

Warning! Not for Sensitive Viewers: Creating Exhibits Policies for Encouraging Healthy Public Discourse

Christina C. Wray and David Benjamin
University of Central Florida

Abstract: Exhibits offer insight into what an organization values while providing patrons the opportunity to be challenged and engaged. This paper explores ways exhibits policies can be crafted to move exhibits beyond the walls and cases to create a space for community discussion that promote growth and understanding by providing space for discussions, contextualizing information, and clear guidelines for organizers and participants.

Keywords: Exhibit Policies, Public Discourse, Community Engagement

The year 2020 is one in which many of us have thought deeply about how we engage in public discourse. We have been confronted in our personal and professional lives with times when incivility seems to reign supreme. Emotions run high in the echo chamber of our carefully curated media streams, and true discourse is often lost in all the noise. As the University of Central Florida (UCF) Libraries began planning for the opening of our new exhibits and gallery space, one thing we knew for sure was that we wanted an inclusive space that supported the mission of the university while highlighting the diverse community we serve.

Exhibits provide a gateway into our collections and communities. As interpreted narratives, they can be experienced on multiple levels from the passive to the transformative. We started to question how to create guidelines that would encourage learning opportunities that resulted in deeper engagement with the content. It is not enough to create well-designed exhibits that “hook” viewers, we also wanted to encourage healthy public discourse. In this paper, we will outline our approach to creating an exhibits policy that will guide the development of community-engaged exhibits which support the mission of the library and our university while encouraging public discourse.

Background

To understand how to craft policies that will support and encourage public discourse, it is necessary to identify the elements that must be present for healthy public discussions to occur. Throughout the literature, three characteristics are seen as necessary components for public discourse: space, balanced information, and rules of engagement (Bail et al., 2017; Brinker & Donk, 2020; Ginsberg, 2020). The first phase of the development of a new, comprehensive policy is to explore existing policies and identify ways to incorporate explicit supports for space for discussions to occur, balanced information and transparent expectations on patron engagement into policy documentation.

UCF, founded in 1963 as Florida Technological University, was established to support the space industry along Florida’s eastern coastline. It would take five years of fundraising, planning, and construction before the University welcomed students in 1968. That first year, enrollment at FTU

was 1,949. Fifty-one years and a name change later, UCF's enrollment was 69,525 in 2019, making it one of the nation's largest universities.

The John C. Hitt Library is the main library on the UCF campus, with gate counts averaging around 46,000 per week during the fall and spring semesters. Library patrons are predominately UCF students, faculty, and staff. However, the Libraries also serves the greater Orlando community and scholars from around the world. The Hitt Library is more than just books. The building is one of the most heavily used spaces for studying and collaboration by UCF students, and we offer public programming and host Libraries and UCF sponsored events.

To create engaging exhibits and programming around those exhibits, we need to know who our target audience is and understand their viewpoints, their shared community standards and mores, and their core values. How does this play out for our exhibits? First, we look at the basic demographics of our student population--our primary target audience. UCF's student demographics for the 2019-2020 academic year included:

- 47.8% self-identify as a minority
- 55.15% self-identify as female
- 22% who are the first person in their family to go to college

Additionally, in 2019, UCF became a Hispanic Serving Institution, meaning at least 25% of the student population self-identified as Hispanic (University of Central Florida). Knowing the makeup of our target exhibit audience helps staff determine exhibit themes and programming. For example, we created programming around Women's History month, including an exhibit of bras decorated by students honoring women impacted by breast cancer. During campus Diversity Week, we curate exhibitions highlighting collections that document minorities and under-represented populations.

In 2017, the UCF Libraries began a multimillion-dollar renovation reimagining the physical spaces. Known as the 21st Century Library Project, the Libraries just completed phase 1 of this multiyear project, including over 38,000 square feet of new public spaces. UCF Libraries is preparing to open a new gallery space that includes eight new exhibit cases and an art hanging system. Before this renovation, the only public exhibit spaces in the Hitt Library were the "gallery wall," a 6' tall by 72" long exhibit wall located near the library's original entrance, plus some older exhibit cases throughout the building. Minimal written guidelines existed for the art wall and cases, and none of these guidelines were publicly available. Most staff were unaware that there even were guidelines. With the opening of the new gallery space the Libraries needed to revise the minimal existing guidelines.

