Arranging 'Babel': Special Collections, Undergraduate Research, and Librarian Engagement

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Arranging “Babel”: Special Collections, Undergraduate Research, and Librarian Engagement

Jonathan Sauceda

abstract: Undergraduate research offers academic librarians and archivists an additional motivation to engage students with special collections. Curriculum design, course instruction, and mentoring by librarians and archivists can benefit not only students but the institution as well. I explore an example of such engagement with a collection of New Jersey sheet music. The project gives students experience producing work with real-world implications. In addition, it increases digital holdings, reduces the backlog of under-cataloged materials, demonstrates the archive’s unique value to the institution, and makes new information available to scholars nationally and internationally.

Introduction

In “The Library of Babel,” Jorge Luis Borges imagines vast expanses of rooms connected by hallway and stairway, holding stacks upon stacks of books. Each gallery contains five shelves of 35 tomes with 410 pages. Taken together, the volumes of the library hold every possible combination of letters. The collection fills its caretakers with hope; they know that the truths of the past and future are all contained within. But its chaotic organization elicits suicidal despair because the likelihood of finding even a single, useful book is remote in the extreme. One might read the story as not merely a thought experiment but also as an attempt to elicit the simultaneous feelings of hope and hopelessness librarians like Borges may experience when confronted by the vastness of uncataloged, unorganized, and underexplored materials within their purview.
While most academic librarians and archivists may not find themselves in charge of a collection of books with every possible letter combination, or even (like Borges) a national library, we often work in or close to a realm with comparably vast hoards of materials: special collections. Upon closer reflection, the typical archivist might feel that the librarians of Babel were fortunate in at least one respect: their items were all books. Archives can contain miscellaneous odds and ends, from Egyptian stela to American Revolutionary War letters to jazz instruments. Mirroring the state of Babel’s information control, these items may be uncataloged or cataloged only at the collection level or item level with very brief records. In contrast to Borges’s imaginary realm, where holdings neither increase nor decrease, real institutional collections continue to grow, frequently outpacing efforts to process and catalog them.

Archives around the world have a tremendous amount of material of great interest to many researchers but often with limited visibility and accessibility. To study certain undigitized holdings at Rutgers Special Collections and University Archives in New Brunswick, for example, researchers must first know that a collection exists and what its contents are but this is often difficult to determine because some objects may only be cataloged at the collection level. Then they would likely arrange with an archivist to visit. If researchers come from New Jersey, they must plan to arrive at a time when the library is open. If they travel from elsewhere, they will likely spend a good amount of money on travel and lodging and still only have access during operating hours. An Americanist in Amsterdam with impressive scholarly credentials is at a significant disadvantage compared to a freshman undeclared major who sleeps in Frelinghuysen Hall across the street from Rutgers-New Brunswick’s core archive. Students have an advantage in terms of their access, but they lack knowledge of the research process and may not realize that
they have the potential to make significant, scholarly contributions, while enriching their own academic experience.

The movement toward original research at the undergraduate level offers librarians an exciting opportunity for engaging students with archives at an early part of their college career. It can help reveal hidden collections, but more significantly, it can teach students the considerable extent of their own ability to contribute to the world’s knowledge. Librarians and archivists are in a strategic position to foster this kind of initiative. In describing the following case study, I explore how librarian engagement with two undergraduate research programs offered significant benefit to the students by providing real world research experience, to the library by increasing user interest, to the university by highlighting unique materials, and to the scholarly world by making these items available electronically.

**Literature Review: Undergraduate Research and Archives**

Advances in technology have had the seemingly contradictory effect of making research more complex and specialized, accessible primarily to a small group of experts, while at the same time opening its creation up to interested amateurs or “the crowd.” The former is epitomized by digital humanists who supplement the writing of traditional scholarly narratives with investigations that adopt computational methodologies. The use of the interested amateur is perhaps less celebrated in the humanities but could have a significant impact on the production of research. Undergraduate research programs coupled with Internet publishing provide a mechanism by which the student can become engaged in providing an institutionally useful outcome. The following review of literature explores several of these kinds of initiatives as well as issues in special collections.
There is a rich tradition of archivists and librarians advocating for student exposure to primary source materials. In 1949, for example, William Tate in volume one of *Archives* states “even a casual and sketchy acquaintance with Archives can do much to broaden and deepen, to enrich and enliven . . . history teaching.” Mary Jo Pugh pays special attention to students in *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts.* She agrees that documents “can make history come alive,” but the approach to them should be well-structured to avoid overwhelming novice users.

