

# *From Coffee to Community*

*Programming to Support Institutional Mission and Culture*

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**T**heological libraries add significant value to their parent institutions in numerous ways. Their collections offer a rich source of research material for students and faculty. Their personnel assist both novice and experienced researchers. Their spaces foster the flourishing of ideas through focused study and engaging conversations.<sup>1</sup> Libraries can also provide significant value by engaging their communities with programming that intentionally supports their institution's culture and values. Over the last decade at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS), we have leveraged library events and archival exhibitions to engage our community, support our institution, tell our story, and foster a sense of community. This chapter describes our mission-driven approach, providing details about the various types of library events and archival exhibitions we have designed, as well as offering insights from our experience.

## *Library Events: Our Story*

When I (Jason) arrived at SEBTS eleven years ago, I knew I wanted our team to invest energy in library event programming. I believe libraries can impact their communities not only through their collections, but also through programming that enhances an institution's mission and creates avenues for community. Well-designed events bring energy, life, and community to a theological library.

We have a strong focus on mission and culture at SEBTS. Our institutional mission is “to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping students to serve the church and fulfill the Great Commission” (SEBTS n.d.). Our library's mission statement is “to engage the Southeastern community with services and resources to equip them to serve the church and fulfill the Great Commission” (Library at Southeastern n.d.). Our cultural values are lighthearted, others-focused, and mission-oriented.<sup>2</sup> These mission statements and values are integral to our event planning. While we care about incorporating traditional theological library emphases into our programming, we also aim to design programming that aligns with being an institution that takes the gospel seriously, yet not so much ourselves.

Hosting events was not entirely new to our staff. The library had hosted events in the past, but they tended to be occasional and were often coordinated by other campus units. We wanted to regularly host events that supported our institutional mission and fostered a sense of community on campus. Although we now offer several different types of programming, we initially envisioned two types of events—one that accommodated large groups and a smaller one that was more collegial. We called the first event a Library Talk and the second a Coffee Break.

Library Talks typically have thirty to seventy-five attendees and feature an interview with an individual or a small panel on a recently published book or a relevant subject.<sup>3</sup> Generally, speakers are faculty members, visiting chapel speakers, or outside scholars invited by other campus units. When we started, we set a goal of offering two to three talks per semester. Over the past decade, we've hosted nearly fifty Library Talks on a wide range of topics, including missions, justice, spiritual formation, theology, cultural engagement, apologetics, and mental health. We've had stellar conversations with our outstanding faculty and with fantastic outside speakers, including Lee Strobel, J. P. Moreland, Russell Moore, Michael Bird, Rebecca

McLaughlin, Alistair Begg, Carl Trueman, and Gavin Ortlund. We typically conclude each Library Talk with a question-and-answer session, allowing attendees to engage with the speakers on a range of issues relevant to their lives and ministries.



Fig. 1. Library Talk on missionary endurance, 2024

Coffee Breaks originated as a venue for helping students get to know faculty outside of the traditional classroom setting. We host Coffee Breaks in a designated area of the library with comfortable seating. These conversations typically take place in the morning, and we provide coffee and tea for attendees. Anyone is welcome to attend, and we usually have between ten and twenty attendees. A library staff member hosts and begins the session with a brief introduction time that allows the featured faculty member and attendees to become acquainted. The staff member asks a few initial questions that focus on the faculty member’s life, educational journey, and ministry formation. Following that introduction, the attendees ask questions that guide the conversation. These sessions usually last around an hour, but often the faculty member and attendees stay around and chat for a while after the formal Coffee Break ends.