Approach

We will examine exhibit policies from a variety of similar institutions to identify characteristics that create potential barriers to healthy discourse as well as those that support and encourage it. To capture broad representation of how exhibit space is managed across academic libraries, we identified four distinct categories of institutions: community colleges, liberal arts colleges, Research I institutions, and other universities. Ten library exhibit policies will be evaluated in each category. Eighteen of the forty institutions selected were privately funded, half of which

were liberal arts colleges. Textual analysis will be performed on each policy to identify ways in which exhibit policies inherently create barriers and opportunities for public discourse.

Nine tentative codes have been identified to define policy content:

- **Barrie:** Policy section limits public discourse by limiting the content, scope or messaging of the exhibit or related programming.
- **Criteria:** Explicit criteria that must be met in part or full for exhibit to be installed.
- **Exhibit approvers:** Section identifies who can approve or disapprove exhibits.
- **Library mission:** Section explicitly ties exhibit content to the library's mission.
- **Library tights:** Section establishes the rights of the library in relation to exhibits materials and content.
- **Openness to the community:** Section explicitly defines unaffiliated community members' rights to use the exhibit space.
- **Promotes discourse:** Section promotes public discourse by explicitly identifying way to engage the viewers with content and each other, or outlines ways to display controversial topics.
- **Purpose of exhibits:** Explicitly identifies overarching goals of exhibit content
- **Safety:** Explicitly addresses library, object, or patron safety

The results of this analysis will be used to help identify language of library exhibits policies that encourage and create barriers to public discourse, as well as guide the development of our own policy. The discussions around what supports and hinders public discourse, which began in our roundtable session, will also help us to craft policy that supports our goal of increased discourse.

At the 2020 American Association of Adult and Continuing Education Annual Conference, round table participants were asked two questions related to what they thought influenced public discourse in their exhibit spaces: What are the biggest barriers to discourse? and How could your institution improve discourse?

Barriers to discourse had two overarching themes: opportunity and scale. The global pandemic highlights current limitations for opportunities to engage in public discussion related to exhibits. Many employees were working from home and patrons had limited access to the exhibits. Institutions were not always equipped to pivot exhibit content to an online space. This was further compounded by financial uncertainty which could negatively impact the ability to purchase the software and equipment needed to create high-quality online content.

Another barrier to discourse was the size of institutions and how it impacts relations with surrounding communities. Some participants were from exceptionally large institutions, like UCF, which creates more diverse communities within the institution, but can also increase tensions with surrounding communities that do not identify as being aligned with the institution's mission or overarching political outlook.

Responses related to improving discourse can be categorized into three broad themes: employee training, opportunities for discourse and transparent communication. Participants felt that training on how to effectively respond to incivility and defuse volatile situations would help them feel more confident supporting discourse opportunities. Further, institutions could provide

more opportunities for visitors to engage in public discussions related to the exhibits. This could be achieved in several ways, including creating contextualizing content online that allowed for discussion, and providing space where discussions could occur near exhibits.

Offering additional programming in conjunction with the exhibit could help enrich public conversations. Without related events, there are limited opportunities for patrons to engage in public conversations. One participant mentioned concerns with how to engage visitors who do not self-select to participate in public discussions. How can organizations support discussions that represent the spectrum of opinions in the community instead of simply the loudest voices?

Finally, providing obvious ways for patrons and employees alike to know what the organizational expectations are and how to express concerns with exhibit content or programming would greatly improve authentic engagement with exhibits. Employees were hesitant to encourage deeper engagement because there were no clear guidelines on what to do if things got of hand.

Major Themes

There are several things you can do right away to make your policies more supportive of public discourse. These three things provide space for public discussions to occur, contextualizing information and clear guidelines for participants.

- Create open and transparent online forums for exhibits
- Create public programming around your exhibit
- Make your exhibit policies publicly available

Online forums are accessible to a broad audience and allow patrons to engage with staff and each other. Blog posts about exhibits enable people to provide comments and feedback and encourages them to engage with the exhibit. Including images of selected items from the exhibit, help illustrate your themes and exposes the exhibition to a broader audience. Use of QR codes linking to exhibit related content to encourage engagement and, again, expose more of your collections to your audience. Utilize social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc. to share different objects/items from an exhibit, provide additional information in online posts and allow patrons to engage with staff and other patrons through comments and posts.

