

# Engaging with campus and community

## Insights from a traveling exhibition

**E**xhibitions draw people to libraries. They encourage visitors to engage with objects and media in a public space and provide opportunities for discovery within the library's collection. Not every library has the resources to create original exhibitions, however. Traveling exhibitions, which arrive ready to set up in the library's existing space, can alleviate some of the labor involved in creating exhibitions while providing the same benefits for the library. The Penn State University Libraries, Georgia Southern University Libraries, and University of Mississippi Libraries each hosted *Americans and the Holocaust*, a traveling exhibition from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in late 2021 and early 2022.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we describe the ways each library leveraged the exhibition for community engagement, as well as some of the keys to success that can inform other academic libraries considering hosting a traveling exhibition.

### Traveling exhibitions and libraries

The academic library is a scholarly space that promotes reflection and discovery. Because it does not belong exclusively to any discipline or department, it is ideally situated to host a campus exhibition that is welcoming to all. Andrew Dutka, Sherman Hayes, and Jerry Parnell describe the reasons for academic libraries of all sizes to develop the capacity to host exhibitions, including providing opportunities for self-learning, presenting unique collections, drawing visitors to the library, and developing partnerships.<sup>2</sup> Beth Auten and colleagues reflected on the experience of hosting four traveling exhibitions from the National Library of Medicine (NLM) and found that partnerships with campus and community organizations brought in additional expertise and in new audiences for the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> When the host is an academic library, as in the cases described here, public libraries can contribute expertise in programming as well as their existing partnerships with community organizations for marketing and joint programming.<sup>4</sup>

*Americans and the Holocaust*, the exhibition described here, examines the motives, pressures, and fears that shaped Americans' responses to Nazism, war, and genocide in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, drawing on extensive new research and a collection of primary sources from the time. The traveling exhibition, based on a special exhibition of the same name at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, is an educational initiative of the museum and ALA. The exhibition was scheduled to travel to fifty public

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and academic libraries around the United States, spending six weeks at each location.<sup>5</sup> Each host library was required to develop a series of programs related to the exhibition.

## The Penn State experience

Penn State's University Park campus is located in the heart of central Pennsylvania, several hours' drive from both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. It is home to 46,000 students, and Penn State University Libraries also serve students at 20 other campus locations and an online campus. Like the other campuses described in this article, the University Park campus is not located near an urban area with museums and other cultural opportunities.



Students visit the exhibition at Penn State.

At the beginning of the exhibition planning process, Penn State librarians identified faculty members who were teaching courses related to the themes of the exhibition during the hosting period. Exhibition coordinators provided them with periodic updates on the exhibition and suggestions for incorporating it into their courses. As a result of these contacts, instructors included the exhibition in their syllabi and librarians gave guided tours of the exhibition to classes. In addition to course-related activities, engagement with faculty outside of the library was also key to program development. One faculty member identified speakers for a series of virtual talks. Holding these programs in a virtual format provided opportunities to participate for Penn State faculty and students from other campuses. Two other faculty members led film screenings and discussions.

Alongside this active programming, librarians sought ways to highlight library resources related to the themes of the exhibition. The Special Collections Library curator developed a companion exhibition, *Jewish Histories*. A tour of this exhibition was included with each tour of the traveling exhibition and provided opportunities to learn about special collections and see the range of materials available for research. Books related to the themes of the traveling exhibition were displayed in the room where the exhibition was set up. An online guide listed library books, films, and databases for further exploration. This guide has since been updated and expanded into a more general guide to library resources for Holocaust research and continues to be used in Holocaust-related courses.

The local public library was a key partner in engaging with the local community. In the month prior to Penn State's hosting period, the public library curated an exhibition of artists' reactions to *Americans and the Holocaust* in partnership with a community arts organization and hosted two book discussions related to the themes of the exhibition.

## The Georgia Southern experience

Georgia Southern University is a public R2 institution stretched over three campuses with nearly 26,000 students. The university is served by the Georgia Southern University

Libraries, including the Henderson Library on the Statesboro campus, which served as the exhibition site. The Statesboro campus is near historic downtown Statesboro and serves as an anchor of community programming to the city's underserved 31,000 residents. The multi-campus structure of the institution, however, allowed Georgia Southern to facilitate programming in the Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Area as well.

Georgia Southern University Libraries identified faculty in four departments and enlisted their collaboration to engage students in learning experiences related to the exhibition. The idea of creating a programming internship grew organically from one of these relationships. Librarians and collaborating faculty structured the internship around the theoretical concepts identified in ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education<sup>6</sup> and SAA/ACRL RBMS's Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy.<sup>7</sup> The internship resulted in a companion physical and virtual exhibition,



The companion exhibition *Our Community and the Holocaust* at Georgia Southern University.

*Our Community and the Holocaust*, based on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *History Unfolded* initiative. *History Unfolded* invites students, educators, and professional historians throughout the United States to discover and submit local news articles related to specific events during the Holocaust. Georgia Southern's companion exhibition transformed the traveling exhibition's central question, "What did Americans know?" to "What did our campus and greater communities know?" More than 140 articles were discovered and submitted to the *History Unfolded* database a semester prior to the start of the exhibition.

Georgia Southern took advantage of the museum docent training program, which proved to be beneficial when the docents became advocates for the exhibition and cultivated additional tours with community groups. As part of docent training, volunteers received general information about the program, a script for guided tours, and tour best practices. Docents were required to attend and conduct tours at the Community Opening and at least two scheduled tours during the exhibition. Tours were offered to university students and faculty and the general public. In total, 357 visitors attended a docent-guided tour during the exhibition (not including the opening reception).

