

Richard Saunders

Editor's Note

This issue's editorial reflection is sparked by the two articles selected for this issue of *RBM*. As a professional librarian I've worked in Carnegie classification R1, R2, and M2 institutions. As a practicing historian I've done site-specific research in academic libraries between St. Paul and Austin, from Berkeley to New Haven, and a lot of places in between. Over the past thirty years I've talked with hundreds of librarians and archivists in scores of different places, from local "treasure" rooms of small, isolated public libraries to the research rooms of the nation's largest institutions. As I've listened to the thumping heart of working libraries I am consistently impressed by the good graces of people from small places, and often frustrated by the sometimes inexplicably pedantic assumptions and requirements made by large research institutions. These articles have prompted me to reflect what *best practice* really means. I've concluded that on the whole, librarians have been far too easily impressed by what other librarians are doing. As a result librarians have failed to equate "best practice" with evidence-based practice.

Perhaps the root of the question lies in the age-old conundrum: how does one measure a measuring stick? Measurements are, by nature, mutual agreements because there is no naturally occurring inch. I'm coming to realize that in a quest for policy uniformity we may be doing ourselves a disservice. Are we too much alike to be "special" collections anymore? I don't have an answer but I do have some provocative thoughts on this point.

One may add virtually any item to a special collections, and for very good institutional reasons. That doesn't mean that the item is inherently valuable. So why does our discipline tacitly insist on the "best practice" premise that everything in special collections cannot be circulated beyond the reading room? Or that we all require the same suite of skills? Is there more than one standard at play? I can think of several possible reasons for material being added: comparative rarity and/or high intrinsic value are the low-hanging-fruit standards, but there are others as well: topic reflection of an institutional mission or collection focus, receipt as part of a larger gift that will be maintained as a unit (a book collection), and one can never minimize relational politics, where an item is accepted because a department or dean fears to offend a current or prospective donor. General reserve collections are a similar special collection, and yet we seem to be much more selective of the content, and favor use there.

That led my wandering mind to another question: I wonder if special collections librarians' eagerness to keep up with the Jones' Library has given some classes of institutions far more effect on the discipline than may be merited. Standards foster consistency between institutions, yes, but it is unlikely that there is really a "standard" special collections. If there were, then really nothing besides the collection contents would be special. As reflected in the Thomas article in this issue, after nearly thirty years of working in academic libraries I am becoming increasingly skeptical that large research institutions adequately represent the realities in which most academic librarians work. Oh, I understand the need for policy and procedure. It has made me wonder, however, whether the reason we have policies and procedure is to *facilitate* use, and perhaps less to preserve books as untouched objects which are never aged by handling. If the purpose for libraries is to foster scholarship and inquiry, then perhaps large ARL libraries might see the wisdom of adopting user-centric "best practices" from smaller, less well-staffed institutions.

Smaller institutions tend to be far more generous with their holdings, as well. I experienced a first-hand instance myself only last year. I was developing a class and wanted a good, sharp image of an egregiously racist illustration printed in a particularly rare book of nineteenth-century pseudoscience. Few copies existed in large research institutions and due to procedures, access requirements to those copies were rigid—in my opinion, unnecessarily rigid. Of the two libraries that did have it in their collection, neither was willing to follow my camera setting requirements for photographing the image. One was willing to allow me to photograph the volume if I travelled there to do so and with many other limiting requirements. In other words, I could get it their way or no way. On a whim I put in an ILL request. A small rural college simply pulled the book from their shelves, where it had been quietly for over 150 years, and sent it to me asking merely that I handle it carefully. If the fundamental purpose of a library is the extension of human knowledge, which was the best practice?

Now, the caveat to fostering an idealized kinder, gentler librarianship is the problem faced by any institution: the misuse of material by a small handful of unethical users. There are far too many rare-book thefts from inadequately sustained collections. Only one theft or misuse is required to heighten concern about everything else. But why is the most restrictive practices of the largest institutions the best practice? Part of the answer is because the library discipline has come to equate wealth and size with sophistication. Lynne Thomas's article invites us to consider just how adequately larger institutions reflect general experience—and therefore whether they should be the standards they have become.