2017 Fall Symposium Recap: "From Good to Great Exhibits"

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol45/iss3/6

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The 2017 MAC Fall Symposium was held in Columbus, Ohio, on October 13 and 14. “From Good to Great Exhibits” was a one-and-a-half-day workshop that explored ways to enhance the creation, planning, and engagement work that archivists do to connect the materials in their collections with a wide variety of users through exhibition. The goal of the symposium was to enable archivists to go beyond the basics of exhibit development and offer principles, tips, and tricks for getting more meaningful results from the time and resources invested in displaying collections to the public.

The discussion began with framing from The Ohio State University Libraries' exhibitions coordinator, Ken Aschliman, who encouraged purposeful focus on identifying “The Big Idea” of an exhibit and the anticipated target audience. Participants then were able to apply those principles to writing better labels. Justin Luna, OSU’s exhibitions preparator, offered some “quick-and-dirty” yet very practical solutions for mounting items and presenting content in engaging ways no matter what an organization’s budget or resources.

Merilee Mostov, the director of inclusive interpretation for the Columbus Museum of Art, helped attendees create interactive elements for their upcoming exhibits and left us all with the sage advice: “Don’t tell the visitors what to think, tell them what to think about.” The group then applied the day’s principles to evaluating the OSU Libraries’ current exhibit Publish or Perish: The Impact of Printing on the Protestant Reformation. They gave their feedback directly to the exhibit’s curator who engaged them in lively discussion about decisions he had to make.

After an evening of digesting all the shared ideas (as well as some of Columbus’s best beer and eats), symposium attendees were ready to kick it up another notch. Saturday morning began with a presentation from Joe Heimlich, executive director of Lifelong Learning Group and a specialist at OSUExtension@COSI (Columbus’s science and industry museum), on creating an assessment plan based on expected impact and advocacy needs. Jenny Robb, curator and head of the OSU Libraries’ Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, then shared her strategies for integrating exhibits into learning experiences and
outreach activities. The capstone on the symposium was an interactive conversation with Ken, Jenny, and other Billy Ireland staff about the cartoon library’s existing exhibits, Tales from the Vault: 40 Years/40 Stories and Founding Collections: 1977–2017.

Feedback from the participants included comments such as:

• “The presenters were exceptionally knowledgeable, and honest about their own challenges and professional development.”
• “Applicable advice for all size shops. Many proposed solutions don’t cost a lot of $$!”
• “So fortunate for this to have been local for me. Everyone—organizers, presenters, and the hosts—get a 10 out of 10.”

The 2017 Fall Symposium, “From Good to Great Exhibits,” was another high-quality, successful professional development offering from MAC. Join us at the Annual Meeting in Chicago for more top-notch content!