Georgia Southern's hosting period coincided with the campus's Black Heritage Month observance. To highlight the experience of African Americans, Georgia Southern University collaborated with Savannah State University, the oldest public historically Black college or university in the state of Georgia, to examine the community's historic Black press newspapers. Despite this intentional engagement with Black Heritage Month, the library received impassioned feedback from students criticizing the timing of the exhibition. Recognizing the concerns of their students, librarians worked with their Office of Multicultural Affairs and responded directly to students by highlighting relevant existing programs and additional

Museum resources related to the experiences of African American soldiers and journalists.

In addition to these activities, Georgia Southern University hosted “Caffeine & Zine” thematic workshops, scholarly panels with faculty experts and community leaders, and a student-led Facebook Live discussion. All programs were offered on Georgia Southern’s Statesboro and Armstrong campuses despite the location of the exhibition in Statesboro.

## The University of Mississippi experience

The University of Mississippi’s main campus is in Oxford, approximately 75 minutes south of Memphis, Tennessee, and 2.5 hours north of Jackson, Mississippi, the two nearest metropolitan areas. Its medical campus is located in Jackson, with four other regional campuses spread across the state’s northern half. The total population across all campuses is 22,951 students, 17,302 of which are undergraduates. Students at the university come from all 82 counties in Mississippi, 49 states, Washington, DC, and 86 countries.

The University of Mississippi hosted the exhibition from December 1, 2021, until January 15, 2022. A planning committee made up of about fifteen members from the library, other academic departments, students, and the Oxford community was formed about eighteen months in advance of the hosting period. Like the planning groups formed at Penn State and Georgia Southern, this committee leveraged its connections on and off campus to maximize the benefits of having the exhibition on campus. For



instance, the history department approved the creation of an upper-division history course called Americans and the Holocaust. Eight students enrolled in the course, which was offered during winter intersession to coincide with the library’s hosting period. Additionally, the director of the university’s museum studies program was a member of the planning group, which not only helped with the planning phase for the exhibition, but also allowed for students in the museum studies program to gain invaluable hands-on experience setting up and taking down the exhibition.

Another planning committee member was a retired history teacher in the Oxford School District. Leveraging this connection along with the district’s proximity to campus, the exhibition provided an opportunity to expand outreach to other school districts. The library hosted a workshop for teachers in grades 7–12 designed to promote reflection and critical thinking about the factors that shaped Americans’ views about the Holocaust and how to incorporate such lessons into their classrooms. The workshop also provided an opportunity to engage with other area school districts that don’t have the luxury of a university next door.

The library also organized programming that framed antisemitism as a locally relevant issue. For instance, historian Dan Puckett, the keynote speaker for the opening reception, explored the changes that the Holocaust had on the disparate and often fractious Jewish communities throughout the American South. The library also hosted a film screening of

*Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War*, which highlighted the potential for individual action to stop hate and included a virtual question-and-answer session with Artemis Joukowsky, one of the film's directors. Additionally, a university archivist curated two display cases that showcased the papers of John Rankin, a member of the US House of Representatives for Mississippi from 1921 to 1953, most known for his inflammatory public statements, xenophobia, and anti-Jewish positions.

## Conclusion

In addition to the importance of partnerships, we found that an understanding of the local environment and flexibility were key to a successful traveling exhibition hosting experience. For example, at Penn State, involving campus faculty and community partners early in the planning process was key to successful programming. At Georgia Southern, librarians found that when an exhibition period overlaps with a period when a traditionally marginalized group has programming, it is critical to amplify those voices. At the University of Mississippi, despite the exhibition occurring during the winter break, the planning committee found ways to maximize the hosting period by offering courses during the intersession and programming events that bookended the end of the fall semester and the start of the spring semester. This required collaboration between departments within the library and across campus.

The three approaches described here, based on local resources and needs, all resulted in increased engagement with the library. Partnerships with campus groups resulted in more robust programming and student learning activities. Collaborating with external organizations brought more people to exhibition-related programs and strengthened relationships between the library and the community. *~*

## Notes

1. This article is based on a presentation the authors gave as part of a virtual training event organized by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in July 2022.
2. Andrew Dutka, Sherman Hayes, and Jerry Parnell, "The Surprise Part of a Librarian's Life: Exhibition Design and Preparation Course," *College & Research Libraries News* 63, no. 1 (2002): 19–23, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.63.1.19>.
3. Beth Auten, Hannah F. Norton, Michele R. Tennant, Mary E. Edwards, Nina Stoyan-Rosenzweig, and Matthew Daley, "Using NLM Exhibits and Events to Engage Library Users and Reach the Community," *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2013): 266–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763869.2013.806861>.
4. Bridget Faricy-Beredo, "Blowing up Harry Potter: Leveraging an NLM Exhibition to Your Advantage," *Public Services Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (2013): 34–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2013.758979>.
5. ALA announced an extension of the exhibition tour to 50 additional library sites on March 8, 2023. American Library Association, "Americans and the Holocaust' Traveling Exhibition Tour from ALA and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Extended to 50 Additional Communities," press release, May 8, 2023, <https://www.ala.org/news/member-news/2023/03/americans-and-holocaust-traveling-exhibition-tour-ala-and-us-holocaust-memorial>.

6. ACRL, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” 2016, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
7. ACRL RBMS-SAA Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy,” 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy>.