



GAEDE INSTITUTE

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**“We are all Amateurs Here”: Using Public Displays
of Knowledge and Expertise to Embody the Value of
Learning**

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*Delivered at the Eighteenth Annual Conversation on the Liberal Arts
March 21–23, 2019 | Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA*

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Introduction

In public discourse across the United States, museums are often branded in distilled terms that echo the ways in which Liberal Arts education is stereotyped. Framed positively, both institutions encourage the mind to expand through the display, contemplation, and discussion, of important ideas. Yet more often than not, both these institutions are also characterized as serving only an elite portion of the population who have the ability to pay for access and consumption of a rarified knowledge that cannot be readily shared or used. Further, and perhaps even worse, this knowledge is viewed as being disconnected from, and useless to, the concerns of daily life. Within this strand of public rhetoric, both museums and liberal arts colleges/universities are framed as a type of luxurious indulgence most people can ill-afford to waste their time and money on.¹ Underlying these stereotypes are embedded social anxieties about class, race, cultural authority, and the nature of knowledge. These anxieties then play out within liberal arts colleges and universities as they try to demonstrate the “value proposition” of the liberal arts ethos to a skeptical, and differently anxious, public within an age of financial responsibility

¹ As Margaret Salazar-Porzio states, “My use of the terms “museums” and “universities” is not meant to imply in any way that all museums or all institutions of higher education are homogeneous. The terms “museum” and “university” are large generic categories that group a considerable diversity of institutional types.” Similar to Salazar-Porzio, I use these words as easy short-hand terms, in a relatively generic way, as means of structuring the rhetoric of my argument, and to mirror the ways in which these terms are typically used in public discourse. “The Ecology of Arts and Humanities Education: Bridging the Worlds of Universities and Museums”, *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 2015, 14 (3): 276.

wherein smaller colleges are closing because they cannot sustain themselves. The result of these pressures, per Eva-Maria Swidler, a faculty member at Goddard College, have resulted in “a system of higher education even more focused on either training only the elites in the liberal arts or training everyone else as obedient workers for a corporate work force.”² To a certain extent, liberal arts institutions fall into the very trap they are trying to avoid, and in the age of anxiety for liberal arts institutions, the closing of diverse types of liberal arts colleges re-enforces the stereotype that there is only one kind of liberal arts.

Using my experiences in the classroom at Regis College, and following an action-research model,³ this paper will explore the evolution of strategies used within a liberal arts classroom to structure undergraduate students’ experiences in ways that fostered their desire to learn, structured their desire to take ownership over their learning, and alleviated their anxieties about their path along the liberal arts.

My argument is that one response to the stereotypes regarding a liberal arts education is for students to prepare museum exhibitions to learn the real aim of the Liberal Arts, the value of knowledge. Designing an exhibition is itself anxiety inducing, especially with the potential for public failure,³ for both students and faculty alike. For students, that anxiety is controlled by the instructor through the classroom process and the practical mechanics of exhibition design. By learning to control the exhibition space, and by exercising an ethical responsibility to treat the objects appropriately students overcome their specific anxieties and learned how succeed at the unfamiliar. From the faculty perspective, providing students with a safe space in the classroom,

²Anemona Hartocollis, “Alternative Colleges and their ‘Radical, Communal Ideas,’ Fight for a Future,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/03/us/college-enrollment.html>

³ Action research “includes studies in which [faculty] use their own classroom as a place to implement untried teaching strategies, solve specific teaching-related problems, or document their own reflections on what they do” while teaching. D. J. Flinders and C.P. Richardson, “Contemporary issues in qualitative research and music education,” in R. Colwell (Ed.), *MENC Handbook of Research Methodologies* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2006): 334.

where they might fail productively, assuaged fears that the students might fail in a public and unproductive way. Through the exhibitions, students and faculty alike opened themselves and the value of their education to being judged by the public. This suggests that one way of countering the broader anxieties surrounding the Liberal Arts is to invest more heavily at the institutional levels in making the actual products of our students' learning more deliberately public by providing them with more opportunities to curate and exhibit their work.⁴ The paper argues that a powerful response to the public stereotypes and anxieties about liberal arts education is to have students actively prepare museum-style exhibitions in order to learn, and then serve as advocates for, a central aim of the liberal arts: valuing knowledge.

