

Scarcity and Abundance: *the cooperative imperative in special collections*

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Old forms, evolving functions



This is an early American **spout cup**. . .

a pouring vessel somewhere between
a **pap boat** and a **tea pot**.

My aim today:
dispense **more bitter stimulant**
than **soothing pabulum**

Pickman, D. Leavitt. (1938). *Pouring vessel vagaries*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Mythology Company.

A view of the future

But in its fight to retain a strong position in the marketplace of researchers' time and attention, I think the library's most powerful weapon is the type of material we usually refer to as "special collections." Patrons can get commercially-published books and articles from any number of sources, but if your library owns a truly unique document (like a [daguerrotype portrait of a 19th-century actor](#), or the [handwritten diary of a Mormon pioneer](#), or a typescript [transcription of an oral history](#)) then access to that document constitutes a genuinely unique value proposition. Historically, we in research libraries have tended to consign special collections to something of a ghetto—a benign and beloved one to be sure, but one that is somewhat outside the mainstream of everyday library services.

That has to change. Greg Silvis, of the University of Delaware library, put it very well when he [argued](#) recently that "the future of libraries will not be found in commodity (catalog) records for commodity

Rick Anderson. **The Portal Problem, Part 2: The Plight of the Library Collection** *Scholarly Kitchen Blog* (April 16, 2012)



Or maybe it's something else.

ARL–CNI Forum, October 2011

Louisiana State University President, John Lombardi

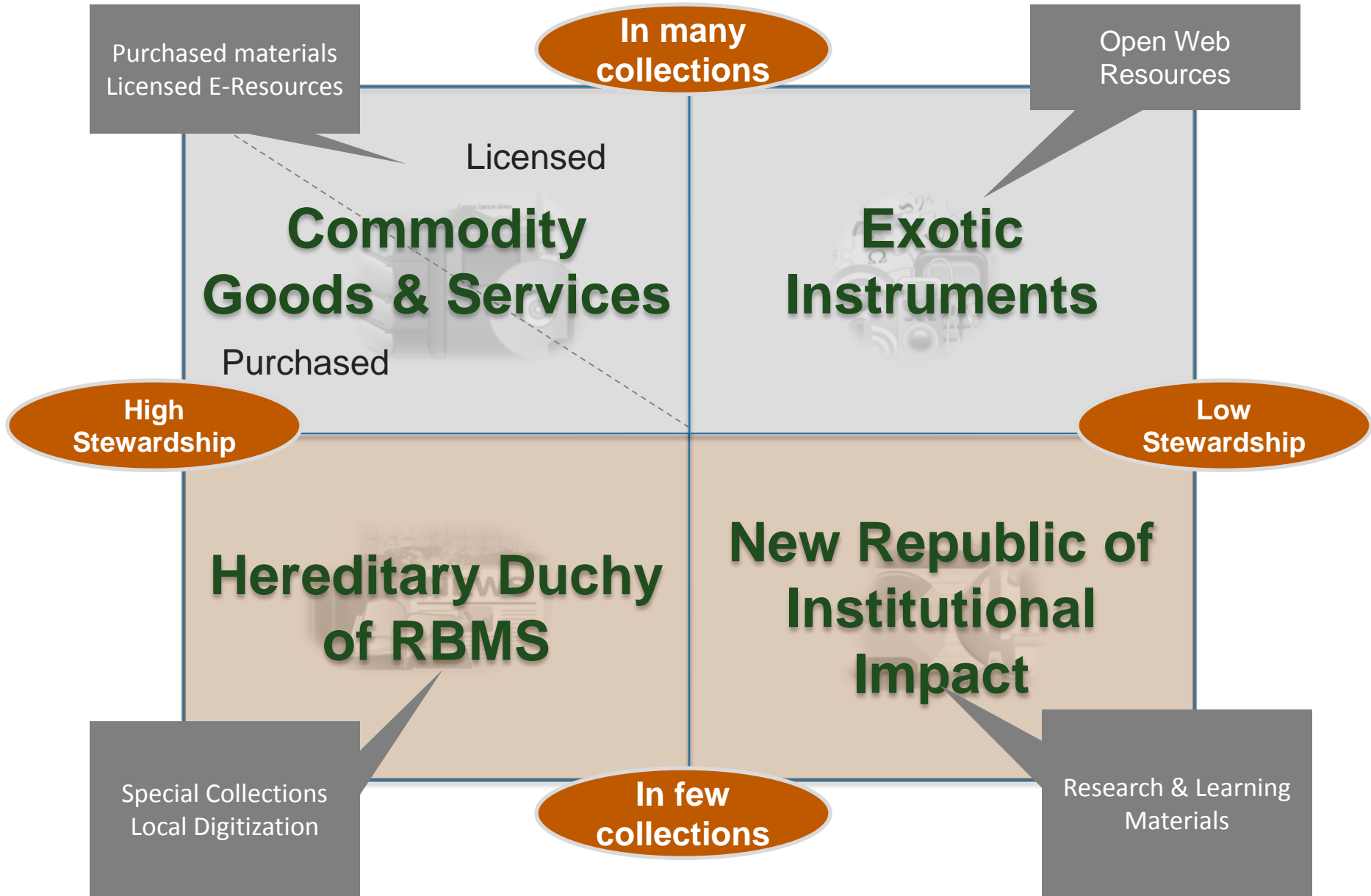
When solicited for university funding, his first question is:

