

ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians

**Revision Approved by the ACRL Board of Directors
June 19, 2020**

(Originally Approved 2003)

Executive Summary

- Special collections practitioners have particular ethical duties and values that derive from the responsibility of caring for cultural property on behalf of the general public.
- Balancing the current and potential future needs of all stakeholders who are invested in the collections stewarded by practitioners is a central ethical concern.
- Relationships are at the center of ethical practice, including those between practitioners and users, donors, creators, vendors, colleagues, administrators, and other stakeholders. The RBMS commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion manifests in ethical practice.
- Practitioners maintain a high standard of behavior due to the significant cultural and monetary value of the materials held in special collections libraries.
- This Code of Ethics consists of three parts: 1) Preamble, which provides an overview of ethical considerations for special collections practitioners as well as definitions; 2) Statement of Values, which describes ethical practice in domains of work important to practitioners; 3) Commentary, which elaborates on the Statement of Values.

Preamble

Special collections practitioners share fundamental values with the entire library profession. They should be thoroughly familiar with the [ALA Code of Ethics](http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics)¹ and must adhere to the principles of fairness, freedom, professional excellence, and respect

¹ "ALA Code of Ethics," American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>.

for individual rights expressed therein.² Furthermore, practitioners have particular responsibilities and opportunities associated with caring for cultural property, preserving original artifacts, and supporting both community engagement and scholarship with primary research materials.

Relationships are at the center of ethical practice, including those between special collections practitioners and users, donors, creators, vendors, colleagues, administrators, and other stakeholders. Practitioners bear responsibility to all of these constituents, as well as to the general public and to the collections with which they work. RBMS “is committed to diversity in its membership, in rare books and special collections librarianship, and among users of rare books, manuscripts and special collections.”³ As stewards of the cultural record, practitioners also bear a responsibility to represent historically underrepresented and marginalized voices, recognizing that diversity is complex and intersectional, and that silences, gaps, and poor description resulting from historical biases have the potential to do great harm. Practitioners should strive to maintain mutually responsible relationships with the individuals and communities that produce the books, manuscripts, and other materials that comprise collections.

Certain stresses arise from the fact that special collections often have great monetary as well as documentary and aesthetic value. Therefore, a number of considerations relating to security and access come into play; special collections practitioners must also exercise extreme caution in situations that have the potential for them to profit personally from institutional activities. Practitioners control or significantly influence selection, acquisition, organization, description, preservation, and access to information. Furthermore, whether during acquisition or ongoing maintenance of collection material, practitioners do not willfully alter, manipulate, or destroy data or records to conceal facts or distort evidence. Practitioners document any actions that may cause changes to materials or potentially compromise the materials’ authenticity. The highest

² In addition to the ALA Code of Ethics, special collections practitioners are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the Society of American Archivists’ Core Values Statement and Code of Conduct, and to consider how it also applies to their work. “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics,” Society of American Archivists,

<https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>

³ “Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries, <http://rbms.info/about/#diversity>.

standards of behavior are necessary to maintain public trust in the institution and in its staff.

At times, ethical values conflict with practical constraints. There are also circumstances in which one ethical value may be in tension with another. When this occurs, special collections practitioners must bring their experience and judgment to bear on each case in order to arrive at the best solution. Practitioners also have a responsibility to center ethical practice in decision-making, resisting pressure to sacrifice values for the sake of pragmatism whenever possible. Assessment and other tools designed to improve institutional performance should incorporate ethical values. Practitioners are encouraged to engage in ongoing professional development and discourse about professional ethics in cultural heritage work.

While special collections practitioners should strive to engage in ethical conduct at all times, they can only act from within their own sphere of influence. They are not responsible for institutional decisions that they cannot control; however they are encouraged to speak out about ethical concerns at their institutions whenever it is safe to do so. RBMS supports strong protections for practitioners to share their views about workplace ethics, including academic freedom. Practitioners distinguish between personal convictions and professional duties, and do not allow personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of institutions or the provision of access to information resources.

Definitions:

Special collections practitioner: An employee of a special collections library or any library staff member whose duties involve work with special collections materials. The principles in this Code relate primarily to professional staff (typically librarians, curators, archivists, and conservators), but all library staff members --- including student workers, interns, and volunteers --- should be aware of the ethical values of the profession, and how these values manifest in practice. The abbreviated term “practitioner” is also used in this document.

Special collections library: A library, or an administrative unit (such as department) of a larger institution, devoted to collecting, organizing, preserving, and describing special collections materials and making them accessible. Such entities are also generally referred to as “the institution” in parts of this document.

Special collections materials: The entire range of textual, graphic, and artifactual primary source materials in both analog and digital formats, including printed books, ephemera, manuscripts, photographs, maps, artworks, audio-visual materials, archival materials, and other objects.

