Background

The Simmons University Transcribe-athon was intended to be held in person in Spring 2020, but due to COVID-19, it was adapted into a week-long virtual Summer program. This change altered the program design and impacted the level of student involvement, but still provided an opportunity for students to learn about crowdsourcing and become familiar with Library of Congress’ By the People crowdsourcing transcription program.

Program Design

Two campaigns from By the People were chosen for the focus of this program:
- The Anna E. Dickinson Papers
- Clara Barton: Angel of the Battlefield campaign

These two campaigns were selected as a reflection on the current political climate and in honor of health care workers during this time of pandemic.

Chapter leadership created a blog site for the program, with posts entitled “Why We Are Doing a Transcribe-athon,” "How to Participate," and "Resources for Transcription." Together, the posts explained why transcription work is important and provided best practices and tips & tricks for creating good transcriptions.

Library of Congress provides a presentation for hosting transcribe-athons, to be edited and used by hosts. Chapter Co-Chair Elena Hinkle created a video of the presentation using Zoom (screenshot above). This video was one of several resources provided to participants in the Virtual Transcribe-athon.

Competition & Results

Participants were challenged to complete as many transcriptions as they could over the course of the week-long program, and the top three transcribers were awarded "virtual trophies" (below). As a group, participants completed over 100 transcriptions.

Impact of Crowdsourcing

In discussing their experiences working on Library of Congress’ By the People campaigns, students reflected on the power of teamwork and the importance of every contribution, no matter how big or small. Common themes in the reflections included:
- The experience of being able to complete transcriptions that had been started by other volunteers, and to fill in question marks previous transcribers had left when unable to decipher some words
- Realizing that every transcriber brings knowledge to the work that others may not have. One student cited their theatre background as being helpful for interpreting stage directions in a play manuscript they were transcribing, which may have been confusing or difficult for volunteers without that background
- Initial reactions of feeling daunted and overwhelmed by the thousands of pages that were incomplete or had not yet been started in the collections, but seeing that "every little bit of transcription work was helpful toward the common goal"

Students were able to see that every effort helps make a dent in the vast number of incomplete documents, and that this is precisely why libraries, archives, and museums use crowdsourcing - to reach overwhelming goals with the assistance of thousands of volunteers.

"I could see how every little bit of transcription work was helpful toward the common goal."