

MODULE 22

**ENGAGING USERS
WITH ARCHIVES:
PROGRAMS THAT
GET RESULTS**

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Collections archivists Derek Gray and Ray Barker have started related projects documenting go-go music and the local underground art scene, respectively, and programming has been central to the effort to build relationships with collectors and other members of those communities. The strength of these projects is derived from community support, and the programs give the community the means to actively participate in the projects. Programs help reach people who might otherwise not have felt any connection to special collections or archives. The programs serve collections goals of encouraging donations and use, and they certainly have an important promotional function. Some of the emphasis we give to programming stems from our function as a special collection within a public library, where community engagement and collections are both equal priorities. This project fuses both aspects of the institutional mission through collections- and community-driven programming.

“Yarn Bombing” to Cultivate an Archival Garden

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The foundation for the programming described here is an exhibition that was intended to support more fruitful collaboration among multiple people across the library, both in and outside of Special Collections, as well as engage others throughout the community. The exhibit itself was focused on creating a single, collections-based thread (plants, flowers, gardening) and building upon it through the tastes, expertise, interests, and collection areas of multiple curators. Exhibits of this kind can be challenging, as they can take a great deal of coordination to develop, but with careful planning and an exhibition plan that helps define the parameters from the beginning, they can be very rewarding. The exhibit featured flowers and other flora representing many subjects, formats, and eras from the collections. Library staff wanted to maximize the exhibit’s presence and simultaneously engage new users, so they hosted a series of events during the exhibition to maximize the “green” theme.

The exhibition’s kickoff was a “garden party,” strategically scheduled in the bleakest part of the Rochester winter and promoted as a way

to celebrate spring and the beauty of nature. The garden party was a simple reception wherein staff welcomed visitors and gave a brief overview of the exhibit. The garden party was sponsored by the Friends of the Libraries group and served as an opportunity both to create buy-in from that group and allow the library to promote the group's work. The garden party was also an opportunity for the library to publicly thank the Friends for their work by mentioning their support in exhibit labels highlighting materials that were acquired specifically through the Friends funding.

After the garden party and throughout the rest of the exhibition, staff implemented an initiative for “yarn bombing” (or yarn *balming*)—which involves the creation of fabric, paper, or other textile flora and greenery—to mimic the growth in a garden. Undergraduate students,



Figure 14: Students wrap column in a knitted dandelion landscape. Dandelions are the official flower of the University of Rochester. *Photo by Jessica Lacher-Feldman.*



Figure 15: Members of the University of Rochester student group chat and create at an informal stitching session. Special Collections provided additional crafting materials for the event. *Photo by Jessica Lacher-Feldman.*

library staff, and other staff and faculty from throughout the university, as well as community members who heard about the initiative through social media and word of mouth, wrapped materials around exhibit cases and throughout the exhibit space to show the changing nature of the exhibit itself, giving it a sense of growth and blossoming over time. The “yarn bombing” concept itself is not new, but connecting it to an exhibit and creating an asynchronous public program not subject to time restrictions or strict curatorial oversight proved to be an excellent and novel opportunity to engage new users in the archives.

Included in the process was a student club who had never before engaged with Special Collections. This group was made up of a diverse cross section of students who work regularly with needlecrafts. Library staff invited these students to an afternoon event during the course of the exhibit and were met with enthusiasm and interest; the resulting event was something new and exciting for all of the participants. Taking place on a Saturday during regular library hours, library staff provided lunch and assorted yarn and other craft materials for students to use in creating flowers or anything else they wanted to add as part of the overall exhibit, both that afternoon and in the future. Several students had already provided some materials for the exhibit, and it was a way to encourage and entice their fellow club members to also participate in adding to the exhibit.

The key notion for this sort of activity is that the programming itself was sustained over the duration of the entire exhibition. The idea of developing opportunities for new user groups to contribute to the exhibition over time centered around archival collections. But the impetus went beyond the collections and spoke to a true desire to work from “the outside in” by engaging new audiences based on their interests. By removing the need for formal collaboration and encouraging visitors to create and “plant” flora when visiting the exhibit, this programming provided a unique and sustained way for users to connect with the repository and gain a greater understanding of archival work. In the justification for the programming, the idea of the “yarn garden” was used as a mechanism for cultivating new audiences, especially those who might be interested in better understanding how the archives can help provide creative inspiration for artistic endeavors. The exhibition and “yarn garden” were promoted widely on social media and through other means such as sharing information about the

exhibit in craft and yarn stores in the community. This new approach ultimately attracted new audiences to the archives and created a level of community engagement that staff had not seen before. The contributions of felt, yarn, and paper flowers and leaves, as well as elaborate wrapped columns of dandelions created by students—who, over time, brought family and friends to see their contributions—thus enabled the exhibit to reach a wider audience.

This exhibit and related programming are a good example of a light lift in terms of programming effort but a heavy hitter in terms of sustained and beneficial outcomes. Exhibit programming created a new community of archives users by engaging crafters and artists to participate in the exhibit over time and through events that allowed for beauty, reflection, socializing, and community, without a specific program or lecture. By inviting crafts and students to be part of the exhibit work, and recognizing their contributions in media promotions and at the garden party event, staff attracted an entirely new group of participants who might not have thought of themselves as connected with the archives.