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From Stealthy to Burgeoning: Student Curators in the Earl Gregg Swem Library

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From Stealthy to Burgeoning: Student Curators in the Earl Gregg Swem Library

Good afternoon and thank you for welcoming a non-Carolinan (Carolinian?) to your annual meeting. (I perhaps don't get out as often as I should and if any of you know me from Twitter and saw my tweets last weekend, you will understand, which makes this conference an added pleasure.)

Today I will share a case study of the experience of the Earl Gregg Swem Library's Special Collections Research Center at the College of William & Mary in curating exhibits with (mostly) undergraduate classes. **This is our third semester working with classes** to curate an exhibit in the library and at the end of the semester we will celebrate the **openings of the 3rd and 4th** class exhibits.

I am here today to tell you that even if you are someone who **hated group projects as a student** (and maybe dropped a class in college when group projects were a major part of your grade), well, you too can find yourself mostly successfully collaborating on exhibits and related projects. There are many, many books & other resources on creating a successful team or cooperative learning project. I haven't read enough to want to cast myself as an expert on the literature and I won't be doing so today. Two of the most important components taken from what I have read and in speaking with our faculty partners is the need for deadlines and in-class time for students to work together.

Prior to the spring 2010 semester, our most recent exhibit collaborations had been an alumnus (a young retiree who was a former librarian) who curated an exhibit about LGBT life on campus and LGBT literature in the collection as a companion to the SFPL's traveling exhibit "Out at the Library" and an exhibit on slavery in Virginia curated by a summer intern with special collections staff, both in 2007. We've also taken over a 24 foot long exhibit case outside the athletic offices in the university arena.

[SLIDE] (front of Swem, front of the SCRC)

I'll just set the scene for you a bit. William & Mary is a public, liberal arts research university of 5800 undergrads & 1900 graduate students (basically, we're very into teaching, learning, & research across the university). Just to give you sense of our evolving mission, in fall 2005 special collections had 5 class instruction sessions, while by last fall that number had grown to 39 instruction sessions. As part of the aggressive and expanded outreach initiatives of the department, one of the library's exhibit galleries was promoted as a potential "exhibit lab" for a few years. The director of special collections would talk with faculty we were already working with about potentially using the gallery for student projects. There were nibbles, but no one was biting into this opportunity.

[SLIDE] (Gallery exhibit cases with people standing next to them to show size of cases)

Why did we want to work with faculty and their classes on curating exhibits? Well, as I mentioned, we've been expanding our class instruction program and this seemed like a

natural step to integrate the collections into coursework other than just a paper and of course a great way to showcase special collections material. Also, the library does not suffer from a shortage of exhibit cases and it seems reasonable that a class-curated exhibit would provide a means of filling some of our exhibit cases. Our layout: there are rotunda galleries of 4 cases on three floors in the library. There are another 3 cases in the special collections lobby for rotating exhibits (plus two permanent displays), another 6 flat exhibit cases in the library, and there are also 3 large portable panels that are used as needed, you know, when we just don't have enough exhibit cases in the building. (There is also art in the library: a portrait gallery, a sculpture gallery, and other art throughout the building, but that generally rotates very, very infrequently.) So, in my experience that is a lot of exhibit cases - 21 - to rotate every few months. In contrast, at my previous institution of similarly sized special collections staff and collections had about half as many exhibit cases.

The library has an exhibits committee, but in practice most of the exhibits are curated & fabricated by special collections staff and our grad students and volunteers.

The idea for class-curated exhibits finally became a reality by chance a little over a year ago during a conversation I had with a faculty member. Prof. Susan Kern teaches courses related to public history and museum studies including a grad/undergrad material culture course. She stopped by special collections during finals of the fall 2009 semester to talk with me about the logistics of donating some of her family papers to another university. I didn't know her at the time and I didn't think she was then bringing her classes to special collections, so I made the ask. She then told me my boss had previously emailed her asking her to bring her classes in and mentioned a possible exhibit. She was interested, but would have to rethink her class and her syllabus and maybe next year (some of you in the room may be familiar with this conversation), but innocent me...I stepped right into it. The next thing I knew I was sending the professor a brief list of material on her material culture class' theme (tobacco, which being a southern university and one that owned a plantation before the Revolution, we were able to find just a few things...). I was also talking with my special collections colleague who handles exhibit fabrication and handles much of the design about potential deadlines for material selection and label copy and making her a part of this project. I wasn't jumping out this airplane alone. Before I knew it we had booked the class for a couple meeting sessions in special collections in the upcoming semester.

