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A World of Collaboration

Insights from the 2025 Area Studies Teaching & Collections Symposium

The 2025 Area Studies Teaching & Collections Symposium¹ was a two-day in-person event hosted collaboratively by the University of Utah (UU) and Brigham Young University (BYU), which share a US Department of Education Title VI National Resource Center (NRC) grant. The primary goal of the symposium was to bring together those who use area studies library resources (faculty, students, staff) and those who manage them (library professionals) for the purpose of exploring ways to develop these interdisciplinary collections. The result was a statewide lesson on partnership, stewardship, and the unique uses of distinct academic library collections.

This conference report describes the growing collaborative relationship between area studies departments and libraries on the two campuses. It further highlights how federal grant funding promotes the learning of world languages and cultures and the development of academic library collections that support such programs. Lessons learned from planning to implementation are shared, as well as ideas for moving forward during a time when federal funding for area studies programs and collections is changing.

About Title VI NRC Grants

NRC grants were established by the federal government shortly after World War II, when the global geopolitical climate prompted a need for experts trained in less commonly taught languages. Today, universities across the nation receive NRC grants under various geographical categories (e.g., Africa, East Asia/Pan Asia, Middle East). The grants support the teaching of world languages and sustain teaching and research about the areas, regions, and countries where these languages are used. For more than a decade, federally funded NRC grants have supported area studies centers and programs on UU and BYU campuses, with the most recent funding focusing on Asian and Latin American studies.

The partnership between UU and BYU is a strategic collaboration that enables academic programming and the sharing of diverse library collections to support students and faculty



2025 Area Studies Teaching & Collections Symposium planning members. From left to right: Robert Behra, Marie Paiva, Annelise Xiao, Timothy Davis, John D. Moore, Dorothy Terry, Jasmine Kirby, Ismaeil Hakimi, Ambra Gagliardi, and Matthew J. K. Hill.

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across campuses. UU has one of North America's largest Middle East collections—a world region encompassed in the Pan-Asian NRC grant category for which the two institutions are awarded. BYU has strong collections for Latin American resources and hosts one of the most robust Asian studies collections in the Intermountain West.

The partnership between UU and BYU has enhanced cross-campus support, though the distinct focus of each institution's collections has posed challenges to deeper integration. While cooperative collecting on paper allows library users at both universities to access physical materials regardless of affiliation, in practice, collaboration between the libraries has lacked intentionality. To address these silos, the UU library proposed hosting a symposium as a way to foster a more immersive and meaningful partnership between the libraries and their respective academic departments.

Although the majority of the joint NRC grant supports academic departments and programs, a small line item to fund the symposium was written into the most recent grant's budget (funding cycle 2022–25) by UU's International and Area Studies Department, which administers the grant for both campuses. Dedicated funding made it easier to get buy-in from library administrators to host the symposium as the two campus libraries were responsible for planning and implementing the event.

About the Symposium

The 2025 Area Studies Teaching & Collections Symposium was a first-of-its-kind event. The first day was held at UU and the second day at BYU, and each day consisted of unique content. The symposium was free to participants, with each institution's library covering the cost of catering. The team responsible for planning the symposium consisted of library professionals from each campus, mostly area studies librarians and collections management staff, and colleagues from UU area studies departments.

Scholars from within Utah and other states presented on a variety of ways they have used, discovered, or created collections related to Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Indigenous, and Pasifika studies. The event attracted more than a hundred registered participants. Each day saw approximately sixty-five attendees from higher education institutions across Utah, many of whom were unique from one day to the next. Participants gained a deeper understanding of what makes area studies collections distinctive and how to integrate them into teaching, research, and learning on their campus. Some presentation topics included:

- The origins and continued management of the most extensive South Asian comics collection in US academia
- How the Tongan diaspora in Utah honors its heritage through library and museum collections
- How to foster collaboration between librarians and faculty to develop collections with indigenous peoples
- How historians use primary sources to engage with students
- How librarians and faculty members can partner to build graded reader collections with the aim of increasing second language proficiency

In addition to fostering connections within the area studies community in Utah, the symposium provided an opportunity to strengthen the relationships between the academic libraries at UU and BYU. The cooperative collecting efforts between UU and

BYU libraries, established at the start of their joint Title VI grants many years ago, have struggled to remain effective due to changes in library leadership, shifting priorities, and staff turnover—inevitable shifts that many partnerships experience.

Planning the symposium enabled library professionals from both UU and BYU to engage with each other more frequently and discuss how their collections are developed and managed. As planning spanned over a year, the committee became much more familiar with each library's structure and collection strengths. Ideas to promote cross-campus use of each library's collections were discussed and obstacles identified. Ultimately, the most impactful outcomes were the relationships among the committee members, which will enable continued collaboration beyond the symposium.

