

Engaging the Alumnus/a Donor

*A Case Study Based on Drew University's
R. S. Thomas Collection*

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Donors are, in many ways, the life-blood of special collections. They provide financial support that pays for supplies and salaries; donate materials that fill our shelves; promote our institutions to potential patrons, researchers, and other donors; and become part of the active community that surrounds and supports our work. As E. Haven Hawley (2016, 9–10) has put it, “[t]he donors and communities with whom we engage embed themselves within how we do our work, generate new possible trajectories, and with us cocreate a system of authority, authenticity, and cultural persistence.” There are, perhaps, no more “embedded” donors in our midst than alumni/ae. This population of supporters of academic institutions in general, and of academic libraries in particular, is among the most invested and informed of potential donor groups.

It is with this population that this chapter is concerned—a population that is sometimes overlooked, taken for granted, or both. While countless articles, books, and book chapters have been written about library donors in general, far too few focus on (or even mention) alumni/ae donors specifically. Within recent important publications in the field, such as Sidney Berger's *Rare Book and Special Collections* (2014) and the edited volume *Forging the Future of Special Collections* (2016, from which the Hawley quote above is taken), no significant mention is made of alumni/ae donors. A recent search of articles published in *RBM* (ACRL's journal dedicated to issues related to special collections) resulted in only three articles within the last decade that even mention alumni/ae in the context of donor relationships (search conducted by authors in December 2020 via <https://rbm.acrl.org/index.php/rbm/search/search>). This is not to say that alumni/ae donors are completely ignored by the profession or forgotten by special collections librarians. Rather, they are relatively absent from the literature and, therefore, worthy of discussion. With this in mind, the authors present the following case study as representative of our larger collaborations and partnerships with alumni/ae donors in the world of special collections.

Drew University's Special Collections and University Archives Department consists of more than 100,000 items, including manuscripts dating from the eleventh century and printed books dating from the fifteenth century. It also houses significant archival collections related to the history of the university and its founding as a Methodist seminary in 1867. While the majority of Drew's rare book and archival holdings have come through 150 years of institutional purchases, faculty contributions, and outside donations, recent years have brought a number of important collections donated by alumni of the undergraduate college, graduate school, and theological seminary. These include a collection of illustrated botanical books, an archival collection detailing the adventures of American college students on a goodwill tour of South America in the 1960s, and numerous donations to Drew's large collection of Methodist books and realia. This chapter, however, focuses on the donations of Rev. John Galen McEllhenney, who graduated from Drew's Theological Seminary with a BD in 1959.

During his more than sixty-year association with Drew, Rev. McEllhenney has been an active student, educator, patron, researcher, and donor. Most of his scholarly work centers around Methodist history in America, and his publications have become important

reference works for students and scholars studying Methodism (see McEllhenney 1982, 1992, 1996; McEllhenney and Yrigoyen 1984; and McEllhenney, Yrigoyen and Rowe 2008). In addition to his contributions to and expertise in Methodist history, Rev. McEllhenney is also an avid collector of poetry. One of his major gifts to Drew's rare book collection was his significant holdings of material published by and about Robert Frost. The Frost Collection (see Drew University n.d., "Frost Collection") is a treasured part of the rare book holdings at Drew and has attracted scholarly interest both from within the university and worldwide. Along with his contributions to the Methodist collection, the Frost donation of more than sixty volumes would be enough to establish John McEllhenney as one of Drew's most important alumni donors. But the material that is at the heart of his connection to Drew is even more significant: the R. S. Thomas Collection of printed books, manuscripts, and archival documents.

