

Central Florida Citizen Curator Project

Project Narrative

Justification

The University of Central Florida is seeking \$25,000 to develop the Citizen Curator Project, which is run jointly by Dr. Barry Mauer (Associate Professor, English), Yulia Tikhonova (Director, UCF Art Gallery) and John Venecek (Research & Information Services Librarian). The project will run for two years: starting in the fall of 2016 and continuing through the spring of 2018. We are currently in the second phase of a pilot project we conducted during a spring 2015 Visual Texts & Technology seminar in which PhD students curated exhibits using materials from an archival collection titled, *African American Legacy: the Carol Mundy Collection*. This collection consists of ephemera such as post cards, product packaging, and illustrations from magazines and newspapers. Much of the material is controversial for its racist content, which makes it both unique and difficult to work with. The goal of the Citizen Curator Project is to expand the scope of what we started last spring by recruiting citizens to curate exhibits at the UCF Art gallery, the John C. Hitt Library, and at partner sites throughout the area. Each year, we will select a unifying theme, such as race, and will recruit citizens to curate exhibits based on that theme. To encourage a diverse array of interpretations, we will encourage our curators to experiment, not just with the material itself, but with the idea of what an exhibit can be. Additionally, we will publish an open source *Guidebook for Citizen Curators*, which we envision as an ongoing publication that changes and grows along with the project.

1. Statement of Need, Problem, or Challenge

The key challenge we seek to address is how to encourage more active and open engagement between the community and local museums, archives, and public history centers. We address this challenge by soliciting the involvement of individuals in the community and by collaborating with other like-minded institutions in the area. By focusing on the idea of citizen curated exhibits, we are opening archival materials to a greater array of perspectives while encouraging more active participation from the community. Our project is inspired, in part, by Robert Ray who reminds us to “gamble more recklessly: by ignoring disciplinary boundaries, by listening to ‘outsiders’ or even dilettantes, by suspecting experts and, in particular, by adapting for research the methods of the twentieth century’s avant-garde arts and non-traditional sciences” (Ray 160).¹ By involving outsiders and by experimenting with curatorial practices, we intend to bring multiple, unique, or under-represented perspectives to archival materials, and to bring these perspectives into the lives of more people. In so doing, we will also achieve the goal

¹ Ray, Robert B. "The Bordwell Regime And The Stakes Of Knowledge." *Strategies* (1988): 143-181. *Film & Television Literature Index*. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.

of strengthening and establishing partnerships between the university, museum patrons, and like-minded organizations throughout the community.

This project addresses the goals of the program by placing our primary focus on citizen curators and community patrons. The process of curating exhibits prepares people to be full participants in their communities by encouraging critical thinking about how museums, archives, and public history centers create narratives that shape our views of local history, community issues, and public policy options. We provide a platform for people to work with archival materials and curate exhibits; a unique educational experience that combines creative and critical thinking skills. Curators must pose questions and assess information about their materials, audiences, institutions, and technologies. Consideration of ethical principles, relevance, framing, and inclusiveness occur at each stage of the curatorial process. Review of the literature about curatorial practices, as well as feedback and guidance from our advisory group, will guide participants as they develop these skills.

Further, this project promotes civic engagement. As public crises emerge, such as those affecting the environment, public health, civil rights, and the economy, we need to access and make use of the unique materials available at our local museums, libraries, and archives as a way to participate in discussions that address these problems. For example, in the Visual Texts and Technology seminar that served as our pilot project, our students were trained to examine their own values and behaviors in relation to the issue of race. They explored how they came to these values, whether their behaviors and values are aligned, and how these values and behaviors might affect their work. This was a self-reflective process that can lead to changes. For instance, many white students came to understand white privilege for the first time. Asian and Latina/o, disabled, and LGBTQ students came to understand their own oppression in relation to that of black people. Likewise, just as self-knowledge requires the examination of personal values and behaviors, citizenship requires examining the values and behaviors of the groups and organizations to which we belong. Thus, students studied the ways in which they learned American history, focusing on the how institutions sorted people into categories (like race, class, gender, and religion) and created habits and expectations for in-group members and judgments about out-groups.

We also train citizens to use technology to discover information and produce knowledge. Technological and social changes have shifted the focus of communicative practice from speech and writing to curating. Many archives are multimedia and contain documented sounds, images, and written texts. These documents can be fragmented, manipulated, juxtaposed, and synthesized in endless configurations. Also, digital platforms can be adapted to include public participation in ongoing discussions about key issues of public significance. Experimental exhibits are a means for curators to remix and rethink archival materials as a way of exploring new meanings and interpretations. Because of the complexity of this training, we have assembled an advisory group that consists of scholars from UCF's Texts & Technology program, Department of English, Public History Program,

University Archives, and the Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories (RICHERS), an interdisciplinary project housed in UCF's Department of History. They will work with our curators to help them realize their visions both in the physical and, when appropriate, virtual realms.