At that time, we did not have solid instructions or best practices for staff who were doing exhibits, let alone these 11 students and their professor we were going to set loose to fill 4 large exhibit cases. Sure, there were generally accepted practices or at least common sense floating around for staff, but it was a bit loose. My colleague who I was working with formerly worked in a museum, which is a big part of the reason why her duties in special collections evolved to include so much about exhibits. She was great in putting together sample label templates for different types of objects along with concise guidance for the students in preparing their label copy.

This class was very interested in the process of the exhibit and we were able to integrate an exhibit into the course that allowed the professor and students to participate from research to design to installation. What made it into the exhibit was actually much of the material we pulled for the class' first visit to special collections when we were introducing them to the department, its collections, and how to find material. It turned out, the students were happy to mostly use the objects and supporting material we had pulled for them. On the one hand, this was a bit disappointing as I hoped more students would dig into the research process in our reading room, on the other hand...this insured that some objects that had truly won my heart made it into the exhibit: the football ashtray that plays W&M's fight song, the pug ashtray, the cigarette holder with a ceramic dog, and so many others.

This class met for over 3 hours once a week, so in addition to introducing the class to special collections during that first session, we also introduced them to how we do exhibits. We showed them examples of recent exhibits on our Flickr page, we went to the gallery space and talked about the space and design. We also talked about exhibit labels and what should be in their label copy.

[SLIDE] (football ashtray photo, youtube video)

At the end of that class period students were allowed the option to select a primary object from those we had pre-selected. The fastest student went right to the musical football ashtray...

During a later class meeting (without special collections staff), the students and professor discussed their selected primary objects and sorted themselves into sub-themes within the broad subject of tobacco. Those themes were "Smoking for the Learned Man", "A Penny a Pound" (the tobacco trade), "Peddling Poison" (general advertising), & "Smokin' Sports" (tobacco & college sports).

The class' second class meeting in special collections was spent with the students working in their exhibit case groups selecting precisely what would be in their case. For instance, they knew they wanted a business ledger, but which pages? They knew they wanted to use cigarette cards (think baseball cards, but in your pack of cigarettes), but which ones? There was a bit of additional research during this class meeting, but the students were prepared. We were also working with the groups to sketch potential layouts of their exhibit cases.

As I said, these students were interested in the exhibit not just as a final project for the class, but on the process of exhibit formulation and construction. So some of them had very specific and strong opinions on the precise layout of their cases. After that class session, my colleague and I worked a bit further with the material selected and did mock layouts like these. (typical practice for us)

[SLIDE] (mock layouts)

Some students (a student) felt very strongly about the design and color scheme for their exhibit and came in to check the progress at various points. We tried to accommodate these requests as we wanted the students to maintain their connection to the project during the two weeks when they were not able to see the material during our exhibit fabrication phase.

In addition to the primary object each student began the project with, they also selected supporting material. In the case of the exhibit case about college sports & tobacco this included things like football programs and photos of the stadium. There were some students who assured us they were going to find and bring in material from elsewhere to use in the exhibit. This has turned out to be a bit bumpy in some cases. That first semester, some students did not bring in their outside material until the last minute - literally the day it was to be installed. We had students bring in low-quality images - things they downloaded from the web - that were low-quality, let alone being blurry stills from Disney movies.

Something similar has come up twice this semester when student curators wanted to use material from their sororities and fraternities. They scanned photos at their chapter house, but they were at too low a quality to produce the best possible print for exhibit. We were able to get one student to make an appointment to bring in the original scrapbook and we shot photos of the pages she wants to use to allow us to create a quality print version.

When discussing the potential components of doing an exhibit with Prof. Kern before the semester began, she was interested in the students having the chance to mount some material and install the exhibit. The class was after all billed as a field school in material culture. Instead of training the 11 students to mount original documents like our own little mad scientist version of a workshop, my colleague and I agreed that we would set aside one small to medium sized reproduction for each student to mount on foam core. This exercise came at the beginning of the class' third session in Special Collections near the end of the semester when the students and professor (because she was a curator as well) were to install the exhibit with myself and my colleague.

