



# Curation Beyond Collecting: Modern Trends in Special Collections Curatorship as Shown through Job Advertisement Analysis

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**abstract:** To date, no one has conducted a big-picture study of what it means to be a special collections curator. This article analyzes 143 job advertisements posted over a decade to determine what types of institutions employ curators and where they fit into institutional structures and values; what types of education are desirable; what types of objects or collections they curate; and what categories of work are included as part of their jobs. The article also considers the meanings of these findings as well as the ways job descriptions do and do not reflect who is hired and what work is done.

## Introduction

In March of 2020, the *New York Times* published an article titled “Everyone’s a Curator Now: When everything is ‘curated,’ what does the word even mean?”<sup>1</sup> While the article mainly focuses on the museum world in the age of Instagram, and partly on exhibition curation, it also gestures toward an existential question in 21st century special collections librarianship. What does it mean to be a special collections curator in an environment where discussions of teaching, research, and use, or new modes of cataloging and description, are prioritized over the amassing of grand collections?

The Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that curators “lead the acquisition, storage, and exhibition of collections,” although they define them in the museum context.<sup>2</sup> Often considered a prestigious position in libraries, beyond a “librarian” or “archivist,” curator positions are sometimes framed as the “alt-ac” (alternate academic) positions

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closest to teaching faculty. But what do these positions actually look like in today's special collections world? How many institutions are hiring curators? Where are they located and what kind of institutions are they? Who do these positions report to, and who in turn reports to them? What educational background is desirable for this type of position? What types of collections are curators asked to manage, and what types of job responsibilities do they have? The authors of this article analyzed special collections library job advertisements explicitly described as "curator" in their titles from 2013 to 2023 in order to answer these questions, develop a sense of how the special collections community more broadly is articulating curation as a concept, and attempt to make some determinations about what a special collections curator does and what role they play in a contemporary special collections environment.

## Literature Review

### Job Description Studies

Many authors have used job advertisements to explore a variety of librarianship trends, including questions related to educational requirements, job duties, and other aspects of professional librarian work.<sup>3</sup> As noted by Ye Yuan, A.M.K. Yanti Idaya, A. Noorhidawati, and Guan Wang, "In library and information science, analyzing job advertisements is

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a prevalent method for pinpointing employment trends, qualifications, and competency requirements. This method is extensively used to evaluate the evolving duties and skill requirements of librarians across diverse roles, emphasizing the dynamic nature of library professions."<sup>4</sup> These advertisements are also marketing materials used to achieve institutional goals, so it is important for them to be in alignment with institutional priorities.<sup>5</sup> Special collections librarianship is no exception. Literature on special collections jobs using the methodol-

ogy of analyzing position postings has tended to focus on what they can say about the greater state of the field, the educational expectations for positions, and what special collections practitioners are asked to do as part of their workload. Some of these articles have mentioned curators, but curatorial positions have not previously been the subject of a concentrated study of job descriptions.

According to the 2015 Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) membership survey, the MLIS is the most common degree for special collections librarians, with 89 percent of those responding holding one; the 2023 membership survey did not report data on degrees. Fifty-six percent of curators responding held a subject master's degree.<sup>6</sup> In her 2023 study of curators at Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries Amy Hildreth Chen found that those studied "come from humanities backgrounds and

have graduate degrees, but these degrees are usually professional or master's degrees in subject areas rather than doctorates," with 53 percent of the individuals in her study holding library and information science degrees.<sup>7</sup> A study of entry-level archivist job advertisements from 2006 to 2013 found that 65% of the advertisements for entry-level archivist jobs required an MLS, and 26 percent an MLS or another master's degree (the study eliminated positions requiring PhDs). Eighty-eight percent of the advertisements did not require or prefer a second master's degree.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a study of archival job postings from 2006 to 2014 found that 68 percent required a master's degree, and that only those positions at public and private institutions tended to mention a second master's.<sup>9</sup> A study of entry-level special collections job advertisements from 2004 to 2009 found that the MLIS degree was required just over 50 percent of the time, while a second master's degree was required eight percent of the time and a PhD only one percent of the time. Eighty-two percent of position descriptions which included preferred degrees asked for a specialized advanced degree beyond the MLIS.<sup>10</sup> Another study of special collections job advertisements from 2013 to 2021 found that 89.3 percent mentioned a library degree and 48.8 percent required a library degree; 6.5 percent mentioned and 1.5 percent required a PhD; and 6.5 percent required a subject area degree.<sup>11</sup>

Various studies have also investigated what kinds of job duties or areas of work are emphasized in special collections position descriptions. Kellee E. Warren and Jung Mi Scoulas analyzed 24 job advertisements for special collections public services professionals from 2017 to 2019. They noted that the common areas of expertise for these public service professionals included instruction; promotion and outreach; reference; collection development; description and access; information technologies; management, supervision, and leadership; preservation and conservation; scholarship; copyright permissions; digital humanities; and project management.<sup>12</sup> Kelli Hanson found that the most common job duties and responsibilities for entry-level special collections librarians could be grouped under teaching and research (82.95 percent); promotion and outreach (81.82 percent) public service (81.82 percent), management and administration (81.82 percent), and cataloging and processing (79.55 percent).<sup>13</sup> Ikumi Corocoll and Kelli Hansen grouped job requirements found in special collections job postings according to the ACRL/RBMS Competencies for Special Collections Professionals, finding that the most common were management, supervision, and leadership (77.6 percent), followed by promotion and outreach (65.6 percent) and technologies and data management (64.2 percent).<sup>14</sup> Chen's study revealed that curatorial roles generally were related to stewardship of collections rather than services.<sup>15</sup>

