

The New Schoenberg Database of Manuscripts Project: Results and Lessons Learned

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The Schoenberg Database of Manuscripts (SDBM; <https://sdbm.library.upenn.edu/>) is an internationally recognized resource that assists researchers in locating and identifying pre-1600 manuscript books from Europe, Asia, and Africa, establishing provenance for these books, and aggregating descriptive information about specific classes or types of manuscripts in general. Until recently, the public's interaction of the database has been limited to searching and contacting the database's managers through email. In an effort to expand engagement and therefore enhance the value and mission of the SDBM, the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries began in July 2014 a three-year, NEH-funded project to redevelop the SDBM into an online, collaboratively-built, universal finding aid and provenance research tool for the world's manuscript books, which is now completed. The New SDBM is an open-access tool, allowing its users—scholars, curators, librarians, students, and citizen scholars—to contribute descriptive information as a by-product of their own research about both the current and historic locations of the world's manuscript books.

In creating this resource, the project team grappled with the issue of how to maintain good description standards that will enable searching and access without intimidating the non-specialist who may have access to data that scholars may not. The issue raises a number of questions that have been crucial to how the New SDBM has been shaped: How do you ensure that good data is entered? What is sufficient data for good manuscript description? What is an acceptable level of "bad" data? When is it appropriate to lower standards? How do you manage the user expectations when your data isn't perfect? This paper will consider these questions and present an overview of lessons learned from the development and implementation of the New SDBM.