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Visual Resources Outreach: Successes and Challenges in a New Role

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Abstract

More than ever, visual resources are intrinsic to the teaching mission and visual literacy goals of universities. However, in many cases potential users are unaware of how libraries can assist in the implantation and integration of visual resources into curriculum. At the University of New Mexico's Bunting Visual Resources Library, this challenge was addressed by creating the role of Outreach & Collections Specialist, a position charged with marketing the services and facilities, as well as reaching out to potential new constituents and exploring new methods for collaboration across campus. The author describes her first year in this new position and observes how outreach efforts can best be utilized for academic visual resources libraries.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Heather Kline received her MLIS degree from the University of Alabama in 2007 and her MA in art history from the University of New Mexico in 2012. She has performed a variety of roles in the field of art information in galleries, museums, and libraries. She was hired in her current position of Outreach & Collections Specialist at Bunting Visual Resources Library in 2012.

Like any visual resources library in the 21st Century, the Bunting Visual Resources Library (BVRL) at the University of New Mexico is faced with the challenges of maintaining the quality of traditional resources and services while constantly integrating new technologies and pedagogical models. As part of the College of Fine Arts, the library houses a circulating collection of over 360,000 slides and 500,000 digital images (displayed in a local version of MDID) covering all areas of art history, as well as a subscription to the ARTstor Digital Library. The collection is particularly strong in the arts of the Americas, which is a primary teaching focus at the University.

Over the past several years, it became apparent that new goals were needed to rethink the direction of the library for a new generation of digital-savvy patrons. Thus, when a position opened up, the Bunting hiring committee conceptualized a new role that would perform the traditional tasks of cataloging and reference work while focusing on reaching out to the campus community in order to attract and educate a new group of users. In order to address this effort, I was hired as the Outreach and Collections Specialist in the summer of 2012. I had just received my Master of Arts in art history from UNM and had already worked as a research assistant in the BVRL cataloging Native American art images.   As a student working in the library I had exposure to the facility and its collections, but I became increasingly aware that many of my fellow graduate students had no idea what a visual resources library was or how it could benefit their research. As most of my past library positions were in technical services, I had no past experience in marketing or PR, and the new role was definitely an exciting challenge for me.

I spent my early weeks brainstorming: there were some obvious efforts I could tackle immediately – create a new brochure, make signs, contact faculty in the College of Fine Arts and the School of Architecture and Planning (our main constituents) about instruction sessions, present at the graduate orientation, start a Facebook page and Twitter feed. I started out by asking myself what I wanted to accomplish in my new outreach role and came up with one relatively ambiguous meta-goal: to increase awareness of visual resources for the purpose of enhancing visual literacy on campus. From this I developed four more specific goals: 1. Get more students and faculty to come into the library; 2. Make our images more accessible and visible; 3. Develop new products and technology; and 4. Collaborate with other departments and institutions. Keeping these goals in mind has allowed me to organize and prioritize my activities.

Then I started creating lists: wish lists (of what I would do if I had unlimited resources); timelines; and finally short-term action items broken down by semester and then by month and week. For such an ephemeral and un-quantifiable meta-goal, I needed to create quantifiable results. These lists kept me on task and motivated. I reassured myself that even if I didn't see results, at least I'd know what NOT to do next time. One of the most helpful things I did at the beginning was to ask questions of the VRA and ARLIS listservs. There is a treasure trove of collective wisdom in these discussion boards, and many of my colleagues were willing to share their outreach experiences over the years, both successful and less than successful.

I distributed the brochures and signs widely throughout the College of Fine Arts, as well as the Fine Arts and Design Library (FADL), which is housed in another building on campus. I started marketing the Facebook page heavily as a way to keep up with departmental news and exhibits,

as well as community art events. I also added project highlights, showcasing recent acquisitions to our digital collection. The Facebook page has seen a slow but steady increase in "likes" and reach over the past year, and it's rewarding to get feedback from users who may not have used the library in the past. I expanded our signage to market the Facebook page and we added links on our website. I try to post at least once a day in order to keep the page current – I choose a wide variety of topics from exhibitions and art talks to the "Friday Fun" type. The benefit of Facebook is that it provides usage statistics, so I generally know when I'm hitting the mark and when I'm not. Over time the trends have become a little clearer, and I hope to learn more about usage over time using this methodology.