[SLIDE] (curators with their cases)

All four cases were installed within the class period and no one was injured. (Almost tears...?)

It was a great experience. We were exhausted, but really pleased by how "A Large and Curious History: Tobacco at The College of William and Mary" came together.

The next week, we held an opening reception for the students to celebrate their exhibit.

A couple weeks after the end of the semester, Prof. Kern and I met for a debrief. We both agreed it was a positive experience and one we would be open to repeating. And because there are always ideas for next time...a few things we thought could be altered in future offerings included: offering the potential for a media component (I think our digitizing of the musical football ashtray couldn't help but wet their appetite). Including an "exhibit tour" by each

student of their portion of the exhibit at the opening reception, which we could record and make available online. And smaller things like including the name of the exhibit case each student curated on their name badge at the reception.

My colleague Chandi and I developed a checklist of sorts of all potential components of doing an exhibit with Special Collections material from the "introduction to special collections" class session to label copy deadlines to who writes the exhibit publicity to media components to the opening reception.

[SLIDE] (components)

So, did we learn from our experience in the subsequent class curated exhibits: yes and no. For the second exhibit class last fall, we had our checklist of needs, expectations, and deadlines. But there were times when we wavered and instances when the professor had to make adjustments.

As summer break neared its end, our eyes had already turned to the fall semester and wondering who could we work with on the next class exhibit. In our minds, we had had our first victim, so now we had a final product to show our next potential collaborator and so we should be able to reel them in easily.

The faculty member who came to mind and who ultimately was intrigued by the exhibit idea was a professor who, unlike our previous victim, had regularly been bringing her classes to special collections and integrated the collections into her students' coursework.

Prof. Jenny Putzi teaches an English course "Gender & the American Diary" on diaries as literary genre (as well as historical artifact). For the last several years, she has brought her classes to special collections where they receive an introduction to the department and are presented with a couple dozen of our many, many diaries. The students must then select a diary (either from those we've pulled or one they find in the collection) and choose a section to transcribe. They also use the diary in a paper later in the semester.

Jenny has always been a fan and supporter of special collections and she was interested in the idea and challenge of doing an exhibit, something new. We had our list of potential components to share with her and we reviewed it with her.

[SLIDE] (Unlocking the Diary 1)

Prof. Putzi had worked with my colleague Susan Riggs the last couple of semesters, so we officially had three staff members working with this class. Susan retained the role of introducing the students to Special Collections and selecting the initial diaries presented to the students. While Chandi and I met the students for their second class visit to talk about the exhibit.

For this iteration, we met with the small groups to select the pages from their diary and the additional, related material that would be in each of their cases outside of class time. There just wasn't enough class time for these meetings during class and so we met with the 15 students in their small groups or individually as needed.

[SLIDE] (Unlocking the Diary 2)

The class did not try their hand at mounting items for the exhibit nor were they involved in the exhibit installation. We did let the class know when we would begin installing the exhibit so that interested students could stop by to see the progress and get an idea of the installation process.

When we first spoke with the professor about what we had learned from our first exhibit experience before her course began, we shared that the deadlines, both for the actual material and the later deadline for label copy, were actually among the biggest challenges we had faced the previous semester. She understood, but the necessary deadlines were the first thing the professor mentioned when I spoke with her just before the opening reception about what surprised her most about the project.

The feedback was uniformly positive from the professor and students. Many, many more people came to this opening reception including folks from the university & community who were descendants of some of the diarists.

This semester, Chandi Singer and I are giving this a third go-round (I joke it has driven her to retire at the end of May and that it is increasing my gray hairs). Another colleague, Ben Bromley, our public services staffer in special collections this year is working with us on both classes' exhibits. I made the decision that we needed another staff member to take on responsibility for the workload and creative patience sometimes required.

We are working with a literary & cultural studies professor who has been bringing her classes to special collections for several years for projects related to student newspapers and other publications for a class called "Constructing the News."

Over the last four years, her students have crafted and expanded their own wiki about various W&M student publications. This year is the 100th anniversary of the student newspaper, The Flat Hat, so that is their focus for the exhibit. This is our largest class to do an exhibit so far with 20 students.