Research with primary sources requires a unique set of proficiencies, which Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres divide into domain knowledge (familiarity with a subject area), artifactual knowledge (critical analysis), and archival knowledge (awareness of practices and principles of archives). Xiaomu Zhou’s study of an American history class in the Bentley Historical Library Archives at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor combines Yakel and Torres’s tripartite knowledge model with Carol Kuhlthau’s well-known information seeking schema, demonstrating how information literacy and archival training can be merged successfully. Another rationale for the intellectual benefits of archival use for students is given by Marcus Robyns, who argues that archivists should move beyond assistance in finding and accessing materials into education traditionally reserved for the teaching faculty that develops “critical thinking,” or the “analysis and interpretation of . . . information.”

In spite of literature demonstrating the value of student engagement with archives, penetration of these ideas may not be as deep as hoped: Ann Schmiesing and Deborah Hollis found that only 23 percent of visits to special collections were course-related. Doris Malkmus surveys the teaching of undergraduate history classes that use primary sources and recommends that librarians take a leadership role through outreach and reference, noting that most instructors
view primary sources as essential. These studies do not set out to explore ways in which the students can provide a meaningful outcome beyond the very real benefits archival study provides to the individual. Having users involved in the creation of data has been addressed in Isto Huvila’s case study of a “participatory” archive in which users contribute record data via wikis.

It is likely that for many of the courses Malkmus surveys, the documents students use are not digitally rare at all: there are only a few maps of colonial Virginia that would be useful in U.S. History 101, and most of those may already be well-known and digitized. As a result, this kind of investigation is less likely to contribute new knowledge, as Anthony Stamatoplos would ideally have undergraduate research do. He identifies undergraduate research as a rapidly emerging pedagogy in colleges and universities, with the sciences being the most common discipline group to champion the approach. In contrast to the research often produced in a course, independent undergraduate research creates new knowledge. He notes the general lack of discussion of how libraries can contribute to faculty-led undergraduate research and that nonlibrarian instructors could inadvertently ignore information literacy training.

Stamatoplos lists the many benefits of undergraduate research for the students themselves but does not explore how this can be used to fill a very real institutional need or humanities-specific applications. He also views the nonlibrarian faculty member as the nexus through which undergraduate research should be channeled. Whether librarians and archivists have faculty status or not, however, they should be encouraged to engage with students directly rather than only through a member of the teaching faculty. It is wonderful if such a relationship can be established or emerges organically, but waiting for one to develop before reaching out to students could result in many missed opportunities.
Nicholas Rowland and Jeffery Knapp discuss the lack of scholarly literature exploring librarian involvement with what they call “engaged scholarship,” that is, experiences outside the classroom such as internships and undergraduate research. The authors blame a lack of awareness on the part of instructors for the dearth of librarian involvement, and vice versa. They also point to a widely held view of the library as a “passive storehouse” of information rather than a partner in knowledge dissemination as a reason for the limited opportunities afforded to librarians to contribute. Such passivity is at odds with trends such as “embedding,” in which the librarian becomes integrally involved in undergraduate classes. Rowland and Knapp see such an approach as a potential solution to librarians’ de facto exclusion from engaged scholarship.

Mark Caprio argues for more focus on publishing for undergraduates, allowing them to function as real scholars. The trend of undergraduates engaging in original research has been prominent since the 1990s. Dissemination has been less explored in the literature, with some authors arguing that undergraduate scholarship should be done primarily for self-learning purposes without a public outcome. Library publishing of open access journals in institutional repositories, however, gives undergraduates the opportunity to develop and demonstrate skills potentially important to employers. The authors of “A Survey of Library Support for Formal Undergraduate Research Programs” examine the level and kinds of support libraries offer undergraduate research programs. They found that 58 percent of respondents supported student publication either through journals, research symposia, or posters, but libraries could do more.

Undergraduates, particularly those in the humanities, face considerable hurdles to performing research that contributes to human knowledge. There are competing demands on their time and attention. Even if they possess advanced writing skills, they lack an understanding of the state of the existing literature in a particular area and oftentimes an idea of how to start.
Librarians and archivists can provide them with direction and may have a greater awareness and understanding of unique collections, yet involvement with students is usually mediated through a faculty instructor. Even embedding as a model has limitations because of the librarian’s diminished role in class design. One could discuss plans with an instructor, but demands of time and curriculum may push the course in different directions. It would in many cases be easier for the librarian to simply agree to join an initiative the faculty member has already developed, limiting projects to those in which the instructor has expertise.

