

## **Outreach, Engagement, and Highlighting the Rutgers University Libraries Collections**

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### Author:

Megan Lotts, MFA, M.L.I.S  
Art Librarian  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
(848)932-7189

[megan.lotts@rutgers.edu](mailto:megan.lotts@rutgers.edu)

[www.meganlotts.com](http://www.meganlotts.com)

**Twitter:** @MCLotts

**Link to work in RUCore** [http://soar.libraries.rutgers.edu/bib/Megan\\_Lotts/](http://soar.libraries.rutgers.edu/bib/Megan_Lotts/)

**Title:** Outreach, Engagement, and Highlighting the Rutgers University Libraries Collections

**Abstract:** Librarians are increasingly focused on incorporating outreach, engagement, collaboration, and innovation into everyday tasks such as programming, collection development, instruction, and reference support. Many libraries are turning their attention to what is happening outside of their spaces to improve services and resources inside their spaces. Some institutions are moving away from traditional models of reference, instruction, and collection development and toward creating active mobile spaces where communities can come together to collectively produce, curate, and consume information.

The Rutgers University Art Library looks outside its walls to connect with the local campus and New Brunswick communities with the goal of providing innovative programming that engages a wide range of patrons while highlighting the library's collections and local scholarly research. This paper will look at outreach and engagement and examine how these activities affect collection development and highlight library collections. Six case studies from the Rutgers University Libraries will be used as examples: The Rutgers Art Library Exhibition Spaces (RALES), the Rutgers University Libraries Coloring initiatives, button-making, LEGO play, an Art+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon, and Banned Books Week.

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## INTRODUCTION

Librarians are increasingly focused on incorporating outreach, engagement, collaboration, and innovation into everyday tasks such as programming, collection development, instruction, and reference support. Many libraries are turning their attention to what happens outside their spaces to improve services and resources inside their spaces. Some libraries are moving away from traditional models of reference, instruction, and collection development and toward active

mobile spaces where communities can come together to collectively produce, curate, and consume information.

The Rutgers University Art Library (RUAL) looks outside its walls to connect with the local campus and New Brunswick communities with the goal of providing innovative programming that engages a wide range of patrons as well as highlighting the library's collections and local scholarly research. This paper will look at outreach and engagement and examine how these activities can affect collection development and highlight library collections. Six case studies from the Rutgers University Libraries (RUL) will be used as examples: The Rutgers Art Library Exhibition Spaces (RALES), the Rutgers University Libraries Coloring initiatives, Button-making, LEGO play, an Art+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon, and Banned Books Week.

## **OUTREACH, ENGAGEMENT, AND TURNING OUTWARD**

Though the words outreach and engagement are often used together, they describe different concepts. The purpose of outreach is to provide information. Examples include a newsletter, email blast, or social media post letting the community know about something happening in the library. Engagement, on the other hand, refers to two-way interactions in which individuals or organizations work together for mutual benefit. Libraries cannot wait for users to come to them; we must work proactively to discover our users' needs. The Rutgers University Libraries recognizes this and turns outward to learn more about our patrons. We try to meet our users where they are, learning about their needs and wants as well as what makes them tick. We have discovered that allowing user needs to inform decision making and working collaboratively with

our communities can produce rich outcomes that lead to libraries having “a seat at the table” and being seen as equal partners.

You can learn more about how the Rutgers University Libraries turns outward to transform communities by reading the paper “The Promise of Academic Libraries Turning Outward to Transform Campus Communities.”<sup>i</sup>

## **LOW-COST, HIGH-IMPACT PROGRAMMING**

Learning more about our communities informs the decisions we make, inspiring innovative programming that highlights library collections. At RUAL, we often fulfill our mission with low cost, high-impact programming. When planning any low-cost event, it is important to think about sponsorship. What community members might have an interest in donating food, prizes, and/or help with publicity? Acts of sponsorship can be as simple as hanging a poster in a store window. It is also important to find collaborators who can help an event gain a wider audience. Sponsorship is important, but the only truly essential elements in creating innovative programming are space, an idea, and a few volunteers.

We try to make sure all of our programming, inside and outside library spaces, is tied back to the libraries. One of the easiest ways to do this is to make sure that every event is connected to one or more collection in the library. This sometimes includes featuring a pop-up exhibit to display related materials during an event. The next section of this paper will briefly look at examples of six events innovative, low-cost, high-impact events at the RUAL.

