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Beautifying your space can increase belonging and use

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Abstract

This paper describes a project that added country flags to the map drawers in the Hamer Center at Penn State University. The project initially aimed to improve the aesthetics of the space but also had the added benefit of fostering a sense of belonging among international students.

Introduction

Penn State University Libraries is an Association of Research Libraries top 10 research library (<https://www.psu.edu/news/university-libraries/story/university-libraries-places-10th-research-libraries-investment-index>.) The score is based on the Investment Index (library expenditures, total materials, professional plus support staff, and salaries & wages for professional staff.) <https://libraries.psu.edu/historical-benchmarking-btaa-investment-index> The Penn State University Libraries has over 86,000 maps, atlas, and globe titles in its collections, as well as 350,000 sheets. The Libraries' Donald W. Hamer Center for Maps & Geospatial Information (Hamer Center) collection currently houses 51,000 titles and 243,333 sheets. The collections of strength are Pennsylvania and United States maps with a significant number of international maps.

During the 2023 Western Association of Map Libraries (WAML) virtual conference Chris Thiry presented a talk called "Make your map collection FAB-U-LOUS!" His project of adding country flags to the collection inspired us to do the same. The Hamer Center is a beautiful space and initially, the project's purpose was to make the space more vibrant, but we also thought it would create a sense of belonging for our international students.



Background

For international maps, many country maps were filed in folders in a drawer with only the call number of the first map in the drawer listed on the label. Sometimes that label also had the name of the first country. Some countries filled several drawers (e.g. Germany) while some drawers had maps of many countries. In some instances, there are as many as six countries in a drawer. For staff and patrons alike, it was challenging to find the correct drawer without consulting other sources (e.g. catalog, poster of world countries and call numbers, or the Library of Congress Class G book.) Our objective was to remove these barriers and make locating the country maps easier.

International students make up 6% of the United State's post-secondary enrollment. ([Inside Higher Education](#).) Like many US universities, Penn State has a large number of international students. As of the 2023/2024 academic year, Penn State ranks in the top 20 Leading Host institutions. ([Open Doors Data.org](#).) For the 2024 school year, Penn State's international enrollment was 9383 and at about 9.4% of total enrollment across all campuses and PSU's World Campus. The home countries of most international students at Penn State are China (2542), India (2115), and Saudi Arabia (604) with students coming from over 100 countries.

Process

An economical method of applying country flags to drawers was needed. The flags needed to be small enough to fit on the drawers, movable, and easy to make. We chose to use Avery Business card template (8371) which is perforated and then were applied to business card sized self-adhesive magnets. The entire project cost us less than \$100.

Once the method was determined, Maps and Geospatial Assistant Jove Goldberg, an art student, spearheaded the effort to develop a plan and tracking documents, design the cards, and teach other workers to use Adobe Illustrator. Writing out the technical guidelines for the project was an interesting challenge because he had several things to consider. The first challenge was finding software that had the capability to manipulate flag images to match the template. Penn State has an enterprise agreement with Adobe, and Adobe Illustrator was selected.

Unfortunately, most Maps & Geospatial Assistants were not familiar with Adobe Illustrator and had to be taught how to use the software. The other challenge was



explaining how to make design choices, which was difficult due to the varieties of flags and the simple reality that it can be difficult to explain visuals with written language. An extensive training document was created to solve both challenges.

The result was beautiful flags that had a gradient applied to them with the right side being white and then a foggy fade to create a place for the country name. The gradient allowed us a place to add the country name without it being too busy to see. We determined that adding the call number made the magnets look too busy. Maps and Geospatial Assistants created the country flag Adobe Illustrator files creating files for each step so that they could go back to a previous version easily. After printing on business card perforated paper, the final step was to add a magnet to the back of the cards and place them on their corresponding map drawer within the collection.