Undergraduate research is a laudable focus of time and energy, especially when combined with archives, which can enhance areas of specialization for universities. Universities often emphasize their uniqueness to attract prospective students, but a recent Gallup survey of mission statements found that most are strikingly similar. Engaging undergraduates with an institution’s distinguishing archives could enhance the sense of value they associate with their alma mater before and after graduation.

Academic libraries in public institutions have not escaped to budget cuts. Austerity has had an effect on personnel levels, which in turn impacts the ability of a department to focus on new projects when it becomes difficult even to maintain day-to-day operations. One advantage of including special collections in undergraduate research initiatives is that it serves as a kind of outreach, aligning the services of the archive with trends in higher education to enhance the undergraduate experience. It also demonstrates to administrators and the public that the vital services the library provides are utilized as much or more by tuition-paying students as by foreign researchers. My own work with special collections has required significant commitment from archivists, which they have been eager to provide since they know that an
increased interest in their work could focus more attention on their unique resources, showing they can be tied to undergraduate success.

Undergraduate Research at Rutgers

Once only faculty and advanced graduate students were expected to conduct research, but today undergraduates may be beginning to realize that simply earning a degree is not enough to ensure that they can compete successfully in the job market. At Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick—a Carnegie Foundation “Highest Research Activity” institution with more than 32,000 undergraduates—the Aresty Research Center and Byrne Seminars may be viewed as opportunities for distinction and specialization. Their flexible curriculum has allowed me to tie undergraduate research to special collections.

Archivists such as Fernanda Perrone have long been active in student mentoring and fostering engagement with collections, as exemplified in publications such as the periodical The Rutgers Scholar: An Electronic Bulletin of Undergraduate Research. “Woman in a Man’s World: The Career of Mary G. Roebling,” uses archives to tell the story of a prominent woman who used her military, political, and business connections to forge an influential career. “Documenting Inter-American Cooperation: Discovering the Legacy of the Inter-American Association for Democracy and Freedom” similarly draws on a special collection at Rutgers to discuss a small but important political organization active during the Cold War. These projects brought undergraduates into Special Collections and University Archives, expanded the historical record, and publicized bibliographic information. Admittedly, the journal format limited what could be disseminated as well as how the information could be structured. The periodical was also short-lived, operating only from 1999 to 2004, but the support of the libraries means that the content has been preserved and remains accessible via the Internet.
Current programs at Rutgers include the Aresty Research Center, whose mission is to support research at the undergraduate level by pairing mentors and mentees. It offers three college credits, a stipend, and student funding for conference travel, as well as an opportunity to present at its annual Undergraduate Research Symposium. A slogan on a recent flyer has the tagline “Think beyond the books: Learn by doing.” The idea has proved popular among students as the number of research assistants grew from 104 in 2011 to 365 in 2015. The program is interdisciplinary, but with a heavy focus on the sciences: in 2014, 55 percent of the projects were in science, technology, engineering, or math; 24 percent were in the social sciences; and 21 percent were in the humanities.

Many universities have undergraduate research programs, but a unique feature at Rutgers is its database that matches students to faculty. The student selects topics of interest, and then the faculty member is notified and asked to interview and rank the top candidates. Projects have explored nano-plasmonics holography (physics), prison narratives (comparative literature), and the political economy of ancient Sparta (classics). The Aresty Center pairs the mentor and mentee and supplements their collaboration with undergraduate group meetings led by an “alumnus” of the Aresty program, an upperclassman called a research mentor.

Byrne Seminars are 10-week, 80-minute courses for freshmen with a cap of 20 students (though they are often smaller). Instructors are tenured or tenure-track faculty who propose topics in the spring, which are then selected for the following year. The opportunity to teach whatever subject the instructor chooses has unleashed a great deal of creativity. Courses have included “Astrobiology: Is There Life on Other Planets?” “Selfies and Digital Culture,” and “Hacking Sound: A Hands-On Introduction to Electronic Music.” The program offers funding for activities beyond the classroom, including field trips to such diverse locations as the Jersey
Shore, Carnegie Hall in New York City, and the Newark Public Library. Librarians may hold tenured, tenure-track, or non-tenure-track faculty positions at Rutgers. Public service responsibilities include instruction that often takes the form of bibliographic “one-shot” sessions, but because of faculty status, we may participate in many departmental programs like Aresty and Byrne. As a result, several Rutgers librarians have worked with undergraduate researchers with great success.

