

Megan Lotts and Tara Maharjan

# Outreach, engagement, learning, and fun in 60 seconds

## Button making at the Rutgers University Libraries

In the fall of 2016, the Rutgers University Libraries (RUL)-New Brunswick Learning and Engagement team spent \$580 to purchase a button maker and supplies to make 1,000 buttons. Since then, the libraries have collaborated on button projects with many departments on campus, including the Rutgers Art History Student Association, the Zimmerli Art Museum, and the School of Arts and Sciences Honors program. These partnerships have helped the libraries build strong ties with the Rutgers-New Brunswick communities and attracted a devoted group of button makers who regularly attend library events.

In 2016, the RUL art librarian requested that the Learning and Engagement team purchase a button maker as a tool for library outreach through pop-up makerspace events. The inspiration came from the ACRL 2013 conference, where Char Booth, associate dean of the library at California State University-San Marcos, spoke about libraries building goodwill within their communities and noted that the Claremont College Libraries button maker was worth its weight in gold.<sup>1</sup>

Button making is a low-cost, high-impact, pop-up makerspace activity that libraries can use to facilitate outreach, connect patrons with collections, teach students about copyright, and promote creativity and fun,

all in just 60 seconds. Since purchasing the machine, the libraries have collaborated on button making projects with many departments on the Rutgers campuses, including the Art History Student Association, Living Learning Communities, Landscape Architecture Department, Mason Gross Visual Arts Department, School of Arts and Sciences Honors program, and the Zimmerli Art Museum. These partnerships have helped the libraries build strong ties with other campus entities and fostered collaborations with the Rutgers-New Brunswick communities.

The button maker has also attracted a group of devoted followers who regularly ask reference questions and attend library events. Making a button provides a quick moment of engagement between a patron and a library staff member, but it is from these kinds of meaningful brief encounters that libraries can learn about their patrons' lives and needs. These encounters can also be a source for the powerful stories, images, and statistics that help libraries demonstrate their impact and value to their communities.

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## Brief history and other libraries making buttons

Benjamin S. Whitehead first created buttons, also known as button badges, in 1893, when he placed a sheet of celluloid on the front of a button to prevent scratching.<sup>2</sup> In 1896, The Whitehead & Hoag Company received the patent for the button badge, which used a metal pin anchored to the back of the button to fasten the badge.<sup>3</sup> The 21st-century resurgence of button making in academic libraries has coincided with the rise of the “making culture.” The 2013 article “10 Ways to Celebrate Maker Culture,” focused on making activities as a way for libraries to offer programming and create in-house publicity. Button making was number six on the article’s list.<sup>4</sup>

Although button making may be found more often in public libraries, many academic libraries use this tool as a means to educate students and help them relieve stress. Some libraries even allow their button makers to circulate. A few university libraries are thinking outside the box and using their button makers in unexpected ways. In 2014, Ann Marie Ramussen and Heidi Madden cotaught a writing 101 course in which students were asked to write papers about Medieval badges. As part of their project, each student was asked to draw one of the badges they had studied, and they then used the library button maker to turn their drawings into modern day badges.<sup>5</sup>

In a project at the University of California-San Francisco Archives titled “Archive Your Pride,” summer intern Kelsi Evans located images from the AIDS History Project Ephemera Collection and the Bobby Campbell Diary for patrons to use in creating buttons that celebrat-

ed diversity.<sup>6</sup> In an article on creating inclusive academic libraries through diversity initiatives, Anne Switzer notes that three academic librarians from Oakland University participated in a campus-wide initiative called Students, Administrators, and Faculty for Equality (SAFE) in which allies were given SAFE buttons to wear to identify themselves as knowledgeable about LGBT resources and willing to help.<sup>7</sup>

From the examples listed above, it is clear there are a variety of ways academic libraries can use a button maker to build goodwill, highlight collections, educate patrons about

copyright, encourage diversity and inclusion, relieve stress, and foster collaborations between departments.

### Cost, supplies, and storage

The button maker has become a key point of engagement at Rutgers, yet it cost the libraries just \$580, including

the machine, a graphic punch, and supplies to make 1,000 buttons.<sup>8</sup> After making the initial investment in equipment, each button cost the libraries roughly ten cents to make. In one year, the libraries hosted 15 well-attended events in which more than 2,400 buttons have been made.

The button maker and supplies are easy to store and can be quickly moved from one library to another (see Figure 1). Besides the button maker itself, our supplies include a graphic punch to cut perfect button-sized circles, a small hammer and block in case the machine jams, a few pairs of scissors, and pre-made copyright-free image templates we think students might want to use to make buttons. We also provide blank button templates, markers, crayons, and colored pencils so patrons create their own images to turn into buttons.



Figure 1. Image of button maker and supplies.

## Button making and special collections

Tucked into the basement of Rutgers Alexander Library, Special Collections and University Archives (SC/UA) is not a place most students come across. Generally, students do not know of SC/UA unless they are required to visit for a class or they find a book in the catalog that is held by the department. This relative obscurity means that outreach is incredibly important. Using fun, eye-catching images from SC/UA for button making facilitates conversations about the image, where it comes from, and how students can visit SC/UA to see the item or image in person.