Few have conducted studies of how diversity, equity, and inclusion are treated in special collections job advertisements. Ruth Xing and Yuzhou Bai recently created an 11-point diversity, equity, inclusion, and access assessment for special collections entry-level positions. In evaluating these postings, they found that few connected institutional-level DEI work to the specific work of special collections.<sup>16</sup>

### Situating Curatorship

Lawrence Clark Powell famously opined that "If the library wishes to emphasize *acquisition* of rare materials rather than the *service* they will be put to, then it is not necessary

that a library graduate be employed.”<sup>17</sup> While it is unclear where the concept of the curator in special collections first began, it can likely be traced back to the “bookmen” like Powell who were in charge of the early rare book collections in US libraries and who were –insistently– not professional librarians, but were known as curators.<sup>18</sup> The origin of the term bookmen is likewise murky, but was often used by Powell and other early rare book curators to describe themselves in their literature. These early curators tended to resist professionally trained librarians, perhaps in part because these librarians tended to be women; the curators also insisted on the importance of scholarship for rare book work, rather than administrative knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Randolph G. Adams noted that since a librarian was “no longer a curator of books—he is an administrative official and a promoter of adult education” the librarian was in danger of becoming an enemy of books, and Powell noted with concern that the inclusion of technical skills for librarians had made them seem less prestigious than teaching faculty.<sup>20</sup> As rare book and special collections departments expanded in size and scope, professionally trained librarians took on positions as the heads of these units, with different and more expansive priorities regarding access, while bookmen remained as scholar/curators.<sup>21</sup>

Bookmen are no longer the only type of curator. At the RBMS 2024 Conference, three panelists currently employed as curators described not knowing much about curatorship when they began their library studies or careers, nor did they initially identify as curators. The panelists also noted that they felt their current curatorial work was collaborative across library and special collections units, that there was a focus on teaching with materials, that they thought differently about how to spend budgets than they perceived previous curators to have done, and that there was less focus on being a subject specialist.<sup>22</sup> This change from subject specialist to balancer of different job functions is also evident elsewhere in librarianship, as Xiang Li and Tang Li noted in their study of East Asian Studies librarian postings.<sup>23</sup> Li and Li also noted that East Asian Studies librarians used to be considered information curators, but the focus of their work in the past decade, as seen through job postings, has shifted toward users.<sup>24</sup>

Literature related to the work of curators has often focused on collection development, one of the traditional aspects of curatorial work. For example, Amy Hildreth Chen’s *Placing Papers* discusses questions of institutional and collection prestige with a wide view of the market for American literary archives. As Chen notes, institutions have “cumulative cultural prestige” that is the result of the collections they have brought together, and it is often a curator’s job to do some of this work.<sup>25</sup> The Society of American Archivists (SAA) glossary also embraces this line of thinking and defines curators as “the administrative head of a museum or collection” with the note that this “carries the connotation, especially in museums and galleries, of an individual who selects items based on artistic merit or connoisseurship.”<sup>26</sup> Given the prevalence of curators in the special collections library field, it is surprising and unfortunate that SAA fails to address them in this context, instead focusing on the narrow context of museum administration in their glossary. Outside of a glossary, the RBMS Core Competencies for Special Collections Librarians also avoids addressing curatorship in special collections.<sup>27</sup> This standard provides basic competencies for all special collections librarians as well as skilled competencies within the areas of collection development, description and access, information technologies and data management, instruction, management and leadership,



preservation and conservation, promotion and outreach, and reference. Curatorship is not specifically mentioned, which may indicate that the profession thinks of curatorship more as an amalgamation of many competencies rather than a single, specific skill area. The term's absence could also indicate that curatorship remains somewhat outside the professional librarian landscape, as Powell and his fellow bookmen desired.

Several recent publications about the state and future of special collections have tended to focus on the concept of stewardship, which has major implications for the collections-focused curatorial role. In thinking about stewardship, questions about collection management and

institutional capacity are considered alongside questions about collection development or collection building. The most influential work in this area has been OCLC's *Total Cost of Stewardship* report, which also includes a suite of

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tools to enable institutions to consider these questions.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the RBMS Code of Ethics for Special Collections Practitioners (revised in 2020), includes the importance of assessing the resources available to describe, preserve, and maintain collections when making decisions about materials to acquire.<sup>29</sup> The RBMS Task Force on Climate Change final report calls for the "deliberate restraint of expansion," when thinking about the profession generally, including collecting.<sup>30</sup> When speaking about their work, many special collections librarians are likely to talk about resource scarcity in addition to important collections.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the profession lacking an agreed-upon definition, many are employed under the curator title. The latest RBMS membership survey from 2023 indicates that curator is within the top five results for job types selected by RBMS members, although no specific numbers or percentages are given.<sup>32</sup> In the 2015 membership survey, curators comprised six percent of the respondents, the fifth most common position type, a drop from 11 percent in the previous 1997 survey.<sup>33</sup> Elspeth Healey and Melissa Nykanen also noted a drop in format-specific curator positions, but an addition of multi-format curatorial positions, perhaps indicating a change in how curatorial positions were constructed.<sup>34</sup>

## Methodology

### Data Selection

Job advertisements present concrete descriptions of what institutions value and prioritize, both in the work they ask staff to do and the skills and background they want staff to have. While individual staff may have specific ideas about and views of their work, job advertisements often go through several layers of administrative review before posting and tangibly demonstrate the strategic priorities of an institution or department. Creating and updating job descriptions can serve as an opportunity to better emphasize



institutional goals through the role of this specific team member within their department. Further, the number of job advertisements for a particular type of position can tell us something about how in-demand that type of work is within the broader profession. While the authors could have spoken with contemporary curators about their work through interviews or surveys, they decided that a review of job advertisements would give a better sense of how the greater library profession, across a wide variety of institution types and years, viewed the work of curators.

