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# CUR Focus

## Curating Exhibitions as Undergraduate Research

### Abstract

Librarians and museum curators are knowledge experts who can collaborate with faculty and serve as exemplary mentors to undergraduate researchers. This article discusses three exhibitions curated by undergraduates that resulted from classroom-based activities. The students engaged in original research to mount the exhibitions—an atypical form of dissemination for undergraduate research projects. One exhibition was housed in the campus art museum; another physical exhibition focused on manuscripts and early printed books from a library's special collections. A third digital exhibition is permanently hosted on the library's website. Each curating activity and exhibition is described, including the process and collaboration with colleagues in the library and art museum.

**Keywords:** *exhibits, museums, libraries, digital literacy, humanities, fine arts, curation*

It is almost universally acknowledged that undergraduate research in the arts and humanities can be difficult to achieve. As Levenson (2010, emphasis added) notes, "Many colleges and universities across the country now have offices dedicated to the expansion and promotion of research activities by undergraduate students. Unfortunately, many undergraduates arrive on campus associating the concept of *research* with the STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and math." However, at the same time, undergraduate research is acknowledged as a high-impact practice that has benefits for all students (Kuh 2008).

Two of the contributing authors (Sand and Kinkead) designed classroom-based research projects that resulted in public exhibitions on campus during an academic year. Although they come from different disciplines (art history and English respectively) and their courses had no connections, their goals were similar: for students to think and act like curators, to develop skills, and to make personal gains (such as in confidence). In this regard, they functioned much like colleagues in the sciences who have developed course-based research experiences (CUREs; see CUREnet for an overview of these resources). A secondary goal was to draw on the expertise of colleagues in libraries and museums, assisted by an institutional culture that values undergraduate research. Additionally, active participation in the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) by faculty and librarians has heightened the interest of engaging students meaningfully and moving

them from novices to more accomplished scholars and researchers. Finally, new leaders at the art museum of Utah State University (USU) strengthened its academic mission to emphasize "teaching with art."

CUR's *Characteristics of Excellence in Undergraduate Research* (Hensel 2012, 11) calls for research results to be "disseminated in a form that is appropriate for a scholar in the research field, and the highest level of dissemination of undergraduate research is in the form of peer-reviewed publication, exhibition, or performance." Three exhibitions resulted from the class-based research projects. One exhibition was housed in the campus art museum. The digital exhibits were hosted on the campus library website. The library was the site of a third, physical exhibition, in which students focused on spotlighting a collection of manuscripts and early printed books. Each exhibition will be described in turn, and the process and collaboration with colleagues in the library and art museum will be described.

### Exhibition 1: "Books/Lives"



Poster for Books/Lives exhibition.

The exhibition "Books/Lives: Every Book Has a Story" featured a collection of manuscripts and early printed books drawn from the library's holdings, including several books of hours, an Ethiopic Gospel, and Albrecht Dürer's work on human proportion, among other treasures from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Its public opening occurred near the end of the fall semester, culminating in a one-day symposium featuring a keynote lecture from a visiting scholar. It was housed in a room featuring an historic ensemble of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English furnishings, located in Special Collections and Archives.

*Process and Outcome.* Sand worked with the associate dean for Special Collections and Archives and the preservation curator to identify a body of early print and medieval manuscript materials in the collection that would be appropriate for introducing students in a manuscript studies course to early book studies.



Professor Alexa Sand and a student work with an early book.

Students learned about the disciplines of *codicology* (the analysis of book structures and materials), *paleography* (the study of archaic forms of handwriting), *typography* (technologies and forms of printing), and *iconography* (the symbolic “language” of pictures). They also read widely on the philosophical and practical issues surrounding the collection and conservation of rare books, especially medieval manuscripts and *incunables* (books printed before 1500). Students first learned to handle rare books appropriately and studied the vocabulary, methods, and theoretical issues pertinent to the study of medieval and early-modern books.

