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Library outreach as a model for staff inreach

A method for sharing success

Libraries have been successful at focusing their outreach efforts to users, but may not be as strong with communicating to their own staff. In recent years, libraries have acknowledged this siloed nature of their organizations, and have sought to break down barriers through a variety of methods. Meghan Kowalski recommended four strategies, one of which is sharing success “at meetings, through emails, or on bulletin boards.”¹

This article will focus on how two Syracuse University Libraries’ (SUL) staff members from different departments took success sharing one step further by applying a successful outreach tradition to an event that would celebrate staff achievements. Spring Fest was an event designed to convene library staff from across the organization to acknowledge combined efforts and embrace the value of community.

Institutional context

SUL supports the teaching and research needs of Syracuse University (SU) through the efforts of more than 200 employees, spread across a variety of physical spaces on and off campus. Bird Library houses the majority of staff and is host to several campus partners, including a student tutoring center, an entrepreneurial innovation space, an undergraduate research space, and is currently the temporary home of the LGBTQ and Multicultural Affairs offices. Staff in each department are charged with supporting student success in a variety of ways. Because each effort takes a varying amount of time, staff members seldom have the opportunity to learn from each other, celebrate accomplishments, and share challenges.

How we came up with the idea

Every year, SUL hosts Welcome Fest, showcasing the staff, services, and spaces in the libraries for the wider SU community. This is a fun, collaborative effort representing contributions from nearly all units within SUL.² While working the event, we noticed that we are good at promoting our services to users, and wondered why there was no similar event for internal success sharing between departments.

The only events that give all staff the opportunity to come together are the dean’s State of the Libraries addresses that are delivered each fall and spring. These addresses allow the dean to outline the strategic priorities for SUL, and include a small portion of time for celebration of individual library successes. While staff are given the opportunity to submit questions and feedback for the dean to address, there is little time for us to talk to each other informally as a community. We saw an opportunity to transform the spring address into a more inclusive, celebratory occasion, and chose to use the “Welcome Fest” format as a pilot model.

Planning the event

In January 2019, we successfully pitched the idea of Spring Fest to our dean of libraries. We put out a call for proposals using a LibWiz-

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ard form, and encouraged all units to consider participating. Individuals or groups from any unit could create posters, handouts, or other creative displays that the rest of the SUL community could explore during an afternoon in the spring semester.

We reserved the largest space in the library and began to communicate the idea to the entire staff through multiple announcements on the organization's listserv. We recognized that the event could not happen without staff involvement across all units, so we relied on administrative buy-in. Having the dean's support was crucial but we also needed unit managers and department heads to be on board. We presented our idea at a SUL management team meeting and were successful in gathering support. Submissions trickled in at first, but ultimately ended up including proposals from all units. In addition, three of our library partners signed up to table at the event to market their services.

Running the event

Spring Fest was decorated and catered with the theme in mind, including fresh flowers and colorful festoons. To keep with the festive atmosphere, we planned to raffle off the fresh flower decorations at the conclusion of the event. We estimated that attendance was at or near full capacity (75 people) for the two-hour duration. There were stations representing a variety of units across SUL, including Access and Resource Sharing, Acquisitions and Cataloging, Learning Commons, Preservation, Program Management, Research and Scholarship, Special Collections, and University Records Management.

Apart from brief opening remarks from the dean, we kept the event informal so individuals

could come and go as their schedules allowed. Attendees viewed a wide variety of creativity and ingenuity on display in many of the projects. Among them were a group from Acquisitions and Cataloging who created their own version of the "Chutes and Ladders" game to explain the tricky acquisitions process. Members from the Belfer Audio Archive and Special Collections curated an incredible set of rare archival materials that would rarely be seen outside of their secure spaces. The Access and Resource Sharing team com-

