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# Expanding Outreach in Lean Times

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With the economic downturn forcing archival repositories and special collections departments to pare down budgets and staff, institutions sometimes view outreach, publicity, and marketing as luxuries. At the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) of George Washington University's Gelman Library, we consider these activities part of our core tasks. Our mission statement declares we will "collect, preserve, and *make accessible* primary resources and rare or unique materials." (1) Fulfilling this third objective requires more than just processing collections and opening the reading room, however. In our view, it requires a sustained and vigorous program of outreach through the Web, events, exhibits, and instruction, all of which help our target audiences get to know our collections, our institution, and the myriad ways in which we can enrich their research and their lives.

Since the SCRC's staff time is already stretched thin trying to meet our processing, collection development, and reference responsibilities, the temptation exists to maintain the status quo when it comes to outreach by simply repeating the same activities each year. Further, while outreach does draw attention and users to the SCRC, its tangible, bottom line benefits can be difficult to quantify, making it hard to justify the cost of new initiatives. However, maintaining the status quo has its own dangers when it comes to outreach. As other departments of the library and the university reach out to students, staff, and the community in increasingly creative ways (for example, our university recently launched its own YouTube and Flickr accounts), the SCRC also needs to find new ways of engaging patrons in order to keep our services relevant and accessible.

So how, then, can we balance the need for innovation and creativity in outreach with limited staff time and resources? The SCRC has continued to offer our usual outreach activities of classroom instruction, tours, exhibits, and press releases, while limiting expenditures on certain forms of outreach like printed materials, paid advertising, and brochures. In addition, the SCRC has found that two strategies in particular are enhancing our outreach efforts in inexpensive ways that do not require a tremendous commitment of staff time. The first is to find partners, both on and off campus, with common interests and develop events and exhibits that complement their initiatives and bring a new audience to the SCRC. The second is an increased focus on posting collection information online and experimenting with Web 2.0 projects, which we hope will dramatically expand exposure to our collections.

## Partnerships

Seizing on several opportunities for partnerships over the past year has helped the SCRC to broaden its exposure on campus and beyond. Some of our more creative activities have come as a result of partnerships with Washington-area poets whose papers are housed in our Washington Writers' Archive. Washington's poetry scene is alive and vibrant, with readings nearly every night around the city where poets whose papers we have collected continue to perform. The SCRC sponsored two different poetry readings this year. The first featured six poets, each accompanied by musicians of their choice; the second was a combination poetry reading/book release party for two poets.

Both events were advertised outside the university community by the poets themselves, and within

the university by the SCRC. The mix of individuals attracted by this approach was quite different from events we sponsor on our own, and the poets were also able to reach a different audience through our publicity. Further, the featured poets discussed what their contributions to the Washington Writers' Archive meant to them and offered suggestions for other poets in attendance on contributing materials, which we hope will result in more donations from the poetry community. Such events increase awareness of our holdings and offer patrons a new and different way in which to interact with materials. We are currently working on a new initiative with a local poet: hosting a production of one of his plays in a campus theater in the spring.

The SCRC took advantage of another new opportunity for collaboration this year when the English Department hosted Pulitzer Prize winning author Edward P. Jones as a visiting professor of contemporary English literature. Jones' fiction has explored slavery in Virginia (*The Known World*) and African-American life in Washington, DC (*Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar's Children*). In conjunction with his visit, the English Department planning committee asked the SCRC to create an exhibit illustrating themes in Jones' work using our extensive collection of Washingtoniana. Two doctoral students volunteered to curate the exhibit, and they did the bulk of the research, item selection, and writing for the exhibit. Their understanding of and enthusiasm for Jones' work were effective complements to our knowledge of the collections and exhibit development experience, and together we created an exhibit that was scholarly in its analysis and appealing in its visual presentation. The English Department publicized the exhibit through its departmental blog and listserv. They also hosted a reception for the exhibit opening, where we networked with professors that had not previously been aware of our collections. A reporter from a prominent local paper was present, taking notes and photos for an upcoming news article on Jones. This project raised the profile of the SCRC in a way that would not have been possible without the English Department's involvement.

