well, and suggests ways to take advantage of these. Over the course of this handbook, the author highlights the unique strengths of special collections and suggests strategies to articulate these to stakeholders and funders. The content is presented in a suitably concise and clear fashion, and there are plentiful references that provide pointers to extensive further reading around each topic. The structure of each chapter is clear, and it is obvious that the handbook is the product of a great deal of care and research. It is a very valuable work that should help shape best practice in working with special collections of all types and sizes.

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