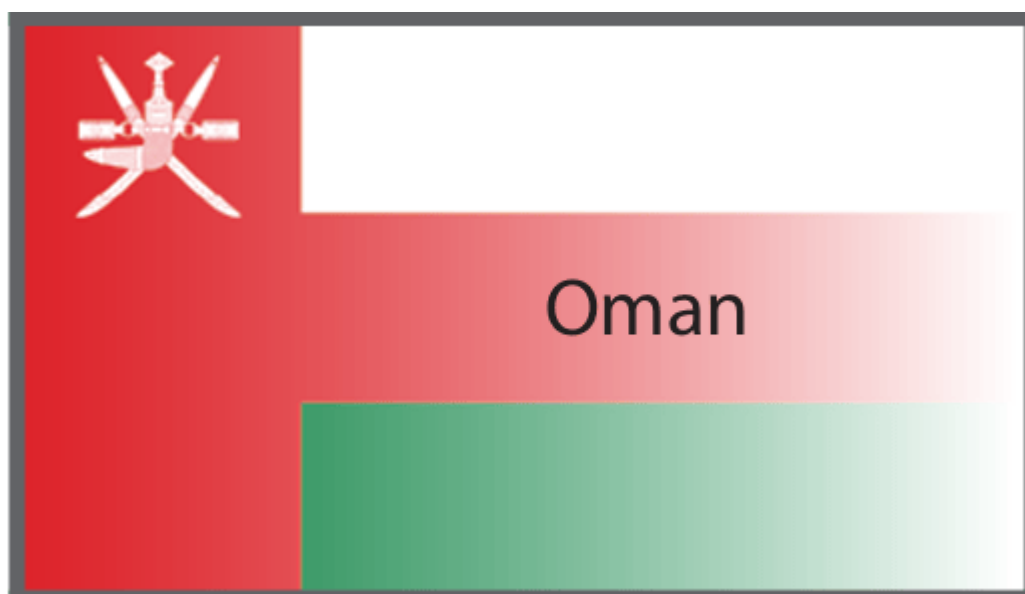


Figure 1: Oman flag with foggy fade and country name

Selecting flags and countries

We sourced almost all our images from [Flag Lane](#) with the flags not found on this website coming from other sources including [Flagpedia.net](#) and [Britannica](#).

There were inconsistencies between the sources above. This can be for a variety of reasons. Occasionally there might be different names for countries for same country. Other times the names and flags used for a given country have



philosophical, cultural, or political implications, affecting their inclusion in one of the lists. Countries like Kosovo are cataloged in the Library of Congress classification system as part of Serbia but maintain their independence (Serbia G6850 and Kosovo G6853.K6). Israel and Palestine share a geographic area that over time has changed names (G7500). It was very important to develop understanding of these concepts, as it allowed us to make informed choices about what names and flags to use for the sheets so that our patrons' national identities are properly respected. We erred on the side of using names and flags that a country's own citizens would use.



Figure 2: Magnets for countries where one country is cataloged as part of another country or share a Library of Congress call number

While nearly all flags were rectangular and fit the template, the flag of Nepal is not, and we created an outline and added the foggy fade to fit to the business card template.



Figure 3: Flag of Nepal; Finished magnet of Nepal

Occasionally flags did not fit the template (2:3 ratio) and were elongated and altered to fit the template by shifting a centered design to the left to avoid foggy fade.

“Jove and I debated for far too long on the implications of modifying the flags that didn’t align well with our card template. Some countries, such as Nepal, were difficult to reimagine due to its design being so unique. Many countries were straightforward to put into the template. We also recognized the importance of exercising mindfulness in our alterations and considered the complexities of today’s geopolitics.” – Ben Brosius, Maps and Geospatial Assistant.



Figure 4: Maps not in the standard 2:3 format were stretched to fit the template

Once the flags were modified to the template shape, the foggy fade on the right



side of the flag and the country names were applied.



Figure 5: Flags with foggy fade applied to right side of image and then country names added

A border was then applied to each flag. Then each flag was applied to a magnet. Magnets were then applied to the correct drawer.