“What will that project do to make the university more competitive?”

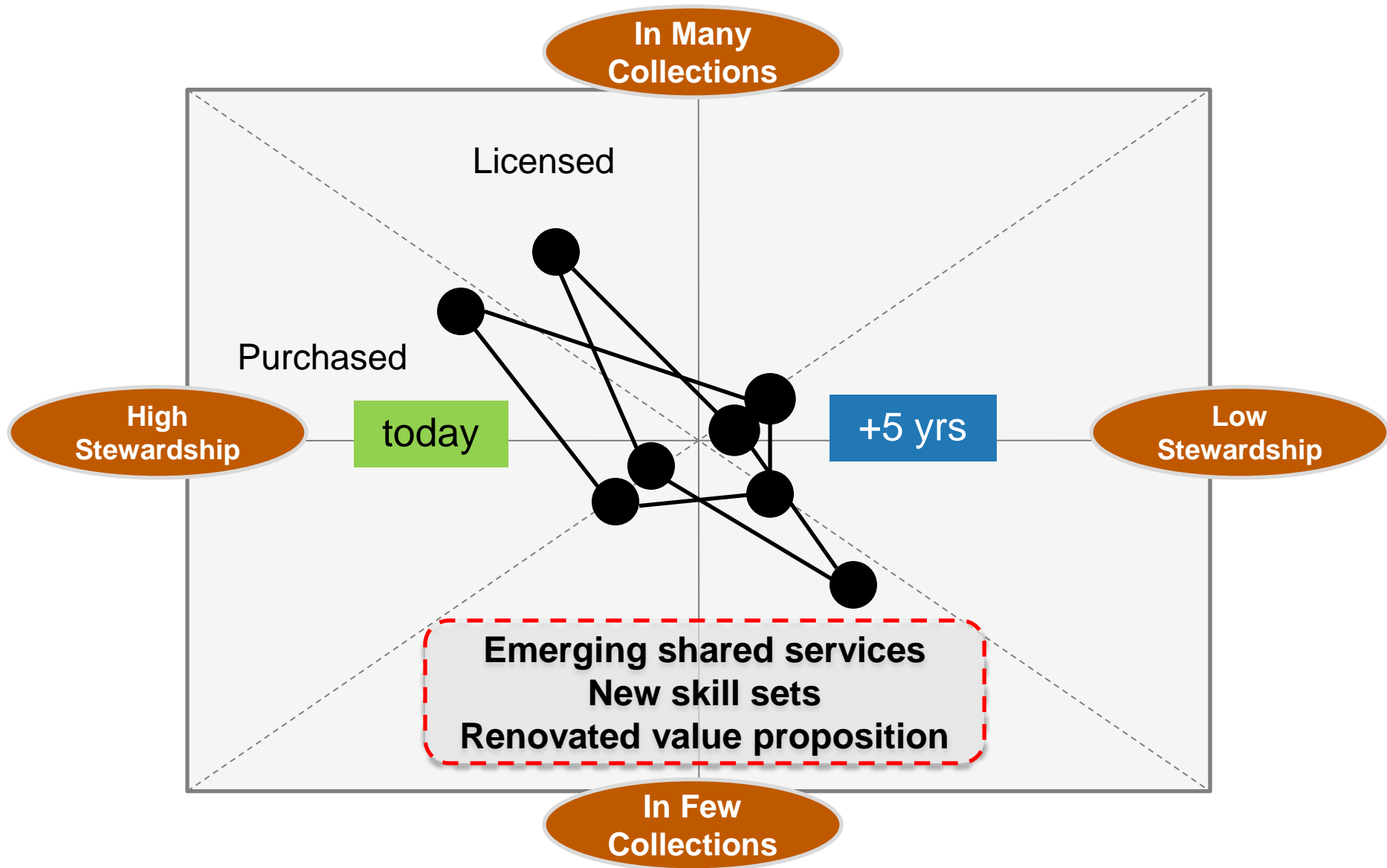
“If you can't persuade me that the work you're doing is going to make us more famous, ***we're not going to be interested in investing in you,***” he said.