Beneficiaries

This project will be mutually beneficial to UCF, our partnering institutions, and the members of the community who participate in the exhibits either as curators or guests. The Hitt Library and Art Gallery have proven that exhibits and related programming can be a significant form of community outreach that have helped establish UCF as a cultural leader in the region. The Hitt Library host exhibits monthly, many of which have been effective in highlighting the diversity of the region and the depth of local history (see appendix one for some recent examples). While these exhibits have been successful forms of community outreach, the Citizen Curator Project will add a new dimension by emphasizing the active involvement and participation from the community. In so doing, we are encouraging our community patrons to take ownership of their historical, cultural, and intellectual legacies. We hope this process will create an immersive learning space that will expose aspects of local history and stories that might have otherwise gone untold.

How will your project advance your institution's strategic plan?

This project advances two of the University of Central Florida's five strategic goals: To become more inclusive and diverse and to become one of America's leading partnership universities. In many ways, these strategic goals correspond to the benefits we describe above. Our previous work with exhibits and programming have helped establish the Hitt Library and the UCF Art Gallery as cultural leaders in the region (see appendix 1 for more information about past exhibits). As a result, we have established many partnerships that have been mutually beneficial.

Performance Goals and Intended Results

The primary Agency-level goal we address is to strengthen museums and libraries as essential partners in addressing the needs of their communities. We propose to satisfy this goal in the following ways:

Goal 1: *To enhance community participation with local museums, archives, and public history centers by soliciting citizens to curate exhibits based on a unifying theme.*

Our main deliverable will be the three physical exhibits created each year by our citizen curators. Each year there will be a different unifying theme that will tie the exhibits to

some aspect of local history and/or a pertinent social issue. Finally, as we discuss in the project design, we envision these exhibits being a form of social action, engaging the curators and attendees to participate in deliberations about social policies. They will include a participatory element designed to enhance the experience of the visitors. The participatory element will be educational, rhetorical, or experimental, depending on the concept for each exhibit. To examine the premises by which our society reasons about policy questions, citizen curators will create experimental exhibits—experimental in the sense that they are reflexive: about our own values and behaviors—that are both rhetorical and educational.

Goal 2: To produce a *Guidebook for Citizen Curators*.

Our second deliverable will be a *Guidebook to Citizen Curators*. This book is currently in its early stages and is based on our pilot project. We expect to have a first edition available in time for our first exhibit. This guidebook will be a way to organize and disseminate the lessons we have learned as well as the theory and best practices employed by our curators. It will also address how ordinary people can take ownership of their historical, cultural, and intellectual legacies; how to think critically about the ways in which exhibits shape our views of the past and present; how to think rhetorically about effective communication with diverse audiences; how to work with various genres of curating and how to involve broader communities of archivists, educators, experts, and organizers in curating. This guidebook, once compiled and edited, will be available free of charge to attendees at our public presentations, as well as through the Center for Public History. In addition, it will be available online and as a downloadable file.

Goal 3: To encourage multiple and overlooked perspectives on issues related to local history and social issues.

By encouraging active participation from the community in the form of citizen curators, we will demonstrate how many different ways there are to interpret historical sources. With this in mind, we encourage experimental approaches to curating, such as collage and sampling, to solicit alternative and unique perspectives. Additionally, we will introduce different disciplinary frames – historical technological, discursive, and philosophical – so our curators may combine frames, add others, or create new frames based on their research. We also encourage sampling and collage to solicit alternative and unique ways of organizing materials to tell different narratives.

Goal 4: To encourage archival literacy.

We expect many of our curators will have had little or no previous experience working with museums and archives. While this “outsider” aspect is a key part of the project, we also realize that museums, archives, and special collections can be mystifying to the lay-person and, therefore, a barrier to active participation. For that reason, we plan to provide our curators some training in the areas of archival terminology, organization,

metadata, and the use of finding aids. Much of this training will be conducted by our advisory group, who will work with curators throughout the entire process of curating their exhibits. More about this training is stated below.

2. Measuring Impact

Our evaluation and assessment will be an ongoing processes that is integrated into the fabric of the project. Assessment will be conducted by the project directors and the advisory board. We have designed a three-tiered plan that will guide the exhibits from conception to completion: front-end, formative, and summative assessment.

Front-end assessment will be an important part of establishing partnerships with local institutions and in recruiting our citizen curators. This assessment will allow us to determine what types of materials are available at different locations and to determine sites for future exhibits. Likewise, we will assess the ideas of our curators as well as how to market their exhibits and include the participation of local patrons, a process that will involve personal interviews, exhibit proposals, and questionnaires.

Formative assessment will help ensure that our curators are meeting their own goals and are communicating their message effectively. For this portion of the process, we will rely on the experience and expertise of our advisory board. We plan to provide a significant amount of creative freedom and experimentation, but we also want to ensure some level of critical thinking and audience awareness to maximize the impact of each exhibit. This stage of evaluation will also serve the practical purpose of ensuring that we use our limited resources effectively.