Fig. 2. Coffee Break with Dr. Akin, 2025

## *Library Events: Lessons Learned*

As we have planned events over the years, we have had to focus on what we had available. When we started, we noticed we didn't have access to many things we needed. We didn't have an event budget, a designated space for hosting, or a list of well-known speakers to draw upon. However, we had space that could be temporarily reconfigured, faculty members with interests we could draw upon, and library staff with ideas and questions that extended beyond what might be addressed in a typical classroom setting. For example, when one of our Old Testament professors started a superb local coffee shop and roastery, we hosted a Library Talk on the concept of business as mission. We offered pour-over samples to attendees and covered the cost from our staff coffee budget. Offering events doesn't require a huge budget or tons of space. In *Sacred Stacks* (2006), Nancy Kalikow Maxwell describes how she initiated a beloved author's reception

program in which faculty would “ceremoniously present their book to the library” (55). This event required relatively little space or financial commitment, but it was significant for their community.

To consider the mission and values of our institution has been important in our planning (Lear 2013; Sheppard and Murrain 2014). Every institution has its own unique mission and culture. At SEBTS, our primary focus is on serving the church and fulfilling the Great Commission. I doubt most theological librarians consider these as direct goals for their programming. Over the years, we’ve had planning conversations about an event idea and we ask, “How does this contribute to our mission?” If an idea does not contribute to our mission or align with who we are as an institution, we typically pass on it.

We’ve found significant value in listening to our stakeholders. Over the years, we have had numerous conversations with library staff, faculty, students, administrators, and visiting scholars about our programming. Stakeholders can provide ideas for new event topics and offer valuable feedback on how to improve them. Conversations with executive-level administrators can be particularly fruitful, especially in advance. They typically oversee the institution’s mission, money, and mindset. Conversations can help them understand the library’s work, offer them a chance to support the team, and allow them to provide guidance.

We also learned to consider our entire user community and strive to market our content to them. For example, since we have a large contingent of online students, we record videos of Library Talks and post them online. We also strive to think strategically about the types of students we have and the variety of degree programs we offer, providing content that reflects that variety. When marketing, we utilize every available avenue. We create and distribute flyers, table toppers, and signage. We post about events on social media. We reach out to campus units that oversee institutional messaging and ensure that ours is included. Most important, we discuss upcoming events with people on campus.

Finally, we learned to collaborate with other campus units to support them and to utilize their resources to enhance our events. One of our major campus events each year is Global Missions Week, organized by our Center for Great Commission Studies (CGCS). During that week, missionaries spend time on campus interacting with classes and individual students. Every year, we collaborate with the CGCS staff to develop and promote a Library Talk for that week

focused on missions. Since we are unable to provide honoraria for outside speakers, we often piggyback off other campus units that already invite speakers and compensate them. Likewise, our facilities department does an excellent job of reconfiguring our space by bringing in folding chairs, and our media services department provides the resources for recording the Library Talks.

## *Archival Exhibits: Our Story*

The Archives and Special Collections (ASC) department of the Library at Southeastern crafts archival and rare book exhibits to support the mission and culture of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Over the years, ASC staff fine-tuned exhibit development and presentation while expanding the exhibits' role in advancing the institution's mission. Staff approach exhibit creation creatively to build community, foster conversation, and strengthen culture.

Beginning in the mid-2010s, ASC established a regular rotation of static exhibits for display in the library commons area, which is near the building entrance. These exhibits featured physical archival materials and rare books in two display cases: one five-shelf vertical case and one 1.35-square-meter flat case. These cases remain the two foundational resources for ASC exhibits.

Staff decided on an initial exhibit series titled "Equipped to Go," which ran from 2017 to 2022. This series consciously alluded to a key aspect of the institution's mission statement: "To glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping students to serve the church and fulfill the Great Commission" (SEBTS n.d.). Featured institutional records highlighted how the seminary prepared and sent students for various ministries, including evangelistic missions, medical missions, youth ministry, women's ministry, biblical counseling, and military chaplaincy.

Individual exhibits ran from either January to August or September to December. The staff sought to provide fresh exhibits each semester to keep library patrons engaged with exhibit content. The library's foot traffic was too low to justify a third exhibit for the summer.



