

Special Collections and Leadership: A Short Reflection on the ALA Emerging Leaders Experience

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Abstract:

“Cello Music Cataloger? You’re kidding. That’s really your title!?” This was the response of one of my fellow ALA Emerging Leaders (ELs) when she discovered what kind of work I do with the Cello Music Collection here at the University Libraries.

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*****Note: Full text of article below**

Special Collections and Leadership: A Short Reflection on the ALA Emerging Leaders Experience

by Mac Nelson

“Cello Music Cataloger? You’re kidding. That’s really your title!?” This was the response of one of my fellow ALA Emerging Leaders (ELs) when she discovered what kind of work I do with the Cello Music Collection here at the University Libraries.

And this incredulous colleague was not alone. She and others in attendance at ALA Midwinter, Seattle 2007, were surprised, and a little entertained, to learn that any librarian might have such a specialized job description. (“I suppose UNCG has an Oboe Cataloger, as well,” quipped one budding comedian.) Several ELs also wondered aloud about what seemed to them a tenuous connection between special collections cataloging and library leadership. This led to lively discussion of an old stereotype: *the isolated cataloger toiling away in some remote corner of the special collections catacombs.*

I remember these conversations sharply because the questions raised by my EL colleagues often echoed those I was asking myself at the time. The Emerging Leaders initiative had first come to my attention in September 2006, only a week or so after I joined the University Libraries as Cello Music Cataloger. Naturally, I had a thousand or so “new job” issues on my mind, and was thus unsure whether participation in the EL program would prove a golden opportunity or serious distraction. I also wondered how the main goal of the EL program—to mobilize a team of one hundred new librarians on the “fast track to ALA and professional leadership”—would apply to my work as cataloger and “chief resource person” for the Cello Music Collection.

As it turned out, being part of the inaugural EL Class of 2007 was a terrific experience that proved relevant for three main reasons: *networking*, *networking*, and *networking*. I found myself in close communication with some impressive library leaders and a great many up-and-coming new librarians. I also participated in research—conducted virtually with five far-flung ELs from different regions of the country—investigating the continuing educational needs



Mac Nelson

of new librarians. This created an ideal context for exploring some of the most pressing issues associated with the organization and promotion of special collections:

- *The changing role of “collections of distinction” in the evaluation of academic research libraries*
- *The blurring of traditional lines between the “cultural memory” institutions, archives, libraries, and museums*
- *The need for specialists to “re-tool,” developing new skill in such unfamiliar areas as funding, program development, and institutional strategy*
- *The impact of digitization on access to special collections*

These very big topics could hardly be more relevant to UNCG’s unparalleled Cello Music Collection. As such, they figure daily in planning conversations here in several departments of the University Libraries, and are notably reflected in the recent *Recommendations of the UNCG University Libraries Revisioning Task Force*. What this tells me is that the kind of networking I found so useful and enlightening as an ALA Emerging Leader is vitally underway here. This bodes well for the future of our precious special collections.