## *Rutgers University Art Library Exhibition Spaces*

The Rutgers University Art Library (RUAL) hosts exhibits in a variety of ways. We have two wall track systems, exhibition cases, as well as space for sculptures, installations, performances, digital exhibits, and pop-up exhibitions. Other types of artworks are considered as long as the work does not damage the RUAL walls/spaces or create a fire hazard. Our display spaces were created because the Art Librarian was looking to connect with departments in her liaison areas, which include Art History, Digital Filmmaking, Landscape Architecture, and Visual Artists.

The RUAL is a perfect space to for sharing and amplifying the scholarly work created on the Rutgers campuses while highlighting the Rutgers University Libraries collections. The exhibitions spaces provide a low stakes opportunity for students and local artists to exhibit their work while allowing the Art Library intern a hands-on opportunity to learn about exhibit curation. In roughly five years, the RUAL exhibition spaces have hosted over 45 exhibitions at little to no cost other than labor. There is no dedicated funding for this space and most materials are donated or provided by exhibitors. These spaces offer students an opportunity to learn about what goes in to an exhibition, from creation to consumption, including installation, marketing, and reception planning, which are life-long learning skills and ideas that can be used in many facets of life as well as scholarly research. These spaces also allow our library users— students, staff, faculty, and community members— to view artworks in person as opposed to studying images in a book.

These spaces have allowed the Art Librarian to form deeper connections with the departments with which she liaises and make new connections with departments on campus that might not otherwise find their way to a specialized library like the RUAL. Having a wide variety of diverse exhibitions brings new users into the library and expands the library's local community. If you would like to learn more about the RUAL Exhibition Spaces, read the paper, "Building Bridges, Creating Partnerships, and Elevating the Arts" or visit the "Art Library Exhibitions Spaces and Special Events" libguide at <http://libguides.rutgers.edu/eventsandexhibits>.<sup>ii</sup>

### *Pop-up Makerspaces*

#### *Coloring Initiatives*

Pop-up makerspaces—informal spaces where people gather to learn, make, and discover—are low-cost, high-impact ways the RUAL engages with local communities. These temporary making spaces have significantly contributed to the RUAL's ability to form partnerships, promote cross-disciplinary collaboration, bring new users to the library, and highlight our existing collections. Pop-up makerspaces provide hands-on learning that promotes creative thinking and problem solving skills, tools that are essential to scholarly research. As these pop-ups prove, you don't need a lot of money or a state of the art makerspace to create a culture of creativity in your library. Makerspaces and making activities can be learning moments that eloquently tell the story of the positive contributions libraries make in their communities.<sup>iii</sup>

The Art Library Coloring book (see figure 1) came about because we observed that students were bored with traditional one shot bibliographic sessions. Students came to the library wanting a memorable experience and the opportunity to learn more than how to use a database. The coloring book was created as a way to provide a fun and unique hands-on self-directed learning experience. Printing the coloring book was fairly inexpensive (\$260 USD for 500 copies). For \$70 USD, the Libraries purchased 500 packets of individually wrapped crayons and 500 adhesive labels to make Rutgers University Libraries (RUL) stickers for the crayons. Many local media sources reported on this project and the coloring books were gone in roughly 3 weeks. Publicity is crucial to the success of a project like this; if you are planning a maker activity in your library, make sure you contact your organization's public relations department and let them help sell your story.