Vendor: An individual or institution that sells items or services to special collections libraries. The term “bookseller” is used in this document to specifically refer to antiquarian booksellers, while “vendor” incorporates booksellers as well as other types of service providers.

Statement of Values

Collection Access and Accessibility

Special collections practitioners demonstrate a proactive commitment to broad, equitable access to all materials under their stewardship, and constantly strive to improve collections access for all users.

Collection Description

Materials description is a subjective activity, and what constitutes appropriate description of materials varies with context and time. Recognizing that ideal description conditions do not exist and description should be responsive to both the circumstances in which it occurs and the materials it exposes, special collections practitioners balance their resources and priorities with the descriptive requirements of the materials in their care.

Collection Development

Special collections practitioners create publicly available and clear collection development policies that are sensitive to and begin to address historical gaps based on

intersections of identity. When making selection decisions, practitioners take into account the level of resources available to process, describe, preserve, maintain, and make materials available, as well as whether other institutions may be a better fit for a particular collection. Practitioners avoid conflicts of interest and the appearance thereof, both in their institutional role and in any personal collecting. Practitioners should attempt to return items in their collections to creators, previous owners, or their descendants if those items were obtained unethically in the past. Due to the variety of past collection development practices, practitioners should consider a policy regarding the return of collection items unethically obtained in the past.

Development and Donor Relations

Special collections practitioners who interact with donors have a dual imperative: to develop and maintain responsible relationships with donors, and to ensure responsible custody of materials and financial gifts by balancing donors' interests with institutional goals, priorities, and capacities.

Labor Practices and Professional Culture

Special collections practitioners encourage a diverse workforce by fostering inclusive workplace environments with regard to identity, culture, and professional background. Respect for the professional nature of the work should be apparent in recruitment, hiring, and professional development practices. Practitioners advocate for institutional support for necessary positions and for ongoing training for current practitioners. In recognition of the collaborative nature of their work, practitioners foster professional relationships internally and across institutions.

Outreach, Reference, Instruction, and Exhibitions

Special collections practitioners work to forge connections between collections and as diverse a community of users as possible, striving to find points of relevance that foster engagement at a multitude of levels. Through outreach efforts, they promote exploration of the spectrum of cultures, voices, and experiences documented in collections, while striving to ensure that all potential researchers and partners are valued.

They also support dialogue regarding issues of silence and power within the historical records in their collections.

Preservation and Security

Special collections practitioners acknowledge the security and preservation of collections to be a fundamental responsibility of stewardship, though human lives should always be valued above the collections themselves. They promote and implement measures to safeguard materials and ensure future access through appropriate policies, environments, procedures, and intellectual control.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Special collections practitioners have a responsibility to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of users, donors, record creators, record subjects, and vendors. When working with potentially sensitive information within collections, practitioners prioritize access while recognizing the need to respect confidentiality of some materials, including the possible use of time-delimited restrictions. Practitioners are transparent with donors and users about the potential legal limitations of any confidentiality promises.

Responsibility to Originators of Materials

Special collections practitioners maintain clear, honest, and open communication with the creators of materials about the roles that institutions and practitioners have played in the past and continue to play as stewards of the cultural record. Practitioners provide respectful and equitable service to all content creators and those represented in materials, while balancing their needs and desires with those of users.

Vendor Relations

Special collections practitioners communicate institutional needs and expectations to vendors in a clear and timely fashion. They also strive for impartiality in vendor relationships and refrain from accepting substantial gifts, loans, entertainment, or personal discounts.

Commentary

Collection Access and Accessibility

Users access special collections materials in a variety of physical and digital environments, and special collections practitioners must be informed of the relevant professional and legal standards that govern accessibility in these environments. So as not to put the burden of inquiry on users, it is incumbent upon practitioners to actively advertise available adaptive technologies and physical accommodations. Online materials — including digital collections, online exhibitions, finding aids, registration, and other forms — should be ADA compliant at minimum, and digitization of materials should be undertaken with the relevant assistive technologies in mind. When assessing digital access and promotion efforts, practitioners consider how for-profit partnerships restrict equitable access, and they avoid monetizing cultural heritage.

Access policies that include accommodations for disabled users should be the norm. The accessibility of facilities, such as reading room and other public spaces, classrooms, and exhibition/ event spaces, can be enhanced through the appropriate use of lighting, furniture, and signage. Renovations and building projects should actively incorporate universal design/ accessibility principles.