The Sinclair Jerseyana Sheet Music Collection

Classes leading to the production of research shared with a broader public are of special interest to me. In my graduate work at the University of North Texas in Denton, a class project involved editing Claudio Monteverdi’s (1567–1643) musical setting of the Vespers (1610), which was published by the German classical music publishing house Bärenreiter. Beyond the benefit that the assignment provided in terms of a line on my curriculum vita, the work felt relevant vis-à-vis for its real-world impact. The class would end, but the tasks we had completed would persist with the print publication of the edition, useful to musicians and musicologists in perpetuity. Such an outcome gave me extra motivation to produce my best work, as well as a sense of accomplishment more profound than the typical curricular experience. I wanted to begin a similar kind of project at Rutgers.

The Sinclair Jerseyana Sheet Music Collection is unique and of substantial interest to scholars, musicians, and the public. It consists of sheet music either about New Jersey or by New Jerseyans and is housed in Rutgers Special Collections and University Archives. The archive holds 177 pieces, mostly from the 1880s through the first half of the 1900s. Most are not cataloged in the database of the Sheet Music Consortium, a group of libraries working to build a collection of digitized sheet music. The consortium database has a finding aid, but it does not
include important fields such as text, identification numbers, subject matter, or genre
descriptions.45 I developed a project to catalog items in the Jerseyana collection for both a Byrne
Seminar and the Aresty Research Program.

Learning outcomes for the Aresty and Byrne students are that they gain a familiarity with the history of popular music in New Jersey, develop critical thinking and listening skills, understand ways in which music and culture interact, increase their knowledge of archives, and add to public knowledge of the materials we investigate. Noting Pugh’s observation that students need structure—especially when time is short—I divide the class into three basic segments and two trips: (1) elements of music (two days), (2) a tour of Special Collections and University Archives, (3) New Jersey history and culture (four days), (4) student presentations (two days), and (5) a field trip to the Institute for Jazz Studies at Rutgers-Newark, the world’s largest jazz archive.46 At the beginning of every class, we take a short, multiple-choice quiz on the assigned reading.47 For the musical elements portion, we focus on solidifying the students’ subject and artifactual knowledge by discussing basic musical terms that might be relevant in describing and analyzing the sheet music and by tracing developments in Western vernacular music from the troubadours to today.48

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<th>Week</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Elements of Music I (key terms, melody, harmony); Vernacular Music I (Middle Ages to 1700s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elements of Music II (form, genre, style); Vernacular Music II (1800-2000s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tour of Special Collections and University Archives, Select a piece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>New Jersey History, Explain why the piece interests you</td>
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Following Robyn’s focus on critical thinking skills, more important than remembering obscure terms for genres and styles or identifying causes of musical development are the analytical skills developed.49 The ability to read notation is not necessary; instead we listen to many musical examples. I ask simple questions about the music and text: “Are there instruments? How many voices do you hear? Do the melody and harmony sound complicated?” I also ask more critical ones such as “What does the work tell us about the culture of the musicians and their audience? How do the music and text interact to produce meaning?”

We note the dramatic effects technological change has had upon music, from creating the possibility of a vernacular music industry with the Italian madrigal and the invention of the printing press, to the invention of recorded sound (in New Jersey, by Thomas Edison), to how the microphone led to the rise of the crooner. We also address current concerns, such as how the Internet has changed the way people acquire, create, and experience music, as well as ethical questions about whether and to what extent piracy has affected the industry, creators, and the nature of art.50 The musical culture of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is most relevant to the corpus of material held in Special Collections, so we focus especially on the
historical contexts of parlor songs by Stephen Foster from the 1840s to the 1860s, Tin Pan Alley hits such as “After the Ball Is Over” (1891) by Charles Harris, ragtime and “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899) by Scott Joplin, as well as jazz in the 1910s and 1920s.

