



## *Rare Books and Special Collections Group*

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### **Skills of a Rare Books and Special Collections Librarian:**

#### **Framework agreed by Group Committee, 1 August 2007.**

Whatever kind of library they work in, librarians who have responsibility for rare book and special collections – whether on a full- or part-time basis – require both a wide range of skills (some specialist but others more generic) and also knowledge of the collections that they curate. Increasingly, especially in universities, librarians are expected to accept responsibility for archives and museum objects as well as for libraries, and should be prepared to acquire the relevant skills and understanding.

Many of the skills will be needed from the start when a librarian joins an institution; others will follow in due course, as the librarian acquires more responsibility. They include the following areas (the order is not significant):

- **historical bibliography** and understanding the characteristics of a wide range of formats, such as early and modern rare books, manuscripts, photographs, prints, bindings and other artifacts (for example, printing types)
- **preservation issues** and practical knowledge relating to environmental control and the safe handling of material being stored, consulted, displayed, photocopied, etc.
- other **collection management issues**, for example, providing a secure environment for storage and consultation, insurance, loans in/out
- **cataloguing of rare book and special collections**: describing the library's collections and providing access to them through catalogues, and also having an understanding of national and international union and other catalogues as a means of assessing rarity and promoting the library's holdings (for example, knowing how to derive maximum benefit from the English Short Title Catalogue)
- **library management systems**: for example, rare book and special collections librarians need to have enough knowledge to be able to discuss enhanced retrieval functionality (provenance information, genre indexing, etc.) that users of their material can benefit from
- **reference work**, including the increasingly wide range of digital resources
- methods for **promoting the collections**, ranging from large-scale digitisation projects to setting out a small selection of items for a visiting group or single potential benefactor. Rare book and special collections librarians benefit from some technical competence in the basics of the main promotional tools (e.g. web pages, displays, and publications), and in smaller institutions librarians who lack the support of technical staff may need many more practical skills (for example, the ability to mount web pages)

- the **basics of market research** and how to use the results of that research
- **presentations** (with the use of aids such as PowerPoint) to a wide range of audiences (ranging from funding committees to schoolchildren) both in the library and responding to requests to speak in a variety of external locations (for example, at meetings of local societies)
- **writing**, for both hard-copy and web publications, again suited to a range of audiences
- **fund-raising**, both from philanthropic sources and – through grant applications – from statutory funding bodies
- **project planning and management**
- **people management** of all kinds, covering both employed staff (permanent and temporary) and volunteers
- **legislation and standards**, for example, disability-related legislation, accessibility of websites, storage and exhibition of archival documents (BS5454), copyright legislation
- **intellectual property rights**

Some of the more specialist skills are covered by options in some [undergraduate/post-graduate courses for information professionals](#), but training is not widely available. The CILIP Rare Books and Special Collections Group's "Education, training and professional development" strategy is directed at providing opportunities (at its annual study conference and other events) to help its members to acquire many of the more specialist skills.

But in addition to these skills the rare books and special collections librarian also requires knowledge of

- the **collections** that he/she looks after in order to identify items to meet specified needs: for example, what would be appropriate exhibits for anniversaries, special occasions, special visitors, etc., or what would provide worthwhile content for digitisation projects, including collaborative projects
- the **subject areas** of the collections to help interpret them and also to facilitate appreciation of the research value of items in the collections
- languages, to help manage and research the collections and also to assist users (for example, increasingly users come without any Latin)
- **related collections** of similar material in other libraries, to help appreciate the particular strengths of ones own collections and the possibilities for collaboration

In addition, in libraries with collections that attract post-graduate academic researchers it is very useful for librarians themselves to have academic interests and an understanding of the requirements of research at this level.

Starting salaries should reflect adequately the range of skills and knowledge initially required for a post with responsibility for rare books and special collections. Since the greater part of such skills and knowledge tends to be developed on the job only over a period of many years, it is also important that salary scales should make provision for those in post to be rewarded for increasing their skills and knowledge.