

Fostering Holocaust Education

A Collaborative Model Between an Academic Library and Middle Schools

In early 2025, Goldey-Beacom College Library hosted the Americans and the Holocaust traveling exhibition, a partnership between the American Library Association (ALA) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.¹ The exhibition offered a unique opportunity for students from ten Delaware public middle schools and one private middle school, as well as the college community and the general public, to explore Holocaust history and examine American attitudes and actions during that time. Outreach efforts mainly targeted public middle schools, which serve a diverse student population. As of 2020–21, more than half of Delaware’s public school students were students of color, with significant increases in the past decade of Hispanic/Latino, English learners, and students with disabilities.² These trends highlight the importance of accessible and inclusive educational programs like the one hosted by the library.

With Holocaust misinformation spreading on social media, educators stress the urgency of teaching younger generations to evaluate information critically. As Audrey Nguyen notes, misinformation threatens democracy and informed decision-making.³ The Toronto Holocaust Museum’s “It’s Critical to Think Critically” campaign reinforces that unchecked misinformation has real-life consequences, particularly for young people who rely on social media for news.⁴ Hetal Doshi highlights that unverified content spreads rapidly online, fueling misconceptions as individuals share information without fact-checking.⁵ London Mayor Sadiq Khan similarly underscores the importance of Holocaust education in countering fake news and equipping students with critical thinking skills.⁶ David Brooks contends that society must balance populist skepticism of expertise with technocratic detachment from real-world complexities—an equilibrium crucial in academic and research environments.⁷ Strengthening critical-thinking skills through connection enables students to assess misinformation and navigate broader societal forces shaping public discourse. These insights informed the program’s outreach design, emphasizing critical thinking and historical empathy through engaging, reflective learning experiences for middle schoolers who build connections to others.

This initiative aligns with Richard C. Harwood’s call for libraries to reimagine their civic role by turning outward—actively engaging with communities to address pressing societal challenges like misinformation and historical literacy.⁸ By fostering critical thinking and historical empathy, the program exemplifies how libraries can serve as essential civic institutions in strengthening public discourse and education.

Delaware’s statewide mandate for Holocaust and genocide education, enacted in the 2021–22 school year, reinforces the necessity of such programs. The collaboration between

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Goldey-Beacom College Library and Delaware's public middle schools exemplifies how academic institutions can enhance mandated curricula through immersive, reflective educational experiences. This outreach program, designed with historical empathy and critical thinking at its core, provides students with the tools to engage with history critically and counter misinformation effectively.

This article explores how the program not only linked historical learning with early exposure to higher education but also integrated lessons on misinformation—highlighting its historical role during the Holocaust and its implications for understanding American society today. The spread of misinformation on social media, which heavily impacts younger generations, shows why programs like this are essential for building critical thinking, empathy, and connection with people who may be different than exhibitgoers.

Enhancing Diversity and Equity Through Holocaust Education

Delaware's diverse student population underscores the importance of designing educational programs that are inclusive and equitable and an extension of the classroom. The collaboration between Goldey-Beacom College Library and local schools intentionally addressed these demographics by providing grant-funded resources that are accessible to a wide age range.

The program addressed barriers like low income or adverse childhood experiences by eliminating entrance fees and offering engaging activities like scavenger hunts and multimedia audiovisual elements. These efforts facilitated access and fostered an inclusive environment where all students could connect with the material.

Furthermore, the program empowered students to navigate complex societal issues by integrating social and emotional learning objectives—such as fostering historical empathy and critical thinking through reflective questions. This approach aligned with Delaware's emphasis on social emotional learning (SEL) as a critical component of education, addressing the needs of underserved students while promoting civic responsibility and ethical decision-making.

To bridge the gap between historical misinformation and media literacy, the program incorporated interactive, evidence-based learning activities encouraging students to engage with historical narratives critically. The Holocaust Timeline Activity provided a structured way for students to analyze the sequence of events, drawing connections between Nazi propaganda, public perception, and policy decisions during World War II. By examining these historical patterns, students became more aware of how misinformation and propaganda influenced societal attitudes. Similarly, the scavenger hunt served as an active learning exercise, guiding students through key sections of the exhibition while prompting them to differentiate between factual reporting, biased narratives, and intentional falsehoods. These activities reinforced historical inquiry skills, helping students recognize the real-world consequences of unchecked misinformation—both in the past and in the digital landscape.

