Aligning Special COLLECTIONS with the Institutional Mission

Tim Pyatt, Huck Chair
Eberly Family Special Collections Library
June 5, 2012
OCLC Research Library Partners
Libraries Rebound
“it will become increasingly difficult to distinguish libraries based on their holdings of these materials. Instead, libraries and their institutions will increasingly be distinguished by the special collections of rare and unique materials that they hold…”

Don Waters, Mellon Foundation in an address to the ARL in fall of 2005
What are Special Collections?
Most would agree...

- Papers of Ernest Hemingway
- Records of the United Steel Workers
- *News from Nowhere* (Kelmscott Press)
- Civil War soldier’s diary
Some materials depend on the institutional context..

- Fred Waring’s “blenders”
- *The Hunger Games*
- Eighteen Century Collections Online (licensed database)
- The People’s Contest (collaborative digital site)
What is Special Collections?

- Place of discovery and excitement
- Integral part of Library and Campus
- Place of innovation
- Place of public trust
- Place of institutional distinction
Alignment – Mission Improbable?

- Historically independently and opportunistically built
- Dedicated and sometimes inflexible funding sources
- Have avoided “trendy” collecting and supporting short term needs
Collection Assessment

- RLG Conspectus
- Taking Our Pulse (2010 OCLC Report)
- 21st Century Collections (2012 ARL issue brief)
Penn State Assessment Process

- Task force charged by dean
- Composed of 3 subject librarians, 1 non-library faculty member, assessment librarian, and director of library development
Data Points considered

- Historical SCL strengths
- Collection use and support
- Main Library strengths and strategic plans
- Campus strategic plan
- Areas of opportunity
Some early results

- Deaccession policy
- More topical approach
- Finding the “gaps” and identifying new opportunities
- Greater transparency about the SCL’s holdings and direction
Benefits of closer alignment:

• Greater understanding and support of Special Collections collecting policy
• More potential for integrated services and engagement from librarians outside of Special Collections
• More focused collections with greater support from campus add to our “distinctiveness”
• Greater development potential – a clearly articulated plan is easier to sell to donors