

MEMO TO: IFLA Professional Committee
FROM: Rare Books and Manuscripts Section
DATE: 1 August 2014
RE: Proposal to change the name of the section

Executive Summary

The Rare Books and Manuscripts Section is making a request of the Professional Committee and IFLA leadership to change the name of the section to Rare Books and Special Collections.

There are three overarching justifications for the new name:

1. The name of the section should better reflect the diversity of the collections, materials, and programs that we lead and manage
2. The current name is archaic. It no longer reflects how libraries are organized or the range of work that is done
3. The name of the section should better reflect the role of special collections in the changing library environment and their relevance in today's world

The new name accomplishes two things: it maintains a dedication to the importance of rare book collections while expanding the scope of collections and activities reflective of special collections librarianship.

Justification for changing the name

The name of the section should better reflect the diversity of the collections, materials, and programs that we manage

Putting aside a valid debate about the ambiguity of the word “manuscripts,” most of the section’s members have over the years simply accepted the old name with the understanding that “rare books and manuscripts” is meant to be taken in the broadest sense to include the full range of rare and valuable objects and collections that are managed by rare book and/or special collections departments. At the same time, we have seen that many library rare book departments have been re-organized and re-branded as “special collections” to better reflect the expansion of the collections, which now typically include diverse materials such as rare photographs, modern documentary photographs, comprehensive manuscript and archival collections of important people, archives of organizations and businesses, collections related to local history or popular culture, other visual materials (such as posters, prints, drawings, paintings, and other art works), printed ephemera and other historical printed materials, architectural records and drawings, artist books, three-dimensional objects, audiovisual materials in all formats, and, most recently, born digital materials such as electronic documents, email, websites, social media sites, etc. Perhaps the biggest shift has been a change in focus from “items” to “collections.” More and more, both the monetary and research values lie in the collection than in each object within the collection. This, in turn, has transformed all of the ways that we conduct our work .

The current name is archaic. It no longer reflects how libraries are organized or the range of work that is done

The outdated stereotype of a rare books and manuscripts librarian might look something like this: a white man wearing a bow tie and unkept academic garb, who identifies as a scholar first and a librarian second, and who is more interested in keeping the books safely on the shelves than in the hands of researchers.

Rare book and special collections librarians are now very different. We are frequently librarians first and scholars second. Special collection librarians do much more than manage rare and valuable collections responsibly. In addition to having the traditional competencies, thoroughly understanding the scholarly process, and undertaking scholarly work, we are also required to have a wide range of specialized skills in collection development, cultivating donors, marketing collections and services, preparing exhibitions, historical editing and publishing, digitization, digital preservation, expanding audiences, fund-raising, grant-writing, and managing large, inter-institutional collaborative projects.

The name of the section should reflect how rare books and special collections are viewed in the changing environment.

Practically every study about the future of libraries emphasizes an expanding role for special collections for three main reasons: they hold unique materials that no one else has, they support a broad range of teaching and research, and they often focus on local culture and history, which are directly relevant to the communities being served.

We look forward to assisting library leaders in reinforcing the value of libraries and keeping them relevant to our communities. We enjoy being engaged within the library, within the scholarly community, and within the general public. We are dedicated to expanding access and building audiences. We also join library leaders in taking an entrepreneurial approach to marketing, public relations, and fund-raising.

Justification for the new name

Early in our discussions we reached consensus to change the name, but finding a new name has been difficult. We tried to work with the UNESCO preference for “documentary heritage collections,” but for some this seemed too broad and could be seen as stepping on the toes of other IFLA sections. Other ideas such as Rare Materials, Rare Collections, or Heritage Collections, failed to attract much enthusiasm.

We admit that the new recommended name – Rare Books and Special Collections – is not a very bold step in a new direction. This is because although we thoroughly embrace the new, expanded world of special collections librarianship, we do not want to compromise the importance of traditional rare book librarianship, which, more than ever, is leading to new discoveries and deeper knowledge and understanding of our shared cultural heritage. The study of the history of the book remains popular and important, as does descriptive bibliography, the history of collecting, and the study of the book as a physical object that bears witness to history and transformed the world. We want to honor and support this tradition, not ignore it.

Therefore the new name does two things: it maintains a dedication to the importance of rare book collections while expanding the scope to include the collections and activities reflective of special collections librarianship.

History of the discussion

Beginning in 2010, the section identified a strong need to better define what is meant by “rare books” and “rare materials” as part of our strategic planning process, which pointed to the fact that the definition of “rare” was changing and that the

scope of our “rare and valuable” collections had expanded considerably over the last 10-15 years. The group decided that this discussion fell squarely under two of IFLA’s key initiatives: the Digital Content Programme (initiative 1) and the Outreach Programme for Advocacy and Advancement of the Professions (initiative 3). This led to an extended 2-hour discussion during our second business meeting in San Juan (2011) about whether to propose a change of name for the section and considerable brain-storming about what the new name should be, weighing the pros and cons of terminology that would have relevance to an international audience and would not overlap with the names and intent of other IFLA sections.

In an effort to educate others about the changing nature of special collections and to highlight the changing competencies needed by staff working with rare books and special collections, the section held an open planning session at the World Congress in Puerto Rico called “What is rare material in libraries, and what are the consequences for actions” (session 96 / <http://conference.ifla.org/past-wlic/2011/rare-books-and-manuscripts.htm>). At this session Jan Bos (National Library of the Netherlands) spoke eloquently to the topics at hand in a paper that was subsequently published as “All Books are Equal, but Some Books ... Towards a Modern Vision of Special Collections,” which then appeared as the first chapter in the IFLA publication *Ambassadors of the Book: Competences and Training for Heritage Librarians*, edited by Raphaela Mouren (IFLA Publications 160), Berlin/Munich: De Gruyter Saur, 2012.

At the Helsinki meeting, the Rare Books and Manuscript Section renewed its commitment to preparing a proposal to change the name to one that would be “oriented toward a more comprehensive vision of special collections.” The proposal would be endorsed by a vote of all section members. At the Singapore meeting, the section again “discussed moving forward with a proposal to change the name of the sections, and to bring to a close the discussions that started two years ago.”

This proposal was distributed to the membership in advance of the meetings in Lyon and then discussed during the section’s first business meeting on 16 August 2014.

[IF THE PROPOSAL IS ENDORSED, A SENTENCE WILL BE ADDED STATING THAT THE MEMBERSHIP ENDORSED THE PROPOSAL AND ASKED THE SECTION CHAIR TO SEND IT TO THE PROFESSIONAL COMMITTEE.]