

Community Engagement through Academic Museums

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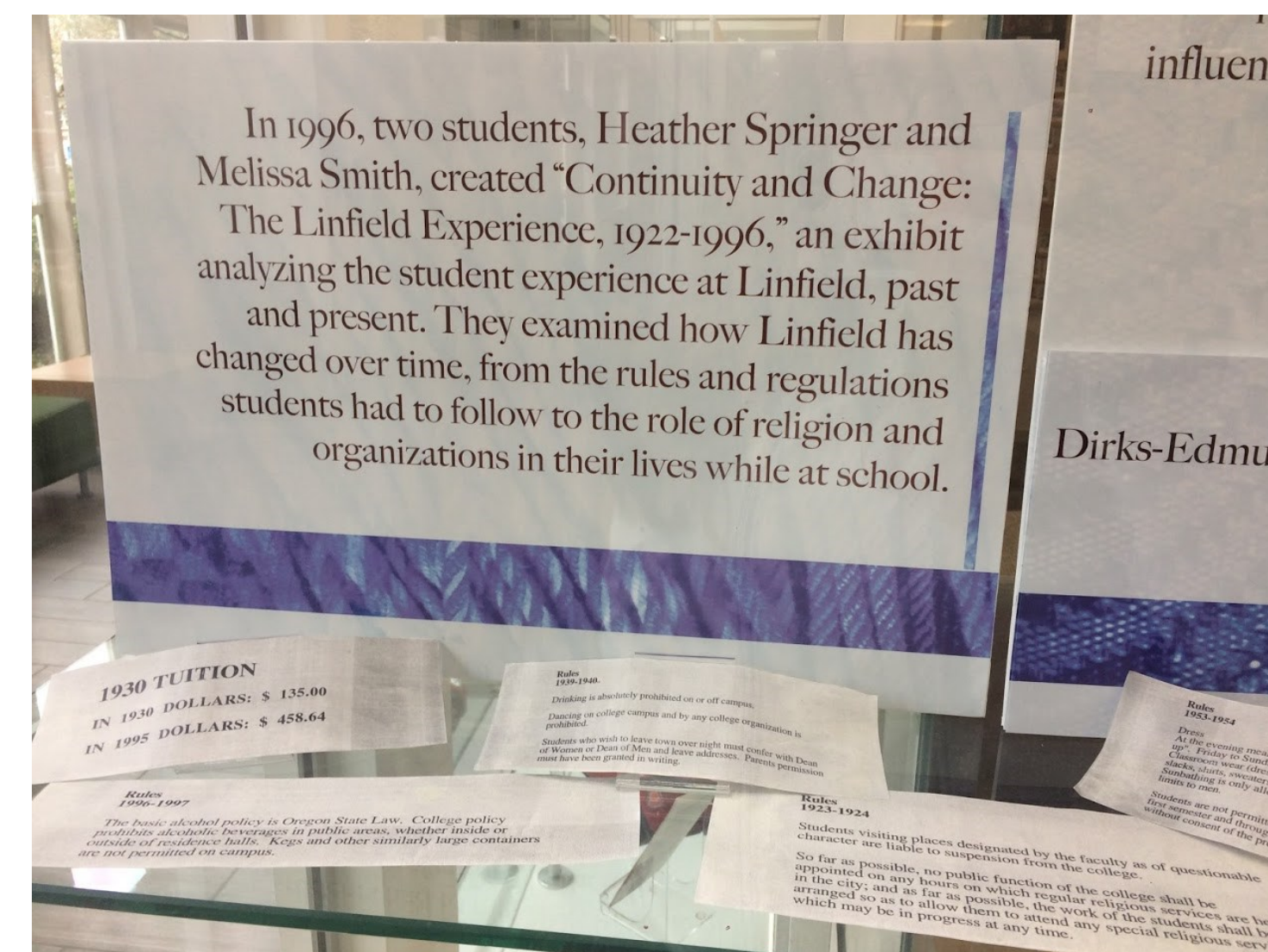


Introduction

The Linfield Anthropology Museum (LAM) is run by the SoAn department of Linfield College. It was created in the late 1980s, mainly by a group of dedicated students, with the help of Joel Marrant, a professor of Anthropology. This theme of being student-led has continued to this day, where students work to create exhibits, either for classes or as an honors thesis. It got its start from boxes of objects that had been donated to the college and has grown substantially to include collections of world-class artifacts and fully-fledged exhibit space that is open to the public.