Moving by decade through various styles, we examine significant New Jersey artists and the features associated with them, starting with Count Basie and swing in the 1930s; Frank Sinatra, movies, and youth culture in the 1940s; the Isley Brothers and rock and roll in the 1950s; Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons in the 1960s; Bruce Springsteen and folk rock, the Misfits and punk rock, and rap and the Sugarhill Gang in the 1970s; Jon Bon Jovi and MTV in the 1980s; Naughty by Nature, Whitney Houston, Lauryn Hill, R&B, and hip hop in the 1990s; and finally today’s bifurcation of Disney-affiliated groups such as the Jonas Brothers and obscure indie bands. The choice of artists and styles is not meant to necessarily show any kind of progression, but rather to tie the content of the course to the state and highlight a variety of ways we can analyze different kinds of music so students will develop tools to critique their own pieces.51

For our third Byrne class (and by appointment with the Aresty research assistant) we visit Special Collections and University Archives, where the head of public services, Christine Lutz, discusses the scope of the archive and the proper handling of sheet music.52 I ask the students to peruse the materials and choose a piece that is meaningful to them. An Aresty student may select one song or several that can be united around a theme. Some find pieces set in their hometown (Hackensack, Jersey City, Hoboken, and the like). Others see a reference to a favorite pastime, such as visiting the Jersey Shore or bicycling. The archive also contains miscellaneous pieces written by New Jerseyans, so there is a topical variety from which to choose. I take digital photographs of the selections while we wait for higher-quality images to be made following the
standards set by our institutional repository, RUcore (Rutgers University Community Repository).53

For the state history portion of the class (weeks four to seven), we discuss a passage from *New Jersey: A History of the Garden State*.54 Then we talk about different conceptions of the state that match many of the topics that come up in an analysis of the sheet music. One of them is diversity, which we explore in a scholarly article analyzing Bruce Springsteen’s poetic imaginings of the U.S.-Mexican border.55 Another is shore culture and Atlantic City, for which we read excerpts from *Boardwalk of Dreams*.56 Finally, I ask the students to find a scholarly resource that addresses a perspective on New Jersey we have not yet considered (ideally related to their chosen song), such as urbanization, patriotism, or politics. We spend half these classes talking about the readings and the other half discussing the project’s assignments, finishing our discussion of musical elements, or playing a variation on a role-immersion game. In this activity, students team up to offer their chosen pieces as candidates for our state song (New Jersey is the only state without an official anthem).57 I play through their pieces on the piano, giving students who do not read music the opportunity to hear their selections several times. Good-humored critiques of their classmates’ selections (“That doesn’t address New Jersey’s rich ethnic diversity like my song does” or “That doesn’t celebrate the Garden State’s pastoral beauty like mine”) reinforce the kind of critical analysis Yakel and Torres advocate.58

We discuss the importance of metadata and as a class identify what fields are most important as we look at examples of sheet music in preparation for the Metadata I assignment (see Table). Students need guidance on this point, as some want to add creative fields beyond the typical “composer,” “lyricist,” “publisher,” “date,” “size,” and the like, and offer suggestions related to our discussion of music analysis (such as “form”), but likely of limited use to the
broader public. Over the next week, students create the metadata for their selection, which they post in the class’s online forum. For the following week, they each check a classmate’s work and provide comments and constructive criticism (Metadata II assignment; see Table). These data are the core of the public outcome for the class, so I emphasize that peer review is vital to ensure their accuracy.

The seminar’s final project involves a short (400- to 500-word) paper and presentation based on that paper that must include a musical excerpt from either a recording they have found (usually online) or a live audio example I perform. I encourage them to find information about the composers, lyricists, and publishers by looking through our databases of historical newspapers, HathiTrust, or Google Books with the goal of including items from their references in the bibliographic record of the pieces. Then they analyze the piece, discussing the interesting musical features and how they interact with the text. For the second part of the paper, I ask them to find a more contemporary piece to compare with their older one, preferably one about New Jersey or by a New Jersey artist such as Frank Sinatra, Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi, or maybe even themselves. The focus on a more recent song makes the project and musical criticism seem especially relevant to their own lives. The students have 10 minutes for presentations followed by a 5-minute question-and-answer session.