Ronald Stuart Thomas (1913–2000) was a Welsh poet and clergyman whose literary work touched on a wide range of topics, including the Welsh countryside, questions of faith and religious uncertainty, and the struggles of everyday life (see Keith 1978; Morgan 2009; Pery 2019; and Poetry Foundation n.d.). Thomas was highly regarded by contemporaries and proved popular among readers in Wales and beyond, and he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996. His poetry was wrapped up in—even warped by—an irascible personality that permeated his personal life as well as his poetry. This personality is fully on display within the material that Rev. McEllhenney has collected and donated over the years, beginning in 2006. In addition to more than 200 printed editions of Thomas's works, the collection also includes an important archive of hundreds of periodicals, essays, pamphlets, reviews, etc. that explore Thomas and his work. In addition, McEllhenney's own research into Thomas, his poetry, and his life represents a significant insider's perspective on the poet. This includes an important and illuminating personal correspondence between Thomas and McEllhenney that spanned the last dozen years of Thomas's life. This personal research served as the basis for McEllhenney's own published study of the poet, *A Masterwork of Doubting-Belief: R. S. Thomas and His Poetry* (2013). The collection, taken as a whole, is the largest dedicated solely to R. S. Thomas in the United States and is regularly expanded through purchases and donations by Rev. McEllhenney that continue to this day—more than 45 years since he first picked up a book of Thom-

as's poetry and started collecting his work (McEllhenney, email to authors, September 17, 2020).

This essay uses Rev. McEllhenney's Thomas Collection donation as a way to illuminate the importance of the alumnus/a donor, particularly the donor of gifts-in-kind (see Kuhn 2016, 11–12; Berger 2014, 176ff.; Leonhardt 2011, 207; and, more generally, Clotfelter 2001; Purcell 2015, 121–40). At the same time (and as the McEllhenney example illustrates), the alumnus/a donor is often also a collector. Therefore, we will reflect on alumni/ae as collectors as well as donors. We have chosen McEllhenney's donation of the Thomas Collection as our case study not only because this collection has obvious connections with the concerns of theological libraries but also because this collection has a uniqueness that makes it especially appealing to librarians and scholars. We will explore that uniqueness and its relevance to our decision to accept the donation. Also appealing, as we will discuss below, is the interdisciplinary nature of this collection. As a poet and clergyman, Thomas's work has potential appeal to students of literature and theology, but, as noted, his themes included Wales and Welsh history as well as the fate of country life in the face of growing mechanization (Keith 1978, 347). Consequently, the Thomas Collection presents opportunities for outreach to students and faculty in a variety of disciplines, some of which we will explore below. Finally, we will discuss how McEllhenney's donation has proven to be a gift that has kept on giving. Not only did that donation lead to significant subsequent donations by the same donor, it also resulted in additional donations by other donors who knew of our relationship with Rev. McEllhenney and his books. Rev. McEllhenney himself has remained involved with Drew's special collections around the Thomas Collection and, as described below, has engaged students using his donations as a departure point. Of course, such outreach to students (and faculty) serves to promote special collections more generally and to encourage students at all levels to become collectors themselves and perhaps even alumni/ae donors.

Alumni/ae Donors

The phenomenon of the alumnus/a donor is certainly not new. To cite but one rather early example: the Spanish theologian Juan de Segovia (d. 1458)—a former student and professor at the University

of Salamanca—donated his substantial personal library to his alma mater in 1457 (Hernández Montes 1984). He did so for many of the same reasons that still motivate donors today: to express gratitude to his institution, to benefit less fortunate students, and to preserve his collection (Hernández Montes 1984, 78–9, 84; Allen 2012, 235–6). Casey and Lorenzen (2010, 517–20) provide other renowned examples of academic libraries, including Harvard’s Widener Library, built or enhanced by donations of personal libraries, although not all their examples involve donations made by alumni/ae.

