

# CONNECTING THROUGH CULTURAL DIVERSITY: LEVERAGING CAMPUS INITIATIVES IN THE CREATION OF LIBRARY EMBEDDED CURRICULUM

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## INTRODUCTION

The phrase “library exhibit” may conjure images of display cases highlighting beautiful library collections, or students walking past exhibit space without a second glance. The following case study from the University of Vermont (UVM) considers ways to draw interest and maximize the value of library exhibits. In this study you will see how two UVM librarians created a multimodal exhibit that connected disciplinary strands of campus research surrounding resettled refugees and employed a university initiative to connect with users, all while promoting library programming, resources, and services. This case study provides examples of programming that fosters connections, offers ideas for incorporating the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2015), and provides lessons learned for academic librarians engaging in similar projects.

## THE UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE: THE FIRST YEAR READ

UVM’s First Year Summer Reading Program is a student’s first introduction to academic life. The chosen book, given to all incoming students, serves as a guidepost for campus-wide, cross-disciplinary discourse among faculty, staff, and students. The university encourages participation from all parties. Students receive summer assignments involving the text, faculty are urged to use the book in their courses, and all campus community members are invited to read the book in the hope that sharing this text will generate discussions and activities.

The first year read for the 2015-2016 academic year, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Fadiman, 1997),

tells the true story of a young, epileptic, Hmong girl, Lia, and her refugee family from Laos. The story documents the family’s interactions with the doctors treating Lia at a small hospital in California. This book highlights the devastating consequences of operating from a position of cultural superiority and encourages readers to consider cultures and cultural beliefs vastly different than their own. It also suggests that western medical practices and beliefs, while grounded in science, are the product of a culture, and may be even more effective when practiced in parallel with the healing practices and beliefs of the patient’s culture.

Interest in this read was impacted by UVM’s location in Burlington, Vermont, which, along with neighboring Winooski, serves as a federal refugee resettlement location. While Vermont does not take in as many refugees as major resettlement areas like New York City or Los Angeles, it does take in a large number when compared to the population. Approximately one in twenty people in Burlington and Winooski is a New American (Grigi & Rosenburg, 2015). Furthermore, interest in the book’s themes was enhanced by the rise in media coverage relating to the Syrian refugee crisis.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT

When searching for opportunities to connect with the broader campus community, librarians should consider university-wide initiatives with inherent, pre-established buy-in from stakeholders. These initiatives will be easier to market and come with built-in audiences:

- Preparatory information sessions about the initiative will put exhibitors in touch with faculty members preparing to teach the book, allowing the library to consider where the exhibit fits into the broader campus

discussion, providing a network of faculty interested in curricular ties and opportunities to cross-promote programming.

- Because of campus-wide interest in the initiative, university communication sources will be on the lookout for related activities, allowing the library to market the exhibit within a pre-existing communication plan that would potentially reach all students.
- The level of university engagement ensures student exposure to the initiative in multiple arenas, both inside and outside the classroom, resulting in familiarity, awareness, and possible ongoing interest.

## THE EXHIBIT

At the heart of this exhibit were ten video interviews with UVM faculty and staff who work with refugees or incorporate themes of diversity and cultural competency into their coursework. These interviews showcased the ways that students might encounter and prepare for cultural differences in their current work and future professions. The exhibit consisted of three layers:

- **Layer 1: The physical exhibit** focused broadly on how the book's themes appear in UVM faculty's work with refugees. Exhibit panels included interview quotes and offered a glimpse into each faculty member's story. Panels also offered a QR code to the virtual exhibit where students could learn more.
- **Layer 2: The virtual exhibit** highlighted library resources to support discussions about the first year read. It was hosted in a LibGuide with full video interviews and transcripts, links to library resources such as videos, books, databases, and research guides, and links to Library of Congress subject headings to encourage further research.
- **Layer 3: Embedded Curricular Tie-Ins** encouraged interaction with the different modalities and layers of the exhibit and integrated *Framework* concepts into the discussion through a student assignment (Appendix A) and cross-disciplinary panel discussion (Appendix B).

