

“Forging the Future of Special Collections.”

Edited by Melissa A. Hubbard, Robert H. Jackson, and Arnold Hirshon. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2016. 202 pages, paperback, ISBN: 978-08389-1386-4. Members - \$85.00, Non-Members - \$76.50.

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The title *Forging the Future of Special Collections* certainly grabs your attention, conjuring up pictures of battles or quests. The actual history of this book, however, can be traced back to a colloquium on special collections called “Acknowledging the Past, Forging the Future” held in October 2014 at the Kelvin Smith Library of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. The papers presented at the colloquium were expanded and have been included in this volume. The book is split into three sections: Communities; the Enduring Object; and From Periphery to Center. Although there are many useful and interesting topics about current and future endeavors in special collections in this volume, a few chapters especially stood out.

*Part 1: Communities*, contemplates how traditional relationships among special collections and related professionals are changing. Topics covered include books and special collections as objects; collection development and donor relations; collecting communities; auction houses; and digital realities. Chapter 2 by Jim Kuhn argues, “Policy statements are only as effective as implemented” (page 14). It also stresses that physical copies with unique customizations, like notations in the margins, make the case to keep originals, rather than solely relying on digital reproductions.

Communities have grown between book printing, auction houses, and donors – often materials end up in special collections because of these relationships. Getting to know the community on an almost individual level builds trust. This is why it is so important to make connections with our communities to ensure we are working towards

gathering information on all people and events. We cannot just write it in our policies - we must act on them.

I found Chapter 4 on Collecting Communities by Melissa A. Hubbard to be the strongest of the first section. She states, "The future of special collections is community" (Page 37). Joining with the community that created the collection and continuing that relationship ensures that the materials stay connected to their original purpose and use. She continues:

"The role of the special collections librarian is to enable a meaningful, ongoing dialogue with collections at its core. Such collections present a rich opportunity to position special collections librarians and archivists as leaders who connect our research institutions to local interests, and thereby describe and document our value." (Page 44)

*Part 2: The Enduring Object*, looks further at rare books and the use of special collections; the changing nature of special collections; booksellers; and digital scholarship. It is because of digital scholarship that we collect materials differently now than we have in the past, as well as how patrons use the materials in question. While these topics are certainly interesting reads, and from a variety of perspectives, I took the least amount of notes. As someone who has been in the field for fifteen years (and counting), I let the topics wash over me and compared the topics to tasks in which I have been involved in the past.

I appreciated the sentiment by Paul Ruxin in Chapter 8 that "Cataloging previously unfindable material and digitizing previously untouchable, fragile paper or

parchment are the equivalents of acquiring something new” (Page 69); and Ken Lopez in Chapter 12 writing:

“...Archives are mosaics. Each piece within the archive represents a single piece of the mosaic. Once combined, they begin to create a picture that is understandable and conveys some meaning and information. Archives are never absolutely complete, but still they create a picture that can't be assembled otherwise.” (Page 97)

To me this sounds like a combination of togetherness, community and access to collections, which flows into the final part of the book.

The section of the book that spoke to me the most, despite being the shortest with only four chapters, is *Part 3: From Periphery to Center*, focusing on access to collections. The chapter makes the argument for special collections as the epicenter; teaching with special collections; integrating special collections into every teaching opportunity; and how to take our work into the future.

Although it may seem obvious, making the special collections part of the ‘everyday’ helps to liberate this idea of archives as treasures, never touched and put behind glass or on a pedestal. Jay Satterfield in Chapter 14 specifies:

“We want students to see that an item is located in special collections and think “no big deal,” and head over to use it. There should not be any hassles involved. At the same time, we want them to absolutely love the experience. We want mundane boredom punctuated with an exquisite and transcendent moment.”  
(Page 117)

The subsequent chapter by Christoph Irmscher builds on this by advocating for the breaking down of walls between teaching and research, and in Chapter 16, Sarah Thomas supports that no library or special collection accept a new collection without the commitment to process the collection quickly. This certainly aligns with many current philosophies as well as the OCLC working group on Collection Building and Operational Impacts.<sup>1</sup> The final chapter by Mark Dimunation details the lessons learned as well as acknowledges the stark reality that we will continue to be expected to do more with less in this profession. The future is coming, and in certain cases is already here. The word *forge* can mean: “To form or make, especially through concentrated effort.” A concentrated effort will be required from all of us, but following Mark’s example, I echo his sentiments about the future: Bring it on!

We do not have the ability to predict the future; “the only thing we can do is point to the constants and imagine how they will translate in a new environment” (Page 183). The book does not always offer specifics on going into the future, but it at least acknowledges the past and present place we are at in the profession. Overall, it is a positive and uplifting book that looks towards ways to create new connections and grow our communities. Although some chapters spoke to me more than they spoke to others, I think that is the beauty of this volume - there really is something for everyone in this easy to digest, enjoyable book.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see: <https://www.oclc.org/research/partnership/working-groups/collection-building-operational-impacts.html>.