Nonetheless, some fund-raising literature suggests that academic libraries, unlike the colleges and universities they serve, “offer no degrees and thus have difficulty building a loyal base of support” (Clark 1986, 20; see also Wedgeworth 2000, 531; Casey and Lorenzen 2010, 521–2). According to this argument, libraries do not have alumni/ae in the same way that the schools themselves or other associated institutions, such as academic departments, sports teams, or Greek societies do. Not surprisingly, this literature focuses on financial gifts rather than on gifts-in-kind such as book donations to special collections. Even so, this literature does not tell the full story. Many alumni/ae do recognize the significant role played by libraries and librarians in their education, and they see the library as a worthy recipient of support both financial and material (Brittingham and Pezzullo 1990; Konzak and Teague 2009). Library usage statistics at Drew University indicate that Theological School students are the most active library users among all student populations, and some no doubt feel a special denominational fondness for Drew’s special collections department, housed currently in the Methodist Archive. We know from his very first letter to R. S. Thomas that Rev. McEllhenney felt a keen allegiance to the institution where he had received his BD degree and that he intended to donate his Thomas collection to Drew, “his theological school,” many years before he actually did so (McEllhenney – Thomas Correspondence, 16 July 1988). The presence of an inviting, appropriate, and well-maintained space only facilitated the decision.

One of the ways that special collections can demonstrate the appropriateness of their space to take on such donations is through the development and curation of exhibitions. Exhibit facilities offer the institution a place to highlight parts of their collections, often in a manner that will equally highlight the donor(s) who contributed the items. At Drew, the special collections department is fortunate to have a dedicated exhibit space alongside the front lobby of the ar-

chives building. This space allows for departmental staff to feature a large selection of material in more than ten large display vitrines. The very public placement of these exhibit cases not only invites visitors to peruse selected portions of Drew's collections but also provides potential donors with a model for how their own donations could be highlighted. This was an important aspect of another alumni-related donation that came to the department early in this century and that deserves mention here.

The Richard L. Walker Papers represent the political, professional, and personal life of Richard "Dixie" Walker, a Drew alum and former United States ambassador to South Korea in the 1980s (Drew University n.d., Walker Papers). The collection came to Drew through Amb. Walker's family, starting in 2003, partially supported by funds raised and donated by Walker's family and friends. One of the conditions of the donation, and something that is not uncommon with large donations to special collections, was the requirement for an exhibition of a selection of the materials after they had been processed. Such an exhibition was mounted, using the large exhibit space in the archives building, and a series of events were held in the building to celebrate the collection and honor Amb. Walker's legacy. The exhibit itself was curated by special collections staff, who worked alongside the university's advancement office to ensure that the donors were supported and included during the process. It was a great success and demonstrated how valuable exhibitions can be in both the highlighting of alumni/ae collections and the potential they have to recruit new alumni/ae donors. The Walker exhibition prompted additional donations from Drew alumni/ae who had seen the exhibit and generated additional interest among current students who wanted to learn more about Drew's connection to the ambassador and his time in South Korea. While McEllhenney's Thomas collection has not yet been featured in a dedicated library exhibit, his Frost collection has been the subject of a smaller, "Out of the Vault" event that allowed for the collection to be displayed to the public in a one-time, pop-up presentation.

Of course, for many libraries and special collections departments, the problem often is not a shortage of alumni/ae book donors, but rather a surplus (Little 1987; Nelson 1988; Wedgewood 2000, 537; Berger 2014, 175). Offers of unwanted or unneeded collections can be problematic. And gifts-in-kind only underscore other related concerns, such as space limitations and processing costs (Lindseth 2016, 31; Berger 2014, 179; Cox 2004, 34). Nelson (1988, 54) has emphasized

the importance and value of a “sensibly worded,” written gift policy as one way to address these concerns. Clearly, not all willing alumni/ae donors will have material suitable for a circulating collection, let alone for special collections. But alumni/ae collectors, especially those with distinctive collections, present us with a different situation. It is often these more specialized and unique collections, such as the Thomas or Walker materials, that special collections departments want to pursue and promote. This is particularly the case when the *alumnus/a* in question is a collector of material that fits well within the collecting policies of the institution.