“Is that wise and profound and good? No. It's stupid. But ***that's the way it is.***”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n49VJKPVw_0



Redirection of library resource



So, what's the problem?

Cooperative infrastructure developed to support efficient management of 'commodity' collections...

widely-held print publications	→	<i>cooperative cataloging</i> <i>shared print collections</i> <i>approval plans</i> <i>on-demand purchasing</i>
licensed electronic resources	→	<i>group licensing</i> <i>knowledge base maintenance</i> <i>shared digital preservation</i>

not necessarily extensible to special collections

Moreover . . .

- **Limited institutional incentives** to share in prestige of ownership
- **Cooperative agreements** for ‘joint custody’, shared stewardship, coordinated acquisitions, etc. are rarely and/or **imperfectly memorialized**
- Special Collections mostly focused on **managing scarcity**; the network economy is governed by the *principle of plenitude*. Abundance = opportunity, not threat.



What makes us **special** is changing

- In many academic research libraries, 30 to 50% of collections, including special collections, are off-site.
- For ARLs, 30% or more print collection has already been digitized – even if the library hasn't scanned a single book.
- For Oberlins, the rate is even higher (>40% median).
- Among IRLA, rates are variable but can exceed 50%.
- A substantial portion of the digitized titles in each library are also relatively abundant in the library system (30%-90%).

Pre-1850 imprints in HathiTrust



- >175K unique (discrete) titles

Cf. Dooley et al. (2010) report avg. special collections print volume count ~80K

- Median holding libraries per title = 7

'scarce' supply in native print format

- 99% designated as (US) public domain [B©]

now embedded in an economy of abundance

OCLC Research analysis of HathiTrust snapshot data, May 2012.

A 'monumental' opportunity

Marcel Breuer's design for St John's Abbey, Collegeville MN, ca 1958.



Preserving and providing access to the monumental dimension of digitized material is a vital task for libraries.

Roger Chartier, June 2012

Stoddard, W. S. (1958). *Adventure in architecture: building the new Saint John's*. [1st ed.] New York: Longmans, Green.

New service frameworks are needed



Lucile
AKA
'Lavinia'

A further stage in the evolution of pouring vessels:

← *the milk carton as a tool for massively coordinated discovery*

Enabling the **creative re-use of content in special collections** is a tremendous technical – and cultural – challenge. We must embrace it.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/foxtongue/119445060> "My muse as a milk carton kid" by Foxtongue – **remixed with illustration from a public domain version of Lucile, sourced from HathiTrust.**

Citation, scholarly work, scale

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Lucile, by Owen Meredith [pseud.]

Main Author:	[Lytton, Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton, Earl of, 1831-1891]
Other Authors:	Gregory, Frank M., b. 1848,
Language(s):	English
Published:	New York, F. A. Stokes & brother, 1889
Edition:	Vignette ed.
Physical Description:	iv, [5]-420 p., 1 L. front., illus. 20 cm.
Original Format:	Book
Original Classification Number:	828 L998L 1889
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The historian cites sources
“so that the past may be
made present.”

