

But What Do We Put in the Cases?

Identifying & Selecting Exhibit Materials at a Small Archives

Overview

Exhibits are a vital means of outreach for libraries and archives, yet many smaller organizations have limited collections from which they can draw for displays. The Duke University Medical Center Library and Archives (DUMCLA) faced this challenge during the process of building its exhibits program. The archival collections were comprised of 20th century documents, a small number of artifacts, and no rare books. Though we believed our collection had materials worth showcasing, initially we were unsure how to create varied, interesting exhibits. Based on what we learned during the process, this poster provides recommendations for developing exhibit topics, identifying and selecting items, and acquiring additional materials.

Developing Exhibit Topics

Because an exhibit topic can radically impact the time and effort needed for identifying and selecting material, choosing a strong, relevant topic that is well represented in the collections is key.

- **Create a list of criteria for developing and assessing exhibit topics.** Factors to consider could include: Appropriateness and appeal of subject for intended audience; Relevance to archival collections and/or library holdings; Pertinence to anniversaries and celebrations; Relation to other events or exhibits at the institution or in the community; Ease of installation.
- **Let collection strengths guide exhibit topics.** A topic that closely aligns with collection strengths makes the process of identifying and selecting materials easier and faster, allows for greater flexibility, and can result in a more dynamic-looking exhibit.
- **Verify that the collections can support the topic before committing.** After identifying a potential exhibit topic, conduct some basic research to make sure there is enough displayable material. This will save time and trouble later on and allow you to feel confident moving ahead with the topic.

Jolie Braun, Curator of American Literature
The Ohio State University

Identifying Exhibit Materials

To locate and identify materials, broaden your scope, work strategically, and assess collections with a critical eye.

- **Choose visually appealing materials.** By reviewing finding aids and collections, the DUMCLA archivists discovered many possibilities within the document holdings: correspondence with illustrated or ornate letterheads, advertisements and publicity materials, patents, drawings, sketches, maps, floor plans, and charts.
- **Showcase lesser-known and less used but interesting three-dimensional objects.** While artifacts may not often be requested by patrons or used in daily work, they can be ideal for display, and may be the best items to help communicate an important part of the exhibit's narrative.



This damaged flak helmet was used as part of an exhibit about Duke's World War II hospital unit. The object and the damage evident take a potentially abstract, distant notion about the destruction of war and treatment of patients and make it tangible, specific, and memorable.

- **Use reference work and processing as opportunities to identify possible exhibit materials.** When the DUMCLA archivists came across an item that had potential for a future exhibit, a photo was taken and a note made in the exhibits documentation, creating a library of options that could be referred to later.

Further Reading

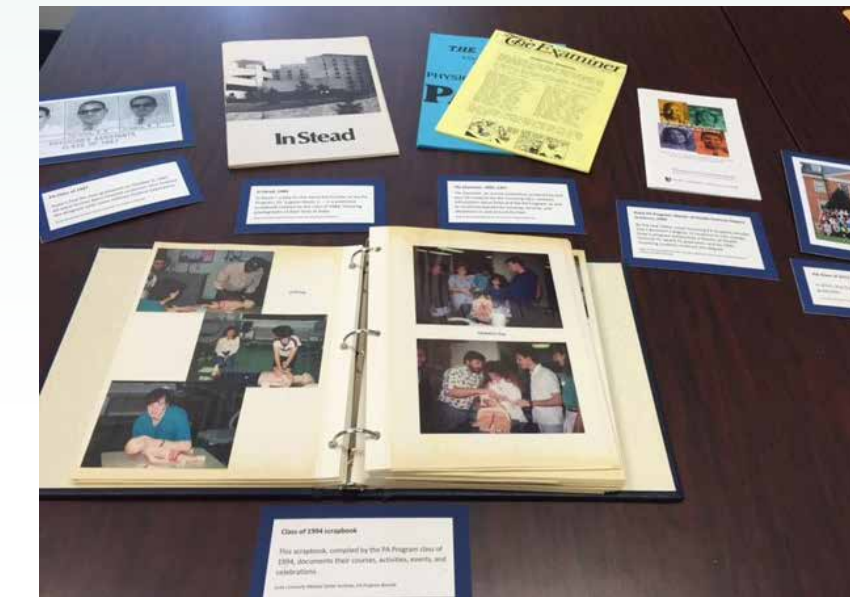
This poster is based on the forthcoming article, "Now on Display: Lessons Learned from Establishing a Small Exhibits Program," which will appear in *Archival Issues* 38.2.