**Fig. 3.** Library commons display cases with typical exhibit design

The goal of this series, and the exhibit space more broadly, is to connect students, faculty, and staff with the institution's history. ASC helps build community by connecting the seminary's past and present. Our department fosters the campus's shared identity defined by the school's mission statement. ASC's archival material enables

students, faculty, and staff to place themselves within the context of the seminary’s larger story and mission.

Since 2022, ASC staff have consciously thought more creatively about strategically expanding or adapting exhibits to reach new community members and develop collaboration with other seminary departments. Rather than offering only static exhibits within the library, staff recognized opportunities to advance the school’s mission beyond the library walls.

As an entity of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), key partners of the seminary include alumni, local SBC congregations and their leaders, and the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BSCNC). In 2019, ASC first developed a simple exhibit for presentation to attendees of the BSCNC annual meeting. Staff partnered with the convention’s historical committee every year to host a table in the exhibit hall.



Fig. 4. 2019 BSCNC Historical Committee and ASC partnership exhibit

Hundreds of North Carolina SBC leaders and church members attend the BSCNC annual meeting. Many are alumni, supporters, or prospective students of the seminary. ASC exhibits for this event presented material of interest to these attendees—including rare books

related to North Carolina Baptist history, personal papers of local Baptist leaders, and other relevant material. Through involvement in this event, and in accordance with the seminary's mission, ASC staff reached those who serve the church in North Carolina.