Finally, the class tours the Institute for Jazz Studies, where students experience an archive specializing in musical materials. The jazz instruments owned by such performers as trumpeter Miles Davis, player pianos, endless boxes of preserved materials, and rows of CDs and LPs might even impress Borges’s Babylonian librarians and certainly have an impact on the students. Although two field trips to archives along with a guided assignment structure cannot hope to fully instill the kind of archival skills that Yakel and Torres have articulated, it does
begin to familiarize students with the environment and several practices and procedures. Ideally, it is just the beginning of their acquaintance with primary sources.

The format of Aresty meetings is less formalized and more guided by the individual student’s interests and expertise. Certain features, such as quizzes, class lectures, the game, and the trip to the Institute for Jazz Studies are less suitable for one-on-one interaction. Instead, we meet weekly and discuss New Jersey history, possible topics, how to find appropriate secondary source material, how to create metadata, and strategies for analyzing the pieces, which I play through as necessary. Aresty research assistants are usually willing to spend more time in the archive than a typical seminar student, flipping through boxes of sheet music to help brainstorm ideas. For the symposium, we work together to craft a thesis-driven narrative and prepare the presentation. Students who have participated in Byrne are often excellent candidates for the assistantship program because they are familiar with the collection and procedures of the project.

An Aresty research assistant does not receive the same kinds of assessment as a student in the Byrne Seminar, but the one-on-one relationship facilitates communication regarding expectations. The symposium presentation serves a similar function to the Byrne’s final project, an example of which I discuss later. For the Byrne Seminar, the metrics include class discussions, quizzes, quality of metadata, and the final paper. Of most concern to the public outcome of the project are the metadata, which are easy to check; thanks to peer review, the “hard” data (composer, lyricist, lyrics, and the like) are consistently correct. Performance on quizzes, which measure reading comprehension, is typically less than optimal, with the class average hovering around 75 to 80 percent, but we always go over the answers in class, allowing for quick correction and discussion of more difficult concepts. Paper quality varies; usually the
Aresty students’ work exceeds even the best seminar papers, perhaps because of the more individualized attention they receive or because they are upperclassmen. Byrne students tend to focus on finding all the information they can on composers, publishers, and lyricists rather than constructing an interesting, analytical narrative about the pieces. Still, it is largely successful in terms of getting them to use library databases to find information.

In the seminar, instructor assessment is built in. Conceding problems of student evaluation, comments have been generally favorable, suggesting a higher level of positive impact according to Peter Brophy’s model, which offers a rubric for assessing library services. Beyond “raising awareness” of archives and information-seeking strategies, students become “better informed” and “improve their knowledge of these topics” (Brophy’s first three levels). Assessment also shows that student “perceptions have changed” (Brophy’s fourth level) in terms of the value they see in analyzing culture through primary sources. Brophy’s fifth level is “changed world view” where skills are acquired that may be transferred to other situations and possibly lead to “changed action,” the highest measure of impact. To demonstrate these levels of engagement convincingly would require a longitudinal study, but some examples cited in the next paragraph suggest their fulfillment.

In one project, Aresty research assistant Trey Shore explored the history of perspectives on New Jersey. The state is frequently lampooned in the entertainment media. One famous resident, Jon Stewart, made it a running gag on his Comedy Central program The Daily Show. This troubled Shore, himself a native of New Jersey. In studying the sheet music, he found mockery of New Jersey goes back to at least the early 1900s. He also discovered several pieces praising the Garden State, often set in hymnlike or otherwise reverential arrangements.
presented his findings at both the annual meeting of the Atlantic Chapter of the Music Library Association and the Undergraduate Research Symposium at Rutgers.68

The sheet music is interesting often for what it includes as well as what it excludes. In the class, we strive to use archives to link “historical and contemporary struggles” as the authors of “Social Justice Impact of Archives” advocate.69 For example, cover art for sheet music about Atlantic City often features the “rolling chair.” Bicycles and motorized vehicles were prohibited from the town’s famous boardwalk, so two- or three-seated rickshaws pushed from behind were a popular means of travel along the beach.70 They were typically pushed by African Americans.71 In several cover art examples, however, the chairs appear to be pushed by no one.72 In others, the features of the pusher are racially caricatured, with the ears and lips enlarged, in contrast to less demeaning depictions of whites.73 The significance of exclusion and differentiation becomes especially stark when considered in light of Bryant Simon’s view of Atlantic City’s draw as being, in part, a place where whites could revel in their distinction over African Americans.74 For Simon, the beach town’s decline was due to desegregation more than any other factor. When students piece together these ideas, I remind them that what they are discovering is likely something Simon had not proved using these specific primary sources, but inferred from other evidence.

