

May 2020

Connecting Libraries to Campus Communities Through Collaborative Displays

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Recommended Citation

Deinert, V. Emily; Brame, DeAnn M.; McLeod, Amanda T.; and Walters, W. Cody (2020) "Connecting Libraries to Campus Communities Through Collaborative Displays," *South Carolina Libraries: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1* , Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51221/sc.scl.2020.4.1.22>

Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scl_journal/vol4/iss1/14

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Connecting Libraries to Campus Communities Through Collaborative Displays

Abstract

To elevate diverse voices and collections at Winthrop University, the Dacus Library Display Committee began collaborating with campus community partners to coordinate library displays with campus events. We found that collaborative displays had a higher rate of engagement, and encouraged additional partnerships throughout our campus community.

Keywords

display, academic libraries, collaboration

Patrons visit libraries to learn and discover more about important people, places, and historical moments, and library displays can help facilitate this learning. Despite this, displays are not always prioritized or recognized as important outreach tools in academic libraries, and the creation of displays falls to people with little training or experience in display curation (Brazer & Wyman, 2001; Dutka et al, 2002). This can pose significant challenges, but with research and planning, displays can be a powerful and impactful teaching tool.

Literature Review

Examples in literature present ways to curate displays in public and school libraries; few focus on academic libraries (Everett, 2018). For academic libraries, there is abundant research on outreach efforts of which displays and exhibitions can play a part. Fabian et al. (2003) noted the importance of developing campus partnerships in outreach efforts and found these partnerships led to more successful results. Further, as Hoffman and Nolen (2020) note, such collaborative efforts can help the library demonstrate its relevance and value while also contributing to students' academic success. However, the focus of this research is more on outreach tactics rather than how a particular tactic (displays) can impact and improve outreach.

Displays can also play an important role in promoting inclusion and engaging with diverse groups in the campus community. Maloney (2012) discusses how the library's unique position in the university makes it well-placed to connect with all members of the campus community. The library can function as a kind of third space, "conducive to representing the culture of campus or community—a safe intellectual space" (Everett, 2018, p. 519). Positioning the library in this way can allow for deeper and more meaningful engagement with various groups on campus, and library displays can be a tool for promoting these conversations.

Displays and Collaboration

We began our display collaboration in January 2019 when DeAnn Brame, Digital Services/Systems Librarian, began working with faculty across campus to promote Winthrop University's Interdisciplinary Food Conference in February 2019. Brame, who was the Chair of the Library's Display Committee at the time, came up with the idea to create a display to promote the conference while still highlighting Black History Month. Winthrop boasts a minority population of 38% and Black History Month displays have been an integral part of Dacus Library's display schedule for some time, so the solution was to make a display focused on the history of soul food and black chefs.



Figure 1 Part of our "Foodways and Soul Food" display; map displays food connections, while table displays recipes and cookbooks.

Our display, titled "Foodways and Soul Food," spanned across the first floor of the library. We conducted extensive research to make a compelling display that provided new avenues of knowledge for our campus community. The centerpiece was a map created by the Display Committee to show how many "Southern Foods" literally traveled from Africa to the American South through the Slave

Trade. Information cards were hung on those travel lines to teach students that some recipes we think of as stereotypically American actually derive from African dishes. For instance, the Creole dish gumbo got its name and ingredients from West Africa -- "gumbo" is the Bantu word for okra, which was first grown in West Africa. To further engage our community, we created related displays throughout the library. We featured our collections through book displays about modern chefs and cooking, such as Michael Twitty's *The Cooking Gene*; we highlighted modern black chefs in America, such as South Carolina's own Rodney Scott, with placards throughout the library; we provided recipe cards for popular soul food dishes; and we invited students to share their experiences with soul food on a white board next to our display. These

displays could not have been created without extensive research into foodways, soul food, black chefs and more. The research conducted by the committee brought legitimacy to the display, strengthening our chances to partner with other campus groups going forward by showing them the dedication and quality work that we are able to create.

While our “Foodways and Soul Food” display was not the only display that took considerable research to put together, it was the first display we developed to specifically collaborate with campus events. This display began a series of interactions across campus. Medieval studies faculty reached out for collaboration after seeing our Black History Month display to promote the Medieval Studies Minor during Medieval Studies Week (March 4-8th 2019). Library

faculty and Medieval Studies faculty worked together to identify items of interest from our Archives and General collections. The resulting display showcased Illuminated Manuscripts from the Archives and books on medieval history from the Library. We cross-promoted the display and other Medieval Studies Week activities through the library’s social media. In a surprising turn of events, our



Figure 2 Illuminated and annotated medieval texts alongside Library materials for our “Medieval Studies Week” display.



display led to an unexpected breakthrough. Someone who could translate the manuscript annotations featured in our display contacted the Medieval studies department. Medieval studies faculty were appreciative of the collaboration and explicitly let us know -- *“All of this came to light because you let the Medieval Studies program display some of our treasures—and we’re very excited and very grateful to you for helping us get our message out to the academic community!”* -Jo Koster, Margaret M. Bryant Professor of English. Our collaboration with the Medieval studies program was so successful last year that they requested to continue our collaboration this semester – the current Display Committee has been working with them to curate a display for March 2020.

In contrast to the two displays mentioned above, we also created an individual display for Women's History Month that we put just as much in-house effort and research into. The Women's History Month display also spanned the first floor of our library with books, displays of women from different waves of feminism, and a large timeline women's rights history. However, we did not receive a fraction of the interaction and engagement that we received from the "Foodways and Soul Food" display. The Women's History Month display required similar levels of research as our Black History Month display and more research than the Medieval Studies Week display, so the committee was expecting similar levels of engagement. When it became clear that engagement was lacking, we started asking ourselves why.

Conclusion

After some reflection, we realized that the work and research we put into our displays was not effective enough on its own; rather, our collaboration with campus community partners brought attention to our displays and was the driving force behind the success of our displays. Collaboration with the campus community appears to be the key, especially considering we created two other displays for the Spring semester that were tied to national events (Women's History Month and National Poetry Month) but they were not connected to any specific events on campus. While the displays were promoted in the same channels as the previous displays, the overall response was muted compared to the two displays that were partnered with other campus entities. Our collaborative work with conference organizers encouraged us to explore new avenues of discovery for our annual Black History Month display, which we believe enriched our students' learning experience, and resulted in our most popular display of the year. We believe collaborating with campus partners for even a few of our displays last year increased the reach and impact of *all* our displays, but displays were *most* effective when we directly collaborated with our campus community.

Since we have undertaken a more collaborative approach to the way we design displays and interact on campus, we have strengthened our relationships across the university through ongoing partnerships. The library is now more active in seeking opportunities to engage with various groups on campus, specifically to create and display resources available through the library (not just to host an event for the campus). This year the library approached the Theater department to collaborate; our Outreach Librarian (Hope Johnson) worked with Library's Display committee and the Theater Department faculty to organize a lecture series in the Library that corresponded with the opening of Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream*. We believe this new collaboration is indicative of a new trend in which our library no longer just occasionally has an event that goes along with campus happenings, we are making an effort to partner with our campus community to incorporate well researched, interactive displays that showcase library holdings.

Collaborative, well researched displays are a great way to have fun while learning and creating meaningful relationships across campus. Most importantly, such displays showcase the library as an integral part of the campus community, reminding and reinforcing that the Library is a space for our community to learn, engage, and discover together.

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