Collection Description

Special collections practitioners who provide descriptive access to their collections have the privilege and challenge of reflecting the nature and intellectual content of the materials in their care. All materials deserve careful and respectful description, especially collections that have been historically hidden or under-described, or that are produced by marginalized communities. While institutional priorities and resources greatly influence the level of description possible, practitioners strive to provide all collections with enough description to make the materials findable to users, while recognizing that not all materials require the same amount of description. Practitioners recognize that descriptive standards are the products of the social world in which they were created. Therefore, standards are not neutral, and practitioners should strive to foster responsive descriptive standards. Additionally, practitioners must consider their own perspectives and biases, and how these potentially affect their descriptive practice.

Collection Development

Collection development does not happen in a vacuum. Special collections practitioners control or significantly influence selection, acquisition, organization, preservation, and access to information. Collection development policies clearly document collecting goals. When made public, they state institutional priorities to booksellers, potential donors, users, and other contributors to the collections. Strong policies based upon organizational guidelines and all applicable state and federal regulations lay out both what institutions do and do not collect, and the methods by which materials are typically acquired, based upon organizational guidelines and all applicable state and federal regulations. Practitioners should be aware of and respectful of other institutions doing complementary work and should acknowledge and support that work whenever possible. As appropriate, collection development policies and practices should address historical gaps based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion or creed, socioeconomic class, disability, and other intersections of identity. Indefinitely-retained documentation of gifts, accessions, and de-accessioning choices demonstrates that selections are made in accordance with previously written policies and practices.

Due to the potential conflict of interest, monetary appraisal of incoming materials by practitioners is strictly prohibited in accordance with IRS regulations. Similarly, practitioners must not recommend any materials for purchase in which they have any undisclosed personal financial interest. Additionally, practitioners conduct their personal collecting in a manner that avoids impropriety or the appearance thereof. Personal collecting can add to a practitioner's understanding of a collecting area and of the special collections materials marketplace. While it should not be discouraged, practitioners should disclose such activity to their employer, especially when their collecting area coincides with that of the institution. When such coincidence occurs, the practitioners must not compete with the institution, must not build their own collection at the expense of the institution's, and must be diligent in distinguishing items acquired for the institution from items acquired for themselves.

Practitioners are encouraged to participate in and even initiate replevin processes when

it is determined that collection materials have been acquired unethically in the past. Depending on the circumstances, materials in such cases may be returned to the materials' creator, previous owners, or their descendants. A written policy regarding this matter is recommended.

Development and Donor Relations

Both materials and financial donors and special collections practitioners benefit from early and ongoing efforts to communicate honestly, thoughtfully, and clearly about each party's respective roles and responsibilities. This communication includes clarifying expectations by and for donors, and creating agreements that address institutional capacities and commitment to equitable access, copyright laws, and future uses of donations. Additionally, practitioners collaborate and communicate with development colleagues to maintain a shared understanding of how to pursue and develop donor relationships.

Special collections practitioners ensure responsible custody by being mindful of the institution's larger policies and missions; balancing donors' desires for gift restrictions with a professional commitment to equitable access; and having a clear concept of the institution's collection development philosophy, resources, and other priorities when considering the impact of a potential gift.

Labor Practices and Professional Culture

Special collections practitioners recognize the problems that explicit and implicit bias create in both hiring and retaining a diverse workforce. Practitioners work to recruit and retain a diverse and representative staff through equitable and ethical hiring, labor, and promotion practices, and to promote and implement policies that result in equitable pay for all workers, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, religion or creed, disability, race, or ethnicity. They actively strive to dismantle systems of oppression in institutional and professional spaces, while being open to difficult and uncomfortable conversations on a personal and systemic level.

Special collections practitioners recognize and value the plurality of professional backgrounds that can lead to a career in special collections. Practitioners also promote paid pathways into the profession for interns and student assistants in recognition of their contributions as well as the importance of providing entry points to all qualified and interested candidates, not only those who are able to take unpaid internships and volunteer positions. Across the board, practitioners should strive to offer guidance and mentorship to students and new professionals entering the field. They acknowledge the importance of employing practitioners from underserved communities, especially when institutions hold collections from these communities. It is best practice to avoid and minimize labor practices that lead to precarity for workers, such as the use of recurring term positions to carry out ongoing, professional work.

Outreach, Reference, Instruction, and Exhibitions

Outreach encompasses formal and informal instruction, individual reference support, online social media content, exhibits and other programs. These activities focus on building relationships and articulating the value of collection materials to a variety of user communities. Special collections practitioners carefully consider the communities they serve and the language they use to promote collections under their care in order to provide equitable treatment and representation for all users while allowing and encouraging them to tell their stories using the collection material.

Preservation and Security

Institutions should provide users with the highest level of access consistent with preservation and security of the materials in question; special collections practitioners perform a complex balancing act between preserving collections and encouraging their use. Institutions should follow standard best practices for the preservation of physical and digital materials.⁴ The [ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections](#) provide a template for the protection of collections.⁵

⁴ Among others, the National Digital Stewardship Alliance, the Northeast Document Conservation Center, and LYRASIS offer training and guidelines in best practices.

