

Courtney Seymour and Kara Jefts

A display of tolerance

Partnering with multicultural groups to mount a juried art exhibition

In a vibrant, creative community, arts programming demonstrates a commitment to local artistic achievement and expression. A library-sponsored exhibition that invites this community to participate is an excellent way to engage and empower patrons, whether they are artists, library visitors, or partners in the planning process. Participation provides your audience with the power to express itself, and to learn and grow through experience.

It encourages open dialogue and awareness, especially when dealing with controversial or sensitive issues.

Early goals for Union College's annual juried exhibition *LGBTQ: A Union Perspective*

included providing members of the gay community and their allies an opportunity to have a voice, promoting tolerance, and increasing awareness of the issue on campus. Departments from across the campus joined forces with library and gallery staff, and pooled resources to support artists in their willingness to speak out on this important subject. An informed and ongoing LGBTQ dialogue was the result of this project, to which the library is a proud contributor.

The formative stage

In 2008, a series of incidents on the Union College campus revealed prejudices within the student body against the LGBTQ community. Following threats and a targeted attack, two gay students of color withdrew from the college, sparking a campus-wide dialogue regarding tolerance. Despite campus and state police investigations, the perpetrators were never identified.

Motivated by their concern about these hate incidents, several librarians and other campus staff members sought to confront homophobia with an event that celebrated acceptance. The idea for an exhibition



David Ogawa (associate professor of visual arts, Union College), *Family Resemblance*, image courtesy of artist.

grew out of a brainstorming session of the LGBTQ Allies, a campus-wide group consisting of faculty, administrators, and staff that provide support to LGBTQ students and employees, and promote tolerance throughout the cam-

Courtney Seymour is head of collection development at Union College's Schaffer Library, e-mail: seymourc@union.edu, and Kara Jefts is assistant curator at Union College's Madeville Gallery, e-mail: jeftsk@union.edu

© 2012 Courtney Seymour and Kara Jefts

pus. Participants quickly agreed that a good way of educating the college community about diversity was to invite all members of the LG-BTQ community to share their experiences. As a foundational principle of Union's residential living and learning Minerva Program, the idea of bringing students, faculty, and staff together for meaningful social exchange seemed a fitting approach to this community issue.

The group invited the curatorial staff from the college's

Mandeville Gallery to a brainstorming session. They also contacted other campus groups, including UNITAS, the campus diversity organization, and Spectrum, the student-run



L G B T Q Clancy Slack (Union College class of 2011) at the 2009 *LGBTQ: A Union Perspective* exhibition, image courtesy of Union College.

seed of an exhibition plan was developed at a round table discussion with representatives from these organizations, who were able to help define the project and objectives. It was decided that a juried exhibition allowing submissions of artwork in all forms (visual art, music, writing, film, dance, theater, etc.) would present the best opportunity for participation by the greatest number of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends. The goal was to make the guidelines for submission as open as possible in order to break down any perceived barriers to participation and to encourage contributions from people who might not necessarily consider themselves artists. In this way the viewer could relate to the exhibition theme,

as this sensitive social issue was addressed by a cross-section of the campus community.

The project was sponsored by a number of members of the campus community. The Mandeville Gallery provided the venue and all supplies needed for installation, the library covered catering costs for the reception, and Student Activities offered the money needed for cash awards. Members of the planning committee printed fliers and posters using their

department resources. A grant from UNITAS, which provides financial support for campus diversity initiatives at any time in the academic year, and funding from the dean of students and the Multicultural Affairs

Office allowed us to make our event a reality.

By involving a variety of departments and organizations on campus, the exhibition committee achieved several goals: a diversified audience, increased availability of resources, and more voices to help spread the word about the call for artwork and the exhibition itself. Having students as part of the group was essential. They were the most valuable resource for creating awareness about the event, encouraging submissions through their personal connections with other students, and sharing ideas about how to reach the student body. Receiving input directly from the audience we were seeking was invaluable for

recruiting the participation necessary to make the exhibition a success.