The result will be two annual exhibits based on a unifying theme. The experimental nature of the exhibits will provoke open and active participation from patrons who will be encouraged to add their own perspectives and personal experiences as a means toward promoting a greater array of interpretations. Our goal is to create stronger ties between the partnering institutions and the community. This, in turn, can change how people think about museums and archives by encouraging them to take ownership of their historical, cultural, and intellectual legacies. The participation we seek is what will sustain this project. Working to create and sustain new partnerships in the community, and strengthening those ties, will lead to further opportunities for collaboration as we move forward.

Summative evaluations will focus on exhibits as an active learning experience our visitors contribute to. This stage will be conducted with in-person interviews, when possible, and via follow-up evaluation forms. We will use this opportunity to address some of the key Performance Goals, including how the audience's attitudes changed toward the host institution, the subject matter of the exhibit, the effectiveness of the exhibit, and their interest in participating in future exhibits. Assessment will be carried out by the project

directors as well as our advisory group, which is comprised of people we selected because of their interest in exhibits, curating, and project management skills (see the Key Project Staff and Consultants appendix for more information about the advisory group).

3. Project Design

Our project design draws heavily from recent scholarship about user-engagement and trends in the participatory museums and archives. Of particular interest is scholarship and projects that deal specifically with difficult or controversial material. As stated above, we conducted a pilot project in a spring 2015 graduate seminar in which sixteen students in a PhD seminar curated online and physical exhibits based on *African American Legacy: The Carol Mundy Collection*. Creating exhibits based on racist ephemera was a self-reflective process that provided an opportunity for students to examine their values in relation to the material we provided. Just as self-knowledge requires the examination of personal values and behaviors, citizenship requires the examination of the values and behaviors of the groups and organizations to which we belong. Although there are many outlets for people to participate in discussions that address public policy problems, Lehrer and Milton state that exhibits are unique in that they inhabit a space that is “not simply as latent in the social fabric, nor only in top-down efforts by the state to encode preferred memory, but also as it is mindfully deployed by individuals and groups in attempts to provoke, enable, and transform” (Lehrer & Milton 3).² They further note that the “official” narratives, or mythologies, advanced by museum exhibits, “often present a simplified view of very nuanced and complicated historical events” (8). Their response is to “de-activate” those narratives in a way that repairs severed continuities and destabilized boundaries. Curating, for them, raises ethical questions about our responsibility to the stories we inherit from the past. When it comes to difficult topics, such as racism, it is the job of curators to unsettle the meaning of past events. When seen in this light, curation can be viewed as a form of activism in which there is a shift from representation to action.

Activities, Evaluation, & Performance

Our project will expand on what we started in our pilot project. We will recruit citizen curators from the Central Florida region to curate two exhibits each year that will be based on a unifying theme, which will be developed in advance by our team advisory group. One exhibit will take place each spring and fall either on the UCF campus, such as the Art Gallery or Hitt Library, or with one of our partner institutions in the region. Our

² Lehrer, Erica T & Cynthia E. Milton. “Introduction: Witnesses to Witnessing.” Lehrer, Erica T, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Patterson. *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*. Houndmills, Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

advisory group will help establish partnerships and will work with our curators throughout the entire exhibition process. We envision our curators being local artists, activists, collectors, educators, students, and members of other community organizations.

Planning & Management

Planning and management will be handled by the project directors: Dr. Barry Mauer, Yulia Tikhonova, and John Venecek. We will also work closely with our advisory group, which consists of UCF faculty who have a wealth of experience with curating exhibits and project management. The first incarnation of this group has been charged with helping take the project to the next phase: moving beyond working with students at UCF to recruiting curators from the community. We envision the advisory group changing as we make new connections. Just as we expect each curator to bring something new to each exhibit, we also seek advisors from a variety of backgrounds and areas of expertise to encourage fresh ideas and new connections.

Financial, Personnel, and Other Resources

More specific information about finances and personnel can be found in our accompanying budget. In sum, we will require supplies for the physical exhibits and will hire a freelance designer to help our curators effectively realize their visions.

Tracking Progress & Sharing Results

To track our progress, we will rely on our assessment plan described above. We have designed this plan to guide us through the early developmental stages (front-end) as well as carrying out the exhibit in an effective and economical way (formative) and, finally, in soliciting feedback to help guide the future direction of the project (summative). Our assessment will be open and transparent. We will share the information with our advisory group, our partnering institutions, our curators, and, of course, the granting agency. We will also use the afore mentioned *Guidebook for Citizen Curators* as a way to organize and disseminate the lessons we have learned as well as the theory and best practices employed by our curators. Finally, we will seek opportunities to disseminate the results of our project through scholarly publications and at conferences such as ACRL, Digital Humanities, and the 2017 HASTAC conference, which will be in Orlando with UCF serving as one of the host sites.