One of our most popular buttons is a black-and-white image of an

African American man in a Rutgers football uniform holding a football. The man in the image is Paul Robeson, a Rutgers alumnus, athlete, singer, actor, and civil rights activist who was blacklisted during McCarthyism. Students, who are intrigued by the picture, often want to know more about Robeson, and we can then direct them to our primary and secondary source materials held in SC/UA.

In one instance, a member of one of the Rutgers Living Learning Communities (LLC) reached out to the art librarian to inquire about acquiring 23 Paul Robeson buttons. The day before, the student had made a Robeson button and now wanted to make more to give to each member of her LLC because they were studying this alum's work. This also provided the libraries with an opportunity to work more closely with the LLC to share additional

resources pertaining to Robeson. Since this collaboration, the libraries have received multiple reference questions from this LLC on other topics related to their coursework.<sup>9</sup>

Button making is an engaging way for SC/UA to collaborate with different departments throughout the libraries and the university as a whole. Through different button designs, the libraries have been able to highlight the holdings of the University Archives during the 250th anniversary celebration, promote images from a variety of collecting areas for “stress-buster” events during finals week, and share



Figure 2. Collage of SC/UA image templates.

Rutgers football-related images for Rutgers Family Weekend (see Figure 2). Recently, when the science library

learned about button events in the libraries, they reached out to SC/UA to get archival science-themed button templates made for button making events at their library.

Buttons are also an interesting piece of ephemera, which patrons can take away for free from library-sponsored events. For an exhibit opening about a New Jersey politician, buttons using his old campaign posters were made as giveaways. During an art and feminism Wikipedia “edit-a-thon,” feminist-themed buttons, based on SC/UA’s weekly #FeministFriday social media posts were given away to participants. Overall, the button maker has helped get Rutgers SC/UA out of the basement by highlighting the libraries’ unique collections, and it has also served as a teaching tool and a means for SC/UA to collaborate with other departments on campus.

## Button maker as teaching tool

Button making offers a low-cost pop-up making activity that addresses the idea of an object from concept to consumption, producing a tangible object that can be worn or given to a friend. Creating a button strengthens creative thinking and problem-solving skills, which are crucial when conducting library research, and also provides an opportunity to discuss finding images and understanding copyright laws.<sup>10</sup>

Some of our most popular button making activities are the pop-up makerspaces we

host, which include “stressbuster” events that happen for the Rutgers University Libraries at the end of each semester (see Figure 3). These events provide library patrons an opportunity to take a short break, stretch their creative muscles with

hands on learning, talk with a librarian, and maybe make a new friend, all while making a button. For patrons who do not have time to create their own buttons, we provide a selection of premade buttons featuring images from SC/UA.

Student clubs often approach the libraries and ask to use the button machine and supplies. In one button making experience with a group of 12 undergraduates from the Art History Department, we discussed finding images and understanding copyright laws, as many students brought images that infringed on copyright restrictions. Students were curious to learn more about copyright and asked questions about how to find and

properly cite an image when writing a paper. This opportunity also allowed the Art Library to share a recently created “finding images” LibGuide, as well as lead students to many other helpful research guides.

One of our most engaging button making projects was a collaboration between Rutgers Mason Gross School of Visual Arts and the Art Library, funded by a Banned Books Week grant from the Freedom to Read Foundation. With this grant, the Rutgers art librarian worked closely with an advanced undergraduate printmaking course from Rutgers Mason

Gross Visual Arts, taught by associate professor Barbara Madsen, to teach students about intellectual freedom, censorship, and banned books. The students then created images that were made into

1,000 buttons and distributed across the Rutgers campuses (see Figure 4). Students still talk about this project and the importance of intellectual freedom. They ask for more buttons and want to know when the libraries will host this event again. If you pay attention on campus, there is a good chance you will see one or more of these buttons on a backpack or jacket.

## What our button makers have to say

In general, Rutgers and local communities love making, wearing, and sharing buttons. The button maker is regularly requested by student clubs, departments, and organizations throughout the Rutgers communities.



Figure 3. Alexander Library button making event for stressbusters fall 2016.

In November 2017, a button making list-serv was created due to the popularity of the button making events. Prior to button making events, the libraries send out an email with a blank button template attached. This alerts students of upcoming events, so they can create their images ahead of time, print them, and bring them to the event.

In January of 2018, we began placing stickers on the backs of the buttons including the RUL logo, as well as the hashtag, #RULbuttonmaking. We hope this sticker will encourage individuals to share their creations and button making experiences on social media. But also the stickers extend the libraries reach, as many buttons made at these events are given away as gifts.