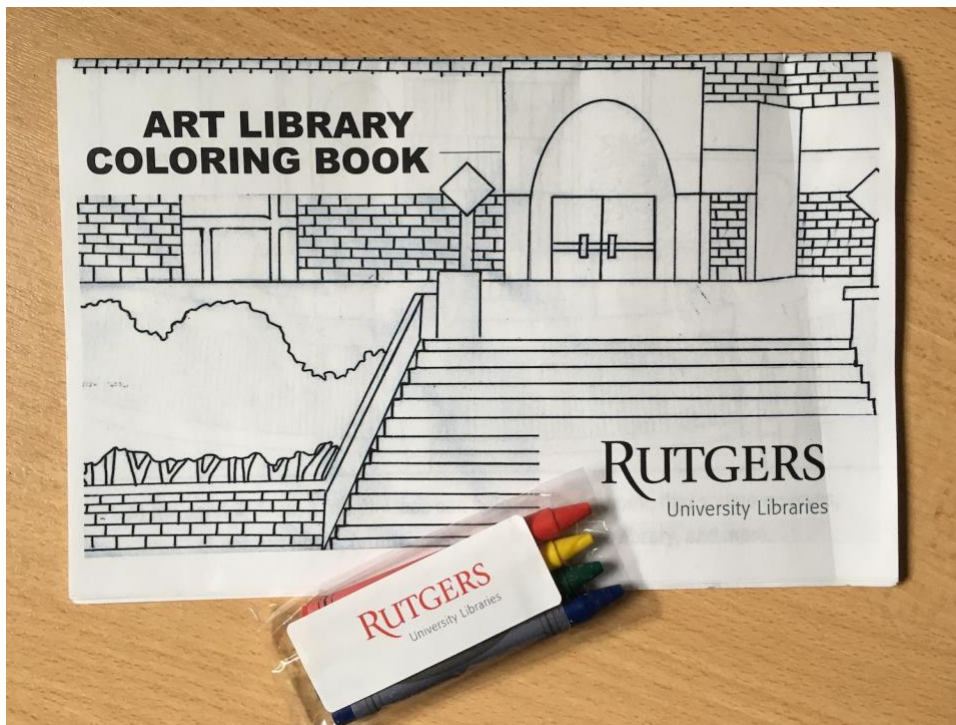


Figure 1 Cover of Rutgers Art Library Coloring Book. Photo credit Megan Lotts.

To celebrate the release of the coloring book, the RUAL hosted an exhibition of materials from the Art Library Special Collections. This exhibit included a number of popular artifacts such as Lynda Barry's *Naked Ladies, Naked Ladies, Naked Ladies*, a rare 1984 coloring book from the well-known graphic novelist. Perhaps the most unique resource on display was an original 1963 copy of *Interaction of Color* by Joseph Albers, an essential text in the arts. This edition was one of just 2,000 original copies created by Albers himself and it provides an excellent example of how a resource can change over time. In figure 2, you can see this original copy of the text, a small black and white edition purchased in the early 1990s, and a contemporary edition of *Interaction of Color*, which is available for the iPad and allows users to create their own digital color studies similar to those made by Albers. This display addresses ideas of knowledge and information creation and the ways these processes have changed over time.





Figure 2 *Interaction of Color* by Josef Albers. Photo credit Megan Lotts.

### *Button-making*

At the 2013 Association of College & Research Libraries Annual Conference, Char Booth, Associate Dean at California State University-San Marcos, said her library's button maker is worth its weight in gold because of its ability to build community goodwill toward the library. In 2016, the Rutgers University Libraries purchased a button maker that has been used for a variety of purposes including creating RUL branded buttons and post-tour take-aways with images from Rutgers Special Collections and University Archives. The machine is also used at stressbusting events, where patrons design and make their own buttons, and for student projects in the RUAL. The button maker became a key point of engagement that cost the libraries just \$580 USD, including the machine, a graphic punch, and supplies to make 1,000 buttons. Following the

initial investment, each button cost roughly 8 cents and, in six months, the libraries hosted over 20 well-attended events at which over 3,000 buttons were made.

As expected, many Rutgers students, faculty, and staff love making buttons and they are excited to learn they can design and create their own buttons at the library (see figure 3). These button making moments lead to reference questions, positive interactions with librarians and the libraries, and sometimes creative collaborations. Some campus arts affiliates have requested the button maker's presence on more general visits in which the libraries work with students making buttons while discussing finding images for scholarly research. This extra level of engagement helps members of the arts community learn more about the libraries and gives them an opportunity to ask questions.

The button maker has become a teaching tool for the RUAL. Button making offers a low-cost pop-up making activity that addresses the idea of the "object," from concept to consumption. In the case of a button, a wearable accessory is the outcome, and the patron gets to leave with the item they have created. Creating a button can strengthen creative thinking and problem solving skills and offer opportunities to discuss finding images and understanding copyright laws.