The authors selected the RBMS News Blog as their source of job postings because it is marketed specifically to special collections workers in the United States, does not require payment to post or access listings, and typically contains the detailed descriptions of a position's qualifications and job duties.<sup>35</sup> The first job posting to the RBMS News Blog was made in June 2013, which also afforded a decade-long dataset.

In July 2023, the authors asked the chair of the RBMS Publications and Communications Committee, which manages the RBMS News Blog, for access to a batch of the RBMS job postings. A dataset of 1,198 job postings was shared with the authors, and included postings until the date of data collection. The authors then used OpenRefine to narrow the position listings to the 147 with the word "curator" in the position title before receiving assistance from the University of Kentucky's Research Data Librarian to generate a series of notepad files for easier coding. On December 21, 2023, the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board determined that this project did not require IRB review.

### Coding and Norming Procedure

While preparing the files for analysis, the authors determined that they would code for the following categories:

- **job title;**
- **year of posting;**
- **whether** the position had responsibility beyond curatorship noted in the position title;
- **hiring institution;**
- **whether** the position was at a higher educational institution and, if so, what its Carnegie Classification was;
- **geographic** location by state;
- **what** type of materials the job advertisement indicated the person would be curating;
- **if** degree requirements were mentioned and, if so, the required and preferred degrees;
- **whether** job duties were mentioned and, if so, what types;
- **if** statements about institutional DEI or DEI work were included in the description; and,
- **if** mentioned, the institutional hierarchy and reporting lines.

The authors divided the coding work, with one coding the odd numbered descriptions and the other the even. Both authors conducted a series of test analyses on the same job advertisements in order to norm their approach to the data. The authors also made some adjustments to their questions, coding forms, and methodology documentation by refining categories and definitions in order to be sure they were recording the information they needed during this norming process. They created a coding guidelines document, to refer to throughout the coding process in order to promote consistency. In support

of this consistency, only material posted on the RBMS News Blog was included in the coding, even if there was a longer job advertisement posted elsewhere or the authors had personal knowledge about the advertisements in question.

Coding was conducted using a Qualtrics survey because it allowed for branched response paths based on responses to specific questions. Review during the coding process led to the elimination of five postings and the duplication of one listing, as it advertised two curator positions. These uncoded positions included the descriptor “curatorial” as part of their title but were not actually curatorial library jobs. The authors also decided that they would code similar advertisements posted by the same institution for what appeared to be the same position listed at different times. They reasoned that there was no way to know whether they were indeed for the same position, whether the position had been filled or not, or whether position descriptions were changed from one listing to the next. The final dataset included 143 job advertisements, which were used as the basis for the analysis that follows. The authors analyzed their results using Qualtrics and Excel and rounded results to the nearest percent, meaning that reported numbers may not add to 100.

## Results and Discussion

### Job Posting Trends

Overall, the number of curatorial positions posted each year to the RBMS News Blog remained relatively consistent (see Table 1). The smaller number of positions listed in 2013 may have been due to the fact that data was only available for six months of that year or to the fact that the RBMS News Blog may have taken time to gain traction. The

**Table 1.**  
Curatorial job postings by year, from 2013 through 2023

Year	Number of Postings	Percentage of Total
2013	1	1%
2014	14	10%
2015	7	5%
2016	11	8%
2017	15	10%
2018	18	13%
2019	17	12%
2020	12	8%
2021	8	6%
2022	30	21%
2023	10	7%



## Table 2.

### Geographic distribution of job postings, by US state

State	Number of Job Postings
Arizona	2
California	9
Connecticut	4
Washington, DC	7
Florida	3
Georgia	2
Iowa	1
Illinois	6
Indiana	2
Kansas	8
Kentucky	1
Louisiana	1
Massachusetts	13
Maryland	3
Michigan	3
Minnesota	6
Missouri	7
North Carolina	5
New Jersey	1
New York	19
Ohio	2
Pennsylvania	6
Rhode Island	5
South Carolina	1
Tennessee	5
Texas	11
Utah	3
Virginia	4

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spike in postings in 2022 may partly be attributed to the low number of curator postings in 2021, when institutions were suffering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and many were facing budget shortages.

The authors recorded geographic location by state in order to examine any trends regarding where more curator jobs were posted over time. Three postings were international, so the total number of United States-based positions coded here is 140. Most positions posted on the RBMS News Blog were for institutions located in the United States, which makes sense given that the organization is part of the American Library Association, where most of the membership is based in the United States (see Table 2).

Geographic locations remained consistently spaced throughout the decade, offering no evidence of certain regions prioritizing the curatorial title over others, or different regions adopting or abandoning the title over time. Due to the large number of higher education institutions present in each state, it makes sense that New York, Massachusetts, and Texas would have a high number of posted listings. While the 2023 RBMS membership survey results did not focus on the geographic location of current section members to the same degree the 2015 membership survey did, two of the states with the most job postings listed (New York, Texas) were also two states with the highest representation of RBMS members in 2015.<sup>36</sup> This may also suggest a greater awareness of the RBMS News Blog as an advertisement resource for those communities rather than a higher number of available positions within those states. Ikumi Crocoll and Kelli Hansen's recent study of all RBMS job postings from 2013 through 2021 found over half of the postings came from only six states; four of those same states also posted the most curator positions during the period under current study (New York, Massachusetts, Texas, California), though in a different order of frequency.<sup>37</sup> These overlaps suggest that locations where there are more openings (as shown by RBMS membership and frequent job postings) are likely to be well-represented in the special collections curatorial field.

