

Academic Libraries and Public Art

Engaging Students in a Timely Discussion

Academic libraries are dynamic institutions that are constantly changing in response to the needs and wants of their users. At the same time, they are also the offices that house the institution's archives and are responsible for preserving the records that document the institution's past. While they strive to adopt best practices consistent with student needs, they also work to protect and preserve the past. Such roles can be at odds.

What do libraries do when current student and administrative priorities, tastes, and institutional missions clash with their interest in preserving the past? Are libraries' users best served by exclusively supporting current taste and initiatives, or does preservation of the past serve students and institutions more? Can libraries use existing historic places to share significant historical stories about their institution and still be perceived as current and attractive? These questions are ones that librarians might struggle with, but they do not have to struggle alone.

Academic libraries exist in colleges and universities that are staffed by discipline-specific experts and the students who are training in these disciplines. Librarians, who work daily with faculty and students, have a ready opportunity to seek advice from both seasoned and budding experts and include them in discussions on authentic dilemmas that libraries face. Collaboration may result in more informed decision-making, as well as provide educational and professional benefits for students as they build work skills, develop more impressive vitas, and become more deeply engaged in their learning.

Public history programs provide students with civically engaged instruction, often incorporating practical projects into traditional classroom learning. Public history fields include librarianship and/or encourage strong relationships with libraries and librarians not only as a source of research, but also as tied to their nature as being public service-oriented. Both have a concern for ensuring information is preserved and shared, and shape community and identity, in shared, as well as unique ways.

During the 2022–2023 academic year, an Indiana University of Pennsylvania Libraries issue related to historic public art was brought to faculty and students with an expertise in public history when seeking a practical solution to a real-world problem. This article will describe the problem, the collaboration, and the manner in which the service-learning activity at once benefited the library, faculty, and students.

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Mural tracing the evolution of communications, located in a stairwell of the IUP Stabley Library. The mural was installed c. 1960s by student and artist Wayne Hawxhurst. Photo by Rhonda Yeager.

The People and the Issue

Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) is a mid-sized public university in Western Pennsylvania that began as a Normal School in 1875 to prepare teachers for common schools. Over the years, it developed into a university with an R2 or High Research Activity classification. In the summer of 2022, IUP Libraries were renovated to support student success by physically uniting a number of campus support services and creating a Learning Commons in the library facility. In the course of the renovations, a stairway previously available only to staff was again opened to the public and a mural painted in the late 1960s was rediscovered. The mural was painted as part of a course assignment by a graduate student who loved the library. It illustrated the evolution of information storage and sharing from the beginning of time to the 1960s. Although it survived for more than 50 years, in the fall of 2022 the new renovations and resulting altered traffic patterns drew attention to the mural and led some to question whether it should be preserved or painted over. Interesting in its time, and related to the library's current and historical mission, it was not consistent with the more minimalist and standardized style of the renovated building. The question arose: should it be painted over, or should it be preserved?

Public History Instruction and Libraries

Theresa McDevitt is a librarian who has a PhD in history. Over the years she has developed several history-based initiatives in the library and university communities and long served

as the embedded librarian for the History Department. In this role, McDevitt has worked closely with Jeanine Mazak-Kahne, a public history professor, to develop authentic public history assignments based upon existing local history records. Mazak-Kahne considers this relationship as essential in providing critical instruction to public history students, from information literacy to research practices in local history.

Instruction in public history is anchored in understanding and fostering the preservation of cultural heritage, whether it be on the local level or a national scale. Course materials and faculty instruction involve a historical understanding of community and memory, especially that fostered by cultural and heritage objects created (such as public art or memorials) for a given purpose and examining how purpose and meaning change over time. In contemporary discussions, the weight has fallen on monuments and memorials. Discussion is often lively and reflective; however, for many, these issues are abstract as students are removed by space and time from the objects and the surrounding debates.

Also critical to public history instruction is the understanding of community and memory. While typical case studies examined in the classroom are often part of larger debates over a national identity, in reality, peoples' lives are most often rooted in the local identity, community, and memory. As students are part of a university community, public history professors recognize that student learning and engagement with material deepens when an understanding of place, identity, and memory is drawn from their immediate surroundings. This leads to the development of connections to the community in which they are immersed in new ways. Through projects that stem from authentic local issues, students apply what they have learned in the classroom to their immediate, discuss identity, memory, and community values and how they have changed over time.

