Karina Kletscher
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White Paper

Programming the Gaps: Outreach to Non-Users at the Academic Library

Background

Central to the core of a university's mission, an academic library must support research endeavors and foster scholarship. The library serves a diverse population of students, faculty, and independent researchers from a variety of backgrounds and nationalities but also skill levels. But many of these scholars are absent from library sessions, work spaces, and programming. Academic librarians are constantly working towards the best promotion and outreach to demonstrate the value of the library to both non-users and other university stakeholders such as administration. Negative or apathetic perceptions and non-use can have dire consequences like wasting resources on irrelevant initiatives, reduction of space allocation, or loss of funding for the library.

Outreach to non-users is an important undertaking that impacts the campus climate, student persistence and retention, and student success. Studies have shown that engagement in educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, G. D. & Cruce, T. M. & Shoup, R. & Kinzie, J. & Gonyea, R. M., 2008) and library use contributes to higher GPA and returning for following semesters, particularly among first-year students (Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013). Additionally, Kuh et al. (2008) determined these use and participation factors influenced students across various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Creating and contributing to "information experiences" and "intentional relationship building" (Schlak, 2018) validates the academic library's role and commitment to engagement in an open, scholarly community.

Increasing cross-campus collaboration and partnerships unifies efforts to increase learning and success while upholding the overall university's mission and values (ACRL, 2017). Applicable to all levels of the university community, be it students, faculty, or staff, collaboration also increases a community's social capital. Strategic partnerships bridge positive networks of people and information sources (Ramsey, 2016) by improving the flow of information and knowledge and leading to better informed decisions and a sense of belonging. While social capital is not typically seen as a library resource (Ramsey, 2016), informal learning opportunities can work towards dismantling stereotypical perceptions of the library, its services, and who it serves (ACRL, 2017).

Potential Solutions

The following solutions extend traditional library outreach initiatives such as workshops, exhibitions, and programs beyond typical conceptions to create informal learning opportunities that inform and attract non-users, while also building on existing relationships with current users. Studies have demonstrated that more out-of-the-box roles for services, collections, and

spaces can lead to increased traffic, use, and knowledge surrounding the academic library (Harris and Weller, 2012; ACRL, 2017) and thus inspire scholarship and community perceptions, and reinvigorate available services and resources.

Solution 1: Faculty-Centered Brown Bag Programming

In efforts to reach the faculty with intentions of trickling down to colleagues and students, the library should look to hosting informal workshops or lectures in brown bag or reception formats. These short sessions could be held on rotating times so as to attract both tenure-track faculty who may be headquartered in campus offices or adjuncts who may commute for only one or two classes. Programming should be low stakes, informal yet educational affairs centered on sharing information, building connections, and even simple refreshments like coffee and cookies.

Faculty identities as teachers, researchers, and role models can both benefit from and demonstrate library resources and collaboration with librarians. Hall (2016) identified three ways of reaching faculty: outreach related to coursework, shared professional goals, and research. Session content may inform faculty how the library can support coursework and classes by introducing Open Educational Resources (OER), course reserves, and LibGuides that ease faculty and student access to materials. This may lead to increased collaboration with librarians regarding instruction on search strategies, database usage, and critical thinking. Faculty, especially longtime and tenured members, may appear self-sufficient but as academic librarians stay abreast of developments and emerging trends in educational issues and technology, sessions regarding citation management tools or open access in scholarly communication can positively impact faculty's personal research as well (Hall, 2016). Partnering with the university's faculty development center could lead to incentives for initial outreach stages and double the marketing impact as well as affirm the library's support for professional development and goals.

In addition, this programming creates an interdisciplinary space for faculty to gather, increasing their social capital in a network of likeminded colleagues. Disciplinary faculty may well find research partners in library faculty and staff, kickstarting new scholarly ventures. Faculty-centered programming highlights the library's role in academic culture but also its role in a network of support that celebrates achievements and showcases what faculty do in and out of the classroom or lab (Reeves, Nishimuta, McMillan, Godin, 2003; Hall, 2016).