R. Chartier (2012)



What should be cited?
The manifestation or the
original item?

Content vs. container: our vessels weep

About this Book

Lucile . . Lytton, Edward Robert
Bulwer Lytton, Earl of, 1831-1891.

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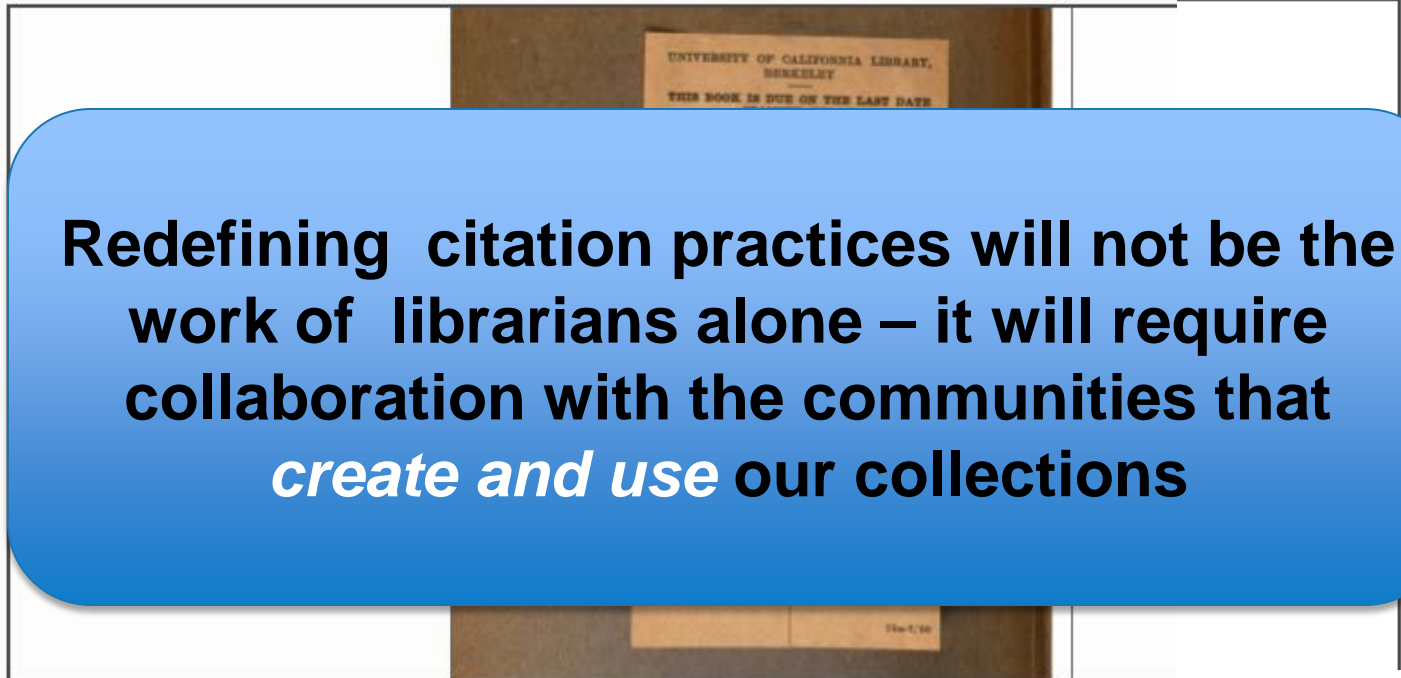
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Redefining citation practices will not be the work of librarians alone – it will require collaboration with the communities that *create and use* our collections

In closing

Maximizing the scholarly value and institutional relevance of special collections will require new forms of collaboration:

Within and across institutions, to establish **common service frameworks** for managing content creation, dissemination and re-use

Among repositories and donors to **broaden the collective collection** and more effectively reveal its underlying 'connective tissue'

In partnership with scholars who are defining **use cases not supported by traditional library infrastructure**, service portfolios or personnel

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Thanks for your attention.
Questions, comments?