



# Students as Curators

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**W**ith presenting as a major component of the new Secondary Core Art Standards, high-school students are expected to become well-versed in the process of not only showing their artwork, but curating and contextualizing their work in a thoughtful way. But have they been trained in the nuance and complexity that is involved in finding space and preparing work for exhibitions?

## A Museum/School Partnership

Provo High School and the Springville Museum of Art in Springville, Utah, have embarked on a partnership program in which high-school students are mentored through the process of curating and mounting professional exhibitions. This innovative program gives students direct access to museum professionals and opportunities to thoughtfully work through the various steps of exhibition planning and development. Throughout the school year, students learn about and practice developing an exhibition thesis, finding and understanding gallery space, writing about exhibitions and artwork, and creating branding and marketing plans for an exhibition.

## Thesis Development and More

The first stage of this program is exploring and understanding the

big idea that guides any exhibition. Students practice developing exhibition thesis statements and gathering small collections of works (on postcards) to support their thesis. Writing skills, critical thinking, and self-editing are all important steps of this process that will serve students later in life as professional artists or in other professional ventures.

Following thesis development, students explore exhibition design and logistical issues such as budget and

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spatial limitations. This provides constraints to further enable their creativity and ability to make thoughtful and focused decisions. Part of this learning process involves field trips to museums and galleries where students conduct evaluations of the exhibition on display. Students are able to critique and assess everything from work selection and organization to lighting and design.

## From Proposal to Exhibition

Students then put their learning to the test as they develop exhibi-

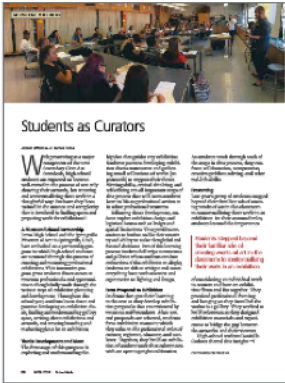
tion proposals that are reviewed by museum staff members. After several proposals are selected, students form exhibition teams in which they take on the professional roles of curator, registrar, educator, and marketer. Together, they build an exhibition of student work that culminates with an opening-night celebration. As students work through each of the steps in this process, they confront collaboration, compromise, creative problem solving, and other real-life skills.

## Presenting

Last year's group of students stepped beyond their familiar role of creating works of art in the classroom to contextualizing their work in an exhibition. In their assumed roles, students learned the importance of considering an individual work in context and how an exhibition flows and fits together. They practiced professional framing and hanging as they installed the works in a gallery. They worked to build relevance as they designed exhibition materials and experiences to bridge the gap between the artworks and their viewers.

High-school student Danielle Corbett shared this insight: "I


CONTINUED ON PAGE 49.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26.

gained a better understanding of roles within art museums, as well as the work which goes into pulling off a successful exhibit. I was able to put myself in the shoes of professional curatorial teams and gained a huge respect for all the work they do. Hanging the show itself took us more than five hours, and I look at art museums much differently now. I have a much deeper appreciation for how art is shown, as well as the big ideas behind popular art exhibits."

**Reflections**

By the end of exhibition, students more completely understood the presenting standard. They moved from conceptualizing a big idea, to making thoughtful works related to a central thesis, to writing about their work to build audience relevance, and finally, to preparing and arranging works in a professional-style exhibition. This program—a collaborative venture between an art teacher and a museum educator—has helped students grow in their ability to convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work. 

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**WEB LINKS**

- [www.smofa.org](http://www.smofa.org)
- [provohigh.provo.edu/faculty-staff/teacher-course-directory/Rees-James/](http://provohigh.provo.edu/faculty-staff/teacher-course-directory/Rees-James/)