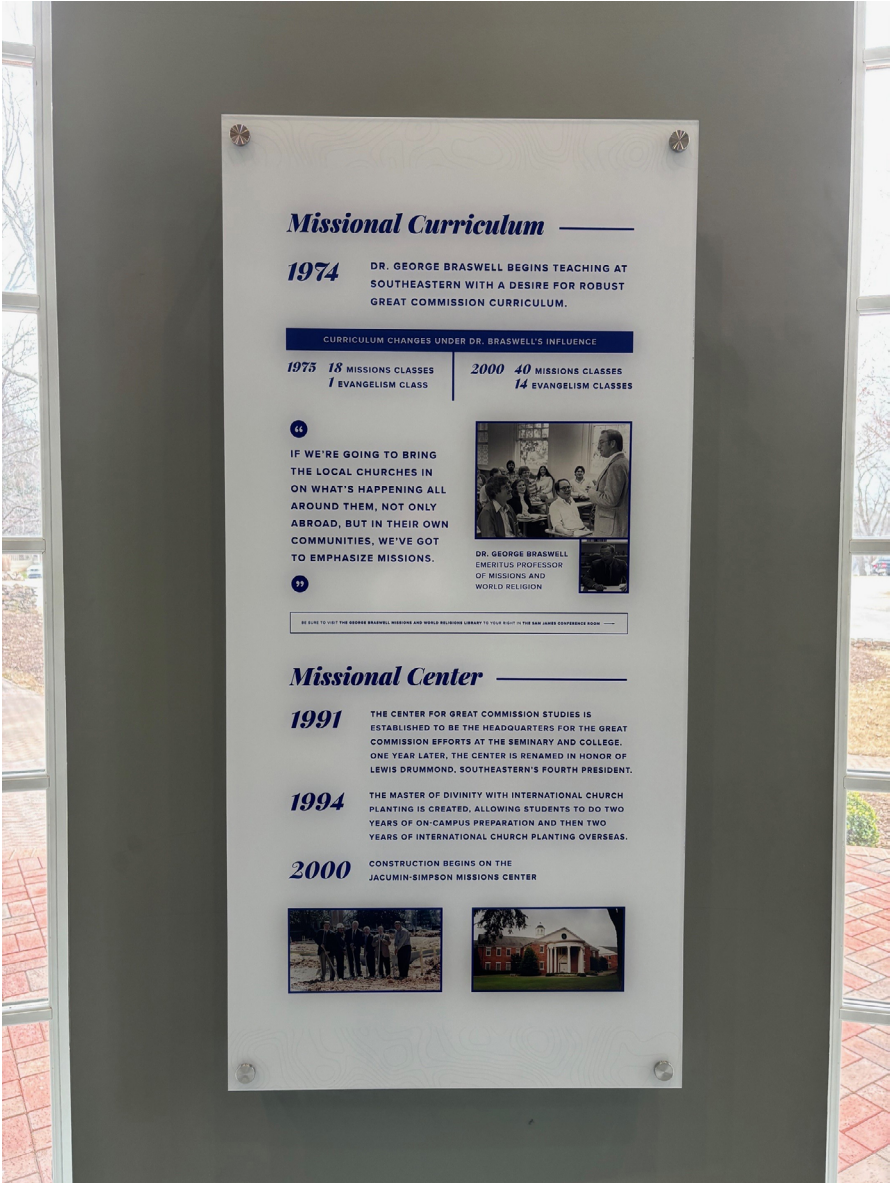


Fig. 5. An example of the exhibit panels in the Center for Great Commission Studies

Staff also considered how best to engage the seminary community in on-campus events and celebrations. ASC crafted exhibits for new student orientation, to mark anniversaries, and to honor long-serving professors. In 2022, ASC began featuring archival material on Preview Days, when prospective students visit the campus.

In 2024, ASC partnered with CGCS and the Communications Department to recognize the seminary's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2025. Specifically, staff developed an exhibit highlighting the seminary's commitment to missions throughout its history. ASC staff selected relevant information and engaging historical photographs. CGCS provided the funds to purchase display panels for placement in the Center. Communications staff designed graphics. Collaboration was key to the success of this exhibit.

## *Archival Exhibits: Lessons Learned*

ASC's experience in developing mission-oriented exhibits reveals three key aspects for effectively engaging communities through exhibits: careful consideration of resources, strategic support for the institution's mission, and secure presentation of materials.

Many archivists and librarians face limited budgets, space constraints, and significant demands on staff time. Staff must shrewdly consider their resources when creating and presenting exhibits. Compelling exhibits do not require state-of-the-art resources. ASC is fortunate to have two display cases and book cradles. However, less expensive folding tables may allow for impactful exhibits, especially those that are short-term. ASC uses such tables for our temporary Preview Day exhibits.

One must also carefully consider staff time as a resource. At SEBTS, the research and design necessary for exhibit creation requires, on average, eighty-five hours of staff time per exhibit. Keeping dual purpose in mind helps when preparing exhibits. If another project required extensive research, perhaps that research can be turned into an exhibit.

Librarians and archivists should think strategically about the role archival exhibits play in supporting the parent institution's mission. ASC staff always choose archival and special collections material with an eye toward our mission. If an item is very interesting but does not advance the mission, it is not featured. ASC holds a Soviet

naval flag. While interesting, this item in an exhibit will not advance the school’s mission as would, for example, a photograph of student missionaries from the 1960s.



Fig. 6. The archivist engages with prospective students during a 2025 Preview Day

Finally, archival exhibits must consider preservation. Securing items from theft or damage is essential. When planning exhibits, ASC uses cases with locks, features facsimiles rather than original material, and ensures climate control. Coffee is fantastic for building community—but not when spilled on unique archival material. By shrewdly utilizing resources, strategically considering the institution’s mission, and securing materials, archival and rare book exhibits play a crucial role in engaging a library’s community members.

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## Notes

- 1 We are indebted to Andy Keck's (2013) Atla Presidential Address, "The Value of Theological Libraries" for the idea of conceiving library values in terms of a collection, a people, and a place.
- 2 "Lighthearted" is admittedly a little difficult to define, but our institutional culture is easygoing and not overly formal. We joke a lot. We laugh a lot. We take God seriously. We take the gospel seriously. We don't take ourselves seriously.
- 3 Two members of our Public Services team, Dougald McLaurin (now of Louisiana Christian University) and Robb Coleman, have been instrumental in making our event programming a success. They tirelessly planned and implemented these and other programs to help engage our community.

