



To: Deborah J. Leslie, chair
ACRL/RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee

From: Winslow Lundy, chair
BSC Core Competencies Task Force

Subject: Final Report of Task Force

In January 2006, before ALA Midwinter, the Bibliographic Standards Committee established a task force to consider the core competencies of special collections catalogers, with the following charge:

The Bibliographic Standards Committee Core Competencies Task Force is charged to devise responses to the questions in the study being conducted by the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Task Force on Core Competencies for Special Collections Professionals, http://www.rbms.nd.edu/committees/task_force/core_competencies_questionnaire.shtml. In its final report, the Task Force is to enumerate and define the core competencies that apply particularly to special collections catalogers in their responsibilities of accurately identifying and providing sufficient bibliographic access to the broad range of special collections resources.

The members of the task force are:

Winslow Lundy, University of Colorado at Boulder, Chair
Laurence Creider, New Mexico State University
David Faulds, Emory University

The BSC Core Competencies Task Force has devised the following answers for the questions in the RBMS Task Force on Core Competencies for Special Collections Professionals questionnaire. In carrying out our charge, we have endeavored to answer as many of the questions as possible specifically from the perspective of special collections catalogers, but in some instances we have broadened our responses to include characteristics of all special collections professionals.

1. One definition for a core competency is knowledge, ability, or expertise in a specific subject area, or a skill set that serves as the basis from which additional competencies for particular jobs are developed. How would you define the term core competency in a special collections environment?

Core competencies for a special collections professional are the fundamental knowledge and characteristic abilities that form the basis on which the librarian can grow with the

experience that will be acquired on the job. For catalogers, that basic knowledge additionally encompasses standards for providing description of and access to rare and special materials, coupled with a basic understanding of the history and structure of the materials in special collections.

2. How is “core competencies” a useful term or concept?

Defining core competencies sets a minimum level of expectations an employer, library, or department may have for the professional who fills a particular position. By enumerating core competencies, a library creates an array of characteristics that can be used in job postings and position descriptions and in the evaluation process for special collections professionals at various levels.

3. What competencies or characteristic(s) do you look for in any special collections professional? Or, what do you see in common amongst all your peers in the special collections field?

Core competencies and characteristics for special collections professionals include:

- Interest in and knowledge of the cultural context in which special collections materials were and are produced;
- Respect for and interest in the materials both for their content and as objects;
- Ability to maintain records concerning description, location, use, or special treatments of materials in the collections;
- Ability to communicate to users and colleagues the significance of the materials for research and collecting.

4. What specialized competencies that apply to some special collections professionals but not to others still should be considered ‘core’ for special collections librarianship?

If there are specialized competencies that are not needed for everyone, then by definition they are not "core." However, we think that in addition to core competencies for the whole field, identification of specialized competencies for different areas of special collections librarianship would be helpful. While some of the competencies we enumerate below may be considered "core" for all special collections professionals, we think all are essential competencies for catalogers:

- Understanding of the principles of cataloging and authority control;

- Familiarity with and knowledge of the various standards used in cataloging rare books and special collections materials, in particular, *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Books*, *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2nd ed. rev., MARC21, International Standard Bibliographic Description, *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, and specialized thesauri (particularly RBMS thesauri);
- Familiarity with and knowledge of the use of online systems (both local and national);
- Basic knowledge of printed and electronic tools, bibliographic resources, and reference sources related to rare and special collections materials;
- Knowledge of the production methods and technical aspects of the materials residing in special collections;
- General bibliographic knowledge of the languages most frequently encountered in special collections; basic reading knowledge of at least one language other than English.;
- Ability to manage time and balance tasks appropriately, particularly in managing the tension between comprehensive description vs. timely provision of access.

5. What competencies do you believe are often present in a special collections professional but are not ‘core’?

The BSC Task Force believes that with the deeper knowledge that experience or training brings, some of the core competencies listed in the previous question will develop into competencies that are more than “core.” Those advanced competencies may come from the depth of knowledge of cataloging standards and tools and of specialized resources; from facility with other languages (including fluency or advanced reading knowledge); from specialized knowledge of printing and publishing history and of other processes in the production of the materials; from knowledge of subject specialties that advanced academic degrees bring; and from an understanding of the principles and practical knowledge of conservation treatments for both routine and disaster-related operations.

