

THEY DIDN'T TEACH ME *THIS* IN LIBRARY SCHOOL

Managing a Library Art Gallery

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IT SEEMS a natural fit to have artwork in libraries. At Sonoma State University Library, in Rohnert Park, California, we have committed to an art gallery in order to support the liberal arts and sciences mission of the university. The gallery's exhibits explore a diverse range of ideas, values, and intellectual and artistic expressions. In working with artists, curators, educators, and collectors from the community, we provide unique possibilities for supporting learning and discovery, and we give students, faculty, and community members yet another reason to visit our library.

OVERVIEW

The Jean and Charles Schulz Information Center opened in August 2000. The original building plans did not include a gallery, but, due to last-minute design changes and the creativity of the campus architect, a 1,200-square-foot gallery was placed directly across from the main entrance. I was asked to coordinate this new service because I had a background in marketing and programming, as well as a huge desire to make it work. I was also liaison to the Art Department, which includes the SSU Art Gallery. (I call it the "Other Gallery.")

As a new coordinator, it was obvious to me that because my degree was not in museum studies, it would be imperative for me to reach out to experts. A fantastic

expert came in the person of the director of the SSU Art Gallery, who was more than generous with his time, expertise, and creativity. His art credentials are impressive, and he has been a strong partner since our first show.

We established a mission for our gallery immediately, desiring it to be an integral part of the library, not a stand-alone service. The mission we created is simply “to support the Liberal Arts and Sciences curriculum of the university.” This mission let us collaborate with different campus departments and members of the community. Some of the planning principles we established were to display works of art by students and professional artists, to show selections from the university library’s unique collections, and to explore the possibilities of traveling exhibitions. We established a principle to work closely with the “Other Gallery” on campus to ensure that our exhibits demonstrated and maintained aesthetic standards and professional quality. We also committed to have one student show per semester—which could be an exhibit of student work or an exhibition that students curate. The exhibits we have shown include “Thinking about Freedom: Works from the San Quentin Arts Program” and “Fresh Starts: Sonoma State Painting Students.”

THE HOW-TOS: MARKETING, FUND-RAISING, IMPLEMENTATION, EVALUATION

Although each exhibit is its own unique experience with unique challenges, there are consistent aspects to every show.

Preplanning. Developing an outline and time line is essential. Even with the best planning, something can happen to thwart time lines. It is important to build in some wiggle room because deadlines will be missed, installations will be more complex than anticipated, and the show must go on (this is the reason I never plan receptions on the day an exhibit is scheduled to open).

Exhibition Design and Installation. Installation requirements are obviously dictated by the work to be exhibited, the gallery space, the budget, and the mission. Some of our limitations include three solid walls and one glass wall and an eight-foot ceiling that we can’t hang anything from due to insulation.

Promotion and Publicity. For each exhibition we develop an announcement card, usually a 4 × 6 postcard with an image on the front and basic information on the back. These cards are sent to an on- and off-campus mailing list (bulk-mail rates, labeled by student assistants; not using a mail house allows us to cut costs and gives late-night student workers something to do). A press release, with follow-up calls, is always created. We have a presence on our library’s website and an extensive e-mail list. We also do an “opening” or reception with light refreshments and no alcohol (supporting the alcohol-free policy on campus—and saving money).

Staffing. The responsibility for design and installation varies depending on the exhibit. These aspects have been handled by students, community artists, gallery or library staff, and me.

Financing (Budgets and Fund-Raising). There is no line item for the gallery in the library budget, so expenses come directly out of the library operating budget or from fund-raising. Even though we keep the costs of our exhibits to a minimum, there have been several occasions where we raised money. The exhibit dictates where we look for funding. Departments on campus, donors in the community, external grants, and even the student clubs have all helped cover costs. It is important to remember that the gallery is only one of many library services, and we don't ever want to compete with ourselves for donations. Because of this, we act very strategically when asking for support.

Evaluation. Assessing each exhibit and the program as a whole provides some intriguing challenges. It is very hard to get quantitative data. There is no counter on the gallery door, and I don't always hear from faculty who bring classes over, nor do I know how many students have written a paper on an exhibit or how many community members have recommended the exhibit to friends. But I can gather some qualitative data from students, faculty, and community feedback. I also get feedback from our public services staff stationed directly across from the gallery door and from the guest book. I also solicit opinions from artists about their experiences exhibiting in our gallery and from other curators who critique the presentation.

CONCLUSION

The gallery has added a fabulous dimension to the library's programs and departmental learning objectives. It is also another reason for the community to come to campus. Although we continually examine the program to ensure its fit with the library as a whole, we always conclude that we must find a way to continue to offer engaging exhibitions that support the liberal arts and sciences mission of our university. As the campus and community continue to provide so much positive feedback about coming to the library to visit our gallery, we feel it is meeting its mission.