By week 3, students identified the particular objects that most interested them. A series of scaffolded assignments guided the process of identification and description, contextualization, and analysis of these objects. Finally, students compiled an extended catalog essay describing their object and its historical significance. These essays included a succinct technical description of the object, information about its origins and journey into the library’s collection (*provenance*), and an interpretive and contextual discussion. This process allowed students to delve into what had attracted them to their chosen object in the first place—textual contents, illustrations or illuminations, identity of the author, or the physical properties of the item.

The nature of the books and book fragments selected by the students ranged from detached leaves from an early-twelfth-century prayer book to an early-seventeenth-century encyclopedia of garden plants prepared for a Protestant monarch by a secretly Catholic botanist. Students learned a great deal about subjects outside the realm of their own project, an aspect of the course that many of them later stated was particularly invigorating.

An important step was the identification of a unifying theme for the exhibition. Working collectively, students identified

questions that united this disparate selection of books and manuscript pages. What struck them was that every book had a biography, a “life” spanning many human lifetimes, as well as an indexical role in many human lives. Such aspects resulted in the exhibition’s theme: Books/Lives.

Once the basic layout of the exhibition had been determined, the material work began. Using archival-quality materials such as binding cloth and Mylar, students designed and constructed supports that allowed them to exhibit each manuscript, printed book, or fragment according to its unique dimensions and its state of conservation. For some books, this meant a large, V-shaped cradle that matched the measurements and condition of the binding; some books could lie almost flat, whereas others could be opened only a little, with clear Mylar strips holding the pages open to the chosen place. Other books were placed on stands made of heavy-weight plastic film that allowed them to appear as if they were floating above the deep-blue velvet chosen by the students for the lining of the glass cases housing pairs of manuscripts.

The physical process of preparing the exhibition constituted an intensive introduction to the real-world work of museum curating, but the students also had plenty of opportunity for hands-on learning in the related areas of exhibition design, publicity, and marketing. From selecting the colors, the design theme, and the appropriate typefaces for the exhibition space to devising a marketing plan, they pooled their collective experience in design, advertising, and museum education to create a striking and effective brand identity for the show. Led by a student majoring in graphic design, they produced a series of three posters with the distinctive Books/Lives logo, featuring images from the exhibition, and picking up the exhibition colors of ultramarine blue (representing the most valuable pigment in manuscript illumination) and brick red (representing the red “minium” or lead-based pigment that is reflected in the Latin word for “miniature”).



A close-up of an early book that students used in the Books/Lives exhibition.

In addition to the catalog essays, collaborative work on the exhibition materials and publicity, and the final push to install the exhibition in November 2015, each student contributed to the object labels and interpretive texts. The exhibition opened with a one-day symposium of talks, poster sessions, and discussion. A visiting scholar delivered the keynote lecture, focused on one of the manuscripts in the show. The exhibition then remained open through

January 2016, attracting more than 200 visitors.

*Reflection and Evaluation.* Most museum exhibitions take months of planning and may involve years from conception to execution, but within the parameters of this course, students had only about 10 weeks to conceptualize, research, design, and execute their exhibition. It seemed a daunting task. However, the students eagerly took up the challenge, and the library faculty went beyond the call of duty in assisting and supporting them. From the instructor's point of view, the key was a clear and fairly rigid set of goals that had to be accomplished each week. Because the course objectives included a broad-based introduction to manuscript and early book studies, exhibition-focused work had to balance with discussion of readings from the textbook and other sources. The students often incorporated the readings into their analyses of the objects.

The two points at which the students expressed the most satisfaction with and excitement about the project were the "soft" opening of the exhibition, when library donors were invited to an evening reception, and the symposium. At the soft opening, students interacted with a variety of interested visitors. Judging by the comments that visitors left in the guestbook, this interaction was extremely productive.

