Designs of Duty: Using Exhibits to Build Partnerships

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/stacey_knight-davis/74/
Abstract

Exhibits in academic libraries are drivers for outreach. Many exhibit programs center on national traveling exhibits often because they are well done and already completed. The only input necessary from a host institution is space and a small amount of time to put up the exhibit. Locally made exhibits create a stronger connection to the community, but they are more expensive in terms of time for research and creating the exhibit, and money for printing. The adage “many hands make light work” accurately describes the local exhibit creation process when multiple groups come together. Partnerships between libraries to share exhibit content broaden the pool of exhibit possibilities and raise awareness of exhibit programs for all partners. In this case, an exhibit at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign that focused on veterans and their service-related tattoos was picked up and built upon by Eastern Illinois University. This case study covers multiple libraries, both academic and public, sharing an exhibit about veterans and their tattoos, providing outreach opportunities to veteran and service member populations at all participating libraries.

Keywords
Exhibits, Partnerships, Outreach, Veterans, Tattoos

Introduction

In 2004, Booth Library at Eastern Illinois University (EIU) began an exhibit program focused on community outreach and student engagement. Since then, EIU has hosted traveling exhibits from the American Library Association, National Library of Medicine, National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) On the Road, as well as other agencies. In some years, exhibits were locally produced. The library’s goal is to host at least one major exhibit per year. Locating quality exhibits at a reasonable cost is a continuing challenge. Local exhibit preparation is time intensive due to the research and then production time required to create a quality product. While there is a librarian with some dedicated hours for exhibit coordination, large locally prepared exhibits require librarians to make time to produce exhibit content. Exhibit work is an additional load on top of regular duties. Using external exhibits reduces the workload of producing exhibits. Exhibits that Booth Library has hosted from national organizations, such as “Elizabeth I: Ruler and Legend,” “Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature,” and “Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World” came with pre-made, freestanding exhibit panels. Local materials were made to fit the 17 built-in display areas in the library. For 2018, this model was flipped so that the traveling portion of the exhibit went into the cases and the locally produced content was put on freestanding panels.

The traveling portion of the exhibit was “Symbols of Service,” an exhibit from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) that was curated by JJ Pionke and Nicholas Osborne. The Booth Library exhibit took “Symbols of Service” and applied the concept to the
community by interviewing area veterans about their service tattoos. The EIU exhibit was called “Designs of Duty.” Many partnerships were formed over the course of creation and presentation of the exhibit, which led to a closer-knit community of practice and to more creativity.

EIU and UIUC have a long history and association with veterans. Booth Library has hosted a recurring Prisoner of War/Missing In Action (POW/MIA) white table ceremony, which is a display composed of a table, chair and place setting that symbolizes the history of lost veterans and their families, similar to the tradition of the riderless horse. The white table ceremony has been attended by community school children for the past several years. EIU has also worked with Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) cadets on two small exhibits about the ROTC program and with EIU faculty on military history exhibits. The faculty-led exhibits covered World War II, with Booth Library hosting two exhibits on the Women Air Force Service Pilots. At UIUC, there is a new Veteran Center that serves as both dormitory and meeting place for veterans at the university and within the community. JJ Pionke has worked extensively with this group to bolster the collection with materials that directly relate to veteran needs as well as to highlight veteran issues and concerns by hosting an extensive exhibit every November.

The local exhibits that Booth Library and UIUC have done individually provide a regional perspective, highlight a related academic area, or tie into the library collections. The exhibits serve as a focus for programming and a jumping-off point for exploring related topics as well as building partnerships, both on and off campus.

**Literature Review**

The majority of research on veterans and student veterans interacting with academic libraries focuses on services and needs. Arzola (2012) annotates fifteen sources on supporting the research needs of student veterans, centering on the needs of post 9/11 veterans. Miller, Accamando, and Wagner (2017) focused their collection development and outreach project on student veterans using education benefits from the 2008 GI Bill. Phelps (2015) provides an overview of student veteran needs and how libraries can respond to those needs. She includes displays as an outreach method.

Academic library outreach to veteran and service member populations through exhibits and displays is not heavily covered in the literature. One of the few sources covering academic library exhibits as outreach to veteran populations is LeMire and Mulvihill (2017). They discuss exhibits as a way for academic libraries to connect with veterans and service personnel. One of their recommendations for academic libraries is to “…recognize the efforts and contributions of veterans and service members on campus,” and they specifically mention exhibits as a possible route to accomplish this (2017, p. 105). LeMire and Mulvihill also recommend that academic libraries develop exhibits that feature “…biographical sketches of student veterans and service members on their campus and build a display that highlights their unique experiences,” and they go on to state that the strategy is “…a particularly effective way to demonstrate that the library is interested in and sees value in student veterans and service members” (2017, p. 121).

