

Greta Reisel Browning, Mandi Burnison, and Kari Salisbury

# Special collections pop-up exhibits

## Two student curators' perspectives

In December 2019, two student assistants in the Special Collections Research Center at Appalachian State University curated an in-person pop-up exhibit of rare and manuscript materials as part of the University Libraries' "Library Cares" week-long exam study break program. The pop-up, entitled "Winter in Appalachia," took place from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. in a high-traffic area on Belk Library and Information Commons' first floor. The student curators were undergraduates who worked part-time at the reference desk in Special Collections and were supervised by the reference archivist, who served as their exhibit facilitator. This article is an interview with the student curators about their experience planning, preparing, and staffing the exhibit, and their evaluation of the event. We hope to be able to return to such events post-pandemic, but we have started to think about ways to incorporate student curation in a virtual world.

### Background

The Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) at Appalachian State University is comprised of four collecting units: the W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, the University Archives, the Stock Car Racing Collection, and Rare Books and Manuscripts. SCRC, like most special collections units, regularly creates outreach activities to raise awareness about their collections. When one of the student assistants suggested creating a pop-up exhibit in October 2019, Reference Archivist Greta Browning thought that with two enthusiastic student curators and a month for planning

and preparation, the exhibit would be a unique addition to the library's popular study break program.

The student curators were seasoned part-time assistants at the SCRC reference desk. Amanda (Mandi) Burnison, a junior English Education major, had worked in SCRC for two years, and Kari Salisbury, a senior Applied and Public History major, had worked in SCRC for one-and-a-half years. Burnison's career plans after graduation are to teach high school English, and Salisbury will attend a Master of Library and Information Science program and plans to work in libraries.

Browning facilitated logistics for the student curators through contact with the Library Cares coordinator, the facilities manager, and library staff who regularly help with publicity. The coordinator of the Library Cares program helped choose a place for the exhibit and suggested times to schedule it when the library would be busy. Between the Library Cares coordinator and the Belk Library facilities manager, we arranged for tables and standing exhibit panels. A library staff member in Technology Services printed and mounted on foam core promotional signs created by a SCRC student assistant.

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From inspiration, through planning, preparation, execution, and evaluation, the student curators and their supervisor undertook an active learning experience. While the pop-up was an overall success, the students learned lessons for the next event or similar situations in their future professional careers.

**What background did you have in exhibits or outreach for rare material and/or manuscripts or archives prior to this exhibit? How did these experiences inform this exhibit?**

**Burnison:** I didn't really have any background in exhibits or outreach for rare material. I follow a couple of archival libraries in the United Kingdom on Twitter, and they always post about having specific items on display in tweets. Seeing all of those tweets inspired me to suggest a pop-up exhibit.

**Salisbury:** I am a Public History major, so a large portion of my time is centered on community engagement, and I have discussed and assessed exhibits as part of my coursework. Also as a student assistant in the SCRC, I assisted with another pop-up previously. I understand that the ideal and reality often don't meet when it comes to big projects, and I was prepared to accept that we would need to cut items from the final display or that we might not get as many guests as I hoped.

**How did you select the theme and make choices of items to display?**

**Burnison:** We wanted the items to be relatable to the time of year. To select items, we used broad search terms in our catalog and manuscripts finding aid search engine, such as "winter" and "snow" to find items that we thought would be intriguing. After I came up with a list of possibilities, I pulled and reviewed them. My favorite items we included were an application to be the "Ski Queen" at a local ski resort called Appalachian Ski Mountain, photographer Jack Jeffers' images of Appalachia, and a Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer children's book.

**Salisbury:** The items that we selected were intended to be representative of both the Special Collections and University Archives, as well as the Appalachian Region. Since most students would be leaving campus after finals were over, the idea

was to show them past winter activities in the region. This would hopefully allow students from the local area to still experience something new. We also discussed the fact that Christmas tree farms and ski resorts have been a large source of jobs locally, both currently and historically, and the presence of materials in the collections about these industries gave us a unique opportunity to explore the importance of the season in north-western North Carolina.

**How much did the fact that your primary audience would be fellow students influence your selection process?**

**Burnison:** I think it greatly influenced what we included. App State has a big ski culture during the winter, so we included items related to skiing, such as posters from various ski resorts. During the exhibit, two students looked at one of the ski posters for a few minutes. They described to each other what paths they have skied and what paths have changed since the poster was created.

**Salisbury:** We knew that students would be tired and not interested in reading, given that this event took place during finals week, so we tried to choose only items that were either easy to read, extremely compelling if they had a lot of words, or images. In the end, the images were the most popular with visitors. One student commented that the table of materials was overwhelming before they spent several minutes viewing the photos and posters on a freestanding wall display. We expected the images to be popular, but we underestimated how much time visitors would spend with them.

**What steps did you take to ensure that you would be prepared for setting up on the day of the exhibit?**

**Burnison:** In advance, we measured the tables that we planned to use. On one of the days before the exhibit, Kari and I tried multiple ways to set up the items that we had selected within the table space we measured. After we set up items, we took pictures and discussed different arrangements to see which was the most logical set up.

**Salisbury:** We also visited the physical space that we would be occupying so that we could understand the limitations. The space was directly

in front of a student study area and the entrance to library staff offices. This was initially something that worried me, but in the end it did not matter. On the day of the exhibit, we had a good amount of passing interest as students made their way to either the nearby elevators or the study space behind the displays.