Public programming around exhibits provides opportunities for patron engagement. Programs could be as simple as a gallery talk with a curator to speaker panels and artist/author talks. This type of programming allows for facilitated question and answer session and can be in-person, online, or a hybrid of both. Public programs can look at an entire exhibit or target a smaller subset of items or exhibition themes. Public programming is an excellent venue to broaden your intended audience, especially if you can present them online through posts or live streaming.

Finally, make your policies transparent, readily available, and accessible. If your institution has a website, post your exhibit policies and guidelines there, but ensure they are easily discoverable. Ensure staff knows about and understand these policies, and, most importantly, where the latest written version is available. Identify the staff member or team responsible for your policies utilizing their expertise to field questions or concerns. Including a way for patrons to contact

these individuals is key to transparency. Finally, ensure your administration is on-board and agrees with these policies. If an outside board governs your institution, ensure they understand your policies and are prepared to adopt them as policies. Minimize the use of jargon and ensure and avoid language that could seem to talk down to patrons.

Some of the changes that can support public discourse may require advocating and time convincing your organization administration that it is in the best interest of the community to make them part of your policies. Here are the top three long-term goals we believe will have the most impact:

- Invite unaffiliated community members to host and curate displays
- Create diverse selection committees
- Incorporate explicit promotion and programming requirements into policy statements

Regardless of your organization type, inviting unaffiliated community members to host and curate displays can strengthen ties between the community and your collections. Further, it can help you gain a better understanding of how the community sees your organization and the ways in which your artifacts and collections resonate with unaffiliated users. The benefits of allowing unaffiliated community members to exhibit also extends to the members of the selection committee.

The makeup of a selection committee greatly influences the types of exhibits which ultimately get displayed. Expanding membership beyond the primary organization will not only encourage more diverse displays but can also strengthen relationships with external communities. Diverse voices are necessary to achieve balanced information. Ensuring that all constituent groups have a part in the selection process can lead to more authentic engagement between patron groups. Further, creating an inclusive selection committee invites external communities to be part of the larger organizational community.

The next step is to make sure all potential patrons know about exhibits and opportunities to engage. Codifying the process of promotion and programming related to events can feel unnecessary and restrictive at first glance. However, incorporating guidelines into the official policy document creates transparent expectations. This becomes increasingly important as an institution starts to invite outside groups to curate exhibits. For increased flexibility, organizations may want to create a referenced sub-policy on exhibit promotion and planning that can be more responsive.

The fundamental ingredient to increased public discussions is bringing a group of people together. It can be difficult to make inroads into external groups to create awareness that exhibits are happening and that they are welcome to attend. Create a plan that identifies

- where to promote exhibits and programming,
- how to market to specific populations, and
- partnerships that can be utilized to increase awareness.

One thing that the COVID-19 global pandemic has taught us is that cultural institutions can provide comfort as well as enrichment in times of crisis. However, this is only true if we can meet patrons where they are at. In a recent study, museum patrons identified four key things

museums could provide during the pandemic “escape, hope, contextualization of pandemic experience, and fostering social connections with others...from a distance.” (Wilkening Consulting, 2020). Creating the online space and high-quality content that will allow patrons to experience exhibits as well as have a place to engage with each other is more important than ever. Online spaces also lend themselves to communicating and enforcing community mores and expectations related to the rules of engaging in public discussion. Incorporating support for online exhibit content as an expectation in your exhibits policy identifies it as a priority while communicating the organization’s commitment.

Conclusion

Organizations are responding to the long-term implications of a global pandemic and social injustice. Crafting transparent, intentional policies for exhibits and programming is one way that cultural institutions can positively impact the state of public discourse. Adult educators are uniquely placed to support lifelong learners engage with challenging ideas and constructs. It is our role to ensure that policies encourage opportunities for all patrons to learn, reflect, and have the tools needed to support public discourse.

As we engage in this work, it is important to remember that policies should support but not demand public discourse. Each learner comes to an experience with their own motivations and openness. Transformation can be exhausting and must happen in its own time. We encourage adult educators to play an active role in policy development to create a balanced environment conducive to public discussions and personal lifelong learning.

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