Solution 2: Library Displays and Exhibitions

This kind of passive programming is familiar to many librarians and users from themed book displays to exhibits including holdings from special collections or the university's archives. If not in place already, the academic library should set aside easily visible space for displays. While it still requires pre-planning, unlike live programming, displays and exhibits are relatively low maintenance ways of improving circulation, tweaking the learning space, and deepening connections between the library and campus or even surrounding community (Maloney, 2012).

Rather than the library operating on its own to plan and design displays, the library should reach out to any number of campus units or external organizations. These strategic partnerships connect viewers with a variety of available resources and increase the impact of the displays through quality content and a unified address of issues and conversations seen and heard around campus. Some ideas for successful displays and exhibits include presenting collections relevant to cultural centers' event calendars (Maloney, 2012), exhibitions of student and local artists (Thomas, Tolliver, Phillips, Alford, Lovelace, 2019),and interactive displays that spark dialogue (Everett, 2018).

These collaborative displays transform collections and spaces into welcoming and inclusive resources for the diverse campus community. The library becomes a place for "discovery, cultivation, and contemplation" that furthers "social capital and intellectual exchange" (Freeman as cited in Maloney, 2012, p. 283). As the content has the power to ignite these inquiries and perceptions, library staff should be mindful of curation and representation. Displays and exhibits can bring forth marginalized voices and counter-stories that challenge stereotypes and the hegemonic culture (Hughes-Hassell, 2013). Exhibit content can also enable the library to increase transparency, remove barriers, and close the distance between the academic institution and users by acknowledging historic complicity in an abundance of issues (Pruitt, 2010). Displays and exhibits become an important means for powerful partnerships and platforms for important conversations.

Solution 3: Interdisciplinary, Multicultural Programming

Similar to Solution 2's displays and exhibits, a more active programming initiative consisting of interdisciplinary and multicultural events would be a benefit to the library and campus community. Continuing in that same vein, live events have the capacity to be platforms for important, sometimes even difficult, conversations. Professional speakers and performers highlight their paths to success, guide and inspire students. But they also represent diverse voices and present stories that act as a window and a mirror as Hughes-Hassell (2013) so aptly puts, which have the power to alter perspectives and develop communities of diversity, inclusivity, and mutual respect.

The library may not be the first place thought of for such an initiative. But as the primary repository of research and stories and gathering place for scholastic and social activities, the library is already uniquely situated at the heart of the campus community. Again, adopting less traditional purposes and roles for a library's services, collections, and spaces (Harris and Weller, 2012; ACRL, 2017) centers the library as a place and resource that is committed to supporting the university community as scholars and human beings. Cross-campus collaboration only increases the connections and benefits: interdisciplinary partnerships and perspectives; available resources; connecting collections and research; the then and the now; enumerations of faculty, staff, and student collaboration; identity formation and confluence. In addition, the on-campus programming can connect the library with external educational initiatives and partnerships (Harris and Weller, 2012), furthering the local, national, or international scholarly community.

With disciplinary faculty, staff, and librarians collaborating on events, they are able to fill in curricular gaps. Inspired by other researchers or relevant creative professionals, these event coordinators can bring in outside experts and well-known personalities to bridge the knowledge and experiences between the ivory tower and society (Thomas et al., 2019). Creating immersive information experiences as Schlak (2018) identifies, campus engagement, sense of belonging, and social capital grow due to the advancement in campus life activities that address the community's multilayered identities (Kuh et al., 2008; Ramsey, 2016).

Recommendation and Summary

The provided solutions are scalable and may be combined into a larger initiative given the available funding and resources at the academic library's disposal. As Solution 3 concerning an interdisciplinary and multicultural programming initiative can incorporate strategic faculty outreach as well as host both passive and active programming, this is the best candidate for an academic library looking to reinvent its outreach strategies and community's perceptions. Additionally, the library should create a committee of internal library and external campus partners and stakeholders to oversee this initiative. This would prevent library staff from being overburdened with design and implementation, strengthen partnerships, increase promotion, and avoid stagnant ideas and approaches.

A strategic programming initiative is not only a nontraditional reinvigoration of library services but a multipronged outreach strategy that invites collaboration, information sharing, community building. In creating these inclusive and educational spaces and experiences, the library sets itself up as a safe, accessible place of gathering and free inquiry for the entire campus community.

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