### **Were you pleased with the exhibit's outcome?**

**Burnison:** I was pleased with the outcome. I think the display was well thought out. I just wish we had a little more space so that we didn't have to cut items during setup. I think the number of visitors was good for our first pop-up exhibit. In conversations after the exhibit, I learned that it may be possible to do a pop-up exhibit in the library's lobby. I think that would help with getting more students to interact with or look at the exhibit.

**Salisbury:** Overall, I was happy with the outcome. I think it was a fantastic learning experience, and it taught me that there can be many variables that can determine the level of success for an exhibit. Time, availability, subject matter, location, and other events can all impact the number of visitors.

### **What went well?**

**Burnison:** Our planning process and the amount of time we gave ourselves to plan (one month) went well. The planning and preparation process did not feel rushed. Another aspect that I believe went well was the engagement we had during the actual exhibit. We had enough knowledge of the items displayed to converse with visitors.

**Salisbury:** The exhibit materials were diverse and interesting. We spent a lot of time arranging things so that the different topics flowed together, and there was no abrupt jump from one subject to another. Another student assistant's graphics were gorgeous, and Mandi did a fantastic job advertising on the social media accounts.

### **What didn't go well?**

**Burnison:** The tables we measured initially for the display were different from the tables we actually used. When we attempted a layout of the items prior to the exhibit, we did so based on the

measurements. At the time of the exhibit, we had to choose a few items not to display because of the lack of space. I think for the next pop-up exhibit, we should practice the display of the items on the actual tables we are using.

**Salisbury:** The time period in which the exhibit was set up was not ideal. Unfortunately, there were two therapy dogs finishing their scheduled visit on the same floor of the library, and it was difficult to compete with dogs for student attention. The therapy dogs were eventually replaced by free doughnuts, so it did not get better. The fact that it was during finals week was also detrimental. Students were more interested in food and studying than checking out the cool stuff in our exhibit. Not that I blame them. Passing finals is definitely a priority. Overall, I believe that the low attendance by students was due to conflicts of interest.

### **What are your thoughts on the audience turnout? Since students were the primary audience, why do you think they stopped to see the pop-up, or not?**

**Burnison:** Considering it was our first pop-up exhibit, I would say it was successful. Students who stopped were interested in items we had displayed. Two students in particular were extremely engrossed in the posters related to skiing and ski resorts. I think it helped to have candy and coloring sheets for students to take. There were students who stopped and just took candy or coloring sheets without paying attention to the items on display, but at least they knew we were there.

**Salisbury:** Students were interested, but many were not able to find the time to stop and view the items. I completely understand their prioritization of food and finals prep over viewing the exhibit, even though they appeared to express an interest when they walked past. There was free candy, and most did not even stop for that.

### **What did you learn through this experience?**

**Burnison:** I learned that people are more likely to look at images displayed on a wall than a table. They are also more likely to look at images instead of reading something with text on it, even if the item does not contain a lot of text. We had a fascinating application to be a "Ski Queen" on

display, and students did not look at it unless it was pointed out. Items that we displayed on the table were not near our wall of pictures, and the table was not nearly as popular.

**Salisbury:** Taking a pop-up from proposal to exhibition is a lot of work. It requires a lot of thought in regards to almost every facet. We had to choose a time for the exhibit and the tables, as well as research the topic and find relevant materials that required little effort to understand on the visitors' part and capture their interest quickly. I also had to think about the items we chose from the perspective of someone [who] doesn't work in the archives and special collections. They may ask, "Why would I care about this item? Does it make me want to know more? Why is this more interesting than the free doughnuts they are giving out in the lobby?"

## Conclusion

Through this experience, we learned several lessons. The student curators offered unique perspectives for attracting their peer audiences, as we saw with their understanding of student interest in local skiing and the good response that we had to the older ski posters. In planning, we learned that special collections units need to draw on the expertise of staff who work in areas of the library, or

any location, where the pop-up will be located to learn the traffic and space usage patterns. While we planned well for the exhibit, we learned that we need to stay flexible if things do not go as planned, such as the use of different tables, and that trial and error helped us learn how to improve our presentation for the next one. For our next in-person pop-up exhibit, we will use fewer items and concentrate on visual ones displayed vertically on exhibit walls or easels. We will also plan to hold an exhibit at a time when students have more free time to stop and view the items, such as in the first few weeks of the semester or during a popular thematic time, such as Halloween.

In a virtual environment, we think that a student-curated exhibit could take the form of a ThingLink interactive virtual exhibit, the creation of Zoom backgrounds or Pinterest exhibits from the collections, or working with archivists and curators to develop mini-talks about items in the collections that would appeal to a student audience. Many of the lessons that we learned from the in-person pop-up could apply to these virtual "exhibits." Whichever method of delivery, we believe that student curation is a valuable perspective to incorporate in outreach events, not to mention a real-world learning experience for all involved. *ZZ*

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*("Finding a good fit faster," continued from page 271)*

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## Notes

1. Meris M. Longmeier and Jody Condit Fagan, "Library & Information Science Journal Editors' Views on Query Letters," *College & Research Libraries*, 82, no. 6 (2021): n.p., <https://kb.osu.edu/handle/1811/92311>; Michael Marinello and Rodney W. Hicks, "Reemphasizing the Value of Query Letters in the Digital Age," *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners* 31, no. 3 (2019): 147-148, <http://doi.org/10.1097/JXX.000000000000200>.
2. "Process and Structure," *Code4Lib*, <https://journal.code4lib.org/process-and-structure> (accessed November 9, 2020).
3. Meris M. Longmeier and Jody Condit Fagan, "Query Letter Samples for Library and Information Science Journals," last modified January, 2021, <https://kb.osu.edu/handle/1811/92283>.
4. Marinello & Hicks, 147. *ZZ*