Planning the exhibition

A juried art exhibition requires considerable preparation. The first step is to consider the exhibition space and the approximate number and maximum size of works it will accommodate, and to write a call for submissions that allows for these requirements. Constructing a timeline that includes basic dates for the show, submission deadline, judging date, exhibition opening and closing dates, and reception date is also an important element of the process, as is building a budget. The overhead can include things like venue rental, installation materials and tools, printed material costs, prize awards, reception catering costs, audiovisual rentals, and other incidentals. Donations and grants from local or campus outlets can be great resources.

The call for artwork should be disseminated to the community, and submissions can be accepted either on a rolling basis or during a designated time period. Once all submissions are collected, a time should be set for anonymous judging. A partnering gallery may then offer its own staff of experienced workers to install the exhibition, or the exhibition committee recruits student assistants or community volunteers. Labels for submissions and signs directing visitors to your exhibition are musts.

A reception can be timed to coincide with the opening of an exhibition, its closing, or some point in between (known as a soft reception). Scheduling a reception to overlap with other events can increase attendance, visibility, and overall impact. Our first two LGBTQ-themed exhibitions, for example, took place during the Day of Silence, a nationally recognized event that asks students to oppose anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment.

The reception is also a venue for recognizing artists and awarding prizes. In addition to honoring prize winners, the reception can be paired with special events, such as the screening of a film, performance of a musical piece or dance, or a reading. Invite local news media outlets and supply them with images of

the exhibition and names of participants and prize winners.

When the exhibition ends, the art has to be de-installed and safely wrapped in bubble wrap or acid free paper. All accepted submissions have to be returned to their owners, unless they have been purchased by patrons, in which case the buyers need to be contacted in order to make arrangements for pick up.

Promoting the library and gallery

The exhibition project was an opportunity for library and gallery staff to get out in the campus community and make people aware of what collaborating departments could do with available resources. Using the Wikoff Gallery gave us the chance to remind student artists of the space available to them, and how they might work with the curatorial staff to display work on diverse topics. The first year's exhibition also served as inspiration for a library display. LGBTQ: A Library Perspective, which had an online presence as well,¹ featured books, reference materials, CDs, films, iTunes playlists, and college archival materials on LGBTQ themes or by LGBTQ-friendly authors. Extending the message of the arts exhibition meant extending an invitation to visit the library, which was an effective way of raising the profile of our department.

LGBTQ awareness in the community

The biggest achievement of this project was raising awareness of LGBTQ issues at Union College. The receptions themselves were modestly attended, and were covered by our campus news feed and our regional LGBTQ council newsletter. A faculty member of UNITAS served as our first reception speaker, and the president of Spectrum spoke at the next event. They addressed the current campus climate with respect to diversity and acceptance, and their words were an extension of the thought-provoking artwork in the two exhibitions.

Entries in our inaugural exhibition's guest book indicate that the conversation our installation was meant to inspire was indeed an ongoing one. One alumnus visitor wrote:

“Wish being out was easier when I went to college from 1969–1973!” Another guest said: “This was wonderful, unique, inspiring and who know [sic] what else! It makes me proud to be a Union student.”²

The art submissions had a life beyond the exhibition, as well. On two occasions a community partner, the Office for Multicultural Affairs, asked for permission to exhibit sample works at a reunion event for LGBTQ students, faculty, and alumni, and at an informal LGBTQ campus gathering. Inspired by the message of the exhibition, the office director wanted to spark conversation at these meetings. In one

other case, we were pleased to see that our exhibition Best of Show winner displayed her submission in the Senior Invitational exhibition in the Mandeville Gallery, demonstrating the reach of the LG-

BTQ: A Union Perspective message. It was rewarding to see awareness continue to spread across campus, beyond the parameters of the exhibition itself. This growth to venues beyond the student gallery marked the success of our initial goal to promote acceptance, furthering a dialogue that celebrated the LGBTQ community rather than rejecting it.

