

# Display cases for academic libraries

## Ten tips for display case persons

by Susan Brazer and Andrea Wyman

Most of us recognize the job title of “display case person,” yet when someone asks for a volunteer to actually take on the regular responsibilities, everyone suddenly takes an interest in their shoes.

Doing displays is a job dreaded, passed around (especially to the newest hire), and a task most likely to be accompanied by a small budget, little support, and less enthusiasm. In short, the job of display case person has been known to age or dismay even the most enthusiastic or stalwart librarian.

Fellow display case persons or display case draftees! Take heart in what we hope will be a fresh look at a sometimes dreaded, frequently avoided, and baffling task. We may not be able to warm your heart to the job, but we can offer advice for ways to refresh the task of filling those glass-sided storage cases with objects and images to showcase your library.

Our offering of ten tips covers the following: how to develop resources, technicalities to consider, suggestions for making the most of what's on hand, and shortcuts to what's “free.” We will also look at a way to formalize the position to exhibits curator or display coordinator.

### 1. Two heads are better than one.

Speaking from experience, being “display

person” is one of the loneliest jobs on campus. If possible, we recommend trying to find a colleague in a similar situation. That's how we got started, and our two heads are better than one philosophy has paid off any number of times. Between the two of us, we had about eight years of on-the-job display history, yet the first time we shared our thoughts, we began exchanging ideas and Web addresses of new sites for free materials. Suddenly doing displays felt fresh again.

**2. Does your library have a display policy?** “A what?” you reply. That's right, ask if your library has a display policy. If not, we suggest drafting one. A typical display policy can cover a multitude of things: purpose, scheduling, external request policies, exhibitor responsibility, security, or even restrictions.

Examples of “purpose” from two libraries include providing “a forum for the free exchange of ideas through the visual arts” (California State University San Marcos Library) or “to increase student, staff, and faculty awareness of library holdings, services, and events; to educate patrons on the use of the library and its facilities; to highlight special holidays or calendar events of local or national importance, especially as they relate to library resources; and in general to entertain

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and to enlighten patrons" (Winthrop University). Probably one of the most important aspects of having a policy is to provide guidelines for individuals outside the library who may be placing materials in library cases.<sup>1</sup> One of our favorites is the policy from the Williamsburg (Virginia) Regional Library:

Library displays are used to promote materials, services, and/or events. Staff select the topics, materials, and dates for displays based on community and seasonal interests. Display suggestions from the public are welcome, but their use is not guaranteed.

Details, such as whether a display case is locked, how long a display remains in the case, or even who has the right to deny the placement of a display in the library, can be easily and clearly covered in such a policy. An added policy step for some libraries also involves "applying" for exhibit space, which can be easily handled with an application form.

**3. Set goals for your displays.** When we first started our display careers, we worked in libraries that had no policy in place. We intuitively responded by developing our own goals and found that they helped keep us focused. The following is a combination of our two lists:

- market library materials and holdings,
- promote circulation and use,
- bring together interests of students, faculty and community,
- use the displays as avenues to educate, inform and entertain,
- change case displays on a routine basis (at least every six-to-eight weeks), and
- make sure library-derived displays are given first priority.

**4. Remember: Flair for the job has little or nothing to do with success.** Even though a recent ACRL survey by found that "exhibit responsibilities are often assigned by default to staff members who have a flair for the doing the work,"<sup>2</sup> we disagree. Flair is nice, but it will not pull you out of your pit of despair when you are staring at an empty display case.

What will work is developing a set of resources: people who have collections, hobbies, or who travel, etc. We also check lists of Web sites from libraries around the world that provide images of their displays.

One of our favorites comes from the University of Waterloo on the subject of Boars. Their tongue-in-cheek topics tickled our funnybones: "Origins of the Boar in Art History," "The Boar in the News," and "The Boar at the University of Waterloo."<sup>3</sup>

Books and Web sites provide helpful visuals that may spark an idea for a display case. Even an older title, such as Mona Garvey's 1969 book, *Library Displays Their Purpose, Construction and Use*, should not be summarily dismissed because of its age. The section on design components provides concrete examples of how shapes and white space can effectively show off your message.

The GODORT (government documents) Web site has an entire section devoted to photos of exhibits and displays just for government documents.<sup>4</sup> This Web site is a great resource for finding out what other colleagues are doing without going any farther than your own computer. We found two sections from the site particularly helpful: "How Can I Make My Displays More Attractive?" and "How Can I Share My Displays?"