After advertising the availability of orientation and instruction sessions on the college listserv and sending emails to teaching faculty in the CFA and School of Architecture and Planning, I started getting requests for classes. This past academic year we taught several sessions covering our facilities and use of visual resources in general, promoting our internship program, and teaching ARTstor. Since then students from these classes have returned to use the library's computers, scanners, and conference room, as well as to set up ARTstor accounts or get image reference help. In the past, the library was not available for undergraduate use, and this shift in focus towards new constituents has definitely increased both virtual and physical traffic.

Another important development for BVRL this year has been the implementation of a digital display case in the hallway outside our library. The planning for this project included getting CFP estimates, trying out various software packages from different vendors (we weren't sure if we wanted an in-house template or something pre-programmed), and pricing the different options. We ended up going with a home-grown solution by purchasing a high resolution LG monitor connected to a Mac computer inside the library. The university provided the work crew to assemble a display case for security, and the result is fairly seamless and attractive. We get many comments each week as well as plenty of viewers of our digital displays. This has also been another great chance to collaborate – I have marketed this display as an opportunity to showcase upcoming events and departmental announcements, and our art history graduate advisor alerts MFA thesis candidates to send us their upcoming show posters. The art museum also gives us images from their semester exhibits, and there is growing interest in using the display for other units in CFA (such as theater and dance) for various other exhibits, lectures and events. It's a win-win for all involved; they get a free way to advertise more broadly, and we get the opportunity to do more outreach.

My biggest success this year has been increased collaboration with FADL, which is administered under the University Libraries umbrella (meaning a broader university collaboration has been set in motion). There has been interaction in the past, but this year there have been several mutually beneficial developments in our collaborative relationship. We began a staff-sharing experiment during the spring 2013 semester that has allowed us to develop a presence at FADL, which serves many more patrons each day. We have been staffing reference shifts a week at FADL and teaching instruction sessions on ARTstor, and this too has been mutually beneficial. I get to answer a variety of reference questions that keep my research skills honed, interact with a much wider group of students and faculty, and get exposure to new resources. FADL gets reference and instruction assistance. In addition, we have been working with FADL on student exhibits. Recent exhibits include violin-making culture and performance in New Mexico (culminating in a

performance of the students playing their handmade instruments in the library) and a Flamenco exhibit that showcased costumes and a live Flamenco performance in the Fine Arts Library. As part of the collaborative model, BVRL created a digital display presentation of the exhibits.

Along with these successes have been some challenges. In general, I would say the biggest challenge to outreach in a visual resources library is getting a good sense of what is and is not having an effect on collection or facility usage. So much of our work is behind-the-scenes and virtual, and somewhat unrelated to visitors to our physical space. I know students have been encouraged by our instruction sessions, displays, brochures, and Facebook page to browse our collection or maybe even to set up an ARTstor account, but I can't discern direct correlation. The reluctance to respond to survey requests exacerbates this lack of quantifiability. At the same time I created the goals that guided my outreach activities, I made a list of outreach challenges: visibility and location (we're located on the third floor of the art building, which is inconvenient for anyone not taking a class or with an office nearby); history (the "but we've always done it this way" syndrome); money and resources; bureaucracy (the need to pass certain actions through committees); and workflow.

Though I continue to face certain challenges and frustrations, they point the way forward. In terms of marketing, I have experimented with a variety of signs and posters and discovered that they are not terrifically effective – as soon as I put one up on a campus billboard it gets covered up by ad for the latest fast food restaurant or punk rock show. I also feel like students have developed a blind spot for these signs. The same is true of the brochures, which may have the effect of just one more annoying piece of paper. I have found our digital display and Facebook page to get much stronger response, possibly because of the general shift towards digital communication. Though there is a steady increase in our Facebook followers, I wish I could find more ways to leverage it for feedback and a consistent source of communication for the department. In terms of collaboration, I would like to work more closely with other departments on campus in order to increase the scope of our visual images as well as promote visual literacy within the sciences as well as the arts. The message I am trying to impart to faculty and students across disciplines is that visual literacy is truly a core competency of a liberal arts education, and such literacy begins with a solid understanding of visual resources.