### Higher Education and Carnegie Classification

Curatorial positions may often be seen as belonging to large, well-resourced universities, partly because the word curator gestures toward prestige, and partly because larger institutions with more sizable library staff are more likely to have the kind of specialized positions (and acquisitions budgets) traditionally associated with having curators on staff. However, not all curatorial positions in the dataset were located at higher education institutions. While most position announcements, 110 (77percent), were posted by institutions of higher education, 33 (23percent) were posted by other types of institutions.

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## Table 3.

Carnegie Classifications of higher education institutions represented within the dataset

Carnegie Classification	Number of Institutions	Percentage of Dataset
Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	82	75%
Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity	16	15%
Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus	6	5%
Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs	1	1%
Master's Colleges & Universities: Small Programs	1	1%
Special Focus Four-Year: Research Institution	1	1%
Not Applicable	3	3%

To better conceptualize the size and prestige of institutions of higher education in a relatively sustainable way, the authors relied on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, “the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education” and a frequently-used method of describing institution type. Because analysis was conducted in 2024, the authors used the basic 2021 Carnegie Classification definitions in coding; the 2025 classifications had not yet been released at the time of analysis (see Table 3).<sup>38</sup>

The largest number of curatorial jobs were posted by “Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity.” These are institutions that award PhD degrees and conduct a high level of research, as determined by research spending at the institutional level. There were 82 institutions that fit into this category. There were 16 “Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity,” a category that includes PhD-awarding institutions with a lower level of research spending. There were six curatorial job postings from “Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus” institutions; these represent institutions that mainly award bachelor’s degrees and not advanced degrees. There was one posting each from “Master’s Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs,” “Master’s Colleges & Universities: Small Programs,” and “Special Focus Four-Year: Research Institution(s).” Master’s Colleges and Universities award master’s degrees; they are divided by Carnegie into



Larger programs, Medium programs, and Small programs based on the number of master's degrees awarded. Special Focus institutions are those where "a high concentration of degrees is in a single field or set of related fields." These are divided into two- and four-year programs and include categories such as arts and music, law, medicine, and engineering.<sup>39</sup> Three higher education institutions were international and thus the Carnegie classifications were not applicable.

While it stands to reason that the largest number of curatorial job postings were found at institutions with high research activity, as represented in the Carnegie Classifications, it is worth noting that there were

more postings at baccalaureate institutions than there were at master's-granting ones. All the baccalaureate institutions in this dataset are members of the Oberlin Group, a library group of "leading liberal arts colleges and small universities in the United States."<sup>40</sup> While special collections is not necessarily a focus of the Oberlin Group itself, many of its members are among the oldest and most well-known liberal arts colleges in the country, which might explain why they have strong special collections programs similar to those found at institutions with high research activity. Many of these small liberal arts colleges are older and more well-funded than non-flagship state institutions that offer master's programs.

### Institutional Hierarchy and Reporting Lines

The authors examined reporting lines for special collections curators as a way to understand where they fit into the organizational structure and the overall hierarchy of special collections departments (see Table 4). Ninety-three (65 percent) of the selected job advertisements indicated some sort of institutional hierarchy, while 50 (35 percent) did not. Within the 93 postings that indicated a hierarchy, the authors coded to whom these curators were listed as reporting as well as their direct reports. Only 81 advertisements noted to whom the curator reported. These postings were classified into the following categories of supervising position: heads of libraries, such as library deans, library directors, and college librarians; associate head librarians and associate deans; heads of special collections departments or divisions, such as director of special collections; and associate or assistant department head, group head, or assistant director of special collections; and other.

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## Table 4.

Reporting lines for curator positions, as indicated in job advertisements

Title	Number	Percentage of Dataset
Head of Library	10	12%
Associate Head Librarian	10	12%
Head of Special Collections	42	52%
Associate/ Assistant Head of Special Collections	10	12%
Other	9	11%

The most common reporting line for curators was to the head of the special collections department, represented in 42 of the applicable job advertisements. Beyond the departmental level, the authors found ten job advertisements in which the curator reported directly to the head of the library or library dean and ten job advertisements in which the curator reported to the associate head librarian or associate dean. Ten of the curators reported to associate special collections directors or directors of a group within special collections. Nine curators reported to a different position, including another curator, head of a special library, or directors of collections beyond special collections. One might assume that the Carnegie Classification of an institution directly correlates to the type of reporting structure a curator has, but this is not necessarily the case. Curatorship postings from four different Carnegie classifications (Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus, Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity, Master's Colleges & Universities: Small Programs, and Special Focus Four-Year: Research Institution) all reported to the head of the library.

Conversely, for special collections curatorial positions beyond the higher education space, the most common reporting structure, at just over a quarter of the positions, was for the curator to report to an associate or assistant special collections department head (see Table 5). This type of reporting line implies more layers of hierarchy than might be expected at an independent library and could indicate that these types of institutions have enough curators that it makes sense for them to have their own unit, rather than reporting to a director of special collections or someone higher up in the library hierarchy.