**5. Use what you have.** What a coincidence it was when we found out that one of our professors in the Economics Department

## Ten tips for library displays/exhibits

1. Two heads are better than one.
2. Find out about your library's display policy.
3. Set goals for your displays.
4. Remember: Flair for the job has nothing to do with success.
5. Use what you have.
6. Comb the local community.
7. Keep track of your displays.
8. Check out international days, holidays, and organization-based days or events.
9. Make use of the ALA Web site.
10. Become an exhibits curator.

collected mechanical banks. His hobby turned out to be our good fortune, so to speak. We worked the display to focus on the banks and antique toys, and once word got out about the antique toys, people volunteered to bring in other antique toys they had at home.

Likewise, we recommend using other departments on campus. These days, many buildings are running out of space and have items that departments are forced to store in a basement or warehouse. We recently un-

earthed pairs of old shoes that a former, world-traveling science professor put in the library basement when he retired. The shoes ended up getting used in a case for the children's collection along with books on ballet shoes, tap dancing, and costumes.

And, most importantly, we suggest developing good contacts with people in the theater department. They work with props every day, and if they don't have something for you to display, they're magnificent contacts for finding other people, accessing costumes, or recommending acceptable facsimiles when the real thing is not available.

**6. Comb the local community.** Is there a famous historian residing in town? A politician who has been in office for more than 50 years? A faculty member who specializes in medieval battle gear? These people can be wonderful resources for displays, and they often have interesting stories and memorabilia that would otherwise not be seen. There may also be something special about the local community itself: industry, geography, history, or people.



The Banned Books display case was covered with brown paper, then "peak holes" were ripped open to view the banned books, and strips of paper displayed book titles and author names for the 100 most frequently banned books in the United States.



What about local happenings? Pennsylvania has always been famous for coal mining, and a recent newspaper article revealed some interesting history about a coal seam under one town that has been burning for the last 30 years. This tiny thread of information is just the right

start for a display. The next step is to track down newspaper articles, original street signs, and other memorabilia for an exhibit on "The Burning of Centralia."

We also recommend collaborating with your local

historical society. When we unearthed a 1897 graduation gown from an old filing cabinet in the basement, we called the local historical society for help. Their archivist made a house call and assisted us in the display of the dress with acid-free stuffed paper, then she donated a special acid-free storage box for use once we finished with the exhibit. Working together, we discussed other collaborative exhibits incorporating their materials with ours and ended up sharing resources in future projects.

**7. Keep track of your displays.** Don't be bashful about documenting your work. Take lots of pictures from various angles (digital cameras are wonderful for this), and put up a Web site listing everything you've done and your personal contact information. Not only does this help you keep track of things and prevent you from doing the same display topic twice, but it also reveals the diversity of cases that the library has sponsored. Plus, with your name and Web address, you can be reached for questions, suggestions for future displays, or even kudos.

Keep a calendar with dates, display topics, and individuals or groups responsible. A Web site developed for such a purpose can be included in the library homepage under the "What's New" section.<sup>5</sup>

**8. Check out international days, holidays, and organization-based days or events.** Did you know about the Pursuit of Happiness Week, Banned Book Week, Kwanzaa, Diabetes Awareness Month, the Annual Bald is Beautiful Convention, Trinidad Carnival Week, Nellie Bly's Birthday, the 225th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence Approval and Signing, or National Safe Kid Week? We didn't either, but once we got started and checked *Chase's Calendar of Events*, we had more days and events than we could use in a lifetime.

We should also add that the best part about using *Chase's* is that it provides names and addresses and ways to contact some of the lesser-known organizations. For example, we bet you didn't know that the Baby Boomer's Recognition Day falls on June 21 or that there's an actual person in New Jersey to contact about it.

**9. Make use of the ALA Web site.** Three areas on the ALA Web site provide potential for displays and exhibits: News and Announcements, Conferences and Events, and This Week's News and Announcements.<sup>6</sup> One of our most successful exhibits came from the Banned Book Week information we found at the Library Promotional Events link. Even though we did not purchase the press kit that was offered, we used all the resources ALA provided (such as quotes about intellectual freedom and lists of books and materials) to create our own.

The ALA Conferences and Events section also provides good jumping-off points for display ideas as does This Week's News and Announcements. Another way to use ALA resources is to watch its Public Programs Office link for traveling exhibit opportunities. The "Beyond Words" traveling exhibit, recently listed, features photographs capturing the "magic of libraries" and "how libraries help people of all ages achieve the American dream, navigate their way through the

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information highway, and access all sorts of resources with the personal assistance of a librarian."