This essay will first briefly examine the similar discourses concerning museum and the liberal arts, and also highlight some key differences in those discourses. The context for Regis College as an institution, and for the courses and exhibits that serve the basis for the case study, will then be explicated in detail. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion regarding how using the best practices of museum work in classrooms can serve as a means of reframing the narrative about liberal arts education by alleviating the anxiety about the value of the liberal arts.

Shared Anxiety: Public Museums and Liberal Arts Institutions

As an industry, public museums of all types and sizes have worked hard to reshape the anxieties and the negative narratives constructed around them. In part, they have done so by acknowledging the institutional history of museums and the colonized history of many of their

⁴ Of course alumni magazines and institutional websites feature write-ups of student work, inclusive of carefully selected quotes from students regarding the importance of hands-on experiences. But it is also the case that there is often more talk about student work than exhibition of student work.

collections.⁵ As well, since the latter part of the twentieth century, museums have conducted public outreach emphasizing accessibility, inclusivity, community-building, informal education, and fun. For example, while the architecture of the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston is imposingly formal, its engagement with people is not. From Instagram queries “Do you have a work of art from our collection that you'd like to learn more about?” (complete with emojis) to Twitter reminders to parents “Looking for fun activities during February School Vacation Week? Stop by the MFA! Bring the kids to explore and make art, watch a hip-hop troupe performance and go on a family art walk,”⁶ the MFA consistently positions itself as a “regular Joe”: down-to-earth, friendly, a place where knowledge can be mutually constructed. Indeed, in 2015 a local man staged a brief protest against the MFA who “accuse[d] the Museum of Fine Arts of not being elitist enough” in its selection of paintings to display.⁷ None of this is to say that the MFA, or other museums like it, abandoned its more elite patrons or gala fund-raisers. However, it is the case that in the late twentieth century, museums in the United States generally recognized the need to shift the rhetoric coming from museums regarding knowledge, education, and betterment to language that embraced notions of community and community building. The emphasis is on a participatory model that trusts patrons’ “abilities as creators, remixers, and redistributors of content.”⁸ The participatory, democratized model does not always work perfectly or achieve its ideal of intellectually engaged

⁵ See: Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, ed. *Colonialism and the Object: Museums, Material Culture, and the Museum*. New York: Routledge, 1998 and Elizabeth Edwards, “Addressing Colonial Narratives in Museums,” 12 April 2018 <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/addressing-colonial-narratives-museums>

⁶ 4:36pm twitter feed 11 February 2019; 10 February 2019 Winslow Homer

⁷ <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2015/10/06/man-pickets-mfa-hates-renoir>. It is also the case that museums, especially art museums, must balance between the idea of access and the idea of “quiet contemplation” needed to fully absorb and understand a work of art. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/this-new-museum-doesnt-want-instagram-or-crowds-does-that-make-it-elitist/2018/08/30/eaf0028a-aa2b-11e8-8a0c-70b618c98d3c_story.html?utm_term=.14ed992743a0

⁸ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter1/>

patrons, but this theory of museum work has permanently shifted the conversation in terms of how museums should function, and can function, within communities.

In broad terms, liberal arts colleges have been much less successful in reframing the public narrative told about them than have museums. Perhaps most obviously, this is because of the very different levels of commitment involved in attending college versus that of attending a museum exhibit. A liberal arts education can take three-six years to complete, cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, create long-term debt, and involves selecting a major that apparently forever determines one's future earning potential. The stakes involved in terms of deciding which museum to attend for a few hours are qualitatively and quantitatively lower.

Public, non-profit museums, through entrance fees, memberships, and reservation schedules, can and do control the sheer number of people who walk through their doors. Through these methodologies, museums thus manifest some control over the economic profile of their patrons, but they cannot, for example, control who passes through their doors by using high school GPA. Thus, while a prospective patron of sufficient means for a public museum might feel anxious for any number of reasons about a visit—being unable to understand the objects on display, an unstated dress code—being *explicitly* refused entry will likely not be a central worry. Further, even if a patron does not fully understand a work of art, that patron is probably not concerned about being dismissed from the gallery as a result. In contrast, a prospective student for a liberal arts education institution is quite literally anxious as to whether or not s/he will be allowed to attend her/his institution of choice. After a student has been accepted into a liberal arts college, an entirely new set of anxieties come into being: affordability, maintaining adequate grades, the “rightness” of the decision to attend at all, are but a few of those worries. Meanwhile, those who are not accepted into their institution of choice, or who elect to apply to other types of

higher education institutions manifest different sets of concerns. Against this complicated backdrop, liberal arts institutions have struggled to adequately articulate their role in a wider community in ways that museums have not.