## EMBEDDED CURRICULUM

The embedded curricular tie-ins served the dual purpose of promoting library resources and services and integrating *Framework* concepts. The assignment highlighted the exhibit's themes of cultural humility, cross-cultural research, questions of citizenship, and the political, historical and social situations that produce refugee movements. This product prompted students to compare and contrast disciplinary approaches. It challenged students to define their own culture and to consider how they might encounter and react to diversity. *Framework* concepts were woven throughout the assignment,

creating opportunities for students to encounter the complexity of research and to develop information literacy skills. In addition, distributing assignment questions designed by librarians offered a tangible example of how the library can augment and support classwork and assignment design.

The discussion panel was comprised of six of the exhibit interviewees. Questions focused on the researchers' work with New Americans, strategies for learning about cultural differences and resolving information gaps, research's impact on practice, and the benefits of stepping outside of disciplinary silos. This opportunity allowed students to see *Framework* concepts applied in academic research and to glimpse how experts in different fields explore similar themes.

The multimodal exhibit and associated curricular tie-ins employed an interdisciplinary approach and allowed students to explore an issue from multiple perspectives. These information products demonstrated the breadth of the library's collection, introducing students to new and various library resources and supports, from research guides to the power of a subject heading search. Faculty also saw examples of library liaison expertise positively informing the creation of learning objects. Perhaps most significantly, the exhibit and its related products positioned the library at the center of a campus-wide conversation, reinforcing the library as a place to explore new ideas and to participate in scholarly dialogue.

## INFORMATION LITERACY GOALS

ACRL's *Framework* played an integral role in the project's later stages, specifically in the formation of our embedded library assignment and panel discussion. Three frames were particularly salient: 1) authority is constructed and contextual, 2) research as inquiry, and 3) scholarship as conversation.

### Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Students considered how authority is constructed and contextual by examining real world events involving citizenship and immigration, and questioning how the social commentary surrounding these events changes over time. Several types of authority compete within *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*; students began by comparing these positions of authority and considering how an established authority's nationalistic expectations of cultural compliance can result in conflict and misunderstanding. With this background, students turned to the rhetoric emanating from the current refugee crisis and looked at the conflicting opinions of various authorities within that debate. This information included news articles covering state governors with strong anti-immigration policies, evolving conversations about refugees and citizenship documented in resources such as CQ Researcher, and NPR interviews with Syrian refugees. Through this inquiry, students were encouraged to consult differing authoritative perspectives in order to develop awareness of biases and to develop a skeptical stance when evaluating information.

In the faculty panel discussion, the concept of authority surfaced in how researchers and professionals negotiate the differences between their western education and schools of thought with the unique and sometimes different knowledge of the New Americans with whom they work. One researcher described her work within a refugee camp where she learned to distribute resources in a model that aligned with refugees' cultural practices. Another panelist explained how her exposure to New Americans' different practices of spirituality resulted in her incorporation of spirituality into her clinical practice—an act that she would never have envisioned before this exchange.

### Research as Inquiry

Through the embedded assignment, we strove to create a dialogue between students' personal experiences and the academic research available to them through the library. We hoped to give students a sense of research as inquiry by pointing to components of everyday life as jumping off points for thoughtful, purposeful curiosity leading to a sustained connection with external resources and information—in this case, by engaging with academic resources.

Students first reflected on the elements of their own culture that they would try to sustain in an unfamiliar setting. Next, students considered the cultural differences encountered in daily life. After having identified some cultural intersections of personal relevance, students examined one intersection more closely through external research, starting with the exhibit's LibGuide. After finding and reading relevant resources, students reflected on new questions that arose. This assignment attempted to model the move from personal inquiry and reflection to ongoing information searching, introducing the iterative process of research.