How do small academic museums, like the Linfield Anthropology Museum, interact and engage with their community, and in what ways is the community impacted and benefitted by the museum? I used a chronological approach, examining how the community interacted with the museum over time. This is because the museum's founding and development correspond with a shift in museum thought towards a more community-oriented perspective, and this change could have an impact on the LAM as well.

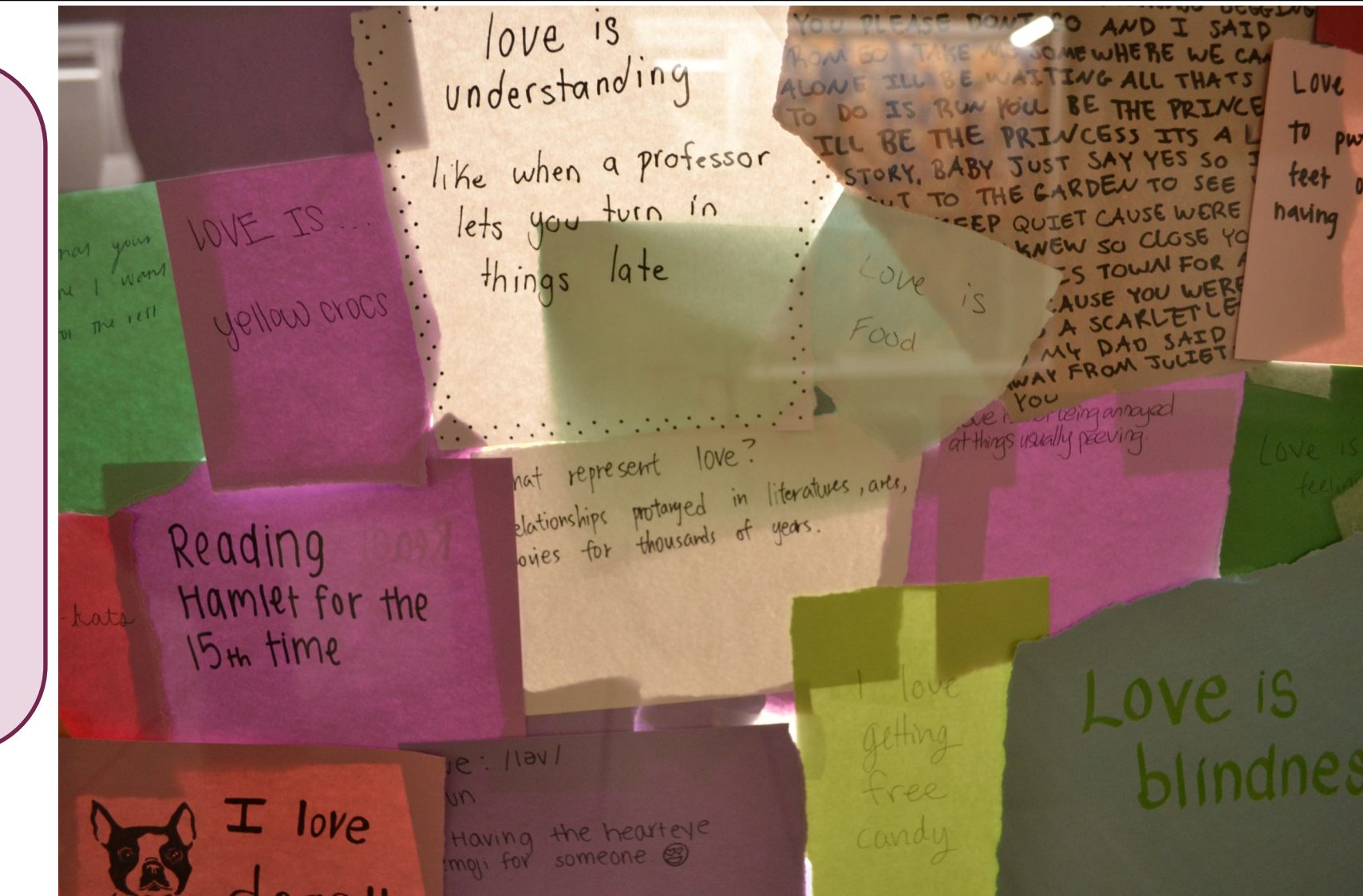
Continuity and Change: The Linfield Experience (1996) This exhibit created by students in 1996, was one of the early instances of community engagement. They traced how the school changed over time, from the rules and regulations that the students had to follow to the role of religion and organizations in their lives. Through this exhibit, the museum was trying to engage and unite the wider community of the college as a whole, by choosing a topic that they could relate to and that was relevant to their lives.



