

Records at Play: Leveraging Exhibition for Public Engagement and Archival Literacy

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Abstract:

As academic institutions increasingly emphasize the importance and quality of their relationships with the communities where they are located, archives in academic institutions have an opportunity likewise to expand their programming and incorporate educational outreach focused beyond campus boundaries. Exhibits provide an ideal vehicle for this outreach and can greatly increase community engagement, as they offer the benefits of an informal learning environment and object-based learning in reaching a diverse audience. Thus exhibits can simultaneously advance both an academic institution's broad goals for public engagement and the more localized initiatives of an academic archives, including archival advocacy and teaching archival literacy.

Academic archivists have recognized the public engagement value of exhibits and incorporated them regularly in classroom instruction and online platforms to teach archival literacy and reach diverse audiences. However, archivists have yet to explore teaching a public audience about archival literacy through exhibition and the benefits of taking this approach in a larger academic context, nor have they fully adopted relevant museum practices designed to engage a broad public audience. Exhibits are an underutilized tool that provide support for the realization of institutional goals at many levels, and the exhibit *Records at Play: The Institute of Jazz Studies @50* provides an example of how community engagement and teaching archival literacy can be connected through public programming that reflects strategic institutional priorities. Using visitation data, programming analysis, and the exhibit's design plan and realization, this case study describes how archives can support multiple academic objectives through exhibition and considerations for what leads to meaningful engagement.

About the author:

Elizabeth Surles serves on the faculty of Rutgers University–Newark, where she is Archivist at the Institute of Jazz Studies. She previously held positions at the Starr-Gennett Foundation, the American Alpine Club Library, and the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music. She earned master's degrees in musicology and library and information science and a certificate in special collections from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and she holds a BA in music and history from Lawrence University. Her research interests include early jazz vocalists as well as archival practice, and she has authored research studies, articles, reviews, and columns in various publications and scholarly journals and regularly presents at national, regional, and international conferences. She was formerly chair of SAA's Performing Arts Section and has served in leadership positions for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, Music Library Association, and the Brick City Archivists.