Showcasing Treasure: Creating Access to Special Collections

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Introducing students and patrons to the concept of Special Collections libraries is always an exciting task. They assume that one library is like another until the discussion turns to the use of primary resources. Students may have learned, at one time, the basic definition of a primary document but the definition greatly expands as they learn about some of the following items:

- Photographs
- Prints
- Sheet Music
- Ephemera
- Flour Bags
- Posters
- Broadsides
- Self-Published Materials
- Matchbooks
- Oversized Political Signs
- Sale Catalogs
- Microforms
- Scrapbooks
- Audio/Visual Materials
- Incunabula
- Appliance Guides
- Press and Artists’ Books
- Sumerian Tablets
All of these materials, they quickly observe, cover a broad range of topics, formats, and time and may be unusual in both structure and content. Access also differs from standard library materials, as special collections items are housed in secure, monitored environments with limited availability.

For the librarian or museum professional, these special collections form the core of an institution and are, in part, the consequence of relationship building and collecting within the broader community. Moreover, special collections are magnets, as they draw benefactors and scholars alike. It is a pleasure to showcase special collections resources, as they are unplowed fields in the land of research. Furthermore, their use helps ensure a bright outlook for the future of academic libraries.

After patrons learn about the wealth of new research opportunities, their questions turn to access. Even though personnel encourage and facilitate on-site use of physical collections, the approach of the modern researcher now predominantly focuses on electronic access. Researchers and students “say that if they can’t find something on the Internet, then it doesn’t exist at all. Regrettably, students are reluctant to enter a library or to work through manuscripts in the archives despite the fact that a staggering amount is not available online.” This evolution in humanities scholarship prompted our personnel to ask critical questions about how effectively the Department of Special Collections meets the research needs of scholars, and about how to sustain and strengthen research by opening the doors to previously “hidden” materials. Walters and Skinner note that such libraries must be “repositioned as vibrant knowledge branches that reach throughout their campuses…. [and the world.]”

For us, creation of a “vibrant knowledge branch” of the university library system came by increasing access to, and exposure of our collections. We had accomplished this in traditional ways via conventional systems: digital finding aids, lectures, the website, media contact, and library faculty publications. Adding social media enabled us to foster relationships throughout the community and beyond, and by using our institutional repository, TopScholar, we have “virtually” opened the door to topics of regional significance and global interest.

Clifford Lynch describes institutional repositories (IRs) as “a set of services that a university offers to the members of its community for the management and dissemination of digital materials created by the institution and its community members.” Our IR documents the scholastic achievements and intellectual output of WKU faculty, staff and students. Moreover, since Manuscripts and Special Collections began digitizing and adding finding aids, primary sources and narrative content, the initial promises of the IR concept have greatly expanded. All of the finding aids for the Manuscripts Division have been added, but at present, this is only a sampling of what can be found in Special Collections. The University Archivist and librarians have taken the lead by cooperating with other department, such as technical services and/or cataloging. The University Archivist has also added audio, video, blogs, e-portfolios and other non-traditional materials that have been popular and widely used.

KenCat (Kentucky Catalog) is a further access portal, mainly for illustrative materials in Special Collections such as drawings, engravings, genealogical family trees, posters, ephemera, maps and photographs. In 2005, realizing that uncataloged materials were unbrowsable, vulnerable to theft, inaccessible to researchers who could not visit in person, or inaccessible due to dependence on staff for their institutional memory, we purchased the content management system (CMS), Past Perfect. The program allows us to process the material and get valuable cultural data out to researchers. Moreover, it produces a very useable, researcher-friendly digital presence for us.

Our library’s One-Search Catalog (Primo) serves as the central access point for rare books and printed materials housed in WKU’s Department of Special Collections. Through the creation of highly searchable content and rich metadata, the library catalog works to increase visibility, highlight hidden materials and improve overall access to our holdings. In order to maximize visibility of our collections, it is imperative that the catalog both reflect the contents of the collection and work to meet the specific needs of our library users. Special Collections houses a wide variety of rare and unique materials, ranging from limited edition books signed by the author, to self-published family histories printed and bound by the author. A book of this type may be the only copy known to exist. In cataloging these materials, we work to reflect details about the items and their contents to aid users engaging in research within our library. The catalog record must also compensate for many of the logistical challenges typical of research in special collections libraries; with the exception of genealogy and local history, most of our items are kept behind closed doors and users cannot physically browse the stacks and retrieve items from the shelves. Further, as library users increasingly access our online catalog from across campus or satellite campuses or even across the world, the catalog record must accurately reflect what is in our collection, so that users know what is available before visiting the library. In order to maximize the visibility of our collections through creative cataloging practices, we implement a two-pronged approach: first, accurately describing the contents of our collection; and second, organizing our library catalog and collection in ways that meet users where they are in the research process. The following paragraphs describe ways we use the catalog record to highlight Special Collections materials and open doors to research.