The Linfield Anthropology Museum, although it existed prior, really came into being in 1991, when a building renovation gave it its own exhibit space. Before this point, the community that the museum was involved with was mainly students and teachers involved in the SoAn department that were working with the objects. It was behind a solid door, in a small room with only a single window. The internal community of the museum really enjoyed having a space of its own, as it allowed them to completely transform the space into whatever they wanted and gave them a place to all work together to create something. However, it was also limiting. In this location, both the museum and its community were isolated. Thomas Love, a professor of Anthropology, said that "Although there was signage and it was a public space, 'you had to intentionally go into it, it wasn't very public, oddly enough'" (T. Love, Skype interview, 16 March 2018). The earliest exhibits created by the museum were not very focused on the museum, choosing rather to show the various collections that were a part of the museum.

Unreasonably Human: Material Expressions of Love and Hate (2017)

Since this transition, two exhibits have significantly engaged with the community, in different ways than in the previous location. The first, "Unreasonably Human: Material Expressions of Love and Hate," although not specifically about the community, did engage with it, particularly with one specific case. The student curators asked members of the community "what is love" and "what is hate," and these are the responses they received. Students walking past would often engage with the cube, stopping to laugh or to look for their own responses.



In 2014, the museum transitioned to a new location, moving from a small enclosed room to glass cases in the hallway and main entrance of the building. It was no longer behind a door where someone had to go looking for it to see the exhibits; now people would encounter it every day, no matter what. The International Programs office has a wall entirely made up of one of the cases, visible from both sides. Prospective students see it when they come through on tours of campus, and the current students and staff pass by it every time they enter or leave the building. According to the people involved with the transition, there were some hesitations about the transition to a less centralized and contained space (Joel Marrant, interview, 27 September 2017), however, the outside community feels that this new space is much more open and that they can engage with it much more than before. The fact that prospective students see the museum as they go on tours of the campus is significant, as one student said that her decision to come to Linfield was highly influenced by seeing the museum when she went on a campus tour.



Time in a Bottle: Time Capsule (2000)

This exhibit provided a significant way for the museum to involve and engage the community. This exhibit was, as the title would suggest, made up of things meant to represent and preserve the year 2000 and predictions for the future. Students chose things that they thought were significant, along with a justification. These things were displayed in the museum space for most of the semester, where students could go and look at their own and their peers' objects and predictions. After taking down the exhibit, the time capsule was buried in a funeral procession and ritual, which also served to unite the internal community of the museum, as rituals are wont to do. The impact of this exhibit on the people involved was considerable, as Joel Marrant, the professor in charge of the museum at the time, still remembers this exhibit clearly and fondly, over 15 years later. The pictures here show one student proudly showing off her contribution to the exhibit, several students dressed up for the funeral, and the time capsule being carried to its final resting place in the procession.

Donations and Discoveries: A Retrospective on the Linfield Anthropology Museum (2017)

The other significant exhibit, part of the same larger project as this research, is called "Discoveries and Donations: A Retrospective of the Linfield Anthropology Museum." It tries to engage the community through the use of reflection. People who have been a part of the community for a longer amount of time can look over the timeline of the museum's development and remember what it was like then and how it has changed, while the people who are newer in the community can learn about the rich past of the museum and gain a better understanding of what they are a part of. Another key feature of the exhibit is the case showing the origins of the various collections that the museum has. While the timeline connects the community with its past, this case extends that community past the bounds of the school. It shows how the people who built the museum and its community were connected to the school, to the wider community of the surrounding area, and across the world.



Conclusion

The community of the Linfield Anthropology Museum has been impacted in many ways by the museum. The LAM has followed the shift, alongside many other museums, towards being more focused on the community. This study has focused on four exhibits and the shifts in the location of the museum. The location changes of the museum have affected the community as well; the shift to a more decentralized, accessible, and open exhibit space has created new opportunities for both the museum and its community. The outside community feels more connected to the museum now in a way that it did not when the museum was isolated in its own room, and the inside museum community gains more outside awareness and support.

The exhibits show the specific ways that the community and the museum have interacted over the years, through responses to questions asked by the museum and incorporated into exhibits in the case of the time capsule exhibit and the cube in "Unreasonably Human" and reminders of shared identity and history, as with "Continuity and Change" and "Donations and Discoveries". This shared identity, which the museum can remind the community of through exhibits, has the potential to make the outside community more united, especially if the museum continues to follow the shift and focus on the community.