Before the beginning of the semester, I fed the professor a few ideas for sections within the exhibit and the students did some further brainstorming and ultimately settled on their top 5 choices. The professor assigned each student to a topic based on their preferences.

This is the class exhibit I have been worried about least as this professor is someone I have known since my first month on campus and is someone who is always utilizing a variety of components and methods in her courses: like the wiki, collaborative writing, other group work,

film and media studies, etc. She and her students began their design meetings with special collections on Wednesday and finished them yesterday. After the first group meeting on Wednesday - which went exactly 30 minutes as it should when students are really prepared and understand the expectations - I asked if I could give her a hug I was so pleased.

The second class doing an exhibit this semester is "The World of Henry Billups", a history seminar about African American Virginians during Jim Crow. Billups worked for William & Mary from 1888 to 1955.

The professor had previously brought a class to special collections for an introductory session, but that first session was not a spectacular success. It was scheduled at a less than helpful point in the semester, the special collections material (or specifically using primary sources) wasn't as well integrated into the syllabus as archivists would hope for. **But**, she knew we were the place for local and regional material on the course topic. She also knew we had done exhibits with other classes. The afternoon she and I met at the end of the fall semester to discuss whether her class would do an exhibit in the spring semester she spoke with Susan, our first exhibit professor, about the process. (Do I think Susan talked her into doing the exhibit? Yes.) I didn't discourage the exhibit and had mentioned it to her, but more in a "you could do this next year" manner as I knew we had the student newspaper exhibit percolating.

[SLIDE] (Allen exhibit case layouts with holes)

We're still in the thick of this semester and this week has had highs and lower points with these projects. At this point, there are multiple students who have not met the document selection deadline and last week I had to send an email with the sentence, "Frankly, I'm concerned." You don't want to have to do that, but we had to be honest. We're helping them curate and also trying to be project managers.

We didn't set out to do two exhibits this semester, but both classes provided different opportunities for us that we couldn't miss. We began by meeting with both professors individually last December before they agreed to do the exhibit. After they both considered and committed to doing an exhibit, we sent both professors the checklist and explained how doing both would impact their deadlines since we would have two exhibits that would need to be prepared at essentially the same time.

I thought for sure one of them would say, "forget it, those deadlines are at a bad time in the semester for me. We'll do this another semester." but they both agreed and here we are. I must admit that when I realized this conference was during the week the second class would be meeting with special collections staff to do the layouts for the exhibit, I did not feel as much regret as perhaps I should have for missing most of those meetings to be here.

What we're doing better:

1/ Our best practices documents to the students for label copy and general exhibit design are more robust. In addition to our specific guidelines, we also suggested a few online resources on basic exhibit theory and design for the faculty to share with their students, which they did.

2/ We're holding the student newspaper exhibit opening reception during the class' final exam block and each group is presenting their cases to the attendees in a formal manner. We may record those presentations.

3/ Our publicity is only improving. PR is always tough for us.

Is it worth it? like so much, it is a mixed bag: new audiences, new or changing relationships with faculty and students. These are great. Special Collections staff are still doing these exhibits. It isn't like I've been able to turn them over to the students and professor. Yet?

We'd like to see more media components.

I want us to get to the point of More exhibit, less process. But that is a goal for the entire exhibit program in our repository, not just the student-curated exhibits.

I plan to strongly encourage any faculty in the future to include a deadline for the selection of at least one object by students, so that we know when we're meeting they have a starting point. Spending 90 minutes in a room with 3-4 students who don't know what they want to put in that exhibit space is not the most fun you can have. This worked well with Unlocking the Diary: the students had to select a diary a couple weeks into the class and do a transcription. This was due 2 weeks before they met with special collections staff to craft the design and layout of the exhibit.

After our meeting with one of the exhibit case groups on Wednesday I asked the professor what she thought was most important to share from her point of view and she didn't have any surprises for us: deadlines and time during class for the students to work in their groups and share and discuss the project as a class.

I spoke with the campus art museum's director of education at the beginning of this semester about the class she is attempting to restart in which students curate an exhibit in the museum. It was an enlightening conversation for me about their mission and I'm hopeful we can work together on future class exhibits too... and not just because they have a much more humane installation schedule whereby their exhibits are installed for the beginning of the following semester.

And now it seems we can't stop our burgeoning partnerships. And we shouldn't. Thank you.