Thus far, approximately 50 of the 177 pieces have been digitized and provided metadata records. My goal for the project is to have approximately two-thirds of the collection completed by the class and research assistants within the next few years before finishing the remainder with an Aresty student. Records created by students will need to be checked and standardized, following the guidelines set by the Sheet Music Consortium.75 In this manner, we may combine
some of the labor advantages of a “participatory archive” and avoid potential inconsistencies for
the end user.76

The structure of the Byrne Seminar and Aresty research program may not currently exist
or be easily replicable at other universities, but an independent study or internship model may
share some features with the undergraduate assistant program. Each tends to be open-ended,
structured around the needs of the librarian or archivist and the student. Unlike an independent
study course, which is often a semester long, the assistantship program lasts throughout the year;
the longer time allows the pursuit of deeper, more involved research questions, and a more
developed thesis.

Conclusion

Undergraduate research and Internet dissemination offer librarians and archivists extra
motivation for engaging students with special collections. Embedded librarianship and other
kinds of supportive activities are excellent opportunities, but direct curriculum design and
mentorship can benefit not only the student but the institution as well. Archivists and librarians
have taken and should continue to take active roles in promoting undergraduate research because
it allows us to place information literacy deep within the curriculum.77 Pugh, Yakel and Torres,
and others seem to cede the teaching of domain and interpretive knowledge to other departments.
But our unique, interdisciplinary perspective, our employment in a unit that specializes in one-
of-a-kind collections, and, increasingly, our focus on scholarly publishing combine to enable us
to contribute in significant ways.78 The digital information age signals not only a revolution in
terms of the creation of entirely new positions for librarians (for example, digital humanities or
data librarians) but also an evolution and extension of traditional ones.
I hope this case study’s focus, sheet music, seemed like an ideal area to explore in a project of this nature, but it took some creative problem-solving to find out what would be most beneficial to the students and the institution. Other universities may have different kinds of materials that deserve attention with librarian and archivist experts in alternate subjects. Materials typically housed in special collections—correspondence, documents related to the history of a university or community, oral histories, and many more—invite distinct approaches depending on the opportunities for student engagement your institution provides.

Several projects come to mind that librarians and archivists could develop into student engagement activities. Librarians with expertise in biology could have undergraduates try recipes from old cookbooks or anticipate the effects of herbal remedies whose contents and preparation are discussed in old medical volumes, resulting in an exhibit or perhaps a publication. Social work or anthropology experts may be interested in collaborating with students to add materials created by the local community to the archives. Geographic information system (GIS) specialists may guide students in mapping out the geographical history of local communities and making their work accessible online. Business librarians may be interested in the development of supermarket promotional materials; undergraduates could digitize or create metadata for the items and explore their relevance to today’s commercials. This article is not meant to provide a blueprint for re-creating a project developed at Rutgers or elsewhere. The specifics of programs, collections, and organizations differ to such a great degree that precise replication is impossible. What is possible, however, is a deeper involvement between the libraries and other departments leading to mutual appreciation for the important work done across the university.

Some librarians and archivists may hesitate to become an instructor of record or lead researcher, but the potential benefits are tremendous. Administrators should consider what
incentives might be offered—such as extra research funding or release time to prepare for classes—to encourage participation. More should be done to consider how faculty in nonlibrary departments might be persuaded to engage more deeply with special collections. Tenure and promotion for them normally focus on teaching, scholarship, and service. In addition to scholarship and service, librarians at Rutgers are evaluated on their librarianship, which encourages us to explore creative ways of engaging with our institution’s holdings in a manner that is perhaps atypical for other faculty.

Had I simply organized the Jerseyana Sheet Music materials myself, the task might have been completed more quickly, but that would have excluded students, who have contributed insights I may have missed without their participation. Furthermore, it would have been a solitary task. Loneliness was perhaps a reason for the spate of suicides in Babel. With an Aresty research assistant or Byrne Seminar student at hand, Borges’s librarians may not have felt so overwhelmed and isolated. Instead, the vast amount of material could have become a source of optimism: It is a virtually limitless natural resource that can be used to engage new users with archives.

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Notes


2. Examples of these are housed in Special Collections at Rutgers University Libraries of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, in New Brunswick.