Indeed, one indicator of the anxieties within liberal arts colleges regarding the external anxieties about liberal colleges are the ways in which many institutions have capitulated to those external anxieties by distancing themselves from their core liberal arts ethos. This distancing ranges from redefining the sciences as falling outside of the liberal arts, to diverting resources to professional graduate degrees, to eliminating liberal arts programs completely.⁹ Meanwhile, an organization such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which advocates for the value higher education, has eschewed the term “liberal arts”, and in its mission statement seeks to “advance the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education”.¹⁰ A liberal education is not the same thing as a liberal arts education, something which the AAC&U itself acknowledges. This choice by the AAC&U is not necessarily a bad one, and indeed there is often quite a bit a slippage between the two terms. The phrase “liberal arts” is politically and socially loaded, hence the argument to drop the term and keep the ethos behind it.¹¹ Thus, in many ways, it might seem as though the threads of my argument are not all that new in that for years now, liberal arts institutions have struggled, to paraphrase essayist Michael Stoner, to tell its own

⁹ Andrew Yang, “Science as a Matter of (Liberal) Art,” <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/science-matter-liberal-art> Spring 2012; The Hechinger Report, “Making the Case for Liberal Arts,” <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2018-05-17/liberal-arts-programs-struggle-to-make-a-case-for-themselves> 17 May 2018; Colleen Flaherty, “Cuts to Liberal Arts at Goucher,” <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/08/17/goucher-college-says-its-eliminating-liberal-arts-programs-such-math-physics-and>, 17 August 2018

¹⁰ <https://www.aacu.org/about/mission>

¹¹ Michael Stoner, “Is it Time to say Goodbye to ‘Liberal Arts’?”, *InsideHigherEd* 6 September 2017 <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education/it-time-say-goodbye-liberal-arts>

stories well.¹² But to be clear, my argument is that as educators, we need to provide the exhibition spaces which allow students to tell the stories themselves, even when (or especially when) they do not tell those stories perfectly or the way we would. Institutionally, liberal arts colleges need to have trust in, and be brave about, our students.

Regis College, New England, and the Liberal Arts in Anxious Contexts

During academic years 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, the following New England liberal arts colleges closed: Mount Ida (Massachusetts), Newberry (Massachusetts), Green Mountain (Vermont). Hampshire College (Massachusetts) announced it would not admit its 2019 class of students to the institution, and that it was actively working to find a corporate or other partner to maintain its financial viability as an institution. Goddard College (Vermont) has two years to stabilize itself financially and administratively else it will lose its regional accreditation through the New England Council for Higher Education (NECHE).¹³ The full impact of the closures on the New England higher education ecosystem is still to be determined, but as of this writing, the Massachusetts State legislature is examining ways to hold private colleges to financial account and NECHE has been engaged in a re-examination of its own accreditation practices. In various ways, all those with a stake in higher education in New England are asking: How transparent should institutions and accrediting bodies be about the financial fragility of an institution when being public about that fragility might tip that college into closure? In other words, does transparency make a bad situation worse or does it confirm the inevitable? The one constant thread in these kinds of conversations is the litany “we don’t want [to be] another Mount Ida.”

¹² Michael Stoner, “Challenge for Liberal Arts Communicators: Telling True Stories Well,” *InsideHigherEd* 12 January 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education/challenge-liberal-arts-communicators>

¹³ <https://vtdigger.org/2018/12/21/goddard-college-eliminates-positions-and-plans-more-cutbacks-next-month/>

The closure of Mount Ida caused massive shockwaves across New England in part because of the apparent speed by which it occurred. In the space of two weeks, students were first informed that the college was stable and then told the college was in such financial difficulties that it needed to merge with another institution; the merger itself then failed. In the end, graduating Mount Ida students disinvented the President and the Board of Trustees from the college's final commencement ceremonies in May 2018. Mount Ida students are still grieving, and still angry.¹⁴

No liberal arts institution in New England, and in Massachusetts in particular, wants to be “the next Mount Ida” or “the next Newberry”; the anxiety runs deep. With Harvard and Yale as perhaps the expected exceptions, newspapers and other local media have over the past year produced numerous articles and think-pieces that generally smooth out the edges of difference between liberal arts colleges. In 2019 New England all private liberal arts colleges are Mount Ida until proven otherwise. The immediate anxiety cannot be overstated, and must also be situated within the broader, now decades-old characterizations of liberal arts colleges as elite and out-of-touch with real world concerns.