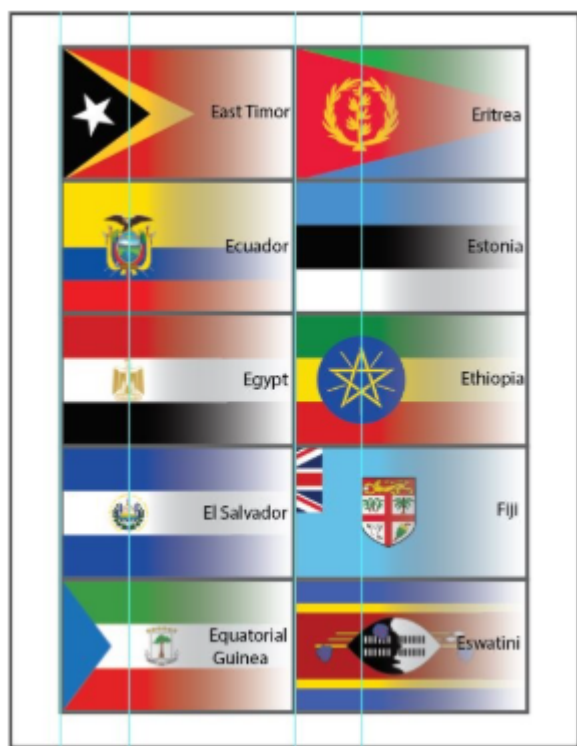


Figure 6: Final flags with borders added



Figure 7: Example of final drawers with labels of multiple countries on each drawer

DIEA-B(elonging) is for everyone

ALA's requirement of "evaluating how diverse collection resources are cataloged, labeled, and displayed" in its statement on "Diverse collections: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights" makes it clear that it isn't enough anymore to just collect diverse items, but we must also be mindful how they are made available to patrons is equally important.

During the process we found that placing the country flags on drawers made it easier for patrons to find the drawer containing maps of their home country, thereby giving our international students a sense of belonging.

The very first day we put out the magnets, we had a student from Oman asking to see maps of his country of origin. As of 2024, Penn State hosted 87 students from Oman. The student pointed to the flag and said he wanted to see maps of Oman. Prior to applying the flags, there was no way for a student unfamiliar with the collection to know we had maps of Oman. We were able to find a map of Oman to



show him with Arabic labels. During that interaction, the patron and I talked about his home and where he grew up. We were able to make a connection through our collection.



Figure 8: Map drawer with label of Jordan and flag of Oman

Country flag and names on the drawers make maps more accessible to everyone, including staff. Students are free to access the drawers without staff intervention, and staff no longer need to know the exact call number for a country. During a class visit to the Hamer Center during the summer 2024, students explored and opened drawers and found items of interest much more easily and enthusiastically than in past tours. The experience reinforced our decision to label the drawers.



Figure 9: Map collection swarmed by a summer class

After the success of the country flags project, we created license plates with call numbers to the US state drawers. License plates were chosen over state flags for this endeavor because the license plates are much more easily recognizable to the average patron than many state flags. License plates were also chosen to differentiate them from the country flags, for easier identification of drawers for patrons.

A Penn State inspired license plate cover was created to unify the designs, then the design process moved forward in a similar fashion to the country flags, with plates being adjusted and minimally changed to accommodate the cover and the size of the tflags. The images used for the plate flags were sourced from [Build a Sign](#) and customized with the call number of the state the plate belonged to.



Figure 10: US state license plates with Library of Congress call numbers added and Penn State University License plate cover

Conclusion

For very little money we were able to beautify the map collection in the Hamer Center and increase access and belonging. The project prompted many conversations with staff about DEIA-B, what makes a country, and how to be careful in how we showcase countries with contentious borders or histories. In addition, visitors were much more likely to browse the collection with ease and understanding of the collection than before the labels.

Feel free to use our files to beautify and increase belonging in your space. [Country & State Map Drawer Magnets](#)



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