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Selecting Exhibit Materials

Establishing a few basic guidelines for selecting exhibit materials simplifies the process.

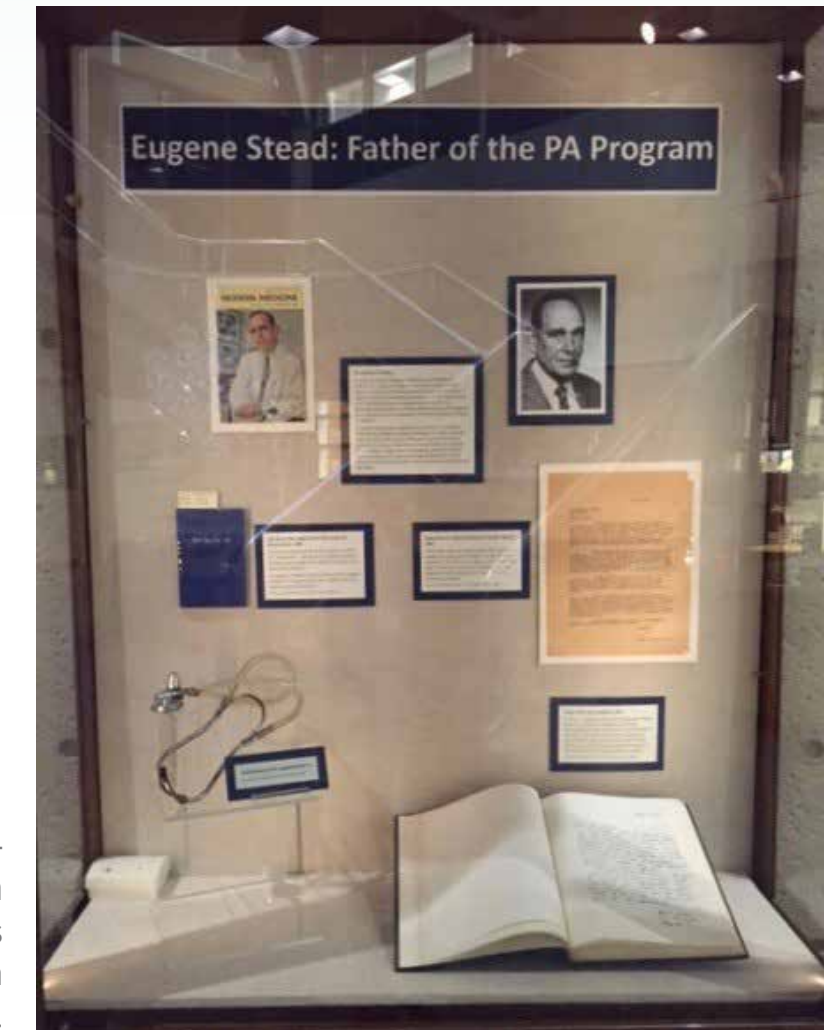
- **Devise a list of key questions to assess items.** For example: What story (or stories) can this item help tell? What do you want visitors to learn from this item?
- **Determine how many items are needed per case.** The DUMCLA staff realized that just a few items – typically six to eight – were enough to make a case look full but not cramped. This can make the process of locating and selecting materials more manageable.



Typically only six to eight items were needed per exhibit case. This image shows the testing of a case layout.

- **Incorporate a variety of material types.** The most visually compelling exhibits juxtapose documents with three-dimensional objects, photographs, scrapbooks, and publications.

Featuring a variety of materials is key to creating a striking and varied display. An exhibit about Duke's Physician Assistant Program featured a case about the program's founder, Dr. Eugene Stead. The case included images, a publication, a scrapbook, and Dr. Stead's stethoscope.



Looking Further Afield

Partnering with another organization, department, or individual can provide additional options.

- **Seek out partnerships to fill in gaps.** Working with another organization can be a way to obtain additional exhibit materials. Such collaborations can also help build relationships and reach new audiences. For example, the DUMCLA staff collaborated with another special collections unit on campus, an organization dedicated to the history of the medical profession, and a local historical society.



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