The SCRC's participation in the university's major annual events for parents and alumni also demonstrates how joining an existing event can raise your profile with minimal cost. GW's Office of Community Relations sponsors a block party every year during Parents' Weekend, where local businesses and university offices can request a table for promoting their office and/or services. The SCRC houses both the University Archives and collections documenting the university's surrounding neighborhood. For this event, we created exhibit panels on neighborhood history, placed reproductions of images of historic buildings and long-ago residents on our table, and offered a "Did You Know?" handout on neighborhood trivia. The exhibit proved popular with neighbors, parents, students, and university staff, many of whom learned that day that Special Collections houses materials relating to the neighborhood and that we are open to the public (unlike the rest of the library). Costs for the SCRC were minimal-just staff time to create the exhibit (which does not need to be recreated every year) and to staff the table. The SCRC plans to expand our involvement in Parents' Weekend this year by hosting a scavenger hunt for students and parents, where they will answer questions by following clues that lead to campus landmarks (and that contain a little university history, courtesy of the University Archives). The first group to return with correct answers will receive a gift card to a local restaurant-our only expense for an event that will raise awareness of our University Archives collections. While we still serve as the sole creator of certain events and exhibits, the past year has shown us that collaboration is a ticket to finding a more diverse audience and developing partnerships that will continue to be mutually beneficial.

## **Web 2.0 Initiatives**

In seeking to further expand outreach, the SCRC has taken an open-minded, experimental approach to incorporating Web 2.0 technologies. Our hope is that in our dabbling, we will hit upon

products or formats that are easy to use and that strike a chord with our patrons, meriting additional time investment.

Simple as it may be in the increasingly complex universe of Web 2.0 tools, we have found our blog to be one of the more effective ways of disseminating information to a broad audience. One new feature we have added is "Light of Day", a special series of blog posts authored by our student workers. In these posts, they share some of the more unusual things they have discovered while working in Special Collections or aspects of their work that they particularly enjoy. (2) We have been delighted with the students' contributions—they are experts on the medium, and write with a light tone and humor that make the archives seem accessible and fun. The "Light of Day" features have drawn interest from the senior library administration as well as the media relations department on campus, which confirms for us that our investment in regular student posts is a good one.

With our Flickr pilot project, we once again employed our strategy of tying our efforts to other campus initiatives. We uploaded a set of photos documenting the student takeover of a campus building in 1969, which complements a photography exhibit on student protest that will soon open in the university art gallery. We will be cross-promoting the Flickr set and the art exhibition with the gallery. For subsequent image sets on Flickr, we plan to work with professors to identify sets of images that their classes could use in their research or assignments. This would bring more visitors to the site and could provide us with a set of quality posted comments that would enhance the viewing experience for other patrons.

The SCRC also recently completed a project using LibGuides, the Web 2.0 content management tool that is gaining popularity among academic libraries. The non-Special Collections librarians have created LibGuides that help students find resources on everything from International Relations to Dance. Until this year, however, Special Collections resources were rarely included in these guides. The SCRC evaluated all of the existing guides and worked with the guide authors to incorporate information on relevant SCRC materials. (3) In doing so, we made progress on breaking down the "information silos" that often separate Special Collections materials from the library's circulating materials and online databases that cover the same subject matter. We consider this outreach, because it extends our presence into a new realm of the library's website and reaches a set of library patrons that might not have explored Special Collections without the hints provided in the LibGuides. Our blog, Flickr account, and LibGuides are three of the Web 2.0 technologies that have earned a long-term investment of time from the SCRC staff through their demonstrated popularity and relative ease of implementation.

It is worth noting that even in our Web 2.0 initiatives, the SCRC's outreach efforts benefited from working with partners or non-traditional contributors like student workers to stretch beyond our usual activities. This requires openness to unfamiliar new opportunities that cross our path, and a willingness to test new waters and risk failure. Our recent outreach experiences have demonstrated, though, that major investments of time and money are not always needed for success. Sometimes just a little extra effort can yield a wealth of positive results.

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## Notes

1. The full mission statement is available at <http://www.gelman.gwu.edu/collections/SCRC>.

2. For an example of a recent post, see: <http://www.gelman.gwu.edu/collections/SCRC/current-events/light-of-day-what-i-did-on-my-summer-vacation-by-dave>.

3. For an example, see our Dance LibGuide's "Archival Research" section at:<http://libguides.gwu.edu/content.php?pid=16865&sid=113717>.

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Jennifer Kinniff received an M.A. in History and an M.L.S. from the University of Maryland. She is the Public Services and Outreach Librarian for the Special Collections Research Center of Gelman Library at The George Washington University.

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