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Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives ed. by Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, and Suzy Taraba (review)

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Anne Bahde

From: portal: [Libraries and the Academy](#)
 Volume 13, Number 4, October 2013
 pp. 423-424 | 10.1353/pla.2013.0039

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Instruction in special collections and archives environments has been gaining attention in recent years, evidenced by a steady increase in the literature on instructional case studies using primary source materials, as well as increased activity within the ALA Connect community called Special Collections Teaching Strategies, and the Reference, Access, and Outreach Section of the Society of American Archivists. Despite this increased attention, the literature on instruction with original materials remains relatively limited, and compared to information literacy literature, only modestly offers best practices for pedagogy or programmatic models.

With the publication of *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives*, editors Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, and Suzy Taraba have improved this environment dramatically, essentially doubling the literature on instruction in special collections and archives with this fantastically useful collection of case studies. The book includes nearly fifty case studies exploring the direct use of special collections and archives materials in undergraduate education. The work is divided into four complementary sections, which effectively categorize each contribution.

Section one, *The Artifact*, presents case studies that focus on teaching the materiality of unique materials, either in single class sessions or full courses. With just one or two exceptions, the contributions in this section emphasize rare books or manuscripts, including two interesting projects integrating the book arts into undergraduate class sessions. Notable in this section is Michael Paulus' essay, "What is Primary: Teaching Archival Epistemology and the Sources Continuum." This continuum is an intriguing concept that "provides a framework for exploring and conceptualizing the primacy of sources," and will be of enduring use to librarians, archivists, and historians teaching the complex issues that primary sources can raise. (p. 77)

Section two, *The Pedagogy*, focuses on creative pedagogical methods for unique and original materials, in class sessions, course modules, or full courses. Several case studies in this section present inventive techniques for engaging disciplines that can be more challenging to attract and involve with special collections materials, such as creative writing, biochemistry, microbiology, psychology, and music. One particularly compelling project from New York University asked computer science students to build an integrated digital archive site featuring a catalogue of digitized primary sources as well as a narrative exhibit element. A fine example of strong pedagogical collaboration between humanities teaching faculty, special collections librarians, and archivists, this adaptable project can yield both an original product for students' capstone portfolio and a digital resource for the library.

Section three, *The Program*, is a shorter section that includes wide-ranging, multidisciplinary programmatic models for integrating primary source-based curriculum at the institutional level; for example, book history programs (Oberlin College and University of Wyoming), and an undergraduate curriculum program based on the holdings of a digital library (University of California). An especially innovative contribution from Sarah Horowitz and Jamie Nelson at Augustana College describes a faculty stipend program to encourage use of primary source materials across the curriculum, an effort which has drastically increased both instruction sessions and student use of collections.

The final section, *The Work*, demonstrates the integration of students into the fundamental description, access, or outreach work of special collections or archives departments. Examples of student-curated exhibitions, blogs, and even collections are featured in this section, along with ideas for student-led processing and digitization projects. The case study on undergraduate research partnerships at Lafayette College, described by Diane Shaw, showcases the remarkable range of internal projects accomplished by Lafayette's Excel Scholars, academically talented students who gain real-world skills and knowledge through a program of experiential learning in the special collections department. Through this program, the department makes a meaningful contribution to the teaching and learning mission of the university, and generates products that improve access to holdings and enrich outreach efforts.

The only negative aspect to the book is its organization scheme within the table of contents. Here, the name of the

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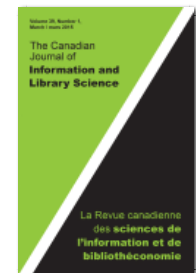
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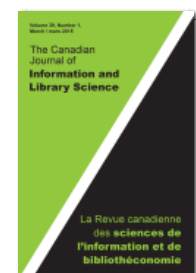
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contributor's institution, rather than the name of the contributor takes the primary place, which can make it difficult to return to a case study if one cannot remember the institution from which it was contributed. An index or table of contents categorizing the case studies by material type, discipline, or at least author name might...



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portal: Reviews

Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives, ed. Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, and Suzy Taraba. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012. 320p. \$60 (ISBN 978-083898610-3).

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