This Frame was reflected in the panel discussion in faculties' reflections on their research paths. For example, a professor in Geography explained that his research questions developed from his relocation to Vermont and his resulting curiosity regarding the number of refugees being sent to small cities such as Burlington. This inquiry and inquisitiveness led to his broader research agenda.

### Scholarship as Conversation

Scholarship as conversation arose in assignment questions asking students to identify, compare and contrast disciplinary approaches to the exhibit's broad, interdisciplinary themes. By considering points of intersection between researchers in different fields, students illuminated potential conversations within scholarship.

In the panel discussion, researchers discussed their views of interdisciplinary research and the benefits of reaching across disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, the panel discussion itself served as a visual representation of scholarship as conversation as panelists spoke of the intersections of their work.

## LESSONS LEARNED

This project was a significant departure from our library's past exhibits, from incorporating digital media in physical exhibit space to creating multimedia resources to promoting the use of embedded curriculum to hosting our first panel discussion. This experimentation resulted in valuable lessons on how to make a project like this more manageable and streamlined going forward:

1. **Pick a topic of interest.** The First Year Read Initiative had a built-in audience with all UVM freshman required to read the book before the start of school. Tying an exhibit to a broad university initiative, curriculum, topics relevant to the local community, or topics that loom large in the news may offer ways to connect.
2. **Attend information sessions about your university initiative and connect with others who are doing similar work.** This project relied heavily on knowing who would be working with the first year read. Information sessions offer a great opportunity to cross promote your efforts, so remember names and follow up.
3. **Complete the core pieces of your project toward the beginning of the initiative when there will be more interest.** Offering a panel discussion or reception nearer to the exhibit's opening could result in more interest and promotion from university news sources. Try to promote your assignment early as well (before the exhibit opening), so that faculty can include it in their syllabi.
4. **Think about how you want the exhibit to look.** This project was very story-driven, and the resulting physical and digital spaces were text-heavy. Taking photos of the interviewees during the interview process would have improved image quality and created some consistency in the look and feel of the exhibit.
5. **Plan how to ask faculty to engage with the project.** All of our interviewees seemed happy to contribute and talk about their work, but this could become overwhelming for already busy faculty. Try to limit the number of requests sent their way.
6. **Be mindful about intellectual property rights and consent.** One faculty member was very cautious of revealing too much about her research—a smart consideration that had not occurred to us. Making a conscious decision about where you will host videos may alleviate some of this concern. We hosted our videos on YouTube because at the time, it was our only option for the number and size of videos. We attempted to control access to these videos by keeping them unlisted, meaning that users would need to know the video's URL or have a link to the video in order to

view it. However, this is an imperfect system. Since the original project, our University has started hosting its own streaming service, which would allow us more control over access. Ask interviewees to sign some kind of Multimedia Consent and Release form and communicate clearly about how interviews will be shared.

7. **Use social media to promote your work.** Our most watched videos were: 1) the Panel Discussion, posted last, towards the end of the exhibit, and promoted on social media; 2) a video interview posted to Facebook; 3) the interviews of the panelists, which were not posted individually to social media but which users likely became interested in through the panel discussion video. The statistics for these videos spoke to the power of social media promotion.
8. **Shorter videos are more likely to be watched.** This may seem obvious; but we were thoroughly impressed by our video interviews and posted them in full. Needless to say, viewer attention still dropped off. It may be worth considering how to break videos up into more manageable chunks.
9. **Use technology to track interest and engagement.** It was a lot of fun to see the number of people visiting our LibGuide and watching the videos, and it revealed what was working and what could be improved. Nevertheless, evaluating student interaction with the assignment questions was difficult. It could be beneficial to pair this with a means for students to discuss the ideas online, to showcase the outcome of their reflections, or at the very least, to track use through link analytics.