Also in January 2018, the Rutgers-New Brunswick libraries have “more intentionally” started collecting statistics, including providing a comment box at button-making events. The comments have been overwhelmingly positive and included statements such as, “Thanks for the new pin, I love it and put it on my backpack,” “making buttons is awesome,” “we love buttons,” “making a button made my day,” “best library ever,” “thank you RU Libraries,” “I love the idea of creating my own button,” and “I’m going to make one for my mom.”

With the popularity of button making, more button events are happening across RUL. This allows students to explore the various libraries and meet the respective librarians throughout the Rutgers-New Brunswick campuses. The demand is so high that library graduate assistants and student workers are also learning to how to use the button ma-

chine and troubleshoot problems so that we can host more pop-up events throughout campuses. Also RUL is contemplating purchasing more machines.

## Conclusion

At RUL, our button maker has become a tool for engagement, which has allowed the libraries to connect with patrons in unexpected ways. This machine has helped highlight the libraries’ unique collections and encouraged students to ask about our Special Collections and University Archives. Button making has also facilitated conversations about copyright and finding images, topics on the minds of many academic librarians. Lastly, the button maker helps students have fun and leave the library smiling. These moments have led to more reference encounters, departmental collaborations, and unique experiences happening at

RUL. Due to the overwhelming success with the button maker, more machines will be ordered, allowing the Rutgers community the continued opportunities to learn, create, and enjoy something as simple as a button.

## Notes

1. Megan Lotts. “Low-Cost High-Impact Makerspaces at the Rutgers University Art Library,” *Art Documentation: Bulletin of The Art Libraries Society of North America* 36, no. 2 (2017): 345-62.
2. “The History of Button Badges,” <https://www.buttonbadges.co.uk/button-badge-history.htm>.

*(continues on page 379)*



Figure 4. Button images created by Rutgers student printmakers for Banned Books Week 2017.

*Abroad: What our students are learning, what they're not, and what we can do about it* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2012): 4.

5. Nicole J Kendrot, "Academic Library Support for Study Abroad Students," (master's thesis, 2011): 39.

6. Kayo Denda, "Study abroad programs: a golden opportunity for academic library engagement," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39 (2013): 155–60.

7. Sarah Faye Cohen and Andy Burkhardt, "Even an ocean away: Developing Skype-based reference for students studying abroad,"

*Reference Services Review* 38, no. 2 (2010): 264–73.

8. Ellen H. Hammond, "Internationalization in higher education and global access in a digital age," *Library Management* 30 (2009): 88–98.

9. We use "off-campus students" and "study abroad students" interchangeably. Colby College refers to this group of students as "off-campus students," but to differentiate from distance education or commuter students, we use "study abroad" to capture the long-distance yet temporary nature of their research projects and study experience. ❧

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*("Ready, set, make!" continues from page 363)*

their future collaborations with school librarians as teachers in their future classrooms.

## Notes

1. Erica Rosenfeld Halverson and Kimberly M. Sheridan, "The Maker Movement in Education," *Harvard Educational Review*, 2014: 495–504.

2. Kate Shively, "Reflections from the Field: Creating an Elementary Living LearningMaker-space," *Learning Communities Research and Practice* 5 (2017): no. 1, Article 3: 1–14. Available at <https://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol5/iss1/3>.

3. Gail Oltmanns and John H. Schuh, "Purposes and Uses of Residence Hall Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* (1985): 172–77.

4. Phyllis Rudin, "No Fixed Address: The Evolution of Outreach Library Services on Campus," *The Reference Librarian* (2008): 55–75.

5. Megan Egbert, *Creating Makers: How to Start a Learning Revolution at Your Library* (Santa Barbara, California: Libraries Unlimited, 2016).

6. Shively, "Reflections from the Field: Creating an Elementary Living LearningMaker-space." ❧

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*("Outreach engagement . . ." continues from page 368)*

3. George B. Adams. "Badge Pin or Button," New Jersey, 1986, <https://www.google.com/patents/US564356>, accessed December 12, 2017.

4. Kate Jagers, "10 Ways to Celebrate Maker Culture," *Library LinkNJ*, <http://librarylinknj.org/techex/10-ways-celebrate-maker-culture>, accessed December 4, 2017.

5. "Badges to Buttons: Students write about 'Images That Shock,'" Duke University Libraries, <https://blogs.library.duke.edu/blog/2014/06/05/images-shock/>, accessed December 4, 2017.

6. Kelsi Evans, "Intern Report: Archive Your Pride Event Planning," brought to Light Stories from UCSF Archives & Special Collections, <https://blogs.library.ucsf.edu>

</broughttolight/tag/button-making/>, accessed December 4, 2017).

7. Anne T. Switzer. "Redefining Diversity: Creating an Inclusive Academic Library through Diversity Initiatives," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 15, no. 3 (2008): 280–300, <https://valenciacollege.edu/faculty/development/coursesResources/documents/RedefiningDiversityLibrary.pdf>.

8. Megan Lotts, "Low-Cost High-Impact Makerspaces at the Rutgers University Art Library," *Art Documentation: Bulletin of The Art Libraries Society of North America* 36, no. 2 (2017): 345–62.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid. ❧