Program Content, Outreach, and Educational Focus

The Americans and the Holocaust exhibition presented a comprehensive exploration of Holocaust history, focusing on the rise of antisemitism, American responses, and civic duty. To contextualize these themes, the program included an emphasis on how Americans at

the time engaged with and understood the Holocaust. Students explored how domestic concerns and propaganda shaped American public opinion and policy, fostering a deeper understanding of civic responsibility and historical empathy.

The program's success began with outreach to school superintendents across Delaware. This outreach broadened the program's scope to engage students from across the state, with the library providing logistical support and resources like lesson plans created by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum to facilitate embedding the visits into middle school teachers' curricula. For interested schools, we offered tours by collaborating with the Admissions Department. These campus tours enriched the middle school visits by integrating guided campus tours, introducing middle school students to college life while reinforcing the exhibit's educational goals.

Teachers were provided with a range of adaptable, grant-funded resources to prepare students for the exhibit. The Holocaust Timeline Activity, a widely adopted pre-visit lesson, allowed students to explore the connections among Nazi policies, World War II events, and individual experiences during the Holocaust through an American lens. This activity encouraged students to critically analyze how historical events were interconnected, fostering a deeper understanding of the Holocaust's complexities.

Interactive activities included analyzing a mix of historical media sources to distinguish between factual reporting, biased content, and outright falsehoods. By connecting historical themes to broader societal contexts, the exhibition encouraged students to reflect on the importance of individual and collective responsibility in shaping ethical responses to humanitarian crises.

During the exhibit visit, students participated in a scavenger hunt, which guided them through key sections of the exhibition and encouraged active engagement with its themes. The scavenger hunt was designed to reinforce the educational objectives of the pre-visit lessons, helping students connect the historical context they had studied to the tangible artifacts and narratives on display.

Many visits also involved classroom activities, such as reading the book *The Diary of Anne Frank* and its play adaptation. One teacher noted that the exhibit served as an extension of the classroom, providing a real-world context for the students' studies. Many middle school students expressed interest in a display of Holocaust books, particularly the graphic novel adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, with several commenting on their eagerness to read it—and many did. This enthusiasm demonstrated the exhibit's impact in fostering a deeper connection to historical narratives on sensitive topics.

Evaluating Program Impact on Delaware's Students and Community

Assessment efforts included reflective activities that allowed middle school students to express their thoughts on the exhibit. Students responded to two prompts on Post-it notes, encouraging immediate reflection.

A common response to how the exhibit shaped their understanding was "History is repeating itself," demonstrating their recognition of historical patterns and contemporary relevance. Regarding what was most impactful, responses overwhelmingly emphasized the videos, with students noting that they were "really cool" and "very informative" and they "answered most of my questions." Many also found the news articles and statistics on post-war murders particularly striking.

Beyond multimedia, several students reflected on specific historical events:

- The Nazi Olympics and Jesse Owens' achievements were frequently cited, with one student describing Owens as "The legendary trailblazer for African Americans in track and field!"
- The treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II, particularly after Pearl Harbor, left a strong impression.
- Several visitors were deeply impacted by wartime propaganda, including Dr. Seuss's depictions of Hitler and the Nazis and news coverage that failed to report the full extent of the Holocaust.

Many students also expressed concern about parallels between the past and today's political climate, with some noting how misinformation spread during the Holocaust mirrors modern issues. The struggles of Jewish refugees resonated with students, particularly personal stories like Helen Roseland's attempt to sponsor Franz Goldberger, who ultimately did not survive the Holocaust.

Teachers observed that these reflections deepened student learning, reinforcing classroom discussions through activities like the timeline exercise and scavenger hunt. Additionally, students showed a strong interest in Holocaust literature, particularly the graphic novel adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, further extending the exhibit's impact beyond their visit.

Challenges and Considerations for Future Initiatives

While the program was a success, it presented logistical and resource challenges that can inform future efforts. Setting up the exhibit was particularly demanding due to limited staffing—the library has only one staff member.⁹ Collaboration with colleagues in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs was essential, as it is for all programs when working as a solo librarian, to ensure the exhibit was set up upon delivery, demonstrating the importance of interdepartmental cooperation.