6. What distinguishes special collections professionals from other information professionals?

Both general catalogers and special collections catalogers create bibliographic records with the purpose of permitting users to find, identify, select, and obtain materials. Special collections catalogers also endeavor to bring out the bibliographic significance of the materials by employing a finer degree of identification and more detailed description. With their interest in deeper analysis and in the artifactual qualities of the materials, special collections catalogers provide more thorough description of and access to the physical characteristics of the materials and to their associations and

provenance. Special collections catalogers' capabilities are enhanced by their passion for cataloging and for rare materials.

7. What qualifications or responsibilities has your institution added to special collections job descriptions in the last two to five years?

Digital initiatives have begun to play a role in many special collections departments. With those initiatives come the demands for more technical expertise and knowledge of new or different metadata schema. In addition, special collections catalogers increasingly catalog not only printed books, but also manuscript materials, materials in other formats, and entire collections. As new cataloging standards have been developed, catalogers are being sought who can apply those standards to provide access to materials that have long been hidden to users.

As they begin to work with a broader range of formats and collections of materials, catalogers have the opportunity to share their expertise with colleagues in other communities. The skills and capacity for communicating knowledge that catalogers can bring to such interactions mean that they will need to be able to collaborate with other departments and to learn new processes.

8. After hiring, what skill or training must you provide, or what competencies do you often have to develop? Or, what did you yourself have to learn after you were hired?

If the new cataloger possesses the core competencies, the department personnel must introduce the new professional to the collections, the local cataloging practices and expectations, the characteristics of the local online catalog, and the intricacies of existing legacy files. Such skills can only be learned on the job. If the new cataloger is deficient in any of the core competencies, provision of training must be made. Although a newly degreed special collections cataloger may have basic knowledge of the bibliographic tools that will be needed, more specialized resources that are specific to particular collections may be outside the knowledge of the cataloger and will require some introduction. Managers and trainers can model the decisiveness, the ability to articulate to outsiders the reasons for what catalogers do, and the delicate balance between research that is essential for cataloging and research that is ultimately unproductive.

9. What do you see changing in special collections job descriptions in the next five, ten, or even fifteen years?

A few of the changes that are both currently happening and can be predicted are:

- Special collections are either acquiring or digitizing materials in new formats or are finding that initiatives and grants will allow them to begin to process and catalog long-held materials in non-book formats. The resulting format explosion will require catalogers and other special collections professionals to deal with them physically and, in describing them, will need to bring out what is appropriate for those materials. Catalogers will increasingly need to understand and record preservation information for digital formats, for example.
- The lines between archives and special collections are beginning to blur. With the removal of the barrier between the two types of collections, special collections catalogers have to learn new standards for content and for description and access.
- As special collections departments undertake more digital projects, catalogers will need to manage and provide access for the digital products of their institutions. In many cases, the provision of access will require knowledge and application of new metadata standards.
- As special collections catalogers become more involved in collaborative efforts, they will need to communicate the significance of special collections materials and of the more complex treatment in description and access given to those materials. They will need to have an ability to make a systematic explanation and interpretation of the implications of what catalogers do.
- Catalogers may need to be involved in the management of archived and preserved older versions of digital objects.
- Increasingly management and supervisory skills will be needed and expected of special collections catalogers, as is the case with general catalogers.
- Special collections cataloger job descriptions will emphasize flexibility and the ability to prioritize multiple demands on the many responsibilities inherent in the position.
- Job descriptions will also assimilate the responsibilities and tasks that have been lost through the effects of staff reductions and retirements.

10. What else do you want to tell the Task Force about core competencies?

We must be willing to help people develop core competencies on the job; library school or even Rare Book School will never produce a sufficient pool of qualified special collections librarians. There is no substitute for a good liberal arts education and passion for cataloging, for special collections materials, and for service to the patron.