The literature on exhibits as outreach primarily focuses on traveling exhibits from national providers such as the National Library of Medicine. Eva Sclippa discusses internal and
external partnerships in her 2017 article describing Alfred University Libraries’ experience with the exhibit “Harry Potter’s World” from the National Library of Medicine. Sclippa describes partnerships formed to promote the exhibit with groups on campus and some off-campus organizations (2017). Exhibits were determined to be a useful tool for raising awareness of library resources and building community partnerships. Exhibits from the National Library of Medicine are also the focus of Auten et al (2013). In a survey, they found that 84% of attendees at library exhibits and exhibit programming responded that the library event they attended changed their perceptions of the library positively.

For publicizing exhibits and exhibit events, Auten et al found the most effective marketing avenues to be email announcements, posters and flyers, word of mouth, and newspaper and newsletter coverage. The marketing channels attendees listed as preferred were email, Facebook, newspaper/newsletter, poster/flyer and word of mouth. Another “Harry Potter’s World” exhibit experience is detailed by Faricy-Beredo (2013). Marketing for them entailed, blogs, social media, posters, screensavers, and campus media outlets. Press releases generated media coverage of the exhibit and marketing was identified as one of the most time-consuming components of exhibit hosting (Faricy-Beredo 2013).

Faricy-Beredo identifies public libraries as a natural partner for academic libraries for collaborative exhibit programming. In addition to marketing experience and support, public libraries bring programming experience. Public libraries have their own partnership systems with area organizations that can be used for joint marketing and programming. Exhibits are a catalyst for partnerships between library types (2013).

Partnerships between public libraries and museums are documented in the literature. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions’ report, “Public Libraries, Archives and Museums: Trends in Collaboration” (2008), includes four descriptions of partnerships involving sharing exhibits. A key example of collaboration between public libraries and museums for exhibit creation is “Real West.” The production team for “Real West” included the Colorado Historical Society, Denver Public Library and Denver Art Museum and each partner also served as a venue for the exhibit (Walker and Manjarrez 1999).

Partnerships between universities and public libraries for exhibitions are less commonly documented, but there are some examples. Manuel (2015) describes an exhibit project created by students from the Department of Historical Studies at Southern Illinois University that was displayed at the Edwardsville Public Library. A key example of multi-agency collaborative exhibit creation is “Because of Women Like Her: Rochester Woman Suffrage 1917-2017.” This exhibit resulted in a collaboration between the Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester Historical Society, the Susan B. Anthony Museum and House, Rochester-Monroe Public Library System, and the University of Rochester’s River Campus Libraries. The Rochester Public Library hosted the main exhibit. The partnership also produced three copies of a traveling banner exhibit, timeline exhibit panels, topical exhibit panels, and freestanding kiosks (“Because of Women Like Her,” 2018).
Examples of academic library collaboration and academic-public library collaboration on exhibits are not well represented in the literature. However, partnerships for outreach are covered. Meyer (2014) discusses the value of short-term partnerships in library outreach. She identifies project-based collaboration as a way to expand resources available for outreach activities. Meyer notes that for project-based collaborations, “…resource contributions may not be equal, and partners may have different goals” (2014 p. 115). So long as all sides of the project-based partnership fulfill their obligations and meet their own goals, the project is a success. Some of the keys to building partnerships are flexibility, personal relationships, getting out of the library to meet potential partners, knowing what the library can provide, and willingness to lead (Meyer 2014).

**Developing “Designs of Duty”**

Hosting one exhibit per year quickly exhausts the available supply from national organizations. In 2018, Booth Library at EIU was fortunate to partner with exhibit curators at UIUC to display the exhibit “Symbols of Service.” Developed by JJ Pionke and Nicholas Osborne, the exhibit uses oral histories and photographs to explore veterans’ stories about their service-related tattoos (Pionke and Osborne 2018). EIU became aware of “Symbols of Service” while the exhibit was still in development through information shared at regional health science librarians’ meetings. Regular in-person networking meetings were the driver for the partnership. Booth Library’s representative, Stacy Knight-Davis, approached JJ Pionke about the possibility of displaying the “Symbols of Service” exhibit at EIU.