Coordinating with multiple school districts to schedule tours and managing large groups of students required significant communication and organizational efforts. While rewarding, tailoring exhibit content for younger audiences was also complex, particularly when balancing the sensitive nature of Holocaust history with age-appropriate educational strategies.

Despite these challenges, the program's success highlights the value of adaptable resources and thoughtful planning. Future initiatives should streamline communication with school district contacts, increase staffing support during exhibit setup, and enhance educational materials to maximize accessibility and engagement. These refinements can ensure a more efficient and impactful experience for students, educators, and the community.

To help other institutions replicate this program, we have outlined the following key strategies:

- **Establish clear educational goals:** Define the program's objectives, such as fostering critical thinking, historical empathy, and media literacy, ensuring alignment with local mandates.
- **Develop adaptable resources:** Provide teachers with grant-funded, flexible lesson plans that include activities like timelines and multimedia scavenger hunts to engage students before, during, and after their visit.

- **Engage cross-departmental collaboration:** Partner with departments like Admissions to combine educational outreach with exposure to college life, creating a more holistic learning experience.
- **Leverage grant funding:** Secure funding to support logistics, resource development, and speaker series to enhance the program’s scope and impact.
- **Promote critical media literacy:** Incorporate lessons on misinformation, using historical examples and connecting them to contemporary issues to build students’ analytical skills.

Conclusion

The partnership between Goldey-Beacom College Library and Delaware schools shows how academic institutions can enhance required curricula with engaging educational experiences. By integrating lessons on misinformation into Holocaust education, the program bridged past and present, addressing critical societal challenges and emphasizing the enduring importance of historical empathy and civic responsibility.

This grant-funded initiative demonstrated how academic libraries can extend their reach and impact through immersive exhibit visits, classroom-ready teaching materials, and a speaker series that engaged the broader community. The program not only deepened students’ understanding of Holocaust history but also equipped them with tools to critically analyze misinformation—an essential skill in today’s information-saturated world.

This approach offers a scalable model for other academic libraries seeking to enrich community education. By fostering collaboration, providing adaptable resources, and promoting critical thinking, libraries can bridge academic and public interests, making meaningful contributions to education and social understanding. With continued grant support and strategic planning, similar initiatives can amplify the role of libraries as centers of lifelong learning and community engagement. ≈

Notes

1. “Americans and the Holocaust: A Traveling Exhibition for Libraries,” *American Library Association*, <https://www.ala.org/tools/programming/USHolocaustMuseum>.

2. “Delaware Public Education at a Glance,” *Rodel Foundation of Delaware*, <https://rodelde.org/ataglance/>.

3. Audrey Nguyen, “To Combat Misinformation, Start with Connection, Not Correction,” *Life Kit*, NPR, September 30, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/30/g-s1-24711/to-combat-misinformation-start-with-connection-not-correction>.

4. Rachel Goodman, “‘The Past Stands as a Warning We Can’t Ignore,’ Toronto Holocaust Museum Alerts about Dangers of Misinformation in New Campaign,” *NOW Toronto*, January 27, 2025, <https://nowtoronto.com/news/the-past-stands-as-a-warning-we-cant-ignore-toronto-holocaust-museum-alerts-about-dangers-of-misinformation-in-new-campaign/>.

5. Hetal Doshi, “Using Critical Thinking to Counter Misinformation on Social Media,” *IUP Journal of Soft Skills* 16, no. 2 (2022): 43–8.

6. “Mayor Reiterates Vital Importance of Educating Young People about the Holocaust in an Age of Fake News and Unregulated Social Media,” *Greater London Authority*, January 26, 2025, <https://www.london.gov.uk/media-centre/mayors-press-release/mayor-reiterates-vital-importance-of-educating-young-people-about-the-holocaust-in-an-age-of-fake-news-and-unregulated-social-media>.

7. David Brooks, “We Deserve Pete Hegseth,” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/15/opinion/pete-hegseth-hearings-defense.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>.
8. Richard C. Harwood, “The Urgent Need for Libraries to Reimagine Their Civic Role by Turning Outward,” *The Library Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (2024): 64–81, <https://doi.org/10.1086/727818>.
9. Russell Michalak, “Managing Oneself in the Face of Downsizing: Strategies for Empowering Academic Librarians,” *College & Research Libraries News* 84, no. 10 (2023): 386, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.84.10.386>.