Perhaps most importantly, it is mesmerizing and fun and it can take as little as 60 seconds to make a creation. Lastly, the button maker has provided many students and Rutgers community members the opportunity to quickly and affordably create and produce a unique work of art that can easily be taken home, given to a friend, or worn as an art object. To learn more about button making at the Rutgers University Libraries read, "Outreach, engagement, learning, and fun in 60 seconds: Button making at the Rutgers University Libraries".<sup>iv</sup>



*Figure 3 Button-making at Rutgers Alexander Library. Photo credit Megan Lotts.*

### *LEGO play*

In 2014, the Rutgers Art Librarian encountered LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) at the “i2c2, Innovation, Inspiration, and Creativity Conference” in Manchester, UK. LSP believes “that hands-on, minds-on learning produces a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the world and its possibilities” and “deepens the reflection process and supports an effective dialogue.” Inspired by what she learned at the conference, the Art Librarian acquired a few hundred pounds of LEGO bricks and began running workshops with the Rutgers University Libraries Faculty & Staff. In August 2014, the RUAL library LEGO playing station was installed (see figure 4). Since opening day, over 1,400 pictures of LEGO creations have been taken at the station. The cost of this makerspace and the more than 35 events hosted there has been less than \$100 USD

total. Most of the LEGO bricks were upcycled donations from an international junk removal company and a few more LEGO donations were made by Rutgers Alumni.<sup>v</sup>



*Figure 4 Rutgers Art Library LEGO Playing Station. Photo credit Megan Lotts.*

As a result of this makerspace, the Art Library has seen an increase in visits to the library from community members in Visual Arts, Landscape Architecture, a wide variety of other campus affiliates, and the public. The LEGO bricks have been used in multiple course collaborations to introduce students to the Rutgers University Libraries, as well as to refine critical thinking, problem solving, and 3D building skills. In one example, the RUAL used LEGO activities as a tool for collecting data about the library needs of our transfer students: thirty-five students from the “Students in Transition Program” run by Academic Services attended one of three workshops at the RUAL. Workshop participants were asked to work in groups to build LEGO models of the best library ever, and then share their creations with their peers. From this workshop, the libraries

learned more about student expectations and things students wanted to see happen in the libraries. As an added bonus, many participants left smiling and saying that they had never been to the Art Library before and that it “seemed like a great place to study.” There were many positive comments, including: “I met new friends, which was great because I’m new to campus,” “I liked having fun and learning with toys,” and “If I need help, they were going to contact a librarian.”

In a recent LEGO project, the RUAL collaborated with the Zimmerli Art Museum to host a LEGO camp for 7-12 year olds. The camp met 3 hours a day for 1 week (see figure 5). The children who participated had the opportunity to learn more about art, the Libraries, making, and makerspaces. These types of events promote recruitment and retention; it is likely that many of these young students will one day attend Rutgers, the largest state funded school in the state of New Jersey.



Figure 5 LEGO camp at the Rutgers Art Library. Photo credit Megan Lotts.

In fall 2018, the Art Library will collaborate with Rutgers College Support Program for students on the autism spectrum to host a LEGO workshop in which 50 students, faculty, and staff will visit the RUAL to participate in a LEGO workshop as well as receive a brief introduction to the Rutgers University Libraries. One of the best things about the LEGO playing station is the way it facilitates storytelling. Students create, re-mix, and sometimes finish other models left at the table. It is exciting to visit the makerspace each day to see what has transpired. Some days it appears that a group of young children have been let loose at the table and blocks are strewn everywhere, including some on the floor. Other days there are elaborate models that tell stories about the students, their lives, their imaginations, and their dreams.

Unfortunately, the RUAL LEGO playing station was removed in spring 2018 in response to issues raised by the Students with Children club on campus. Members of the club wrote a letter to the head of Rutgers- New Brunswick academic affairs, demanding more opportunities for students with children on campus, including toys at all libraries, similar to the LEGO station at the RUAL. Rutgers University Libraries are unable to support an initiative like this at all of our libraries, so the RUAL LEGO playing station was removed. The LEGO collection was added to the circulating collection, but in over 4 months, these toys have only been checked out twice. The Art Librarian still receives regular requests for LEGO workshops and LEGO sets for use in the classroom, but it is clear that the impact of the LEGO playing station depended on the serendipitous way library users stumbled across this rare collection that encouraged spontaneous hands-on learning, a skill that is crucial to researching in the arts.

