Rare Books: A Price to Pay?
Commentary by Dean Lance Query

Our university and public libraries are among our most civilizing of institutions, bulwarks against those whose beliefs and practices coarsen our culture and society. At the heart of our libraries are collections of rare books, manuscripts, and other special works that comprise a distinctive and coherent collection designated for a unique use. Such irreplaceable materials are the pride of our libraries—and are the best testament to our own humanity.

At the same time, however persuasive the mission of rare book libraries for preserving the recorded history of civilization, the argument loses its urgency when opposed to the need to acquire the major tools of research and teaching: journals, monographs, electronic databases, and other audio and visual resources. Rare book collections are criticized as expensive and unnecessary except for the wealthiest of public and private institutions. And, in fact, such criticism is valid if the institution is concerned only with enhancing its ego or, in superficial ways, focusing on a “high spot” here or there. Such a development philosophy is particularly unfortunate when other, more pressing needs are set aside.

Moreover, rare book librarians have not, traditionally, justified the high cost of their acquisitions. Rather, during the halcyon era of higher education funding, the 1950s to the 1970s, newcomers plunged boldly into an expensive market that was inappropriate to their own institutional mission. Scholarship would have been better served if rare materials had been acquired, housed, preserved, and cataloged by fewer, but more accessible libraries.

What, then, is the rationale that justifies the development of rare book collections? If it is not to provide distinctive evidence of mankind’s “humanity,” what persuades scholars, librarians, and academic leaders that the considerable expenses of the purchase, security, and preservation—not to mention the cost of experienced staff to interpret the materials for users—is worth the price? Most simply put, each rare book collection must support, in a tangible way, the research and scholarship of the institution in which that specific collection is housed. Even though such use may ebb and flow as changes occur in the faculty and curricula with respect to research interests, a larger audience must continue to exist because that particular institution is recognized for the relevance of its rare but coherent book collection. Collections as, for example, the pre-Colombian codices and early cartographic maps at the Newberry Library in Chicago are internationally known to researchers because of their rich depth. Yet, it is equally important that similar excitement and enthusiasm are generated among undergraduate and graduate students when they, too, can examine and analyze these unusual materials.

Still, a question remains answered. How can we most efficiently ensure scholars’ or students’ access to costly, rare materials? Not only is the price prohibitive in many instances, but private collectors are continually at work building their own libraries which are seldom available to scholars. Once again, the answer may well lie in shared collection development. Such a plan calls for proximity of participating institutions, comprehensive and accurate catalogs of holdings, and, perhaps most difficult, a commitment of scholars, academic leaders, and librarians to provide easier and improved access to the special collections.

The University Libraries has assumed a position of leadership in making shared acquisitions of rare materials a reality. Western Michigan University and the Newberry Library are jointly acquiring a 14th century manuscript that will complement WMU’s liturgical collections and medieval studies as well as the recently approved Ph.D. program in Comparative Religion. This extraordinary volume will be housed at our library four months each year.

A similar arrangement has also been made between the Newberry Library and Notre Dame in Indiana. These two examples of cooperation are the first efforts of three distinctive institutions to resolve the serious problem posed earlier. We hope that they signal other regional institutions as well as private collectors that we are committed to ensuring that the recorded testaments of our civilization are available to students, researchers, scholars. To this end, I am both dedicated to and celebrate each effort that explores cooperative and shared acquisition of our rare book heritage. These efforts represent an innovative and progressive solution to the problem of collecting and accessing rare materials—as well as a means by which we can justify the price to be paid.

“What I mean by reading is not skimming, not being able to say as the world saith, ‘Oh, yes, I’ve read that,’ but reading again and again in all sorts of moods, with an increase of delight every time, till the thing read has become a part of your system and goes forth along with you to meet any new experience you may have.”

C.E. Montague