## CONCLUSION

Employing university initiatives as a springboard for exhibit ideas has inherent benefits thanks to their built-in interest from the campus community and communication sources. Furthermore, the ACRL *Framework* can offer guidance while developing the exhibit and curricular tie-ins, for example by determining interview questions and guiding assignments and panel discussions. In the end, the topics discussed in our exhibit and curricular tie-ins provided a ‘container’ of relevance to students because of their coursework or interest in local and global issues. In addition, weaving *Framework* concepts throughout this work helped us to demonstrate research skills and encourage students to think critically about research practices. In the end this project spoke to the ways that library programming and curriculum development can work collaboratively within university initiatives and faculty syllabi, thereby encouraging student interaction with the library, building networks between faculty and librarians, and promoting library services and information literacy goals.

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## REFERENCES

- ACRL. (2015). *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>
- Fadiman, A. (1997). *The spirit catches you and you fall down: A Hmong child, her American doctors, and the collision of two cultures*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Grigi, L., & Rosenberg, A. (2015). *Approved refugee settlement capacity versus city population*. Refugees in Vermont Project, NSF Award#1359895

## APPENDIX A

### EXHIBIT ASSIGNMENT

#### Memo

This assignment is offered as an encouragement for students to interact with the Bailey/Howe Exhibit: *The Spirit Catches You...Conversations Inspired by the First Year Read*. Questions walk students through the physical and digital spaces, and ask students to think about refugee and immigration issues, cultural competency, and how culture may come into play in their own lives. Additionally, students completing one or more of these assignments may:

- experience how research can be informed by current issues and their daily lives
- see how they can become a participant in scholarly conversations
- witness how different types of authority and different perspectives can benefit the research process.

Please feel free to use this content as a jumping off point for your own assignments, to change the questions as needed, to use it in pieces or in its entirety, and please share your feedback!

The exhibit will be open to the public until March 6th, 2015. The library will also be hosting a Gallery Talk on February 18th at 4:30 PM. This event is open to the public, and students are welcome to attend.

For any questions or to provide us with feedback, please contact: Megan Allison, [mfalliso@uvm.edu](mailto:mfalliso@uvm.edu) or Emily Crist, [ecrist@uvm.edu](mailto:ecrist@uvm.edu)

#### #1 Interact with the Exhibit

Upon completing this assignment, students will be able to:

- **compare different perspectives surrounding refugee and immigrant issues**
- **recognize scholarly conversations taking place within their field of study or interest**
- **integrate cross disciplinary approaches to information seeking**
- **describe how cultural competency will come into play in their future work**

- A. Look at the exhibit in Bailey/Howe Library Lobby.
1. Do you notice any themes that keep coming up, regardless of the discipline?
  2. Compare two disciplines. Choose one that you are studying at UVM or that you are interested in, and one alternative option with which you may not be as familiar.
    - Identify common threads AND differences in their approaches to working with refugees.
    - Did the less familiar discipline add new insights that could inform your future work?
  3. Did looking at the exhibit as a whole bring up any new questions? Or, any potential research topics worth investigating?
- B. Watch an interview by scanning a QR code or visiting the [research guide](#).
1. What stood out to you in the interview?
  2. How does cultural competency and humility come into play in the person's work and research?
  3. After viewing the exhibit and the interview, how might cultural differences come up in your future work? What can you do to help bridge these cultural differences?

#### #2 Cultural Self Reflection

Upon completing this assignment, students will be able to:

- **recognize, consider and define their own culture**
- **formulate strategies for communicating and working across cultural differences**
- **become participants in scholarly conversations**