In their end-of-semester course evaluation surveys, several students mentioned how much the symposium contributed to the course. In terms of these surveys, the course was an exceptional success; the overall ratings for course excellence and instructor efficacy were in the top tier, with an 82-percent rate of response—a reflection of the students' engagement and enthusiasm for the class. Although such surveys are a rough measure of instructional success at best, the outcomes confirmed the more anecdotal evidence of strong learning outcomes for the course.

In terms of the four-step learning process defined by CUR and NCUR (2005) for effective undergraduate research, the course specifically and intentionally targeted each step. The "identification of and acquisition of a[n...] interdisciplinary methodology" of museology and book studies at first took shape through readings and class discussions but very rapidly became the toolbox from which students drew as they collectively defined their exhibition ("setting out of a concrete investigative problem"). The hours of intensive work that went into designing and producing the exhibition and the related essays, presentations, and interpretive materials inarguably represent a highly successful example of "carrying out of the actual project," whereas the exhibition and symposium, along with the more informal sharing of knowledge at the soft opening, clearly constitute "the . . . sharing of [the] new scholar's discoveries with his or her peers." Other key benefits of undergraduate research, such as the development of collaborative skills for problem solving and the

growth of the individual's self-confidence and sense of purpose, emerged from the combination of group and individual responsibilities. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of the course pushed all the students to work to the limit, and sometimes beyond, of their experience and intellectual background. This emerged strongly in the course evaluations, in which respondents unanimously gave the highest possible degree of agreement to the statement "[s]timulated students to intellectual effort beyond that required by most courses."

*Significance and Impact.* This was the first time that Special Collections and art history faculty had collaborated on a course-based exhibition, and the process, as well as the end result, was strongly positive. It will become a regular offering in the art history curriculum. Crossing disciplinary boundaries among art, art history, museum studies (housed in the anthropology program), history, religious studies, and literary studies, as well as tapping into the rich teaching collection of the library, the project brought together students and faculty from a variety of backgrounds. One important outcome has been the strengthening of relationships—personal and institutional—among the Department of Art and Design, Special Collections, and the museum studies program. These relationships benefit student and faculty researchers by expanding the range of resources, collections, and course- and internship-based learning opportunities available to all.

## Exhibition 2: Digital Exhibits

In spring 2015, the Digital Initiatives and Special Collections units at USU Libraries launched an effort to work with classes to create themed digital exhibits. Typically, exhibits draw on historical photographs, journals, newspapers, letters, and other unique items from Special Collections and Archives. Student curators augment library holdings with items of their own creation (such as interviews, graphics, and captions) as well as other resources discovered in the course of their research (such as images). The library brings all digital exhibits together in one online space, making these student-created exhibits available globally. The development of digital exhibits draws on several recommendations that came from the Boyer Commission report *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities* (1998): make research-based learning the standard, remove barriers to interdisciplinary education, link communication skills and coursework, use information technology creatively, and cultivate a sense of community.

One year into developing the digital exhibits, the library worked with students enrolled in the spring 2016 Honors Think Tank course. This special course, composed of three sections, looked at the topic of sustainability through different lenses: science, social sciences, arts, and humanities (<http://exhibits.usu.edu/exhibits>). Interdisciplinary groups of students chose from a list of topics—including alternative

markets, urban agriculture, and food waste—to complete exhibits with guidance from a faculty mentor.

Five librarians and one student assistant supported the project by providing hands-on training days on the open-source digital exhibit software Omeka. Students were also introduced to concepts such as copyright, metadata, and file-naming conventions to support them in the creation of the digital exhibits. Students were novices in creating digital exhibits and had to become adept at selecting suitable content, understanding copyright restrictions, and managing the logistics of working within the Omeka platform. Librarians introduced students to the concept of storyboarding to help them think through each page of their exhibit.