Exhibit scheduling at Booth Library is carried out by a committee of librarians and the library public relations director. The committee discusses potential exhibits to determine what will be a good fit based on the library’s outreach and engagement goals. “Symbols of Service” was brought to the Programming Committee for review. The committee was strongly in favor of hosting the exhibit because of its community outreach appeal and as an opportunity to involve student veterans.

To localize the exhibit, library staff replicated the oral history and photography methodology of “Symbols of Service.” In “Symbols of Service,” veterans were interviewed about their tattoos using a short question set that could be added to during the interview to elicit richer responses. After the interview, the veteran’s tattoo was then photographed by a departmental photographer. For “Designs of Duty,” the Booth Library public relations director, Beth Heldebrandt, and a student intern created a publicity campaign to seek participants from area veterans. The goal was to include both on-campus veterans as well as veterans from the greater community. Recruitment efforts included:

- Press releases were published in print and in online media sources both on campus and throughout the surrounding seven counties.
- A social media campaign utilized the library’s Twitter and Facebook accounts, as well as accounts of area veteran groups.
- Letters were sent to the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) posts in the surrounding seven counties, as well as the local state Army National Guard post.
• An informational screensaver was placed on all 170 public computer screens in the library.
• Information was shared on the library website and in the University Newsletter.
• Representatives from the library visited the EIU ROTC office.
• Emails were sent to all veteran groups and officials on campus.
• The campus financial aid office sent information to all veterans receiving financial aid.
• Fliers were posted throughout campus on public bulletin boards.
• The public relations director spoke at a breakfast hosted by the Coles County Veterans Support Coalition.
• The EIU Military Student Assistance Center and Student Veterans of Eastern groups were contacted.
• Fliers were placed in the three tattoo parlors in Coles County.

These efforts resulted in contacts by nine local veterans with service-related tattoos. After the initial call, two of those chose not to participate; seven veterans agreed to be interviewed and photographed for the exhibit. These seven veterans visited Booth Library, sat down for a recorded interview lasting between 25 and 60 minutes and had their photos taken by the library photographer. In addition to close-up photos of the veterans’ service-related tattoos, the photographer also took a head-and-shoulders photo of each participant. Each veteran submitted a photo of himself during his time in the military.

The seven veterans featured in “Designs of Duty” served over a 45-year period throughout Asia and Europe. One veteran served in Vietnam; the others served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and South Korea. These veterans represented the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marines. One veteran was a current EIU student.

Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were uploaded to YouTube under a “private” designation and closed captioning was created. The closed captioning was used to create a transcript of each interview. Each transcript was edited by the public relations director and student intern, and the most important passages were highlighted for consideration in the exhibit.

An introductory panel for the exhibit was then designed, as well as a panel for each participating veteran. The exhibit project directors thought it was important to include geographic information to demonstrate the wide variety of countries in which these veterans served. The library photographer created a large map for the introductory panel that highlighted all of the countries in which the interviewees had been. Each veteran’s panel contained an inset map(s) highlighting the particular area of each country in which that veteran had served.

Similar to the “Symbols of Service” template, each “Designs of Duty” panel contained an information box with the veteran’s submitted service photo, age, branch of the military, rank, dates of service, and deployment locations and dates. The veteran’s current photo was published larger on each panel, along with the logo for the military branch in which that veteran had served. One compelling quotation from the veteran’s interview was chosen to highlight on each panel.
Once this general template was in place, the public relations director then designed each panel individually, using the veteran’s quotes, background information, and photos of their tattoos to tell their story. Although each veteran panel is unique, each contains uniform elements that tie together the panels as part of the same exhibit.

The “Designs of Duty” exhibit was intentionally created as freestanding panels so that the exhibit could be shared with area libraries. Public and academic libraries from throughout the East Central Illinois region were contacted to see if directors were interested in hosting the exhibit. The hometown libraries of the veterans also were contacted.

The libraries were given the option to host all or a portion of the exhibit (depending on size constraints) at no cost to them. Booth Library staff delivered and set up the panels, as well as picked them up at the completion of the exhibit. Each library site was provided with half-page fliers containing the exhibit website, which contains more information. In addition, the Booth Library public relations director sent a press release to the local media of each participating site.

Seven public libraries and one academic library agreed to host the exhibit for three to four weeks each. “Designs of Duty” ended its display at Booth Library on May 11, 2018, and then traveled throughout the region from May 14, 2018-Jan. 3, 2019.

With the “Designs of Duty” exhibit on freestanding panels, the library’s built-in display units were used for “Symbols of Service.” This presented a challenge, as the exhibit was originally laid out for standard-sized horizontal display boards. The available space was of varying sizes and shapes. The solution was to request permission to reformat the existing panels to fit the space. JJ Pionke supplied the original image files and the panels were reformatted to fit. The look and feel were preserved but the text and image layout were redesigned to a more vertical layout.