Reporting lines are an important signifier of organizational priorities and a position's prestige within the institutional hierarchy. Reporting to someone at the level of a dean or associate dean gives that worker access to certain information and personal connections, which may impact their standing throughout the organization or future career prospects. Jae Jennifer Rossman's historical discussion of the ways in which curators and library



## Table 5.

Reporting lines for non-higher education curators, as indicated in job advertisements

Title	Number	Percentage of Dataset
Head of Library	4	17%
Associate Head Librarian	4	17%
Head of Special Collections	4	17%
Associate/Assistant Head of Special Collections	6	26%
Other	5	21%

administrators have often had different views of how special collections departments should operate suggests that, at least in the past, significant distance between curators and upper library administration may have been a deliberate choice that allowed bookmen-type curators to operate on their own, while professional librarians maintained special collections units that were more integrated within larger library structures.

### Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

How do institutions recognize and acknowledge the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in job advertisements? Because there are many ways that DEI could be represented, each of which demonstrates varying levels of institutional commitment to these ideas, the authors looked at the data in multiple ways. First, they determined whether the job advertisement included a statement or mention of DEI. This did not include Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) statements that appear at the bottom of many job postings. Eighty-six of the job advertisements coded did not include a DEI statement or mention, while 57 did (see Table 6).

There were few job postings that mentioned DEI at all in the early years within the dataset. There was a notable increase in 2018, which is difficult to attribute directly, but may be part of a long tail of influence of growing awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and policies of the first Donald Trump presidency. There was another increase in 2021 to 2022, which was likely influenced by the murder of George Floyd and resulting Black Lives Matter protests. While the number of position postings was much lower in 2023, the percentage with DEI components remained high in comparison to the years prior to 2020. The rise in DEI elements in job advertisements goes beyond special collections, as this trend was also found in a 2022 study of technical services job postings.<sup>41</sup> Given the current backlash against DEI, new state and federal laws related to race, and law-



Table 6.

Job posting inclusion of DEI information by year

Year	DEI Present = Yes	DEI Present = No	Percentage that includes DEI
2013	0	1	0%
2014	2	12	14%
2015	1	6	14%
2016	0	11	0%
2017	1	14	6%
2018	7	11	39%
2019	8	9	47%
2020	6	6	50%
2021	6	2	75%
2022	20	10	66%
2023	6	4	60%
All years	57	86	40%

suits against affirmative action hiring practices, it will be interesting to see in the future whether DEI continues to be a prominent component of curatorial job ads, particularly those in institutions of higher education.

For those positions that did include DEI as part of the description, the authors coded for whether this was part of the job duties of the curator or whether it was noted as an institutional priority. The authors defined DEI work as relating to marginalized communities, as opposed to meaning “wide-ranging.” When evaluating job duties, the authors looked for requirements around working with diverse communities and diverse collections, reparative description projects, and historical research projects re-

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lated to diverse communities. The authors coded DEI as among institutional priorities when there was language that the institution valued having a diverse staff or made note of the importance of diverse voices. Because there is some overlap in these categories—having a job where a major component is reparative description or community collecting work is an example of an institutional priority, after all—the authors chose either one or both categories during coding (see Table 7).



**Table 7.**  
Types of DEI information present in job descriptions

Year	Articulated Institutional Priority	Part of Job Duties	Both Institutional Priority and Part of Job Duties
2014	2	0	0
2015	1	0	0
2017	1	0	0
2018	5	1	1
2019	6	1	1
2020	3	3	0
2021	1	0	5
2022	5	1	14
2023	2	1	3
Total	26	7	24

Of the 57 job advertisements that included DEI in some way, 31 job advertisements (54 percent) included DEI as part of the job duties, while 50 (88 percent) included DEI as an institutional priority. Thus, it is much more common for DEI to be noted as an institutional priority, rather than to be formally incorporated into the description of work noted in a job advertisement. Including DEI work in a job description enables the job holder and their supervisor to allocate time to that specific work and to note it as a priority. The study shows that DEI work as part of a position's duties was slower to emerge than DEI as an articulated institutional priority. This is similar to Xing and Bai's finding that few job postings in their study connected institutional-level DEI work to special collections work more specifically.<sup>42</sup> Kara Malefant and Sian Brannon also noted in their discussion of the 2023 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey that from 2020 to 2023 institutions increased their written goals and focus areas around EDI though there was a small decline in some academic institutions undertaking these activities.<sup>43</sup>

### Educational Background

Curatorial jobs often have deep connections to materials and, in many ways, this type of work benefits from specialized subject knowledge. Many people working in special collections departments also employ the theoretical underpinnings necessary to organize massive collections in varying formats and to make these materials available to users with a wide range of backgrounds and expertise. Curators must be able to converse



with subject specialists who need to consult materials, undergraduates learning to use rare materials, and their institutional colleagues who organize and make accessible the materials they acquire. Because of these wide-ranging needs, the authors wanted to consider what degrees were listed as required or preferred in curatorial job advertisements, in case one type of knowledge was viewed as more desirable than another by hiring managers. When coding for degrees, the authors first noted whether there were any listed degree requirements in the position. If present, they were then coded as master's of library science

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**Curators must be able to converse with subject specialists who need to consult materials, undergraduates learning to use rare materials, and their institutional colleagues who organize and make accessible the materials they acquire.**

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(MLS), both MLS and an advanced subject degree, MLS or an advanced subject degree, an advanced subject degree only, or a doctorate only. The "MLS" code indicated an MLS, MLIS, or equivalent was acceptable, showing that an advertisement prioritized a librarianship skill set over specialized subject knowledge. When assessing the preferred degree, if the advertisement mentioned both an MA and PhD but no preference for one, "Advanced Subject Degree" was selected instead of each.