Students in the IUP public history program comprise multiple disciplines from history and anthropology to art and English. Students continue to work in a variety of fields, including historic sites and museums, but also in archives and libraries, and they benefit from developing an understanding of how information is preserved and used in these different organizations. Therefore, it is an ideal situation to work with the embedded librarian and university library to develop authentic applications of theory at every opportunity possible.

The Assignment

Discussion of whether the library mural should be painted over came just at the time when instruction in the public history course shifted to the meaning of memory and identity as preserved and expressed in public monuments, memorials, and art. In this course, students are encouraged to think about how the meaning of public objects change over time and how evolving meaning and understanding of our past causes us to reinterpret these objects. They also seek to explore how objects have different meanings within the community and how public historians must navigate and negotiate these meanings among different groups and provide professional insight when called upon.

McDevitt and Mazak-Kahne felt that the discussion of whether the mural should be preserved or painted over would be a good authentic assignment for students. Students in two public history classes, Introduction to Public History and History Museums and Historic Sites, visited the library and read about the mural's history in an alumni newsletter article. They were then asked to call upon what they had learned so far to provide advice to the libraries on the disposition of the mural. The mission of the libraries was shared, and the

historical value of the mural and possible significance of its having been painted by an alumnus was considered. They were able to recommend that it be preserved or painted over. If they chose the latter, they were asked to suggest ways that the historical information intrinsic to the artifact could be preserved. Discussion prompts included those related to historical significance, historical content accuracy, artistic quality, and impact of ease of navigation when the space might be used for navigational signs.

While considering this real-world dilemma, they were asked to consider what the historical significance of the content of the mural was, and if it was accurate, and if that mattered. The students participated actively in the discussion, clearly drawing upon their training, and raised unanticipated issues that led to a deeper consideration of not just the mural, but of all public art in the library.

Some of the students in the classes were so intrigued with the mural that they volunteered to look more into its history. They wrote up their findings for library administration and prepared background documents that will be preserved in the Special Collections Department. They also provided wording for a plaque for the mural should it be preserved.

Outcomes

In reflecting on the assignment, Mazak-Kahne felt that the mural lesson enhanced student learning, immersing them in the immediate relationship between public art, public engagement, and institutional memory. She feels that it is important for students to learn that life is messy and that no solution is perfect, while giving them practice in making decisions for the common good, while not dismissing the past. She argues that engagement with this real-world problem helps students gain experience that may help them assess the complicated circumstances that professionals encounter in their field.

Based on this success, Mazak-Kahne intends to build upon this project in the future. IUP's public history program spans multiple courses, and it is often the case that a project started in the Intro class is carried into the archives, museums, oral history, digital history, and family and local history courses. The documentation created during this project will, at the very least, be used to create a digital exhibit that will be housed on the program's website, currently under construction.

Students who worked on the assignment echoed Mazak-Kahne's sentiments. They reported that the mural project gave them insight and hands-on experience that corresponded to their field of interest, public history, and offered them a glimpse into the work often found within museums and archival sites.

They also agreed that the investigation of the mural led them to deepen their understanding of historical research by conducting thorough research into various primary and secondary sources in a manner that an actual public historian would. Although it was challenging, they felt that translating discovered information into an accurate and unique plaque strengthened their ability to communicate historical information effectively and efficiently.

Lorilie Blose, a student in the class, wrote, "Throughout the project, I learned about the meticulous research required to understand art and artifacts, the careful decision of what to preserve, and the significance of accurately documenting and contextualizing historical objects and art. . . . This hands-on experience helped me grasp the intricate workings of these institutions, preparing me for potential future roles in public history." She continued that it "enhanced my academic experience but also gave me invaluable insights into the operational

aspects of public history. Such projects help to bridge the gap between theory and practice, preparing students for careers in history and other related subjects.”

Conclusion

For the immediate future, the mural will continue to grace the walls of the stairway in the older part of the library building, and the students’ plaque text will be mounted near it in the stairway. Based on this experience, the curator of the University Museum was inspired to ask interns working at the University Museum the following semester to write descriptions for more of the art items in the library.

The decision of what to do with the historical mural presented a challenge to library personnel. Like most challenges though, it offered opportunities for learning and growth. By including history professors and students as advisors in the discussion-making process, librarian learning was extended, and students and faculty benefited as well. ❧