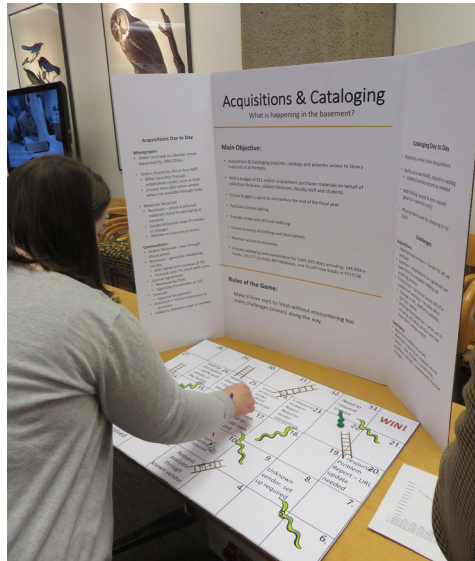
plied a video examining the lifecycle of a book. A library technician from Acquisitions and Cataloging made a tabletop display to showcase a series of interesting items found in returned books. Librarians from the Learning Commons department reported on the increase in virtual reference interactions following the implementation of proactive chat. More than 25 posters, tabletop displays, and videos were shared in a festive environment that

inspired the dean to remark that "a new spring tradition had been born."

Assessing the event

We created a brief survey to solicit participants' thoughts and reactions to the event. Attendees were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the Spring Fest event as a whole on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being "excellent" and 1 being "poor." They were also asked to share their favorite and least favorite aspects of the event, and if they would attend another Spring Fest event in the future.

When asked about the overall quality of the event, 92% of respondents ranked the event at "excellent" or "above average." Attendees were



Spring Fest "Chutes and Ladders" game covering the acquisitions process.

impressed with the way an environment was created that enabled “a sense of community, connection with other library departments, and a sense of celebration.”

One respondent who usually works evenings and weekends said, “This was a great way for me to find out what my colleagues who work regular business hours have been working on.”

The only negative feedback concerned the need for a larger space. Respondents noted that the room (despite being the largest reservable room in the library) was crowded and difficult to maneuver. Finally, 95% of respondents said they were “very likely” or “likely” to attend another Spring Fest event.

Increased collaboration

While the main goal of Spring Fest was to foster communication across the organization, an unexpected collaboration emerged, as well. During the event, the director of the libraries’ Digital Library Program approached us individually and suggested that we consider digitizing Spring Fest projects for SURFACE, our institutional repository.

Since the event, we have met with individuals from multiple departments to begin collaborating on a workflow for archiving and digitizing both past and future Spring Fest projects. We view this collaboration as an added bonus.

Implications for other libraries

We believe this model can be applied in any library context. The most important aspect is encouraging participation from all units of your library. In our case, we believe the novelty of our event contributed to the wide participation throughout the libraries in the first year. In order to keep the energy flowing from year to year, we will need to invest the time and resources into designing a sustainable model for implementation, delivery, and improvement.

We recommend assembling a team similar to that of the Welcome Fest committee, which has an established workflow and has demonstrated success throughout the years. This committee includes coordinators who shepherd a rotating group of members through the process, which

includes creating marketing and assessment communications, space coordination, catering, and serving as ambassadors throughout the year.

Because Spring Fest is geared toward success sharing among the libraries, there is an opportunity to preserve staff projects year after year. This way, employees past, present, and future can partake in the knowledge transfer and accomplishments of their colleagues. In our case, we are in the process of building this collection with our Open Publishing unit, and suggest that other libraries consider similar collaborations.

Conclusion

We believe Spring Fest was a successful effort to turn outreach inward. Attendees frequently said they were impressed with the level of participation, celebratory atmosphere, and creative quality of projects displayed across all units in SUL. Many employees said that they enjoyed learning about the annual highlights of different library departments and services that are not traditionally reported across the libraries. Further, a number of attendees enjoyed the opportunity to mingle and catch up with their coworkers in an informal academic setting.

One person said their favorite thing about Spring Fest was the “chance to see what others have been working on! We don’t usually get enough exposure to other departments’ activities, so this was really interesting.”

We look forward to continuing this new spring tradition of success sharing. This is one method for breaking down silos in academic libraries, and we encourage other organizations to adapt this structure for their own contexts.

Notes

1. Meghan Kowalski, “Breaking Down Silo Walls: Successful Collaboration Across Library Departments,” *Library Leadership and Management* 31:2 (2017), <https://journals.tdl.org/llm/index.php/llm/article/view/7202>.

2. For more information on Syracuse University Libraries’ Welcome Fest, see our Flickr Page at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/syracuse-learningcommons/albums/72157694986491050> and the Spring Fest Flickr Page at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/syracuselearningcommons/albums/72157704633734092>. 