Within this ecosystem sits Regis College, the subject of this particular case study. Regis College was founded in 1927 by the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Boston as an undergraduate liberal arts college for women, particularly Catholic women, who had few other options if they wanted

¹⁴ The *Boston Globe*, as well as InsideHigherEd.com covered the situation at Mount Ida extensively. It is also the case that Regis College took in the Mount Ida Dental Hygiene program, a half-dozen faculty and staff from several programs, and approximately eighty students. Laura Krantz, “Former Mount Ida students sue, accuse former college leaders of fraud,” <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/11/26/former-mount-ida-students-sue-accusing-college-leaders-fraud/yjnFGLT8s4MHGbRycSrKEL/story.html> 26 November 2018; Laura Krantz, “Former Mount Ida students and staff try to move forward,” 22 November 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/11/22/former-mount-ida-students-professors-pick-pieces/9KmZGGo1ZRnnciJnO7WkrM/story.html> ; “Massachusetts plans closer oversight of private colleges,” <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/01/22/state-plans-closer-oversight-for-private-colleges/3GRhJ5ztDDen7jhxQLhDcJ/story.html> 23 January 2019

to earn a degree. The founding of the college was thus in keeping with the mission of the Sisters: “to serve the underserved”. While the definition of who, precisely, the underserved are has evolved over throughout the history of the institution, the mission has nonetheless remained fundamental to Regis’s identity. Over time, Regis has become co-ed, expanded into graduate degrees, and within the past fifteen years re-positioned itself as a multi-faceted institution with strong nursing and allied health programs which have come to overshadow the more traditional liberal arts programs. Currently, one third of Regis students are undergraduates within a traditional residential college experience, and two-thirds are graduate students within face-to-face or completely online programs that fall within the nursing and allied health professions. Well prior to the fall of Mount Ida, Regis had shifted away from characterizing itself as only an undergraduate liberal arts institution, but the anxiety remains. Even so, its undergraduate core curriculum remains rooted in the liberal arts, with required courses in Ethics and Philosophy, as well as the more typical requirements in writing and quantitative reasoning.

Case-Study: Creating Exhibits

A participatory museum:

in addition to producing consistent content, participatory institutions must also design opportunities for visitors to share their own content in meaningful and appealing ways. Supporting participation means trusting visitors’ abilities as creators, remixers, and redistributors of content. It means being open to the possibility that a project can grow and change post-launch beyond the institution’s original intent.¹⁵

The language Simon uses to describe a participatory museum has clear implications when applied within an educational setting, in part because her language echoes that used to describe

¹⁵ <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter1/>

high-impact teaching practices. The ideas of co-created knowledge, moving away from the “sage on the stage” model, active participation leading to deeper knowledge, all resonate. The central difference, however, between the participatory museum and high-impact practices in higher education is that the participatory museum always assumes an outside public audience. High-impact practices assume the relationship between the faculty and the students, but within this framework, the idea of an outside audience is negotiable, but it should not be; it is a hedging of bets. If students are truly active participants in their learning and creating something of value, and if liberal arts education is living up to its promise, then the work of the students can stand the scrutiny of an audience outside of the classroom and the eyes of the individual faculty member. This is not to deny that much of the work students produce is, essentially, the rough draft for the greater and better work to come. I am not suggesting that scaffolded work and small-scale efforts leading up to a final product should be subjected to critique from outside of the classroom. Students deserve a level of privacy within the process of learning, and a supportive classroom environment within which they can safely make mistakes, test ideas, and be students. But so much of student work is kept outside of the public eye that perhaps that is one reason why students themselves often doubt the value of the work they are doing in liberal arts institutions.

