

## Travel Report by Kristen Nyitray

**Dates:** 7/27/03 - 8/1/03  
**Place:** Rare Book School, University of Virginia at Charlottesville.  
**Course:** "Advanced Seminar in Special Collections Administration."  
Seminar led by Samuel A. Streit and Merrily E. Taylor of Brown University.

**Rare Book School (RBS)** Rare Book School (RBS) is an independent non-profit educational institute supporting the study of the history of books and printing and related subjects.

The course I attended is described by RBS as a "practical seminar in the art and science of administering a special collections unit." It was designed for special collections/rare book librarians with several years of professional experience whose present responsibilities are becoming more broadly based. My class was comprised of twelve archivists, manuscript librarians, and special collections' administrators from diverse institutions, including Columbia University, the Library of Virginia, the St. Louis Historical Society, and the Vatican Film Library.

Topics covered during this week-long course included

- 1) **Tactics special collections librarians may use for interpreting needs and objectives to their administrations.** Three perceptions/categories of special collections departments were discussed: the albatross, the icing, and the cake. Most of the attendees noted that their departments were not well-respected or utilized by the campus community, hence, the albatross. Discussions also revolved around the issues of faculty-status for librarians; the negative perceptions of librarians by "academic" departments; and the difficulties in quantifying and articulating the needs/value of special collections and the library to key administrators. Deans/higher level officials should be careful not treat the department as the "icing" or something "extra." Rather, it should be promoted as the "cake," or the "treasure house" of the institution; a foundation for academic programs and research.
- 2) **Assuring an active role for special collections in the research and curricular programs of their institutions.** The instructors stressed the importance of the library supporting the university's/president's missions. The faculty should be encouraged to participate in the acquisition of new materials. They should also be allies in regards to identifying potential donors, both on campus and in the greater community.
- 3) **Fund-raising, including the most effective use of friends' groups; coping with tight budgets and budget re-allocations.** It is difficult to raise money for the libraries, as they have no natural donor-base, i.e. alumni. Additionally, the library is rarely a priority for campus administrators (the annual fund is always the greatest priority). Libraries today need to fund-raise just to "survive." According to Taylor, all staff members should be actively involved in fund-raising initiatives. It the role of the dean to articulate the needs of the library as often as possible. The dean should be attuned and

respectful of his staff's input, as this can affect the morale of the workplace during times of budgetary cuts. Friends groups can be effective, although they often require a tremendous amount of time and effort. A majority of these groups do not financially break even, although they can foster positive public relations.

The seminar format of the class encouraged student participation. It was very useful to learn from the experiences of other professionals in similar positions, along with the occasional contrasting perspectives of class instructors Merrily Taylor, University Librarian, and Sam Streit, a Special Collections administrator. More information regarding Rare Book School and its course offerings may be accessed at [www.rarebookschool.com](http://www.rarebookschool.com).