Alumni/ae Collectors

If, as Lindseth (2016, 31) has noted, “library special collections material often comes from collectors,” and if, as Casey and Lorenzen (2010, 522) rightly observe, “alumni are the most obvious potential donors to an academic library,” then alumni/ae collectors should constitute the most likely and attractive pool of alumni/ae donors to academic special collections. There is ample evidence to confirm that many alumni/ae collectors, including many distinguished collectors, have indeed donated collections to “their” schools (see, among many examples, Washington University, n.d.; Dartmouth College n.d.). Perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most valuable financially, alumni donation was that of William Scheide to Princeton University (Princeton 2015). Though housed at Princeton since 1959, the Scheide Library officially became a donation to the university upon William’s death in November 2014. The collection of 2,500 volumes was valued at the time at around \$300 million and represents one of the finest private rare book and manuscript collections ever assembled. While most alumni donations are not going to reach the heights of the Scheide Library, many donor-collectors have much to offer their degree-granting institutions, and, in return, these institutions have much to offer donor-collectors.

As suggested above, a critical part of accepting such donations involves publicizing them as widely as possible, or at least as widely as donors find agreeable (see Berger 2014, 178). Such publicity is a boon for the institution and its special collections holdings, but it is also often an honor for the donor as well. By highlighting alumni donations through publications, press releases, exhibitions (physical

or virtual), social media posts, etc., special collections can demonstrate the importance of the material and, by inference, the importance of the donor. This need not necessarily be an effort to fluff the ego of a donor or to solicit an additional donation. Rather, it is a way to demonstrate the legacy of the donor and his/her donation and its long-term impact on the institution and its faculty and students. For alumni donors who are serious about their collections, whether they be 200 R. S. Thomas items or 2,500 of the rarest books in the world, there is an element of pride and honor associated with donating their materials. These are items that have been collected with care and passion and often at no small expense. Promoting their donation to one's institution is a way of honoring the work of collecting that has been done by the alumnus/a and their family.

For this reason, special collections departments should be as attentive as possible to the collecting habits of alumni/ae. This is especially important for smaller institutions with more limited resources. Knowing who is collecting, and in what areas, is important. While one does not need to check in constantly on potential alumni/ae donors, it is important to have a finger on the pulse of their collecting habits and areas of interest. For small institutions, this can often serve to expand or build upon existing collecting areas. At Drew, that often means expanding the large Methodist Library collection—something that not only serves the immediate university community but also supports Drew's existing partnership with the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church. Many of Drew's most active alumni/ae donors, like Rev. McEllhenney, contribute books to the Methodist studies portions of our special collections.

Tapping into alumni donors can also create new areas of collecting when they are needed. This has also happened in Drew's special collections, particularly in recent years, as we have expanded our holdings in areas related to popular culture and graphic narratives. Specifically, we looked to expand upon an existing collection of cartoon art and graphic satire (the Chesler Collection; see Drew University n.d., Chesler Collection) that has had significant growth in terms of usage and student interest over the past few years. The Chesler Collection includes a number of comic books, graphic novels, and secondary sources related to the history of comics. Because of the increasing interest in these materials, we began to seek out additional comic books to supplement the collection and to support new and existing course offerings. Rather than spend our somewhat

limited budget to purchase comics for the collection, we reached out to existing donors and alumni friends who were themselves comic book collectors. These efforts were notably rewarded and resulted in a series of comic collections, all donated by alumni collectors, amounting to nearly 12,000 comic books (see Drew University n.d., Comic Collection). These donations represent a vast resource for current students—one that the special collections department could not have purchased or otherwise acquired without the generosity of our alumni collectors.

Rev. McEllhenney's donation of his R. S. Thomas Collection was a similar case. Although Drew did not have a specific collection related to modern poetry, much less to Welsh poetry, the need for such a collection was increasingly evident on campus at the time of McEllhenney's donation. At that time, Drew had a strong MFA in poetry program and was looking to add collections to support that program. This resulted not only in the Frost and Thomas donations, but also the addition of world-renowned collections such as the Byron Society of America Collection and the Maxine Kumin Collection. The Thomas Collection, however, was the most significant one donated by an alumnus of the university. The donation began when Drew's dean of the library at the time responded positively to Rev. McEllhenney's initial overture. He visited McEllhenney's home several times, reviewed the Thomas Collection with the donor, and clearly communicated his desire to obtain it for Drew's special collections. This desire was equalled, if not exceeded, by the donor's own aspiration:

Meanwhile, I collected everything I could find by or about [R. S. Thomas]: first editions, limited editions, anthologies, critical studies, biographical materials, his letters to me, recordings of him reading his poems, even a coffee mug. Where was this collection to live when I no longer lived? At Drew was the obvious answer. I was a Drew graduate. In the late 1990s, I wrote and taught an online course in [United Methodist] history, doctrine, and polity for Drew, followed by a short course for women preparing to be commissioned as deaconesses. I knew the archives building at Drew from the time it was a hole in the ground, was present for its opening ceremonies, and wrote the brief history of Methodism included in the Drew-published volume celebrating the building. Dean Andrew Scrimgeour told me about each step in his plan for expanding the space for collections. His visits to my home, to see the collection, to develop a relationship that became a deep friendship, were crucial. Because of the nature of my collec-

tion, the works of a poet who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature and who was an Anglican parish priest, it needed to be placed where researchers had the support of scholars of English literature and theology. (McEllhenney email to authors, September 17, 2020)

That place, it was clear, was Drew University's special collections.

As Dow, Meringolo, and St. Clair (1995, 119) note, and as the McEllhenney case demonstrates, "if handled properly, the acceptance of gifts-in-kind can help establish a more complex relationship with the donor," especially with one who already feels an allegiance to the institution. This individual attention is always important in securing donations, but the entire process is better facilitated when the donor already has a connection with the institution, as in the case of alumni/ae donors.

Perhaps more than other collectors, alumni/ae collectors who become donors usually want their collections to be preserved intact and to be used by students and scholars (see, for example, Lindseth 2016, 34). Such was clearly the case for Rev. McEllhenney. On 23 May 1991, in a letter to an editor at Seren Books, one of R. S. Thomas's publishers, McEllhenney wrote,

[I plan] to give the RST collection to the library of a theological seminary with the requirement that it be maintained as a unit. There it will be available for others who have been drawn to RST as I have been drawn.

McEllhenney's desire to keep his collection together as a unit reflects a concern of many donor/collectors (Berger 2014, 178). Although this desire can sometimes present the receiving library with challenges (Berger 2014, 178–9), the Thomas Collection was attractive enough and manageable enough in size to overcome those challenges. And in McEllhenney's desire to make his collection available to others, one could hardly wish for a clearer statement—to paraphrase Bernard Mandeville—of a private vice (if book collecting should be considered a vice) turned into a public benefit.

Uniqueness of the Thomas Collection

Drew's R. S. Thomas Collection is certainly not the only one of its kind, nor is it the largest collection of materials related to the famed

Welsh poet. For example, substantial collections are found at the National Library of Wales (n.d.) and the R. S. Thomas Study Centre at the University of Bangor (n.d.). Still, it is unique, particularly in the United States, and that uniqueness underscores the value of special collections. Although portions may be accessible in other American libraries, the material within the Thomas Collection is of particular value because of its diverse nature and the completeness of the collection. As noted above, Rev. McEllehenney collected everything he could find related to Thomas and his work. The determination of a dogged collector—the “completist”—is evident throughout the collection (even down to collecting a coffee mug!).

Moreover, the nearly sixty letters between McEllehenney and Thomas constitute an especially interesting component to this collection. Private correspondence, one might argue, is necessarily unique, and the McEllehenney–Thomas correspondence gives Drew’s Thomas Collection an even more distinctive quality. In addition to the correspondence, McEllehenney has also donated a series of archival materials related to his own research into Thomas and his work. As mentioned above, these materials helped McEllehenney craft his monograph on R. S. Thomas. For researchers, such material offers a unique perspective on Thomas (from McEllehenney’s point of view) and an insider’s tour of the scholarly approach to understanding Thomas and his work. These archival documents provide insights that go beyond the printed word and present an example of how scholarly texts are researched, developed, written, edited, and published. In many ways, seeing the drafts and corrections of McEllehenney’s work can better demonstrate the scholarly process of creation than reading the final product. McEllehenney’s archival material includes numerous drafts of his book on Thomas, as well as research materials, interviews with Thomas and others, and even page proofs from his publisher. These are materials that could not be found elsewhere.