In spring 2013, as part of a work-study project, two students from the Regis College History Department, had inventoried the art acquired by the college over the past eighty years. The college has a distinct Catholic identity inflected by the social justice position of its founders; the art college very much reflects a Catholic tradition. During the next academic year, my students and I in a Museum Practicum course designed and curated an exhibit highlighting the history of the college using this art collection. The following year, a different cohort of students curated an exhibit using artifacts from Papua New Guinea donated to Regis from a former

professor of history. Students next worked with sculptor Nancy Schoen (“Make Way for Ducklings”), to curate the first- ever retrospective of her entire body of work—spanning from her first project as a 1940s high school senior (a small-scale sculpt of a lion) through her most recent piece (a butterfly with a 4-foot wing span) in 2017. In each case, the exhibits were designed during the fall semester, and installed in the first week of the spring semester; all of the work, with the exception of climbing up a 9-foot ladder to install the latex lettering for the exhibit title, was accomplished by the students.

Depending on the year, the students enrolled in the course had varying skill sets and knowledge; their majors ranged from History to Art, from English to Communication. A few had served as volunteers at museums, but none had ever curated an exhibit. Certainly, none of them knew how write an interpretative label or how to place objects in relationship to each other to create a cohesive visual experience and narrative for a viewer. Therefore, while each exhibit had its own, topic-specific needs and content-related areas of emphasis, the class from year to year featured similar elements and a fairly standard pedagogical structure.

The first element all of the classes had in common was an established body of artefacts from which the students were allowed to create the exhibit. In other words, in any particular year, the students did not have a choice about the topic of the exhibit. Their choices involved the particular story they wanted to tell both about, and through, the objects. They decided which objects should be left out of the exhibit narrative, how to place the objects in conversation with one another, and how to promote the exhibit to others so there would be an audience for what they had accomplished. These were not exhibits featuring student work in the traditional sense, but it is also the case that the exhibits were nothing but the work of the students. I can imagine a class where the frame was not pre-selected for students, especially if they already had some

experience in curation and exhibits, but for this class, that first decision had to be made without him in order to provide them with the boundaries within which they could work.

Another element each exhibit had in common was that each one was installed in the Fine Art Center's Carney Gallery. The space is unusually shaped. It is not square, but rather is best likened to an irregular trapezoid, with a glass entry-way previewing the exhibit that lies within. To assist students in visualizing how their exhibit would fit in the space, time would be spent in the gallery during class time, however a professional exhibit would already be in that space, filling it up. Confronting the empty space in the spring, with a long, blank, imposing wall needing to be filled with objects, and a strange corner that declared itself to be a dead space, students invariably panicked, just a bit, before getting down to work. And the carefully laid plans of the fall semester just as invariably underwent revisions to accommodate the specifics of the empty space.

Pedagogically, each year had its own specific challenges and targeted instructor interventions, but the learning outcomes, essential assignments, scaffolding, timeline, and overall approach remained the same. Each year, it was important that the students knew that the decisions involving the final shape and story of the exhibit was theirs, not mine. I might suggest a grammatical change to a label, or nudge students to measure the gallery wall before they hung the objects, but the final decisions—all of the great successes and the small mistakes—were theirs. Even when I had misgivings about a choice they were making, ultimately I left it to the students as a group to determine whether that choice was correct or not. I defined myself as a spotter—the person who watches the gymnast fly through the air, and catches them only when something goes horrifically wrong.

It was also very important to make it clear from the outset of the course, and in every class, that the Carney Gallery was relying on the students to complete their plans for the exhibit at the conclusion of the fall semester so that it could be installed during one intensive week in January when classes resumed. While the layout of the exhibit might be tweaked during the installation process—when objects enter into a space, it is not uncommon for some re-arranging to occur—the object labels and the gallery guide needed to be complete, printer- and public-ready. Ultimately, the students’ work would be assessed by anyone who visited the gallery, and while I could (and would) be flexible on my own internal deadlines given the collective nature of the work, the outside final deadlines were final. The students had ethical obligations to each other, the Gallery, and to me to grade (least of all) to turn their work in on time.

During the first few weeks each semester, students were required to read selections from Beverly Serrell’s book *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*; it is literally the only book on how to write museum labels. They were also required to read topic-specific texts concerning the subject of the exhibit, be it the history of Regis College, the religion and culture of Papua New Guinea, or the process of casting bronze. But also right from the start, students were required to jump into the process of creating the exhibit.¹⁶ The first day of class, students were asked in class to examine photographs of the objects to be displayed, and to then create an initial mission statement for the exhibit. Each student had to read that mission statement aloud, and post it to the

¹⁶ In this regard, my process and pedagogy differs from that outlined by Susan Rodgers in her excellent article on a very similar topic, in part because she had much more by way of the luxury of time, “Toward a pedagogy for faculty and student co-responsibility in curating college museum exhibitions,” *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 2015, Vol. 14(2): 150–165. However, Rodgers and I both have similar approaches in terms of the value of student ownership over the curatorial process, and the importance of having students demonstrate their knowledge through exhibit creation.

course Learning Management System. By the end of the third week, a collective mission statement for the exhibit was decided on, and every object selected for the exhibit had to relate back to that mission.