6. Ibid., 50–51.


15. Ibid., 236.

16. Ibid., 239.

17. Ibid., 238.


19. Ibid., 20.


25. A secondary role could challenge Zhou’s recommendation that librarians and archivists should view themselves as “real instructors” (“Student Archival Research Activity,” 485).


29. Employment prospects in the years following the 2007–2009 recession, even for those with college degrees, have been discouraging. In 2011, when an undergraduate graduating in 2015 was a freshman, the jobless rate for 20 to 24 year olds with a bachelor’s degree was 8.7 percent; without a degree and with some college it was much higher. It has fallen since then, but in an employers’ market, students likely feel extra pressure to distinguish themselves from their peers. See United States Department of Education, National Center for Education


35. Ibid.


38. In a Byrne Seminar in the fall of 2015, 1,999 students enrolled, and 1,503 enrolled in the spring of 2016; Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, “About Byrne: By the Numbers,” accessed July 2, 2017, https://byrne.rutgers.edu/about-byrne/by-the-numbers. Having a smaller class size for archival study is in line with Anne Bahde’s analysis of the literature, though she herself advocates for taking materials outside of the archive to the potentially larger classroom itself. This is a laudable method to maximize outreach, but also limits student familiarity with archival policies and procedures, perhaps decreasing the likelihood of future visits. Anne Bahde, “Taking the Show on the Road: Special Collections Instruction in the Campus Classroom,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage* 12, 2 (2011): 78. Pugh’s preference is for bringing smaller numbers to the archive (*Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*, 53).


41. Librarians who have taught courses include Melissa Gasparotto, Connie Wu, Laura Palumbo, Lily Todorinova, Leslin Charles, and Francesca Gianetti. See Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Rutgers Undergraduate Academic Affairs, Byrne Seminars, 2016, “The Secrets (and Big Business) of Search Engines,” accessed October 5, 2016,

43. The structure of the course also satisfies two of Greg Johnson’s keys to introducing undergraduates to archives by making them seem less intimidating and showing the real value of the materials. See Greg Johnson, “Introducing Undergraduate Students to Archives and Special Collections,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 13, 2 (2006): 92.


46. Pugh, Providing Reference Services, 52. Compare with other, more open-ended topic selection instructors, such as Mazak and Manista, “Collaborative Learning,” 231, 241–42, or Zhou, “Student Archival Research Activity,” 481.

47. Readings include excerpts from Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, American Popular Music (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Students tend to enjoy the quizzes the least, and they are atypical in seminars, but I believe they help motivate and reward more serious engagement with the readings, ensure a common base of knowledge, and promote thoughtful discussion during class.


51. Discussions are typically lively, so we seldom finish our survey of popular music in the first few days and must use time in the remaining classes.

52. Bahde, “Taking the Show on the Road,” 86; Pugh also notes the importance of “hands-on” engagement (Providing Reference Services, 55).


58. Yakel and Torres, “AI,” 50. Two teams present their songs, each arguing that theirs is the better state song. The rest of the class votes by secret ballot, and on that ballot, they write why they voted as they did. Winners move on to the next round of debating.

59. Other fields typically include other contributors (such as arranger, performer, and the like), subject (topic of the piece), genre (waltz, parlor song), location, call number, lyrics, size, pages, rights, instruments, date digitized, identification number (if applicable), and notes.


61. Byrne Seminar students are good candidates for the Aresty research program, rather than vice versa, since the seminar can only be taken during their freshman year, while students may not apply to the Aresty program until after their freshman year has begun.
62. In lieu of a final grade, the Aresty Research Center sends out a midsemester and end-of-year evaluation form asking whether the student is performing or has performed satisfactorily.


72. For example, Joe Goodwin, Ballard Macdonald, and Halsey K. Mohr, “Rolling in His Little Rolling Chair” (New York: Shapiro, Bernstein, 1917).

73. For example, Edward Jolly and Bob Alden, “Take Me to Atlantic City Down by the Sea” (New York: Nathan Bivins, 1905).

74. Simon, Boardwalk of Dreams, 10.


76. Huvila, “Participatory Archive,” 32.

77. Yakel and Torres, “AI,” 77.

78. Yakel and Torres, “AI,” 52; Pugh, Providing Reference Services, 54.


80. Widener and Slater, “Mapping an American College Town.”


82. Magia Krause notes that studies have generally undervalued “the education contribution of archivists and special collection librarians in developing instructional materials and directly