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Ad Astra per Aspera: Aspiring to Excellence in Challenging Times

Welcoming Undergraduates to Special Collections

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Abstract

Special Collections libraries and librarians have increasingly strived to provide more access and openness to their collections and services. However, not all students have received the message. If "perception is reality" we need to change the perception of research libraries as an intimidating place, even when we believe we are welcoming to all. Kenneth Spencer Research Library, the rare books and manuscripts library of the University of Kansas, adopted two major initiatives during the summer with the express purpose of making our library more welcoming and accessible. Spencer Library staff has worked hard over the years to engage with faculty and students and promote use of our collections. As the number of class requests increase, we are making progress but still encounter assumptions that students will not be welcomed and it will be a confusing and intimidating process. In addition to bringing students into the building, we must show them once they arrive that we are a modern facility, even if our collections are historical. A warm, welcoming presence and an efficient mode of operation can go a long way toward getting students to give you the benefit of the doubt as you show them how special collections can inform their own research.

For over a decade, special collections libraries have actively debated their future and their relevance. An article in *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage*, Traister (2000) argues that America's special collections have a future, but that "the world in which these institutions and activities exist and persist, however, is changing radically, not in the direction of increased restrictions but toward expanded access and openness" (p. 76). The Kenneth Spencer Research Library is certainly no exception to this increasing focus on welcoming users, in fact, a look at the library's evolution shows it to be a microcosm of the trends within the special collections arena.

The Spencer Research Library is located on the campus of the University of Kansas in Lawrence and was designed specifically to house rare books and manuscripts. It was built in 1968 through a large gift by Helen Foresman Spencer in memory of her husband, Kenneth Spencer and consists of three collecting areas: The University Archives; The Kansas Collection, a regional history collection; and Special Collections, which contains a wide range of rare books and manuscripts.

The three departments were in the same building but operated completely independently of each other, with each on their own floor consisting of separate reading rooms and separate staff. The library had a reputation for being intimidating and unwelcoming and rumors have spread that students were not allowed in and only faculty could use the collections. This, of course, was never true, but the unwelcoming atmosphere existed, even if it was only in attitude and demeanor rather than in actual policy.

An early report in the Special Collections department files that sprung from a proposed statement of the Manuscripts Committee of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Rare Book Section, in June 1969, advocating free access to manuscripts, debated allowing increased access (Kenneth Spencer Research Library Special Collections). Up to this point, Spencer was following a protectionist policy that allowed KU faculty and staff to receive an exclusive reservation for two years to work on a manuscript for thesis, dissertation or publication purposes (Spencer Research Library, p. 1). While Spencer staff did eventually move away from protectionism and putatively encouraged use by "embryo scholars", they were careful to build in exceptions to prevent manuscripts from being used for "frivolous purposes" and did nothing to actively encourage use of the library by undergraduates or to make them feel welcome (Spencer Research Library, p. 3).

Over the years, as the professional community in general called for greater access to research libraries, Spencer took steps to promote its collections to faculty and get out the message that we were there and available for classes at all levels, but the message was not always heard and faculty and undergraduates alike continued to perceive Spencer as unwelcoming and difficult to use.

In 1998, two consultants were hired to assess the library and prepare it for the future. They noted many strengths of the library, but also observed that "[t]he occasion of this assignment is the more pressing because of the widespread conviction on campus, particularly amongst faculty, that the Spencer Library is not as welcoming as it might be, researchers having to face unnecessary obstacles in the undertaking of their work" (McCorison & Joyce, p. 10). Faculty is key to welcoming undergraduates to special collections. Most undergraduates will not set foot in a research library without the impetus of a class meeting or assignment.

As a direct result of the consultant's report, in 2000 the three collecting areas combined resources and came together to serve patrons in one reading room with staff from all three departments staffing the reference desk. Spencer also developed a new Reader Services unit at this time. It was not easy to develop consistent policies and we still wrestle with this, but a great deal of work was done with the goal of improving patron service in mind.

Our building has worked against us, though. Intended to be a monument and memorial to the late husband of the donor, Helen Spencer, the building that was designed to look grand and imposing instead scares students away. To quote briefly from the consultant's report, "What ought to be the library's

principal entrance is located opposite the rear of Strong Hall where one finds inadequate signage, no indication of welcoming activity, nor awareness of the existence of the Spencer Research Library. Although constituting a world-class adjunct to the intellectual life of KU, the university has successfully hidden Spencer Library" (McCorison & Joyce, p. 16). To make matters worse, students step into a dark and empty grand foyer. It was designed to house exhibits, so lights were intentionally kept dim, but funding has greatly reduced our ability to provide the type of exhibits we once put on. Now students must traverse this foyer to get to the reception area where they finally find someone to help them. Then we send them back through that lobby to leave their belongings in a windowless locker room to which the Fire Marshall will not allow us to keep the door propped open. Once they have done that, they turn around and go through that lobby for the third time and at that point they finally make it into the reading room through the reception area.