Lessons Learned

The symposium planning committee learned many things and will share key lessons to encourage similar partnerships. These insights come from three (all from UU) of the ten committee members who planned and hosted the symposium.

1. *Define a scope.*

Area studies is a truly interdisciplinary field of research that includes any study of language or culture outside of the United States or Canada. Within this vast scope, and given our institutions' NRC funding focus, our symposium planning committee decided to concentrate on Latin American and Asian studies. Keeping the focus on regions "outside the U.S." was challenging as many of us became interested in area studies due to either being part of or having family or friends in a diasporic community. Additionally, Latin America and Asia are both large, diverse parts of the world, making it challenging to define a clear scope. We drew guidance from parameters created by the UU and BYU departments' programs and colleagues. For example, we reached out to Russian and Middle East departments after consulting with our Asian studies departments as these regions fall under the large "Asian" umbrella.

2. *Reach out to potential collaborators early.*

The committee had several iterations, with people coming and going, before we settled on the ten individuals who worked on the idea over the past year to bring it to life. Additionally, it is important to recognize that various institutions, particularly those with private versus public status (UU is a public institution and BYU is private), have distinct processes and organizational cultures. Figuring out those processes and reaching a point of comfort where you can have honest conversations about them takes time.

3. *Ask people what they want.*

Doing so will give you a better sense of whether hosting an area studies symposium is a good idea in the first place and who might attend. Throughout our planning process, we had numerous opportunities to receive direct feedback from stakeholders. One crucial aspect of this was having stakeholders serve directly on the committee, which was especially true on the UU side, where we had strong involvement from the Latin American studies program. Another integral part of this was surveying faculty and librarians, via an online survey, about what they would like to see at an area studies symposium and using the results as we developed our programming.

4. *Define roles and structure for the committee.*

Establish a committee chair early, someone who is the defined project manager. Assign at least one person from each institution to regularly attend all meetings and answer questions on behalf of their institution. Prepare to rotate tasks, such as note-taking responsibilities for meetings, and encourage the chair to delegate tasks to avoid the risk of burnout.

5. *Keep good records.*

This is crucial for adapting to change and collaborating across institutions. Create clearly defined and delineated tasks so it is easy to track what is being done and who is doing it, as well as what is being left behind. A little data management planning goes a long way. Sticking to one platform (e.g., Google Drive or Box) and putting meeting notes in one place will make everything easier. Along with templates in Canva and Qualtrics surveys, one of the project's outputs is an email list of individuals engaged in area studies in Utah.

6. *Logistics are time consuming.*

Hosting an event in one place is hard. Having it in two places that are forty-five miles apart is harder. We were excited to host a two-day symposium at two different locations, but we were concerned about attendance given the substantial distance between the two campuses. We explored chartering a bus from Salt Lake City (UU's location) to Provo (BYU's location) and vice versa, but the cost was prohibitive. In the end, attendees needed to figure out their own transportation. Bringing in external speakers and arranging their travel requires significant administrative support. Therefore, looping in colleagues with experience coordinating travel logistics is essential. Moving money around will occur up to the event date, so stay flexible.

7. *Embrace new ideas.*

Creating an event from scratch can be a lot of work. Take advantage of the different personalities and passions of the people involved. You never know if you have a creative type or someone who thinks outside the box. Some of the highlights from the symposium included fifteen-minute chair massages for participants throughout the day, as well as unique swag and handouts. Just because this is academia doesn't mean it has to be boring.

8. *Get ready to work.*

Preparation the day before the event is extremely important. Last-minute challenges always arise, whether it's name tag organization or a speaker forgetting something in their hotel room. Having clearly delineated tasks for committee members to carry out on the day before and the day of the event will help limit chaos and alleviate stress. For example, we had a list of who was staffing the registration desk and bringing wireless microphones for fielding questions from the audience. However, there are always things you cannot account for, so be prepared.

Future Work

UU and BYU's joint Title VI NRC grant catalyzed this symposium, providing the primary source of funding and uniting the two institutions in a shared mission to support area studies programming. Currently, the US Department of Education is facing significant changes at the federal level, and the future of Title VI NRC grants remains uncertain.

We aim to maintain the momentum from the symposium while also acknowledging the evolving landscape.

The partnerships we have developed are now more critical than ever, given the shifting priorities of universities and national security. Collaboration among institutions will help better align our work with new priorities and encourage us to find the words to effectively describe and convince administrators, stakeholders, and politicians that area studies collections and programming remain worth funding.

UU and BYU libraries plan to host a similar, potentially virtual, event in the future. In doing so, we aim to find innovative ways to maximize the value of our diverse global collections while delivering excellent services. The experience of working together on this symposium has renewed our desires to create a library environment where our students can learn about the wider world and feel safe and represented among our stacks.

Acknowledgments

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Note

1. 2025 Area Studies Teaching & Collections Symposium, May 2025. <https://ias.utah.edu/news/2025-library-symposium.php>.