- A. In her interview, Shana Haines said, *“I hear my students say a lot of the time, I just don’t have a culture...I’m from South Burlington... That’s just not true at all. And you have to realize that you do have a culture, and that’s just a really important step in realizing and connecting with other people and other people’s cultures. That way, when you own your values as part of your culture and you can compare, you can see why there might be tensions with other cultures and their values.”* It can be difficult to name the elements of our own culture because we are so immersed in it, so try this exercise: Imagine that you move to a foreign country. What “culture clashes” might come up? What will you miss and try to bring with you? What is essential for you to maintain your sense of cultural identity?
- B. In his interview, Pablo Bose said, *“We think of culture clashes as grand things—this is my religion and language. And that’s true, but just the day-to-day things of life are equally confusing”.* Differences can be big or small, they can involve people from different countries or people from different states. Cultural differences occur when people have different experiences and different understandings. What are some cultural differences that you encounter in your daily life? How do you make sense of these differences or make sense of the other point of view? What are the opportunities and challenges in these differences? How do you build a bridge between understandings?
- C. You have identified several “intersections” where culture may come into play. Choose one, and use a resource listed in the [research guide](#) to examine the issue more closely.
  - What issue did you select?
  - What resource did you find?
  - Based on your own experiences and the resources you found in your search, do any new questions come up?

### #3 Authority, Bias, and Current Events

Upon completing this assignment, students will be able to:

- **compare past events to the current refugee crisis**
  - **consider different forms and constructions of authority**
  - **develop awareness of biases and develop a skeptical stance when evaluating resources**
  - **recognize the value of diverse perspectives when conducting research**
- A. Think about how negative stereotypes or stigmas impacted the Hmong refugees in the book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. Can you see similar conversations surrounding the Syrian Refugee crisis?
  - B. Check out [this article](#). Here you have more than half of the country’s governors saying they will not take in Syrian refugees because they are concerned with the potential danger. Elected officials tend to have a certain authority because of their position. Do you see a way that these typically authoritative perspectives may be biased or informed by a certain school of thought?
  - C. When we select resources, we often look to authority to determine the trustworthiness of the information. Authority could come from:
    - **studying a subject extensively** - for example people who hold high degrees in a particular field
    - **a person or organization’s position in society** - for example, if the author represents the official opinion of an organization or the government
    - **experiencing an event first hand** - for example, if the person is a witness or a participant in the event
 But the CNN article points to the fact that authority can be complex. Authority is granted by a community of people. Additionally, different authorities may disagree, and the core ideas that authorities put forth may change over time. For example, issues of immigration have long been debated. You can see how the conversation surrounding refugees and immigration has developed over time in this [CQ Researcher Report on the European Migration Crisis](#). Check out the Pro and Con stances as well. You can see from the works cited list in this article that a variety of authorities are consulted. How does the range of authorities consulted in the CQ article inform the article itself? Does it make the information more trustworthy in your opinion?
  - D. In general, it is good to consult differing perspectives and differing kinds of authorities in order to get a more well-rounded picture on which to base your opinions, arguments, and writing. How might the above articles, one from a reputable news source, and the other consulting a variety of experts, be informed by the first hand [perspective of a Syrian refugee](#)?

## APPENDIX B

### PANEL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Please tell us about your work with New Americans or Refugees, and how you became involved with it.
2. In your interviews, many of you spoke of the importance of learning and attempting to understanding another culture in your work. What strategies do you use to do this? Where are the information gaps? What barriers exist to your understanding?
3. In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Dr's Neil Ernst and Peggy Philp find that cultural sensitivity towards Lia's parents conflicts with their medical and legal responsibilities. At one point, Neil files a report with Child Protective services. Have you experienced a point where cultural sensitivity has clashed with policy, be it legal, medical, academic, etc.? What do you do to resolve this?
4. What can research (evidence and data) contribute to the rhetoric surrounding refugees and current events such as the Syrian refugee crisis?
5. Research interventions occur at many different levels, from an individual person to policy makers. How does your type of research/work affect your participants? How can these interventions from the individual to the global work together and build on each other?
6. You are all working with refugees or New Americans in some way, and all six of you represent a different discipline. Can you speak to the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach, and the opportunities that this approach affords?
7. A significant part of your work is with people whose language you may not speak and who may not speak your language. What is it like to work with an interpreter? Is anything lost in translation?
8. Have you changed or adopted a different cultural practice/stance from your work with different cultures? What has influenced/changed in the way you work (professionally or personally)?