We have worked on small measures to make the library more user friendly, such as rewording the library's rules and regulations to be less negative and relocating the reference desk to a more helpful location. This summer, however, we began two initiatives that we believe will help counteract some of these problems and welcome users into Spencer in a way we have not been able to in the past. The first, thanks to a generous gift from a retired KU faculty member and long-time user of Spencer, Marilyn Stokstad, will allow us to create a new interior reception space and remodel the reading room. By improving the lighting and relocating the reception desk from the interior of the building into the lobby, students immediately encounter a welcoming face to help them get started. Once they have registered, they will still need to put their belongings in lockers, but the locker room will only be a few steps away and the door will be glass, avoiding the isolation of which some users have complained.

We are also moving the entrance to the reading room, so it too is right at the front of the lobby and visible from the reception desk. This is obviously more efficient in terms of steps to get in to the reading room. But more importantly, it is also more inviting. I have seen many students walk into the building and look completely lost in the large foyer. I am sure there are some I have not seen who just turned around and headed back out. Having a well-lit interior and a friendly face right there to greet them will go a long way to putting a student at ease.

And we do need to put students at ease, because what has not changed is the need for a higher level of security. The reading room is being remodeled to serve the needs of researchers in the twenty-first century, while continuing to provide the extra level of security research libraries require. Students still must register, they still cannot take bags or food or drink into the reading room and they still must view the materials in the reading room. We need friendly, knowledgeable people to explain the process, the reasons these procedures are in place and how to go about getting the items they need to see.

Our second initiative also provides an extra level of security and benefits users by allowing them to register and request materials from home. In August, Spencer went live with an online request and management system designed specifically for special collections. This system, called Aeon, was designed by special collections librarians and developed by Atlas Systems, which also developed the Illiad software used for interlibrary loan. Aeon is hosted by Atlas and patron and transaction data are stored securely in the Aeon database, independently from other applications. It allows patrons to register and request material from any Internet browser and has a staff client that allows material to be tracked through specific queues, increasing our ability to monitor our collections, providing greater security and also improving our ability to maintain statistics of use.

The Aeon web interface enables patrons to create a personalized web account and request items directly from the online catalog and, ultimately, from our EAD finding aids, although this feature is not yet in place. The majority of our holdings can be found in the libraries' online catalog and that is how most of our undergraduate users will find us. When Spencer items come up in the catalog, a "Get at Spencer" link allows them to register and request material in advance and from a format that is not wholly unfamiliar to them. Going from paper call slips to Aeon is comparable to moving from a card catalog to an online catalog—and many undergraduates have never seen a card catalog. This gives students the ability to

familiarize themselves with our procedures and holdings in advance and in an electronic format that they are comfortable with, ideally making their initial visit to Spencer a less intimidating experience.

Like most, if not all, research libraries, we require a photo ID upon registration and do not circulate our materials. While registration and requests can be done from any computer, our users still must physically come to the library and view the materials onsite. When a patron arrives for the first time, we will pull up their registration and check photo identification. At that point they will be "cleared" to go into the reading room. It is not until they are cleared that we consider them fully registered and able to view collection materials. We also do not page items until they have checked into the reading room.

Spencer Library offers many one-shot classes, tours and events. This is one of our favorite ways to reach out to undergraduate users. Aeon allows us to group the materials pulled for these sessions as a single event, making it easier to retrieve them and generate statistics. For repeat classes or events, staff can simply pull up a list of the items requested last time and clone the event with a new date. We can also add others to the event, which gives us the opportunity to work closely with faculty, customizing the event with each instructor.

The response from patrons has been overwhelmingly positive, but in particular undergraduates take to this system immediately. For the most part, they have no trepidation about using a web account. They are comfortable with this format from sites like Amazon and iTunes. Once students learn our system, they tend to be excited about the fact that they can get a head start on their projects before ever setting foot in the library and don't have to waste time filling out call slips. Another benefit of the system is the request history that remains in each account. We no longer have to worry about the student who comes in at the end of a project because "I just need citation information for a book I looked at in this library—I don't remember what the book was, but it was green."

The renovation that was supposed to be completed during the summer continued throughout the Fall semester, and Aeon has only been live a few months, so I do not yet have statistics to assert increases in our use by undergraduates. But anecdotal responses to the system have been quite good. Early in the semester, I sent an email to departments letting them know we might not be able to accommodate them in the manner that we had in the past, but if they could "excuse our mess" this semester, we would be able to offer a much better experience in the future and that we would love to talk with them about what we could do for them. Instead of just sending it to faculty who have used our facilities in the past, I expanded the mailing list to any department I felt we could support with Spencer holdings. This semester we have had requests for classes or tours from 11 groups that have never before met at Spencer. So far, we have been able to accommodate every group that has requested a class or tour, although we have had to be a little more flexible in our use of space. I am also pleased to say we completed the entire renovation while only closing to the public one day and never while classes were in session.

I mentioned the need for faculty by-in to get undergraduates through the door. However, it is the experience they have once they enter the library that will inform their impression of original research and determine whether or not they return. The first time in a research library can be intimidating for anyone, but this is particularly true for undergraduate students. At the same time, providing access to undergraduates is an integral part of the library's mission. As we look to the future of our library, it will be important to assess the impact these new initiatives have on the quality of service we provide and whether we have been able to dispel the perception of intimidation and an unwelcoming environment that undergraduate students have felt in the past. I feel confident in predicting that students will remain a vibrant and important demographic if archives and special collections libraries hope to stay relevant and remain an intellectual center within the university.

References

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