While the creation of each exhibit was the work of a collective of students working in collaboration, it was also the case that to assess and grade the students, individual work had to be assigned which flowed back into the collective creation of the exhibit. All students had to select five objects which interested them and write five individual labels for those objects that adhered to the best practices for label writing as articulated by Serrell. Students were told that these labels would be made public to the other students in the class after I had first reviewed them. Mid-way through the semester, all students also had to write a five-page object history of an individual piece; this required more in-depth research and often inflected the overall shape of the exhibit as it developed. Students were also required to write individual, public blog entries about the exhibit over the course of the semester; this helped to make the public nature of the exhibit more tangible for students. All students were required to write individual essays at the end of the semester reflecting on what they learned during the process curating the exhibit; this self-reflection is critical.¹⁷

In addition to the collective assignment of designing and curating the exhibit, students were also required to develop and run a fall event open only to members of the Regis community which would generate interest and curiosity about the exhibit for the spring. The first class

¹⁷ It has been long documented that students must reflect on their learning both in order to deepen that learning and to better prepare them to apply that learning to new situations in the future. Ronald Fry and Donald Kolb, "Experiential Learning Theory and Learning Experiences in Liberal Arts Education," *New Directions for Experiential Learning* Enriching the Liberal Arts through Experiential Learning Number 6 (Jossey-Bass Incorporated, 1979): 81.

hosted a pop-up museum event, the second worked with student-groups to host an event celebrating different cultural expressions of masks, and the third sponsored an “art therapy/stress relief” evening during final exam week and encouraged drop-in participants to create their own art. These different events tapped into the various social strengths of the students, and was yet another way to prepare them for the public nature of the exhibit while limiting that initial publicness to the relatively safe public of Regis.

The label-writing exercise occurred very early on in the semester, before the students had really settled on what the thematic or narrative structure of the exhibit would be, before they really knew how to work together, and with a very rudimentary understanding of Serrell’s text. So of course I had each student select what they felt was their best label and then projected it on the screen for the entire class to see. The label’s author read that text out loud and then I asked the class as a whole to edit the label with myself serving as the class secretary. This exercise served multiple purposes. First, students got their first small taste of exposing their work to people other than me. Second, in reading their label out loud, students could hear where the label might need some improvement; many students immediately started to self-edit the label on the fly while reading it aloud to their classmates. Third, in collectively editing labels of 150 words (which is the outer limit for an individual object label), students began to learn how to work together in constructive, honest ways in order to ensure that the final product would be of sufficient quality for a complete stranger.

Invariably, often students felt awkward and anxious about reading their label out loud, and the peer editing started out as stilted and polite. Students were over-cautious with one another, not wanting to offend, not feeling expert enough—either as writers or as content experts—to voice a suggestion regarding what someone else had written. I would remind them:

this label might be a part of our final exhibit, so what can we do to make it even better than it is now? As the instructor, my anxiety was always about keeping myself quiet during this first exercise. I made no suggestions, would not comment on whether the revisions contradicted each other or made the label stronger or weaker, I simply typed and prompted students to speak out. In one semester, students blossomed in the space of one class session, correctly interpreting my silence and digging into the labels with vigor and precision. In another semester, this exercise was much more painful, with student anxiety over getting things wrong and my apparent lack of guidance resulting in surface edits and generic comments along the lines of “I think this label is pretty good.” The third class was a mix, with some students engaging enthusiastically with the process, and others not quite willing to do so and content to rely on the more outspoken students to do the work of public editing.

Notably, the overall class performance during this exercise was not a predictor of the success of the exhibit; each class faced different types of hurdles during the semester. Some of those hurdles were related to the content of the exhibit itself, other hurdles were rooted in the personal dynamics of the students who made up the class. Ultimately, all of the different classes produced quality, public-ready work, with the strengths and weaknesses of any curated exhibit. Some of the students became leaders, other realized that they had a talent for spatial thinking. All of the students saw improvement in their writing and in their problem-solving skills. All of the students contributed to the overall success of the exhibit, from label writing to holding up a painting while three others measured its distance from another exhibit object. As a collaborative endeavor, students took on different roles and contributed differently, albeit equally, to the final product.