To enrich their exhibits, students conducted oral histories, visited sites appropriate to their topics, and took photographs. (All students were certified in human subjects research, and the institutional review board approved their work.) Midway through the project, librarians conducted a short assessment to solicit feedback from the students. Students reported that they enjoyed conducting research for the exhibits, gaining experience in conducting interviews, and visiting Special Collections. Other students noted they liked learning the new software that they could use for other classes. One student commented, “These projects can be seen and viewed perpetually once they are uploaded,” which demonstrates the true value and potential significance of these exhibits. Other students appreciated the intellectual freedom they had with this project.

To become more expert, students turned to librarian mentors for guidance in uploading images and content, seeking answers to questions about metadata, and resolving issues with the Omeka platform. “Cookbook” projects draw on more rote skills; however, public exhibitions require creativity, independence, and responsibility. Collaboration with peers and mentors is a recursive process. Students needed more time for group work, and librarians arranged to be on hand to offer immediate answers to their questions and suggestions on exhibit formatting to make pages look visually appealing. Some students struggled within the confines of the platform, wishing it could be more robust. However, the librarians collaborating on this project were impressed with the students’ ability to push the limits with Omeka. Students created quizzes; designed their own infographics; and included videos, audio clips, and other multimodal forms to enhance their exhibits.

The projects were evaluated on audience, coherence, balance of text and graphics, metadata, organization, and use of a variety of sources appropriate to the topic. These assessment data included useful insights for the librarians and future classes that might curate digital exhibits.

The value of these exhibits and the potential significance of

each exhibit go beyond the penultimate research paper that is usually assigned in humanities classes. The possibility of a curated digital exhibition with a global reach excites some students and teaches them how to tell a complex story visually and share their research with a wider audience.

### Exhibition 3: Art Museum

The Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art (NEHMA) featured “Growing West: Exploring Art and Agriculture,” an exhibition organized by students in a special Honors Think Tank class that focused on sustainability in agriculture, food, and land. The goal of Honors director Kristine Miller was that students would collaborate across disciplines to address local problems of food and water sustainability in creative ways. The instructor wanted the exhibition to be the visual realization of readings in literature and history about how the West developed in terms of agriculture. Although none of the students were experts at curating an art exhibition, they engaged intensely in choosing the works, organizing them thematically, and developing signage with guidance from an expert staff committed to hands-on learning. Many research experiences help students develop identities as professionals; the purpose in this case was to see how their expertise in science and social sciences might apply to genres outside their disciplines. They developed a better understanding of another discipline and how it creates knowledge.

Sourcing objects from the museum’s collection, ranging from photography to paintings and from ceramics to prints, the students worked with the museum’s curatorial staff to select artworks that recount the historical narrative driving Americans and European immigrants to settle the West as homesteaders and farmers. The exhibition also provided contemporary perspectives on themes such as food production, gender roles, labor issues, irrigation systems, and the mechanization of farming practices. The agricultural sciences major might be drawn to a 1930s photograph of dry-land farms; the women’s studies major might focus on traditional roles of farm women and girls.

As with Books/Lives, this was an intensive, step-by-step process. Inception to reception took about eight weeks. The first visit to the art museum—for many of the students, a truly inaugural visit to an art museum—stopped just after the front doors. The education specialist used the enticing installation piece “Klompfen” (1987) by Trimpin as an example of how museums must immediately engage visitors. When a visitor inserts a quarter into a box, the sculpture of Dutch wooden clogs plays one of 24 different electronic arrangements. A staff member explained that visitors’ point of entry and their interests are taken into account. What *didactics*—signage—do they need to understand the works of art? What are their comfort needs to avoid gallery fatigue? A startling statistic is that, on average, visitors spend only eight seconds viewing

any one object, which must be factored into exhibit presentation.

To select the works of art for the exhibition, the students viewed 150 slides of objects compiled by the staff with the theme of land and agriculture. Each student selected three to five images, which were compiled and then culled. Early in the process, they also decided on a title for the exhibition for publicity, something that reflected the content yet was also attractive to visitors. “Growing West: Exploring Art and Agriculture” was the result, a nice play on words. Students conducted research on the works, using the resources of the art museum, the library, and the Internet. For some pieces, little was known, one of the most frustrating roadblocks for the researchers. Sometimes students using the artist files of the art museum found empty folders.