Two very large display spaces remained after “Symbols of Service” was installed. These areas were developed into supporting displays exploring other forms of art in the military: aircraft nose art and helmet graffiti.

Exploring Other Forms of Military Art

Tattoos are a common way for individuals to express their service and document their experience. In a similar vein, other art forms have found their way into military service on very personal levels. Artists, writers, and musicians have drawn upon the profound experience of war for thousands of years. With an overall focus on U.S. veterans, librarians chose to focus on art forms that are highly relevant to the American experience and that might resonate strongly with the current population.

The first exhibit focused on aircraft “nose art” in the military. The personification of vehicles and equipment through art is not unique to aircraft, but some of the richest examples of this amateur art form emerged from the air bases of World War II. A goal of the display was to explain why personification was important. The combat environment creates unique relationships between crews and the equipment upon which they depend. The images used in the exhibit were selected to best represent these relationships, with the crew of the Memphis Belle
B-17 Bomber being the most familiar from World War II as one of the first bombers to complete 25 missions, thereby earning the right to return home.

Nose art was sanctioned after the war to honor previous generations and maintain camaraderie among personnel and remains in effect in the Air Force (Air Force Global Strike Command 2015). Images of modern nose art were incorporated to convey the evolution of the art form. This project required full color images of the resolution and size to allow poster-sized printing. To maintain the regional aspect of the exhibit and increase chances of success, Air Force units within the state and region were researched. The goal was to find Guardsmen and Reservists in the campus community to connect us with the public affairs offices in the units they serve. A library employee and Guardsmen connected us with the 126th Air Refueling Wing of the Illinois Air National Guard. The Wing provided high-resolution photographs of the modern nose art applied to their aircraft and were happy to contribute to the exhibit while having their efforts recognized by the broader community. As the photographs provided by the Wing were from a government entity, no copyright clearance was required.

The second exhibit explored the personal art work boldly emblazoned on gear and equipment of American service personnel during the Vietnam War. The exhibit focused on the common act of adding personalized graphics to the cloth helmet covers issued to American combat forces. Later popularized by Hollywood films, helmet “graffiti” was a way for individuals to express themselves during a time of war. Images were selected from hundreds of photographs taken by journalists and combat photographers in Vietnam to cover a spectrum of subjects. The display included examples of political messages, cartoon art, dark humor, calendars, and prayers, amongst others. Perhaps as a result of the personal nature of this practice, helmet graffiti disappeared from the military, creating a unique connection between the art form and the Vietnam War.

Public Relations and Public Reactions

The “Designs of Duty” exhibit debuted at Booth Library on Jan. 22, 2018. General press releases were sent to on-campus and regional media partners in the surrounding seven counties. Individual press releases highlighting each participating veteran also were created and sent to media outlets in each veteran’s hometown. Computer screensavers and fliers were created, and a social media campaign ensued.

The general response to the display was positive. Although it’s impossible to know exactly how many library patrons viewed the exhibit, library staff regularly saw students, faculty and staff view the exhibit as they passed through the building. Several community groups came to the library specifically to view the display.

In addition, an EIU anthropology professor used the exhibit as part of the curriculum in her “The Body in Anthropological Perspective” class. The students came together as a group to view the exhibit, and they were then asked to respond to questions such as common threads in the symbols that the veterans chose; underlying meanings; connection to emotions or life stories; contrasting semiotics and phenomenology as demonstrated in the exhibit; and specifically, what the veterans had to say about their experiences of war and military life, and being tattooed.
The local CBS station, WCIA in Champaign, Illinois, visited the library to shoot a segment for its “Central Illinois Living” TV show. The show host interviewed one of the veterans who participated in the exhibit and one of the exhibit curators, as well as including close-up video of the exhibit panels themselves.

The newspaper in Shelbyville, Illinois, the hometown of one of the participating veterans, published the press release that was sent to them by the public relations director. That story was picked up by the Associated Press, cut down to a few paragraphs and distributed on the national news wire. Because of this, the “Designs of Duty” exhibit was publicized in about 75 national media outlets, including *Stars and Stripes, ABC News, U.S. News and World Report*, and *The New York Times*.

