

# Understanding Access in Academic Library Special Collections

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## ABSTRACT

Over the course of the long 20th century, American academic libraries have collected and championed rare and unique non-circulating materials now referred to as *special collections*. Because of the presumed rarity and value of these materials, they are handled differently than materials in other parts of academic library collections. Thus, a different set of access policies and procedures, as well as specialized staff, have long been practiced. This research project looks at how ideas of access to special collections have changed during the period 1936 to 2019. Interviews with 21 special collections professionals with between 5 and 50 years of experience were conducted. Using a grounded theory approach, a conceptual model of the aspects of access was developed. Ten aspects of access (diversity, documentation, engagement, preservation, provision, readers, security, spaces, stewardship, technology) were mapped onto three overarching categories of intellectual, physical, and sociocultural access. An exploration of access through the lens of special collections is especially meaningful because of the tension between the principles of preservation and access within the special collections community. This project is also significant as the library profession as a whole explores how representation of diversity within collections impacts library users. Special collections librarians and archivists are exploring how to change collecting and description practices to better represent or be more inclusive of underrepresented voices in these spaces of the library that can feel even less accessible or inclusive than the general collection. Exploring how we think about access should be part of these ongoing conversations.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Academic libraries; Archives; Sociology of Information

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Special Collections; Access; Stewardship