
From Rare Books to Real Connections

Rethinking Outreach Through Active Engagement with Primary Resources

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ABSTRACT Brews & Books is an event series designed to increase engagement with our library's Special Collections through intentional, community-centered programming. Held three times a semester, each event features hand-selected materials curated by our Reference and Instruction team. These events invite students, faculty, and staff to view unique materials in person while enjoying coffee and tea in a relaxed setting. To enhance access for our hybrid and distance learners, we created a LibGuide that includes digitized versions of the materials, supporting resources, and event visuals. By connecting archival materials and rare books to classroom discussions, current events, and student interests, Brews & Books bridges academic content with community life, while demystifying the research process and showcasing the richness of Special Collections. The collaboration between departments not only fostered greater internal knowledge sharing but also helped students become more confident and curious researchers. Through this initiative, we created new opportunities for discovery, both within our Special Collections and across our campus.

THE "WHAT"

Have you ever felt stuck when it comes to creating unique, engaging, and meaningful outreach programming at your library? If so, you are in luck! Staff members from the Reference, Instruction, and Outreach Department and the Special Collections Department at Pitts Theology

Library have collaborated in building a successful outreach model, called Brews & Books, and we are excited to share what we have learned along the way. In short, Brews & Books is an event centered on an item, or items, from our Special Collections Department. Each member of our Reference and Instruction team chose two items for a total of six events over the course of the academic year. The event itself involves having materials from Special Collections available for viewing, under the watchful eye of our colleagues, a monitor to present our information slides, bookmarks created especially for the event, and of course...coffee and tea.

THE “WHY”

Community

Library staff can stand in the gap between students’ interests and the material being discussed in the classroom. As we were planning, we thought about how the event could come alongside students, faculty, and staff and connect to what they are already learning and talking about. We brought in our observations from the classroom, conversations with students, and wider community issues and asked how we could leverage the unique materials in our library to match those interests. As this community is dispersed—a large portion attend as hybrid students—it was important that this event served all members of our community.

For our in-person contingent, we hoped the event would inspire the use of primary resources in research. By displaying physical items from our collection, we hoped to kindle interest in other primary sources. Not only do the events bring us together to build relationships, but they also support our goal of helping students to become more confident researchers. For our distance learners, even though these events would take place on campus, the hope was that these students would be able to see the items digitally. With the creation of a LibGuide, they were able to see the items, engage with related resources, and be connected to other digital offerings from our collection.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

These events showcased the breadth and depth of the materials we hold in Special Collections. Many students are unaware of the materials that we have, and this allowed us to discuss not just the item on display, but others that might pertain to their research.

If something is already digitized, we could use that content. If not, then we have a great in-house digitization process with our colleague Ann McShane who could digitize the materials.

As with many libraries, the archive at Pitts is housed in an area that is a little hidden. The department is several floors up and behind locked doors. This is not an area that a student would just stumble upon, and while that is by design, it is still important for students to know that it exists. The Brews & Books event allows the library to showcase eye-catching materials so that students can discover the Special Collections.

It is necessarily difficult to access materials in Special Collections. Sometimes the process can be a little intimidating, so ensuring that staff from Special Collections are at the Brews & Books events provides a face and a specific email for students to contact to access materials. There are a few extra hoops to jump through, but we want these materials used, so it is beneficial to be able to reassure students of that at these events.

Additionally, it is easy for each department to be very focused on their own work and protocols. The Brews & Books event brought together our main Reference department, which has the most face-to-face interaction with students, and our Special Collections department. This event allowed for the Reference Department to become a little more familiar with what is held in Special Collections, which means they can point more students in our direction when appropriate, and they can explain how to access the Special Collections department.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Planning each Brews & Books event followed the same rough timeline:

- Choose Item(s)

- Research Item(s) and Context
- Create Visuals
- Promote & Execute
- Evaluate

Choosing items always began with what is available in our collection—whether it was part of a larger set of materials (e.g. our Wesleyana) or to highlight a lesser-known resource (e.g. our stereoscope). The first aspect of selecting an item from the archives was to look through the Finding Aids, Digital Collections site, and Library catalog. While doing so, we were also thinking about who would be interested in, and attend, the event. As we have already mentioned, this includes supporting events or conversations already happening on campus (e.g. Douglas choice) or specific classes. Since we wanted this to reach the largest number of people, we knew it should also be available digitally. Sometimes our choices highlighted items that were already fully digitized, but it was exciting when we could use the event as an opportunity to digitize items that had not yet been digitized.

After selecting an item, we would physically pull the item from the archives and go about researching the primary source. Performing research with the physical object included looking through the item, making notes, taking pictures, and noting anything unique or unexpected.

After viewing the primary source, we continued our research with additional sources that could illuminate its context and broaden the conversation about its importance. This research was central to the visuals we created for each event. These were slides that included key information about the item in its context (historical, theological, religious, cultural, etc.), images of the item, ways to connect the item to larger conversations or themes (conceptions of time and its representation in print, for example), and suggestions for further reading. They were displayed on a monitor during the event and then converted to images and included on our LibGuide, which was also accessible via a QR code in the day-of version of the slides. There, they were combined with links to books, articles, and other special collections available from the library. Lastly, we used images of the item to create a unique bookmark for each event, again with a QR code to the LibGuide.

In addition to these visuals, it was equally important to create promotional graphics. Working alongside our Communications student worker, we created a graphic template utilizing Emory branding color schemes. We promoted the event through our weekly newsletter, the Prospectus, on Instagram, and through the student and faculty email listservs. Once the event date arrived, all that was left was to set up all the materials. Because Brews & Books is held just outside the library's front doors, there is some minimal furniture rearrangement required. We set up tables, bring down the brewed coffee and tea, and display the screen and Special Collections materials.

Lastly, it was important to evaluate whether Brews & Books was a good use of staff time and resources. We tracked how many people came to each event, how many LibGuide views we got, and how many appointments in Special Collections were made because of one of these outreach events. During the 2024-2025 school year, we reached over 200 community members, had 140 LibGuide views, and four people made appointments in Special Collections to explore materials in greater depth. Since the Brews & Books events are a relatively light lift for library staff, it has been determined that it is worthwhile to continue this outreach programming again during the 2025-2026 academic year.

We encourage you to consider what kind of similar programming might be possible at your own institution. We hope you will make use of the Brews & Books Annex1 that contains template designs and other detailed information to help with the creative process. Good luck!

NOTES

- 1 See <https://guides.theology.library.emory.edu/brewsandbooks>.