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.

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

1. **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.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. **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.

6. **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.

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

1. **Devises 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?

2. **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.

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

4. **Partnering with another organization, department, or individual can provide additional options.** For example: What story (or stories) can this item help tell? What do you want visitors to learn from this item?

5. **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.

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.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to Pam McClung, OSU Libraries Graphic Designer, for designing this poster.

Jolie Braun, Curator of American Literature
The Ohio State University

The Ohio State University
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES