The security of special collections is a difficult and sensitive matter. Difficult, because with all possible precautions taken, theft may still occur. Sensitive, because patrons may be annoyed or offended by the encumbrances placed upon them. The physical conditions are the ones we most often associate with good security measures, and they are certainly not to be minimized. Special construction, alarms, and motion detectors number among these.

However, many security issues may have more to do with policies and procedures than with the physical condition of the building. Most thefts are of a subtle nature: items are discovered missing long after the actual theft has occurred, what insurance adjustors call “mysterious disappearance.”

The Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America has categorized book thieves as (1) the kleptomaniac, suffering from a compulsion to steal books, (2) the thief who steals books for his own use or possession, (3) the thief who steals in anger and is likely to destroy materials, (4) the casual thief who steals when an opportunity presents itself, and (5) the thief who steals for profit.

Over the past thirty years there has been increasing activity in the last category. Rising prices of books—as with art works—has made this an attractive field. But to gain access to rare books is not an easy matter. Consequently indirect methods are often employed by the thief. It is sad to report that seventy-five per cent of the thefts are believed to be from within. Most of the remaining twenty-five per cent are the result of lax controls. Very rarely have there been forced entries.

There are four ways that we can strengthen internal security: (1) careful selection and observance of staff, (2) patron monitoring, (3) room monitoring, and (4) material protection.

When hiring staff a thorough background check should be made; bonding should be periodically emphasized and reviewed so there is no relaxing of controls, nor a succumbing to temptation.

Patron monitoring is a sensitive issue. Criticism from faculty and administrators who believe that monitoring is too restrictive is a frequent plight of curators. Restricted access seems to invite exceptions and pleas for special privileges. If granted, control is lost. Therefore, uniform application of regulations is crucial for an effective control policy. The appropriate steps to be taken include signing a registration card, reading and signing the policy statement, keeping all personal belongings out of the reading room (except paper, index cards, pencils, and a personal computer, preferably a laptop), and having an interview with the curator. During the latter, the researcher can explain her/his needs and at the same time take advantage of the curator’s knowledge of the collections. Finally, there are also correct ways of handling the materials that should be observed.

Procedures should never be allowed to lapse, especially for long-term users who have become familiar to the staff. The thief may be someone who is least suspected. Past court cases have shown that thieves took advantage of their trustworthiness to gain access to rare materials. Among them have been scholars, librarians, writers, book dealers, archivists, and even clergymen. In the majority of cases they were people who had developed an inside understanding of libraries and the antiquarian book trade.

Room monitoring is also important. An employee should supervise the reading room at all times. Never should this person leave the room while a researcher is working there. If an item needs to be retrieved from the vault, only an authorized person should be allowed to carry out this task.

It is essential that thorough bibliographic control is exercised for positive establishment of ownership. Identification of stolen items cannot be made if record maintenance is poor. Besides a very accurate and precise description of each item, it is perhaps desirable to mark it as well. The best way to do this is to stamp it with ink. Admittedly, this is not widely practiced, even today, although it has been endorsed by the profession, since it was felt that rare works should not be marked in any way. However, marking has been the policy of the National Archives and the Library of Congress for many years. Performed properly and with the right ink, marking will not detract from the value or create aesthetic harm. If we follow these practices, the chances of theft are greatly minimized and we will never have to face that dreadful moment of the “mysterious disappearance.”

—Hans Engelke, Asst. Dean University Libraries