The 2015-2016 academic year will mark the 15th anniversary of the Jean and Charles Schulz Information Center. Important offerings by the University Library over those 15 years have included a robust Arts and Lectures program. I was awarded a four month sabbatical to begin the organization of a 15th Anniversary catalog (both in print and online) to showcase all of the fabulous exhibitions and programs that have taken place since the very first exhibit “Peanuts Goes to College: The Work of Charles M. Schulz” in October 2000. What follows is a brief summary of the progress I made on this project during my four month sabbatical.

I was most excited to begin working with all the disparate bits of information, the unique pieces that tell the story of each exhibit, lecture series, and program. As I had mentioned in my sabbatical application I have been a much better curator of exhibits and programs than an archivist of those programs. Turning the individual data elements into a meaningful database was my highest priority. I needed to sort through, gather, and find materials that were loosely organized in folders, stashed in boxes, stored as slides, photos, and film, held digitally on various cameras (owned by the library, artists, myself, and other collaborators), kept on my computer as well as computers from collaborators, and saved on CD-ROMS and flash drives in my work and home offices.

Of course, I was overly optimistic about ease of this first phase of the project. I didn’t realize how much actual “stuff” was associated with over 60 exhibits. I under-estimated the amount of time, patience, and determination necessary to find these materials and track down artists and collaborators. For example, I was aware that one artist had passed away but I wasn’t aware of the complexity of her estate. It has been extremely difficult trying to gain access to and use of some of her images that we exhibited. Also, I didn’t anticipate the number of technical difficulties I would encounter. Some of those difficulties were because of software programs that don’t exist anymore or technology that has become obsolete. While these issues slowed my progress, I was able to identify a few solutions such as using a combination of scanning and/or rebuilding from disparate elements. I still have work to complete on this first phase of the project but have confidence I will ultimately gain access to the majority of the necessary materials.

The creation of a print and an online catalog is the end product of all the data gathering and organizing. Interestingly, because the data gathering process was so much more time- and labor-intensive than anticipated, I had a greater amount of time to think about the presentation of the final catalog. Prior to starting the project I had thought to create a book with a simple chronological organization. However, working more slowly with the material, different patterns and ideas were able to emerge. Because the mission of the Library Art Gallery is to support the campus curriculum it was not surprising that we hosted a number of exhibits about the environment, immigration, and incarceration.
What was surprising was the large number of exhibits on each of these subjects. Naturally the gallery exhibited work by student artists and student curators but we also showed a great deal of work by SSU alums working as professional artists, numerous international artists, artists of color, holocaust victims and survivors, and a remarkably large number of female artists. Another realization I had during the slow data gathering process was about the editorial content. I realized if I asked artists and collaborators to contribute short essays about working with the program the final catalog would more deeply reflect the impact of the Arts and Lectures program. I also had time to able to mock-up several ideas for the print cover, one of which I like very much.

Developing ideas and prototypes for a print catalog is one thing; developing a dynamic interactive online catalog is quite another. Exploring how museums and galleries were presenting “exhibits and catalogs” online was an important part of my sabbatical project. I was hoping to discover a software package that would allow for some fabulous, interactive presentations which I could use for posting the 15th Anniversary catalog online. I examined 47 online art institutions (museums, galleries) of various sizes, and 10 other “cultural” institutions (theater companies, dance companies). I was surprised to find that most organizations display exhibits in a very static fashion. A few organizations were using a program called Omeka, something I held great hope for prior to starting my sabbatical. None of the organizations using Omeka seemed to do so in a sustainable manner. A few of the larger institutions appeared to have created their own programs but had not made anything available for a wider group of users.

Examining these online exhibits gave me the opportunity to increase my knowledge and awareness of specific copyright laws. For example, while it is often clear who owns the copyright of a piece of artwork, it can often be very murky who owns the copyright of a photograph of an artwork as well as the photographs of an exhibit of artworks. Further, it can be quite a challenge determining who is the current copyright holder when creating a publication years after an initial exhibition. While contacting institutions about the software they used for online displays, I was also able to discuss how they handled certain copyright issues and permissions. The sabbatical gave me time to read in-depth such important copyright resources as “Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Academic and Research Libraries,” “The Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education,” “Copyright, Permissions, and Fair Use Among Visual Artists and the Academic and Museum Visual Arts Communities,” “Visual Resources Association: Statement on the Fair Use of Images for Teaching, Research, and Study” and other such resources. The complexity of copyright is astounding and having had time to read and focus on these topics helped me gain a better understanding of the unique issues surrounding the preservation and publication of creative and artistic endeavors.

While the lack of an obvious dynamic exhibition software product was disheartening, I was able to talk through many of the issues with our Web Services Librarian. She helped me understand there might be different approaches for harnessing the types of technological output I was seeking. We are both excited by the Provost’s vision of promoting creativity as a cornerstone of our campus. We decided the 15th Anniversary
Arts and Lectures online catalog project would prove a perfect pilot project for how to best approach online presentation and preservation of the creative work of SSU faculty and students. Currently, the Library uses a program called dSpace for SSU ScholarWorks, the campus Institutional Repository, and ContentDM for electronically preserving special collections items. Neither of these software packages is really satisfactory for dynamically presenting the creative work (such as dance, performance, or dynamic exhibition catalogs) of faculty and students. We will begin working closely during the fall semester to identify approaches for presenting a dynamic, digital exhibition catalog to be ready by fall 2015.

Another goal for my sabbatical was to develop an exhibition schedule for the 2015-2016 academic year that would reflect the excitement of the past 15 years while also looking toward the future. By slowly going through each past exhibit and program I was able to visualize exhibits that will include works by alumni, students, faculty, student curators, local artists, and even a surprise twist. By the end of my sabbatical I had developed exhibitions plans for all four exhibitions and contacted several of the artists and lenders.