(1) Notes: added names and relationships. Many researchers, especially local historians, genealogists, or casual users hoping to find details about their family history, may not find the information they seek in an item’s title; or, oftentimes the information is in a resource whose original purpose was vastly different from how it is being used today. For this reason, we work to identify items and highlight pieces of information that might be particularly helpful to our users. One example is the local family history title, The Adwells of the Barrens. As the title indicates, plenty of information can be found on the Adwell family in
Kentucky; however, this resource also contains information on an additional 57 family names, some of which might or might not be as common as the Adwell name (Dreisbach Family, Mikul Family, Pinotti family, Poynter family, Shugar family, and so on). By creating access points for each of these family names, we increase the item’s visibility within the catalog record, which could potentially help users find a reference source they otherwise might miss. Added names and relationships also help to identify those involved in the production of research materials, such as printer, photographer, illustrator, composer, or compiler. A case in point was the researcher seeking information on an illustrator; having this information noted saved the researcher many hours of searching.

(2) Local and copy specific notes. We add local and copy specific notes to the catalog record to indicate bits of information that otherwise might not be readily apparent, or that are specific to our library’s copy and cannot be found in similar editions in other libraries. For example, a record for a published collection of short stories might contain a local note that it is the first appearance of a work by a particular Kentucky author. Or, the catalog record might indicate if a copy of a book contains handwritten proof edits or commentary within the margins that might provide additional insight into the author’s creative process. Whenever a resource contains item-specific information that contributes to its rarity or research value, we add these notes to the catalog record to increase visibility to the researcher.

(3) Format and binding descriptions. These descriptions, when relevant and appropriate, can help the researcher looking for the physical characteristics of rare books and other research materials. For example, many of our 16th century printed works are still in their original vellum binding and contain folded maps or illustrations. Such information might help a researcher or a class instructor searching for early modern printing specimens. Another example is our recent discovery of approximately 200 miniature books covering a wide variety of genres and subject areas within our collection. By including format and binding information in the catalog record, and indicating that these books are miniatures, users can search specifically for miniature books. Finally, we use controlled vocabularies to provide uniformity within the catalog record, to ensure consistent application of the proper search terms.

Controlled vocabularies such as those provided by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL): Rare Books and Manuscript Section (RBMS) “provide standardize vocabularies for retrieving special collections materials by form, genre, or by various characteristics that are typically of interest to researchers and special collections librarians.” Through the creation of highly searchable content, rich metadata, and the use of controlled vocabularies, our cataloging practices work to highlight contents and characteristics of research materials, thus increasing discoverability and access for our library users.

In addition to knowing our collection and using the catalog record to increase access and visibility for our library users, we try to understand who will be using our collections and how the materials will be used, in order to meet the research needs of our patrons. The organization of the reading room’s browsing collection helps us accomplish this goal. This reference collection contains materials specifically related to genealogy and local history, and expands beyond Kentucky to cover portions of the Southeastern United States. As our library users often have very specific needs, the collection’s organization highlights certain high-interest areas. While materials are organized using the Library of Congress classification system, we adjust the cutter numbers to make the research process more intuitive and self-explanatory. For example, all Warren County, Kentucky death and cemetery records can be found on a shelf next to one another, regardless of author name. This minor adjustment to the catalog record could affect significantly the research process and the amount of time spent by a user researching these records.

Murtha Baca, of the Getty Research Institute, agrees that the process of integrating diverse information sources presents a continuing challenge, but one that can be met through some of the processes we have highlighted: “selecting and implementing the appropriate metadata schemas, controlled subject vocabularies and thesauri, metadata crosswalks, and information technologies.”

The Department of Special Collections focuses on our intended end-users, enabling us to provide the best service to the diverse patrons we serve: community groups, undergraduates, distance learners, traditional research scholars, and faculty and graduate students. All “librarians have rich opportunities to insert themselves into the evolving, increasingly digitally oriented research workflows of [researchers] through their existing and emergent expertise in information retrieval, digital curation, and facilitating the interoperability of resources for discovery and access.”

We encourage and facilitate the use of our valuable and unique resources for all, to have an impact on the propagation of new knowledge. We are partners with our researchers and must remember that “without productive engagement between people and collections, rare and unique materials – even if processed and cataloged – remain dormant. The individuals who teach, create, and publish using original sources bring library materials to new audiences and are well positioned to serve as powerful advocates for libraries and archives. Moreover, the librarians and archivists who ensure the physical safety and accessibility of collections need scholarly users’ support not only to build public awareness of collections, but also to help maintain an ongoing focus on the mission and wider significance of their own work.”

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