A description of the needed space for the traveling exhibit was provided and libraries willing to host the display were encouraged to apply. The cost of shipping the exhibit to its next location was the only expense.

**10. Be an exhibits curator or display coordinator.** Displays take a lot of time and hard work. Our thinking then is: "Why not include a formal description of all the work that it involves as part of your job description?" Other libraries have shared their position descriptions<sup>7</sup>, and, while we found them helpful, we wanted to make some adjustments.

First, we recommend that the title be considered separately. After examining all the position titles from the ACRL survey, we realized that not one of them was actually a separate "display" or "curator" title; all the individuals handling displays were doing so with these responsibilities tacked onto existing job titles, such as circulation/reference librarian, special collections assistant, reference assistant, or archivist. Make it clear by your title that you are responsible for exhibits or displays.

That said, two titles we think fit the bill are either *exhibits curator* or *display coordinator*. They both carry some weight and provide enough scope to make the details of the job seem worthy of all the hard work that goes into it. To express the corresponding job responsibilities, we again turned to the ACRL survey.

After looking at Moorhead State University's example, we thought it had potential but needed expansion: *Responsible for coordinating and initiating library*

*newsletter and displays*. The Bowdoin College description came a little closer and addressed more of the tasks involved: *Design and write exhibition material and place exhibits in cases and other display areas*.

We believe a more robust, cut-and-paste position description is likely to receive administrative support and might read something like this:

**Title:** Exhibits Curator

**Description of Duties and Responsibilities:**

Create and maintain appropriate exhibits in library display cases. Schedule and plan all library exhibits or touring exhibits. Change displays or exhibits in a timely manner. Prepare supporting materials, i.e., signs, press releases, and Web pages for exhibits or displays.

With the job more carefully defined, a good set of resources at hand, and another person to share and trade ideas, we think the role of display case person has the potential to move out of the “dreaded task” category. And if

you’re alone and out there struggling with displays at your library, why not contact one of us as a start? We look forward to hearing from you because we know from experience that we’ve gotten some of our best ideas from other display coordinators or exhibit curators.

## Notes

1. Jane Kemp and Laura Witschi, *Displays and Exhibits in College Libraries*, ACRL Clip Note #25 (Chicago, ACRL, 1997).
2. *Ibid.*, 23.
3. See <http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/tour/boar/BoarContents.html>.
4. Visit <http://www.lib.mankato.msus.edu/lib/govdoc/proj/tutorials/finalfront2.htm>.
5. Two examples of library display Web sites are [http://www.salisbury.edu/library/Displays/display\\_cases.htm](http://www.salisbury.edu/library/Displays/display_cases.htm) from the Blackwell Library at Salisbury State University and <http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/url/urlxhibits/calendar.htm> from the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA.
6. Visit <http://www.ala.org>.
7. Kemp and Witschi, *Displays and Exhibits in College Libraries*. ■

(“Taking time . . . continued from page 902) organizational retreats, the library currently seems to be unique in its willingness to devote a substantial amount of time to the organization and development of its staff. It is not a perfect model, but it seems to be working and, for now, will continue to be followed.

The organizational week began as a response to the change in organizational structure. The organizational weeks are continued as tweaks are made in that structure for improvement and future development. The library environment will be constantly changing, and this tool is effective in meeting the demands of the changing environment. As in any journey, there will be bumps, curves, and detours; but the road will still take us to new adventures and exciting challenges as we move forward in the 21st century.

## Notes

1. Randall R. Richards, “Crafting a dynamic board retreat: How to set the stage for strategic thinking,” *Association Management* 50 (Jan. 1998): 93.

2. Geoffrey James, *Business Wisdom of the Electronic Elite* (New York: Times Business, 1996), 57.

3. Janice Kirkland and Linda S. Dobb, “The retreat as a response to change,” *Library Trends* 37 (spring 1989): 496.

4. Norbert Lewandowski, “Retreat to compete,” *Ohio CPA Journal* 56 (July–September 1997): 44.

## Additional resources

Cuff, E. Dale, and Gisela Webb, “Staff retreats in ACRL libraries,” *College & Research Libraries News* 49 (Sept. 1988): 517–21.

Dobb, Linda S., “Four retreats and a forum: A meditation on retreats as a response to change,” *Library Trends* 47 (spring 1999): 699–713.

Nanus, Bert, “Leading the vision team,” *Futurist* 30 (May/June 1996): 20–24.

Stern-Dunyak, Alison, and Jane Sanders, “Moving forward with a retreat,” *Association Management* 52 (Dec. 2000): 49–51. ■

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