

Review Essay

ANNE R. KENNEY, editor

SPEC Kits: Compiled Information about Library Management Policies, Procedures, and Techniques

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Editor's note: This review essay is the first of what is intended to be a recurring feature in the Reviews department, namely essays of a length sufficient to permit, as in this case, the collective or comparative treatment of a related body of works or extended thoughtful analysis of a particularly important work. Individuals interested in preparing such an essay or in suggesting the subject of a review essay should contact Reviews editor Anne R. Kenney at (607) 255-6875.

The regular reviews that were scheduled for this issue have been deferred because of size considerations.

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SPEC Kits. Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, The Systems and Procedures Exchange Center, 1973-1989. Nos. 1-155.

Clearing house sources of compiled information are a feature of disciplines where access to current information is crucially important. Professionals in fields other than the one within which the clearing house operates may also appreciate the benefits

that such sources offer in facilitating access, either to a mass of potentially useful information, or to information that is scattered or otherwise not readily available.

SPEC kits are a publication of the Systems and Procedures Exchange Center (SPEC), set up in 1973 by the Association of Research Libraries' (ARL) Office of Management Studies to promote and facilitate the sharing of management techniques

and expertise among its constituent libraries. The center collects, analyzes, and distributes information and descriptive material about specific management topics, and the policies, procedures, and management techniques developed by academic libraries. It thus serves as an information clearinghouse to help libraries "learn of current practices, solve problems, manage change and improve performance."

The kits are currently published ten times a year, and average 110 to 150 pages in length, mostly typescript in form; the samples they contain are facsimile reproductions of submitted material. Since the establishment of the center, 155 kits have been issued to date (August 1989); roughly half of them appear still to be in print. As a whole, they cover the broad areas of collections management, public services, technology applications, preservation, staff development, and personnel management.

Each kit focuses on a single topic that has been identified as an area of interest by staff appointed as SPEC coordinators within member libraries and other Office of Management Studies staff during library site visits. Information about topics is obtained primarily from surveys that the center conducts several times a year from all or select institutions among its membership, together with any supporting material submitted with survey returns to document policy, procedures, and techniques relative to the survey topic.

The kits contain selections made from the documentation received, such as reports, forms, manuals and brochures, administrative memoranda and guidelines, and any other type of material that might serve as a sample, together with statistical survey results, a short selected reading list, and a table of contents. An accompanying two-page flyer introduces the kit topic, summarizes and briefly discusses the survey results, and usually identifies and analyses trends and issues based on the survey data and supporting documentation. The survey

returns and documentation on which the kits and flyers are based, are maintained in files at the center, which also provides a telephone and mail reference service. The center has from time to time published a subject index to kits in print, the subject headings being based partly on *Library Literature*.

Originally, only ARL subscribers received the kits but they are now available to other library subscribers, including public and special libraries, through library distributors, subscription agents, and vendors. The recent introduction of personal flyer subscriptions, and the reporting by some libraries of their holdings to bibliographic databases, should widen the availability of the kits. Additionally, almost all out-of-print items listed in a recent index (April 1989) are in the ERIC system; the index provides the ERIC ED number where applicable.

Some of the strengths and weaknesses of SPEC kits, and their potential usefulness for archivists, can be inferred from the description of their contents and method of compilation. Because they do not provide a context for or analysis of the specific documents included, often they are valuable as a source of ideas and examples to adapt and modify, rather than as models.

SPEC kits may be of more value to those contemplating new procedures and programs than practicing veterans. For example, experienced university archivists will find SPEC Kit #107, *University Archives in ARL Libraries* (September 1984), to be of limited usefulness, but they may benefit more from kits that deal with issues such as management, where archivists often have received little formal training. Second, for the substantial portion of the membership of the Society of American Archivists who work in university/college archives and special collections departments, the kits provide information germane to the institutional culture in which they are expected to function, even if they may be of more limited usefulness for specifically archival

duties. In some cases, the kits should be used advisedly and with regard for the local situation, since some issues covered, e.g., collection security and problem patrons, have legal implications, and awareness of variations in state law may be needed in drafting procedures or policies.