Of the 143 job advertisements examined, 118 (83 percent) mentioned degree requirements while 25 (17 percent) did not (see Table 8). The most common degree requirement specified in a curator job advertisement was holding an MLS, which suggests library skills are more highly prioritized than specialized subject knowledge for many current curatorial positions. This is an especially interesting finding given the recent rise of graduate programs in Curatorial Studies, which may incorporate library science courses into their programs but are often housed in other departments.<sup>44</sup> Such degrees are similar to LIS programs in that they specialize in an area of professional work rather than an academic subject.

Preferred degrees were less common, with only 48 (34 percent) of advertisements listing a preferred degree (see Table 9). Given the prevalence of an MLS as a degree requirement for most postings, it is not surprising that the most common preferred degree is an advanced subject degree. This suggests that while the general skills of librarianship are the most prioritized by hiring administrators, having subject knowledge is also important for curatorial positions. It is interesting to note, however, that this subject degree does not have to be a PhD, but only an advanced subject degree of some kind.

This emphasis on MLS degrees is especially interesting, as a recent survey of librarians with and without PhDs identified special collections as the second highest area which those surveyed thought could benefit from having PhD holders in positions; only a small number of the respondents identified as special collections librarians, however, so this is an outside perspective on the work of special collections practitioners.<sup>45</sup> Thea Lindquist and Todd Gilman also found that PhD holders were desirable candidates for library collection development and rare books or special collections positions, which make use of their advanced subject knowledge.<sup>46</sup> However, they also noted that many of these PhD holders are nearing retirement, so it is possible that they represent an older version of



## Table 8.

Required degrees, as listed in curator job postings

Required Degree	Count	Percentage of Dataset
MLS only	59	50%
Both MLS and an advanced subject degree	15	13%
MLS or an advanced subject degree	23	19%
Advanced subject degree only	19	16%
Other	2	2%

## Table 9.

Preferred degrees for curators, as listed in job postings

Preferred Degree	Count	Percentage of Dataset
MLS only	5	10%
MLS or an advanced subject degree	8	17%
Advanced subject degree	22	46%
Doctorate only	13	27%

the special collections curator model, and a new model is emerging—or at least that library administrators writing job advertisements are amenable to such an emergence.

These required and preferred degree findings are relatively consistent with those seen in Amy Hildreth Chen's article on curators at the top 25 ARL libraries, which found that 53 percent of curators had a MLIS, 41 percent a subject master's degree, and 32 percent a subject doctorate.<sup>47</sup> The percentage of MLIS degrees is of particular interest, since the top 25 ARL libraries would be considered by many to be the most resourced and most prestigious curatorial positions available in academia within the United States. This may explain why Chen found a higher percentage of PhD-holding curators than is represented by the advertisements in this dataset. Of course, what job advertisements say is

desired and what search committees decide on is not a perfect match, and PhD-holding candidates may be hired for positions where that degree is not required or preferred. Chen also found that curators without subject degrees were more likely (53 percent) to be women, and that 29 percent of men and 71 percent of women in her dataset had MLIS degrees, which further tracks with Rossman's historical analysis of bookmen as curators and subject specialists who were usually male and did not have library degrees.<sup>48</sup> Given the required and preferred degrees documented here, this dataset would indicate that the profession is moving away from such a curatorial model, at least in theory, or that there is at least an interest in prioritizing library knowledge with some subject specialization over solely specialized knowledge of an academic subject area.

### What Do Curators Curate?

The authors assessed what kinds of collections curators oversee by reviewing job titles, descriptions of job responsibilities, and the types of collections described in job advertisements. They divided this work into five categories: format, subject, time period, geographical area, and none of the above. Format meant working with a specific type of material, such as rare books, manuscripts, or born-digital materials; if the position was responsible for multiple formats, it was not coded as format, as the curator was charged with stewarding more than one physical or digital type of material.<sup>49</sup> Subject curators were those who had a deeply specialized area of responsibility, such as literary manuscripts or architecture. Curators defined by time period included work focused on Early Modern or contemporary collections. Geographical area was taken to mean collections defined by a particular region, such as Western Americana, China, or the history of a particular state. None of the above was used if the description was generic, such as "special collections curator," and there was nothing in the text of the advertisement that indicated a more specific set of responsibilities. The authors could also opt to select multiple categories because it is possible for positions to be defined in multiple ways, such as a curator of early modern printed books, which would be coded for both time period and format (see Table 10).

"Subject" was the most common type of curator, with 62 of job advertisements falling into this category. Format was the next most common type of curatorship, appearing in 44 of the advertisements. Nineteen of the advertised positions would oversee geographical materials while 14 were responsible for time period-specific collections.

The fact that time period and geographic materials codes applied to few positions is unsurprising, given that these are relatively specialized ways of thinking about a collection. The fact that "none of the above" accounts for 17 percent of the positions coded may suggest that some institutions are using "curator" as a more general term, or as a way of enhancing prestige for what might otherwise be a position known as "special collections librarian" or "archivist." Just over a quarter of the jobs coded were for single format curators, meaning they had a responsibility for managing a singular type of material. The relatively high number of positions with this type of status seems to contradict Healey and Nykanen's 2015 finding that single-format curators had declined in the RBMS membership, but that mixed-format positions were becoming more common.<sup>50</sup> It is possible that this trend has swung in the other direction, which could be an interesting area



## Table 10.

Types of collections curators oversee, according to job advertisements

Type of Collection	Count	Percentage of Dataset
Format	44	26%
Subject	62	37%
Time period	14	8%
Geographical area	19	11%
None of the above	29	17%

for future exploration. While “subject” is the most common type of curatorial position, it is interesting to note that this seems to have little impact overall on the type of degree required or preferred for a position, since, as mentioned, an MLS was required much more frequently than a subject degree in the studied postings.