Most recently, we were pleased to be recognized with UNITAS’ Community-Building Award, which was presented at the Fall 2011 Convocation. The president of the college spoke about the hate speech incidents of the past, and the ways we and the exhibition com-

mittee attempted to balance this message with the annual invitational. This acknowledgment was indeed an honor, especially because it was given at this high-profile, start-of-term venue, exposing new students to an atmosphere of tolerance on the very first day of their college experience. Diversity and LGBTQ issues are now clearly and solidly part of the campus dialogue.

Arts, the library, LGBTQ and future exhibitions

When an exhibition becomes an annual event, there are opportunities for reflection, improve-

ment, and, ultimately, for expanding its influence. One benefit to the project would be to recruit more partners, especially from student groups that are already active on campus, such as the Student Fo-



Rachel Start (Union College class of 2008), *Under the Radar*, image courtesy of artist.

rum, Safe Space (the sexual violence support group), or the Womyn’s Union. With more participants from diverse groups, we could encourage more submissions, more patrons to view the exhibition and attend reception events, and more people to take part in an open dialogue about this important social issue. And, of course, volunteers for planning, installation, and de-installation would be most welcome.

We would like to encourage more submissions from alumni, perhaps by working with the Alumni Affairs Office to distribute the call in a more systematic and far-ranging manner.

The participation of alumni would extend the message of acceptance beyond the college gates, revealing support from and for members of the Union community who perhaps did not experience the same tolerance during their time as students. The recognition of change is powerful, as seen in other campaigns such as *It Gets Better*; the highly successful social media movement organized by gay rights activist Dan Savage to encourage struggling LGBTQ youth to have hope.

More local participation, as mentioned, is a key to making this project an annual priority on campus. While we have targeted faculty members who are likely to have potential contributors in their classes, we could visit studio art classes on our own to present the project to students, set up an informational table in the campus center, develop a greater Web presence for the exhibition, or, perhaps, offer more substantial prizes. A Web page would also allow us to post additional photos of installations and receptions, and could be a place to showcase interviews with artists, speakers, or other LGBTQ community members.

To bring more project events into the library space, the gallery exhibition could be followed by the installation of selected works in the library building, or the library could

purchase pieces for permanent display. The library could also host panel discussions with artists on campus and local LGBTQ activists, to coincide with the gallery exhibition. And, of course, the Collection Development Office should continue to purchase LGBTQ and arts-friendly materials in all formats, which could be fodder for future library exhibitions, Web pages, or LibGuides.

Library and gallery staff members were pleased to be part of this project, to provide the labor to make it happen and the voices to speak its message. It truly was a collaborative initiative, with many groups having something to contribute to the LGBTQ dialogue. An art exhibition is a time-consuming undertaking, but finding partners with a shared commitment to your message makes the work manageable, rewarding, and a fine example of what community librarianship can accomplish.

Notes

1. See LGBTQ: A Library Perspective at www.union.edu/library/galleries/lgbt/index.php.
2. Wikoff Student Gallery 2009, "LGBTQ: A Union Perspective," Schenectady, New York: Wikoff Student Gallery, Guestbook. *z*
3. Right to Research Coalition, see <http://www.righttoresearch.org>.
4. Council of Undergraduate Research, see www.cur.org/about.html.
5. *Undergraduate Economic Review*, <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/uer>
6. Open Access Week, www.openaccessweek.org/.
7. Ethnography of the University Initiative: <http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/755>.
8. ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, see www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.
9. Joyce L. Ogburn, "Lifelong learning requires lifelong access: Reflections on the ACRL Plan for Excellence." *C&RL News* 72, no. 9 (2011): 515. *z*

(*"Engaging..." cont. from page 215*)
article "Lifelong learning requires lifelong access."⁹

Notes

1. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Understanding a Diverse Generation: Youth Civic Engagement in the United States, published 2011, accessed March 7, 2012, www.civicyouth.org/featured-new-study-dispels-stereotypes-about-young-voters-ahead-of-2012-elections/.
2. Scott Warren and Kim Duckett, "Why Does Google Scholar Sometimes Ask for Money? Engaging Science Students in Scholarly Communication and the Economics of Information," *Journal of Library Administration* 50, no. 4 (2010).