⁵ "ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections," Association of College and Research Libraries, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/security_theft. These guidelines are a "gold standard" that institutions should strive to attain. They are not considered minimum best practice.

Special collections practitioners maintain current disaster preparedness and recovery policies and procedures. Planning for the long-term care of special collections materials requires practitioners to consider the sustainability of collections, along with an awareness of the potential impact of climate change and other environmental risks. In addition to considering the stability of collection mediums and format-specific needs, practitioners should recognize that maintaining appropriate building temperature and humidity in the longterm is a significant source of energy consumption. To the extent possible, practitioners minimize the negative environmental impact of preservation and other practices.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Privacy is regulated by laws at the federal, state, and local levels. Special collections practitioners have a duty to conform to state and federal laws, as well as to laws governing privacy of individuals, while complying with the user record retention schedule of their institution. They respect the users' rights to privacy by maintaining confidentiality regarding their research and protecting any personal information that the institution gathers.

Similarly, when appropriate, special collections practitioners safeguard the privacy of content creators and vendors. Vendors or creators may determine, in tandem with practitioners, whether to share acquisition information specific to the source of the collection. Practitioners also consider the public good whenever making contractual agreements about the confidentiality or accessibility of information, such as contract provisions regarding limitations on communication about purchases.

Many special collections materials were not created with unrestricted public access in mind or contain collection contents that are sensitive to individuals, organizations, and/or record creators. Embargoes on access are discouraged because restrictions reduce or prevent use of the materials, and permanent restrictions should be applied only in extraordinary circumstances. Special collections practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that any restricted confidential or sensitive material follows reasonable time frames for access that respect concerns based on living donors or materials from third-party individuals within the collection. Similar guidelines might apply to the

records of organizations or corporations which include trade secrets, patents or other regulatory information. Practitioners also promote the respectful use of culturally sensitive materials by encouraging communication with communities of origin.⁶

Responsibility to Originators of Materials

Special collections practitioners show respect and equitable treatment of all collections and their creators in all matters of policy, promotion, and access, regardless of whether the communities represented are content creators or have a direct relationship with the special collections library. Clear and honest communication with content creators is crucial to establishing respectful relationships and maintaining responsible custody of collections. This communication includes, but is not limited to, discussion about donation/ sale agreements, timelines for providing description and access, potential conservation or digitization, and the future or ongoing role of content creator(s) in relation to the collection(s) and institution. Institutions strive to provide appropriate contextual information when promoting materials.

When approaching or working with community-based archives and special collections, additional considerations come into play. These collections are best described as “independent grassroots efforts emerging from within communities to collect, preserve, and make accessible records documenting their own histories outside of mainstream archival institutions. These community-based archives serve as an alternative venue for communities to make collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them, to shape collective memory of their own pasts, and to control the means through which stories about their past are constructed.”⁷

Special collections practitioners must consider how best to respectfully support the needs and mission of community archives and their collections. Rather than immediately encouraging physical donation and transfer of curatorial responsibility to

⁶ In institutions that hold materials of Native American origin, practitioners should specifically consult the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials. “Protocols for Native American Archival Materials,” Northern Arizona University, <http://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/index.html>.

⁷ Caswell, Michelle. “SAADA and the Community-Based Archives Model: What Is a Community-Based Archives Anyway?” South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), April 18, 2012, <https://www.saada.org/tides/article/20120418-704>.

an institution, practitioners should consider whether it would be more appropriate to recommend stewardship resources available via professional archival organizations. In some cases, it may also be appropriate for an institution to offer expertise or resources directly.

Vendor Relations

Maintaining relationships between vendors and institutions requires clear, direct, and timely communication addressing the expectations, practices, and schedules of both parties, especially with regard to timelines, payment schedules, visit protocols, acquisitions, and auction-bidding. Additionally, transparency in communication and documentation should be pursued as much as possible when selecting and working with vendors of supplies and services (e.g. digitization).

All acquisitions decisions must be based on the professional judgment of the special collections practitioner, with due consideration given to the objectives and policies of the institution. While close relationships between practitioners, booksellers, and collectors are desirable, it is imperative that conflicts of interest do not arise. Conflicts clearly result when practitioners accept substantial gifts, loans, entertainment, or personal discounts from vendors or donors. The issue of whether any of these offerings should be accepted from these sources is contentious, and so practitioners must make a judgment in each case as to whether the appearance of improper influence might result. Institutional policies regarding the acceptance of gifts or entertainment must also be observed. Practitioners should consider salaries and benefits provided by their institution to be the sole and complete remuneration for the performance of their special collections duties.