On the other hand, the kits are devised to offer aids to problem-solving, and shared, timely, and practical responses to issues and trends. They present samples that illustrate alternatives and innovations without endorsing any one approach, and their frequency of publication offsets comprehensive coverage, which would be difficult to achieve in a short time, even with greater resources. The flyers, because they do present some analysis as well as a concise overview, are an important accompaniment to the kits, and can be a very useful introduction to the subject for the reader, especially one having limited or no familiarity with the topic covered.

Some information, particularly concerning automation, quickly becomes dated. A few kits have been updated or are linked to earlier ones in response to ongoing interest and developments, as for example, several dealing with related areas of reference service. Kit #101, *User Studies in ARL Libraries* (February 1984), provides documentation on the methodology of user studies and approaches to user groups, as opposed to the earlier kit #71, *User Surveys and Evaluation of Library Services* (February 1981), which was oriented to assessments of library performance as perceived by users. Kit #121, *Bibliographic Instruction in ARL Libraries* (February 1986), reflects developments since Kit #17, *Library Use Instruction*, published in 1975 and updated in 1977. The covering flyer notes how, in response to the impact of rapidly advancing technology including that of microcomputers, the focus of instruction has shifted from how to find information in a particular building, to how to access information in general. The flyer also calls

attention to new teaching techniques that are being adopted and explored. Kit #132, *Library-Scholar Communication in ARL Libraries* (March 1987), is based on the library-related results of a recently conducted survey by the American Council of Learned Societies' Office of Scholarly Communication and Technology, and includes samples of fact sheets and newsletters designed for the scholarly clientele, as well as the report on the survey by its organizers. This group of SPEC Kits obviously serves as a resource for archivists who are attempting to identify their clientele and to evaluate how their collections are used. In a similar vein, those who have followed the profession's recent emphasis on planning will find common ground with Kit #108, *Strategic Planning in ARL Libraries* (October 1984), and #134, *Planning for Management Statistics in ARL Libraries* (May 1987).

Some managerial concerns cut across the great variations in type and size of institutional setting in which archivists are employed, and are not peculiar to academic libraries. There are a number of the kits that pull together salient information on topics that may be explored more fully, from the archivist's viewpoint, in existing archival literature. The kits on users have been mentioned above. Kit #138, *University Copyright Policies in ARL Institutions* (October 1987), which supplements #102, *Copyright Policies at ARL Libraries* (March 1984), includes samples of specialized policies (performance/display, software, music) and ownership policies for specific materials (computer software, university-sponsored educational materials) and a longer reading list than most kits; the accompanying flyer briefly identifies issues to consider in developing an institutional policy. Kits #100, *Collection Security in ARL Libraries* (January 1984), and #150, *Building Security and Personal Safety* (January 1989), contain samples of guidelines for staff, some of which have applicability

to archival collections; the latter includes sample position descriptions. Kit #120, *Exhibits in ARL Libraries* (January 1986), contains detailed sample checklists of procedures for planning and mounting an exhibit, and position descriptions. Personnel matters are discussed in #135, *Job Analysis in ARL Libraries* (June 1987); #140, *Performance Appraisal in Research Libraries* (January 1988); and #143, *Search Procedures for Senior Library Administrators* (April 1988).

SPEC Kits are a well-established information resource in the academic library community. As archivists seek to develop

their managerial skills and strengthen links to allied professions, they may also find that the kits supplement a literature which is growing, but still offers limited coverage of their work.

SPEC Kits may be obtained through subscription or by individual order, prepaid only, for \$20.00 (\$10.00 for ARL member libraries). Order by title and number and make checks payable to "ARL Office of Management Services." The address is: Systems and Procedures Exchange Center, Association of Research Libraries, 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C., 20036.