### Job Duties

Given the lack of an agreed-upon professional definition of a special collections curator, the authors were interested in the tasks curators in 21st century special collections departments were being asked to do. They developed a list of different job duties based on their professional experience and added additional categories during the test coding process, including collection development; outreach (including programming and event planning); teaching or instruction; reference (reading room work, answering researcher questions); cataloging, processing, or description of some kind (including collaborating with cataloging and processing staff); fundraising (including working with monetary donors); grants; exhibitions; and scholarship, publication, and presentation (including being active in professional groups).

Job duties were mentioned in 132 (92 percent) of the job advertisements examined (see Table 11). The authors coded multiple duties from each position description. The most common one was collection development (126 positions), followed by outreach (120 positions), reference (107 positions), exhibition (97 positions), teaching or instruction (93 positions), cataloging, processing, or description (88 positions), and scholarship, publication, or presentation (83 positions). There were also smaller sets of jobs that included fundraising (46 positions) and grants (36 positions).

Collection development is a traditional aspect of curatorial work, so it falls in line with expectations to see this as the most commonly articulated piece of curatorial jobs. Likewise, exhibitions are generally considered to be scholarly work, so it is unsurprising to see this type of work highly ranked as well. Just under two-thirds of the positions



Table 11.

Curator job duties, according to job advertisements

Job Duty	Count	Percentage of Dataset
Collection Development	126	95%
Outreach	120	91%
Reference	107	81%
Exhibitions	97	73%
Teaching/Instruction	93	70%
Cataloging/Processing/ Description	88	67%
Scholarship/Publication/ Presentation	83	63%
Fundraising	46	35%
Grants	36	27%

were explicitly required to engage in scholarship or professional presentations of some kind. As noted in the literature review, conducting scholarship using their collections was an integral part of the work of bookmen and one of the ways they defined themselves

**That scholarship remains a core aspect of curatorial work but is referenced in fewer position descriptions than public services and technical services duties provides important insight into how current curators are expected to spend their time and resources.**

as apart from librarians or archivists.

That scholarship remains a core aspect of curatorial work but is referenced in fewer position descriptions than public services and technical services duties provides important insight into how current curators are expected to spend their time and resources.

Given the commitment made by special collections departments to teaching and instruction in recent years, particularly at higher education institutions, the authors were eager to learn whether curators were taking on some of this work,

or if it was more likely to be left to colleagues in teaching and outreach units. The data here indicate that teaching has become a core part of curatorial work, although it is less common than other “public facing” work such as outreach and reference, indicating that it is still more important for curators to work with scholars and the public rather than students. It is unclear from the data whether this includes teaching undergradu-



ates, although the authors would expect that it does. Future insight into this area would require speaking with curators about their specific teaching experiences. The time period covered in this study overlaps with what Jen Hoyer and Anne Bahde have identified as a “maturing field” of teaching with primary sources, including the development of primary source literacy concepts and the connection of teaching such skills with special collections departments.<sup>51</sup> Given that Warren and Scoulas note that collection development, a traditional curatorial activity, is something public services librarians are being asked to do, it is significant that public services are a common feature of curatorial position descriptions, as well.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, for a position type traditionally located outside of technical services departments, it is noteworthy that two-thirds of the postings analyzed included duties related to creating descriptions or working alongside description experts. Taken together, these results indicate an intermingling of responsibilities across many different types of positions in special collections departments.

Fundraising and grants are often considered administrative responsibilities, and their relatively infrequent appearance as a job responsibility may indicate that curators have fewer administrative responsibilities in general. This makes sense given the reporting lines for curators; major work with monetary donors and granting agencies may be part of the portfolio of special collections department heads, with curators participating but unlikely to direct these efforts. However, the current trend of soliciting money along with in-kind donations when receiving large collections, as a way to help cover the cost of processing, cataloging, and storing materials, may change this.<sup>53</sup> It will be interesting to see whether this kind of combined collecting and fundraising will result in more mentions of fundraising in future curatorial job advertisements or if this will simply be seen as something covered under the duty of “collection development” or “collection stewardship.”

### Direct Reports

The authors also noted whether curators had direct reports listed for their positions. Because the curatorial track is often considered to be one that can set a person on the path to advancement into administration, determining how many curators have direct supervisory experience is an excellent way to tell whether they are being set up to succeed at management and other larger administrative tasks.<sup>54</sup>

Of the 93 positions that mentioned some sort of institutional hierarchy, 61 (66 percent) had no direct reports listed in the job ad, while 32 (34 percent) had at least one direct report. This is only 22 percent of the 143 positions studied, which does not suggest supervision as an inherent task of a curatorial position. The authors decided not to count the supervision of students or volunteers as direct reports, given the inherent transitory nature of those supervisory relationships, as well as the fact that working with students and interns can often be more of a mentorship experience than a supervisory one. If a position mentioned supervising specific staff members, then it was included here.