## **EVENTS**

The RUAL regularly collaborates with other campus departments, student organizations, and local community groups to host events. We have co-hosted Murder Mystery nights, symposiums and panel presentations, book sales, maker days, contests, and more. In March 2018, the RUAL collaborated with Special Collections and University Archives and the Institute for Women in the Arts to host an Art + Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon. In conjunction with this event, we staged an exhibit of feminist works from the RUL collections. Part of the exhibition featured the work of Alexandra Lobo, an advanced printmaking student from Rutgers Mason Gross Visual Arts Department. This event focused on discovering and using the RUL collections to advance the representation and documentation of women artists on Wikipedia.

In fall 2018, the RUAL hosted a series of events for Banned Books Week, sponsored by a grant from the American Library Association's Freedom to Read Foundation. The RUAL collaborated with the Rutgers Visual Arts Department student printmakers, who created images about censorship and intellectual freedom. These images were made into buttons and t-shirts that were circulated throughout the RU communities. The RUAL also exhibited materials related to banned books from the Rutgers University Libraries collections, hosted a live performance, and offered banned books related games, coloring pages, and other interactive activities.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Meaningfully assessing events and exhibits can be challenging. It is important to think about assessment in terms of impact rather than trying to determine if an event or exhibition was a “success.” For each event, have a goal in mind and consider what might indicate that you have reached your goal. It is important to remember that sometimes there will be multiple goals, focused on both short and longer-term objectives.

The RUAL approaches assessment in a variety of ways including surveys, head counts, and measuring supplies used and reference questions asked. The RUAL monitors social media and local media sources for any comments, likes, or shares about our events. If there is enough time and help, we assign someone to capture overheard comments and questions and make note of interesting engagements or connections made among patrons. We also document every RUAL event using digital image and video, but we acknowledge that this can be tricky depending on your organization’s video and photography policies. Sometimes images can only be used internally, but these can still provide valuable assessment data. The RUAL also has an assessment form that event staff fill out after each event. It serves as a mini-debriefing and allows space to write about what worked, what did not work, and what outcomes were observed. Finally, we always provide a comment box with pen and paper.

## **CONCLUSION**

Turning your attention outward and engaging your communities with innovative low-cost, high-impact programming can yield rich content and images that provide dynamic ways to highlight



collections and demonstrate how libraries engage with patrons. Strengthening ties with local communities and surrounding neighborhoods builds goodwill, which encourages engagement and new partnerships, as well as promoting the kinds of cross-disciplinary collaborations that can bring new users to the library. Interactive events can provide hands-on learning experiences that foster creative thinking and problem solving skills, tools that are essential when performing scholarly research. As art librarians know, learning from a book cannot compare to the learning that happens during an ephemeral experience with a librarian or living artist or experiencing art in person. You don't need a lot of money to create engaging events. Be resourceful and get to know your community and your local media sources, who can help with publicity. Lastly, turning outward helps libraries tell their stories in interesting ways; these events let us show the ways we contribute to our communities and highlight our role as a crucial component of culture and learning.

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<sup>i</sup> Kranich, Nancy, Megan Lotts, and Gene Springs. "The Promise of Academic Libraries Turning Outward to Transform Campus Communities." *College & Research Libraries News* 75, no. 4 (April 2014): 182-186.

<sup>ii</sup> Lotts, Megan. "Building Bridges, Creating Partnerships, and Elevating the Arts." *College & Research Libraries News* 77, no. 5 (May 2016): 226-230.

<sup>iii</sup> Lotts, Megan. "Low Cost High-Impact Makerspaces at the Rutgers University Art Library." *Art Documentation* 36, (Fall 2017): 345- 362.

<sup>iv</sup> Lotts, Megan and Tara Maharjan. "Engagement, Learning, Outreach, and Fun in 60 Seconds: Button Making at the Rutgers University Libraries." *College & Research Libraries News* 79, no.7 (2018): 364-368.

<sup>v</sup> Lotts, Megan. "Playing with LEGO, Learning about the Library and 'Making' Campus Connections: The Rutgers Art Library Lego Playing Station, Part One." *Journal of Library Administration* 56, Iss. 4 (May 2016): 359-380.