From the research, they drafted signage, including the name of the artist, the title and dimensions of the object, the media of the object, and the date of creation. The interpretative text provides the didactic function. The following is an example involving a photograph:

**Russell Lee**

American, 1903–1986

*Irrigation Ditch*, 1940

Gelatin silver print

Marie Eccles Caine Foundation

1987.105

Irrigation water was and still remains the lifeblood of agriculture in the west. The first settlers in Utah experienced its arid nature and made irrigation canals the first public utility they built upon their arrival. The signature feature of many of Lee’s photos is sharp details illuminated by bright lights, and this image is no exception. The crispness of the landscape is remarkable. Hired by the Farm Security Administration to document the effects of the Great Depression, Russell Lee photographed farmers across America. Lee’s work in Utah centered on the trials and triumphs in the daily lives of farmers.

*Wall panels* (larger blocks of didactic text) explained the exhibition, drawing on readings such as the following 1785 quotation from Thomas Jefferson (1858, 403): “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds.” Writing these short pieces was perhaps the most challenging aspect of curating.

The layout of the exhibition involved meeting in the physical space and placing scaled models on a table-sized plan of the room. Students worked through several placements

before arriving at a satisfactory location. Even so, the actual hanging resulted in further modifications. An exhibition is an iterative process, a loop of visions and revisions. The Honors undergraduate teaching fellow maintained a blog tracing students’ experiences as curators (<https://usuthinktank.wordpress.com/>).

The opening of the exhibition coincided with National Agriculture Day and the first day of spring, appropriate for farm-themed works of art. Prior to the reception, the students underwent docent training by the education curator of the museum. In addition to providing the facts about the works of art, she emphasized engaging the visitor with questions and personal anecdotes. Jade Burt, who “owned” the irrigation ditch photograph, drafted a docent speech that included this history—but he also referenced his grandparents to provide a personal touch before discussing the artist and the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a federal agency designed to combat rural poverty during the Great Depression.

In terms of marketing, students drafted a press release, designed informational postcards, and developed a seed packet with the “Growing West” label. Unexpected payoffs included the university’s alumni magazine featuring the exhibition and its student researchers (“Honors Students” 2016) and a local farm implement company requesting the exhibition to travel to its site for the summer.

Student-organized art shows are not uncommon; see those held at Bowdoin College (2016), College of Wooster (Finn 2012), University of Warwick (2016), and Yale University (McDonald 2014). However, these may not always be viewed as undergraduate research. The “Growing West” exhibition allowed students to become immersed in the methods of curating, to apply humanities information, and to disseminate the results to a broad, diverse audience.

## Implications and Takeaway Messages

These three diverse exhibitions illustrate how undergraduate research can be undertaken in libraries, museums, and digital spaces. Students produced original research, saw their projects through to completion, and disseminated the results in visual and tangible ways.

These projects also exemplify how colleagues in libraries and museums can serve as collaborators with faculty on curricular projects and as mentors to the students themselves. Piazza, Smith, and Pollenz (2016) note that we often think of university librarians educating students about information literacy. They point out, “faculty librarians, especially those affiliated with large research-intensive universities, also possess highly specialized training and knowledge that position them as highly effective mentors to undergraduates” (4). The same could be said about colleagues in museums. Katie Lee Koven (2016), executive director and chief curator, stated in

the news release about the exhibition, “As an academic art museum, NEHMA seeks to serve students and faculty across the university in their learning, specifically to find opportunities such as this where we expand their learning, challenge their approach to research, and encourage cross-disciplinary connections in order to strengthen and broaden students’ skills no matter what major or discipline they are coming from.” We urge others to investigate the rich, collaborative possibilities of working with these knowledge experts. 

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