An additional aspect of the collection’s uniqueness is its ability to transcend a specific topic. Extending from literature to theology and nature writing to Welsh nationalism, the collection is unique in its scope. While many collections have a strong, single focus, the Thomas Collection is more expansive and so can prove useful to more diverse interests.

Interdisciplinary Appeal

The increasing importance of interdisciplinarity across academia has been well established (Klein 2010; Gibson and Mack 2012). Not surprisingly, the term figures prominently on the Drew University Theological School website (see, e.g. Drew Theological School, n.d.). Rev. McEllhenney's own interest in R. S. Thomas might be seen as interdisciplinary, as he was, from early on, convinced that "Thomas's poetry would be of particular interest to pastors" (McEllhenney – Thomas Correspondence, February 9, 1993). Indeed, part of Drew's interest in McEllhenney's Thomas Collection lies in the fact that Thomas's poetry exhibits wide-ranging religious concerns and so is of interest to theology students.

As McEllhenney himself attests, part of what drew him to reading (and collecting) Thomas's work was the poet's clear and fearless attempts to openly discuss his own doubts about God and his own occasional lack of faith in religion. Thomas's poetry supported McEllhenney's conviction "that doubt is the crack in conventional religion that allows the light of true belief to get in" (McEllhenney email to authors, September 17, 2020). This discussion of belief and doubt formed the foundation of McEllhenney's book on Thomas and is at the heart of the material within the Thomas Collection. Poetic struggle with theology, philosophy, faith, and God—it's all right there on the shelves and in the boxes of Drew's special collections. It could not be more appropriate for an audience of seminarians, theologians, and researchers. However, the interdisciplinary possibilities of the collection extend far beyond that theological audience. Indeed, McEllhenney saw this as well when offering the collection to Drew. As he recently put it: "the search for the Still Center, the Ground of Being, may be found in poetry and art that is doubt-laden, not overtly religious, perhaps even patently anti-religious" (email to authors, September 17, 2020).

Poetry, literature, and art are also disciplines that are able to take advantage of the value of the Thomas Collection. Such areas bring rich resources to explore a poet's oeuvre, biography, and personal perspectives. From the MFA program in poetry to undergraduate classes in English, poetics, and nationalistic literature, to memoir writing and personal reflection, the Thomas Collection is a valuable, hands-on teaching tool for classes that visit the archives. Students in literature-related majors and graduate programs have been able

to engage the Thomas Collection from completely different perspectives than that of their seminary colleagues.

One particularly interactive way in which the collection has supported academic programs at Drew is as a model for student authors. Students in the MFA and other graduate programs have used the Thomas material for inspiration in their own work. Classes have visited the archive to read and review Thomas's work (among others) as creative stimulus, particularly in areas related to writing about the natural world. Undergraduates in writing classes have been inspired by Thomas's poetic memoirs and personal struggles. Seeing first-hand these moments of inspiration in the reading room demonstrates just how much of an impact the Thomas Collection can have at all levels of literary study in the university.

The final, and perhaps most unexpected, discipline that has tapped into the Thomas Collection in recent years is that of environmental studies. In recent years, classes focusing on environmentalism and writing have come to the archives and taken advantage of the materials in the Thomas Collection. Thomas's poetry has elements of what Christopher Morgan (2009, 51) calls a "romantic-realism" in its discussions of nature:

[R]omantic in the sense that R. S. Thomas's experiences and explorations of nature continue, ultimately, to be experiences and explorations of the self and of God... and yet realist by his consistent acknowledgement of nature as not merely sublime in its aspect or nurturing in its action, but equally as fierce in its tumult, ruthless in its purpose, deadly in its possibilities, frightening in the harshness of its very discompassion towards itself and its human interpreters.