**Building and Maintaining Partnerships**

“Designs of Duty” could not have come together without the collaborative partnerships that formed both accidentally and on purpose. Once a partnership had been established between EIU and UIUC, the development of internal partnerships at EIU was a must. While one person could have created “Designs of Duty” given enough time and resources, it was through the dedication of many people working together that the exhibit took shape. Collaboration is not always an easy proposition, especially when larger and multisite teams are involved. While JJ Pionke provided “Symbols of Services” and served as a consultant on “Designs of Duty,” that was the limit of his contribution to “Designs of Duty.” At EIU, multiple people had to be coordinated to bring the exhibit to fruition. There were definitely lessons learned along the way.

**Five Tips for Building a Successful Exhibit When Working With Partners**

1. **Partnerships can and do happen in unexpected places.** JJ Pionke and Stacey Knight-Davis both regularly attend a specialized library group, Health Science Librarians of Illinois. JJ attends because he is a health librarian. Stacey attends because she serves as library liaison to the departments of Nursing and Health Promotion. Ordinarily, their paths would not cross but because of their mutual attendance, a conversation was struck up and then a plan developed.

2. **An exhibit of this scale requires teamwork.** Constant communication and constructive critique within the team are essential. This often took the form of email as well as hallway conversations as team members went about their assigned duties. While exhibits weren’t necessarily codified in their job descriptions, this project generally fell under “other duties as assigned” or, in this case, volunteered for.

3. **Share your success! Offer your exhibit to other libraries.** You can share the physical exhibit or the digital files needed to re-create it. Sharing with other institutions is a great way to build relationships and lay the groundwork for future partnerships to create new exhibits.

4. **When offering your traveling exhibit for display at public and academic libraries in your region, be public relations friendly.** Provide hand bills that explain the exhibit to each library location. Write a press release for each location and submit it to their local media. While this may seem like more work for you in the short term, in the long run it
helps build relationships with other institutions and creates goodwill, and it is ultimately easier for the creator of the exhibit to develop these materials because they know the exhibit best.

5. **Be brave and try new things.** This is the first oral history project done at Booth Library, the first traveling exhibit produced from a fellow library, and the first time reformatting external content to fit built-in display cases. It was a lot of firsts for Booth Library, and by doing this project we learned that we are capable of doing similar projects with other organizations.

**Limitations**

This case study had several limitations. Other than flyer printing, there was no budget for advertising to recruit participants. There was also no budget to offer participation incentives. Participants could only be interviewed on campus and times were limited to when two exhibit staff and the photographer were available to do the interview. The time frame for recruiting participants was determined by subtracting the time needed for design and printing ahead of the exhibit opening date. The exhibit was regionally limited by design, but also by lack of transportation funds for participants. Exhibit panel production size and material was restricted to the library's available supplies and equipment, specifically one 45” printer and a 60” dry-mount press. The available paper supply and the capabilities of the printer dictated the size and type of paper used for printing. The library owned a set of display easels from an earlier project. The size of the traveling panels was limited to the size that would fit on the existing easels.

**Future Directions**

As “Designs of Duty” traveled the region, Booth Library was planning its spring 2019 exhibit “On the Shoulders of Giants: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon Landing.” Feedback from host libraries was overwhelmingly positive and partner libraries indicated strong interest in hosting future Booth Library exhibits for their communities. With this in mind, the design team for “On The Shoulders of Giants” chose to develop a traveling component for the exhibit. As content is produced for the main exhibit on display at Booth Library, planners are formatting select exhibit elements for the traveling exhibit. The purposeful development of a traveling component serves three primary purposes. First, it allows planners to create displays that are easier to transport or ship. The large-format panels used in “Designs of Duty” cannot be shipped and require a van for transport. Second, “Designs of Duty” was developed for Booth Library’s display space. We found that public libraries typically have a much smaller display space and may benefit from a different format. Third, the exhibit may travel much earlier and reach more hosts before the July 20th anniversary of the landing. Additionally, the earlier start allows high schools the opportunity to host the exhibit before the end of the academic year.

**Conclusion**

Further research on how, when, and why such collaborations come about as well as a closer examination of the kinds of exhibit projects on which institutions collaborate is needed. In
particular, exploration of how, when, and on what academic and public libraries collaborate is something that is lacking in the literature.

The exhibit was successful in large part because of the work, time, and dedication that people put into it. While there were many individual contributions, it was ultimately the collaboration between two institutions and then the exhibit team within EIU that made “Designs of Duty” and the visiting “Symbols of Service” a success. Successful collaboration takes communication and perseverance, and this was borne out in the relationship between EIU and UIUC as JJ Pionke and Stacey Knight-Davis started talking about the project almost two years before “Designs of Duty” came to fruition. In the end, both the exhibit and the collaborations, internal and external to EIU, were very successful.

References