Another reason to have the label-writing exercise so early in the semester was to facilitate a connection between the students, the objects, and the people behind those objects. Although the art and objects for each class were quite radically different from one another, they all fell outside of the daily lives of the students. Initially, the students had neither the social nor the cultural context into which they could situate the artefacts. In the case of “Following Our Path”, students were working with Catholic religious art and artefacts from a time in the college’s history that was far removed from their own lives. For “Stories of the Unfamiliar”, students were faced with spirit boards and masks from a place they had never heard of. With “The Art and Life of Nancy Schoen,” students contended with living artist over 80 years of age with her own ideas about her work. None of the students in these classes would have elected to curate an exhibit based on these sets of materials, but well before the end of the semesters, all of the students felt ethically bound to “do right” by the objects and the people whose lives were represented by those objects.

In the case of “The Art and Life”, the class visited Ms. Schoen’s house. They saw her workshop, how her life’s work was displayed throughout her home, and took oral histories from her about many of the pieces. While initially intimidated by Ms. Schoen, the students quickly grew to love and respect her. They therefore placed enormous pressure on themselves to not let the artist down and to create an exhibit that could compete with an MFA exhibit. With “Stories of the Unfamiliar”, the creators of the spirit boards and masks were long dead. It was not even clear if the faculty member from the 1960s who had donated the materials to Regis had bought the artefacts directly from artists, or had obtained them in some other way. But as the students learned about the history of Papua New Guinea and investigated similar-looking spirit boards and masks, they became determined to represent the objects with deep care and respect because those who had created them never had the chance to represent themselves; the students did not

want to reinscribe a history of colonialism. The students who curated “Following our Path”, decided that using different parts of the charism of the Sisters of Saint Joseph to organize the exhibit thematically served as a practical solution to the thorny problem of cohesively structuring the art and artefacts available to them. That decision led them to engage much more deeply with the history of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, especially those who had taught at Regis over the years. All of the students in the class decided that their primary audience for the exhibit were the Sisters themselves, but they also wanted to create something that truly reflected the lived values of the Sisters to outsiders.

In general, the public response to each of the exhibits was extremely positive. Various member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph Boston congregation told the students that they felt the exhibit represented them. Gallery audiences were struck by the display of the spirit boards and masks, and by how open the students were in the exhibit labels about their collective lack of knowledge about the specifics of each piece, even as those artefacts were situated within a larger history. Nancy Schoen, her family, and many others were impressed by how the students framed out an artistic and personal biography of Schoen through the exhibit. Thus, each exhibit while not explicitly about the students, was always already implicitly only ever about them and their ability to write, to communicate, to create cohesive narratives, to manage a project, to measure, to make ethical decisions. Behind that, because those exhibits were so public, they were also about my own ability as a faculty member to teach the students the appropriate skills and content such that they could exhibit themselves and feel confident in doing so.

There were also critiques of the work of the students. Some of the labels were not smoothly written, the narrative arc of the exhibit that seemed so clear to the students was opaque to some, and many other small-scale errors made their way to me. The public audience did not

see the process of learning that went into the exhibit, they did not know where the students had started and how very far they had come, but that was for me and the students to know, not the audience. They could only judge the final product, and judge they did. The students took in those critiques, acknowledged them, and it did not stop them from feeling proud in what they had accomplished. It did not stop them from wanting more of the same type of public experience, inclusive of the critiques, because the students were confident that next time they would create something even better. They engaged with the audience in the same way that the best museum professionals do within their community.

Conclusion

This essay began with a comparison between museums and liberal arts institutions, the rhetoric applied to them, and the ways in which both sets of institutions have responded to that rhetoric. Museums are public spaces. It is part of their mission, in the broadest sense, to not only preserve artefacts, but to exhibit them, and through the exhibition, to educate. The mission of liberal arts institutions is to educate, but perhaps it is well past time for that mission to also include a larger measure of publicness when it comes to student work, by an expansion of what is meant when we talk about exhibiting the work of students, and as faculty and administrators by letting go of the need to curate that work for students, and to instead provide students with the tools to curate and exhibit their work themselves.