This result is unsurprising in some ways, given that curators are often thought of as solo workers, particularly the bookmen of the mid-20th century. However, if curatorship is seen as a potential avenue for advancement into administration, it is worth recognizing that almost 80% of postings in this dataset do not mention supervisory expectations.



Having direct reports can enhance the perception of a position's prestige; however, supervisory duties add significant workload for the individual. The lack of direct reports may also relate to the lack of more administrative responsibilities as articulated in the older bookmen model of curatorship.

### Responsibilities Beyond Curatorship

The authors examined whether many curatorial positions included further responsibilities, or further job titles, beyond curatorship. They also noted the types of institutions that employed this nomenclature or dual position approach. They recorded this information to more clearly examine what professional duties might be considered outside the scope of a curatorial role by those creating position descriptions. Job advertisements were considered to be part of the "curator and" category if they included a second job title, such as curator/archivist or "curator of books and special collections librarian." A title such as curator of rare books and manuscripts was not included here, as that simply indicated that the curator had a variety of curatorial areas to cover.

Of the 143 positions coded, only 27 (19 percent) positions fit into this category. Thus, a majority of institutions with designated curatorial roles assessed that this position includes enough responsibility to merit an entire position as opposed to part of one, signifying curatorial work's importance and the perceived amount of work encompassed by the title. Of the five "curator and" postings that were not part of a higher education institution, all were combined with a more senior administrative role, such as a chair, senior librarian, or head, implying that it may enhance the prestige of a senior administrator to also be thought of as having a curatorial role. It may also be the case that some non-higher educational institutions have smaller staffs and thus combine multiple prestigious or high-level roles into one. Thus, curatorial work can be seen as an influential activity that is separate from administrative duties. However, this is an interesting contrast to the reporting line discussion, wherein institutions outside of higher education were more likely to have curators report to an assistant department head, implying more layers of hierarchy. It is possible that the independent library population is bifurcated between very small and very large institutions, but further study is required to know for sure.

The 22 "curator and" postings within higher education institutions did not follow this trend nearly so closely. Positions were sometimes connected with named collections; functional duties such as instruction; the additional title of librarian or archivist; or department head. One might presume that the use of a "curator and" position in higher education would be most prevalent in smaller institutions where library workers tend to simultaneously manage several types of tasks that might be entire positions at larger institutions, but this is not the case. Eighteen (82 percent) of the 22 positions were within institutions with Carnegie Classifications of Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity or Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity. The other four were: one at a higher education institution outside of the United States, one in the Master's Colleges & Universities: Small Programs classification, and two in the Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus classification.



## Conclusion and Future Research

Special collections curatorial positions of the 21st century retain many continuities with the bookmen of the mid-20th century, while also indicating that the profession's thoughts about curatorial work have changed over time. Curators can be found at many levels in the library hierarchy, but the most common reporting line is to a director of special collections. The most common type of curatorial job is one focused on a subject, but many also specialize in a certain type of format. Though the position is currently considered a pathway to administration, few curator

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**Special collections curatorial positions of the 21st century retain many continuities with the bookmen of the mid-20th century, while also indicating that the profession's thoughts about curatorial work have changed over time.**

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job postings noted direct reports. Therefore, curators may lack supervisory experience. While collection development remains the most common job duty, public-facing activities such as outreach, reference, exhibitions, and teaching are the second most common set of responsibilities, indicating that today's curatorial roles are outward facing, rather than focused solely on building collections and scholarship.

Additional findings from this study include that 75 percent of recently hired curators are employed at doctoral universities with very high research activities, but they are also found at almost all levels of higher education with a considerable number working outside higher education. The number of postings seem to have neither greatly increased nor decreased over time, and there are no geographic trends connected to these openings. Special collections curators may also have a variety of educational backgrounds, but the majority of position postings require a library science degree of some kind. Very few position descriptions were designed to incorporate DEI directly into curatorial work, nor do they emphasize it as an institutional priority.

Although it is unlikely that Powell's acquisition versus use dichotomy was ever as stark as he depicted, and curators have always had multiple responsibilities, it is clear that current position descriptions for special collections curators are focused on collection use. This is consistent with the work libraries and special collections have done over the past ten years to align themselves with larger institutional goals and position themselves as partners in research and instructional support.<sup>55</sup> These larger institutional moves have helped to change the vision of the role of special collections from a more passive access point for distinctive collections into an active location of teaching and learning. However, further research on what collecting for use means for curators, and how the addition of instruction programs and teaching requirements in curatorial positions might change their approach to collecting, is important to study further. Does collecting for the curriculum carry the same prestige as collecting for research use? Are curators pursuing materials because of connections to faculty curricular offerings? Because of the wide range of responsibilities curators now have, are they spending less time on collection development?



Questions left unanswered by this study might be addressed through conversations with curators about their own perceptions of what their roles encompass versus the expectations that are here set out as priorities in the hiring process. How do the many job duties listed get prioritized in busy libraries? Do curators feel prepared for their work by their educational background? Are larger discussions in the field about stewardship influencing how curators approach their work? Do special collections curators feel that their work aligns with institutional priorities?

If the current vogue for the idea of “curating” comes from a world over-saturated with information and a desire for coherence within that world, as the *New York Times* story suggests, this study of special collections curatorial job postings indicates that while “choosing”—that is, selecting materials through collection development—remains core to special collections curatorship, it is by no means the only aspect of this important work. Curatorship has grown over time to include the development and stewardship of both collections and people, bringing them together in a variety of modern special collections contexts that value various educational backgrounds, types of collections, and areas of experience.

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