This duality of the sublime and the reality of nature, evident throughout much of Thomas's work, is perfect for an environmental studies curriculum that includes classes on nature writing, eco-criticism, and literary analysis. What better way to learn about writing about the natural world than to explore a collection devoted to a man whose poetic work was often dedicated to that very topic?

These environmental studies classes also provided an opportunity for Rev. McEllhenney to see his collection at work first-hand. During a class visit to the archives in October 2019, Rev. McEllhenney himself was a guest lecturer. He discussed with students his collecting habits and history. The class (ENGH206 Nature Writing) was taught by Dr. Summer Harrison and was focused on the "tradition

of writing about the natural world,” including exploring “the role of writing in the human relationship with the environment” (Drew University Course Catalog, Fall 2019). Students in the class looked at a variety of collections, including both the Robert Frost Collection and the R. S. Thomas Collection. Rev. McEllhenney was on hand not only to talk about the collections but to answer questions, and, at the end, he read aloud some of Thomas’s poems. This interaction between an alumnus and current students—between a donor-collector and potential future donor-collectors—left a deep impression on all involved and exemplified how special collections can use material “to deepen and enlarge the understanding of students in a wide variety of disciplines” (McEllhenney, email to authors, October 16, 2019).

The Gift That Keeps Giving

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, Rev. McEllhenney’s donation has introduced new students to the joys of book collecting and to the wonders of special collections. Although initially aimed largely at attracting Drew Theological School students and faculty, this donation has proven to have wider interdisciplinary appeal and to have enticed undergraduates to engage with library collections in new ways. This has led to a greater awareness and use of the Thomas Collection and to an even stronger relationship between Rev. McEllhenney and Drew’s special collections.

A wonderful example of how this relationship has expanded over time is the addition of a new collection to Drew’s special collections. This collection, consisting of more than 100 volumes of books by and about C. S. Lewis, came to Drew as a result of its relationship with Rev. McEllhenney. In October, 2019 (shortly after the Nature Writing class session), Rev. McEllhenney reached out to the archives with an offer to connect us with Ellen McGill, a friend of his who was looking for a place to donate her late husband’s large collection of C. S. Lewis material. We were only too eager to accept the donation. Although Lewis is well-represented in Drew’s library, there were few (if any) first editions or rarer publications. This became a perfect marriage of a collection rich in scholarly materials, which needed a home, and an academic library that needed it—an engagement facilitated by a donor matchmaker! In many ways, the Frost and Thomas Collections brought the C. S. Lewis collection to Drew and so illustrate how a

deep relationship with a generous alumnus is the gift that keeps on giving.

In their study of academic libraries and engaged alumni, Griffith and Kealthy (2018, 203) present a “base interaction model for the alumni – academic library relationship.” This model highlights the pivotal role played by academic libraries in creating engaged students and, in turn, engaged alumni who support libraries. The McEllhenney donation illustrates quite strikingly how an engaged student can become an engaged alumnus whose donation to the library—in this case, specifically to special collections—has helped to engage new students. Ideally, this cyclical model should perpetuate itself. As Michael L. Taylor (2018, 129) has noted, “it is important to include current students in the category of potential donors. As alumni, they may one day be in a position to give.”

As is evident from this case study, what alumni can potentially give to an institution’s special collections cannot be measured solely in the number of books donated or in the rarity of manuscripts and archival material given. Rather, it is also measured in research done, connections made, exhibitions curated, publications produced, classes taught, students inspired, and more. Rev. McEllhenney’s Thomas Collection thus confirms the claim that “libraries can benefit from alumni who have a deeper relationship with the library that extends well beyond graduation” (Griffith and Kealthy 2018, 204). In this particular case, sixty years beyond graduation seems to be just the beginning of Drew’s relationship with John McEllhenney. Other donor/alumni relationships are out there for other institutions large and small. One never knows exactly where these relationships will lead, but the possibilities are endless and the outcomes often unexpectedly rewarding.

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