

Mitch Fontenot

# Five “typical” years as an outreach librarian

## And five things I have learned

**F**ive years ago I wrote an article for *Louisiana Libraries* entitled “A ‘Typical’ Year in Outreach Services at Louisiana State University”<sup>1</sup> after my first informal year of filling interim in the position. Now after having been an outreach librarian formally at Louisiana State University (LSU) for five years, I thought it was a time for a look back, statistically as well as events wise, to see what had been accomplished, how to proceed, and to determine whether there were any developing trends in outreach librarianship.

Generally, an outreach librarian is responsible for “reaching out” to a library’s clientele to actively educate them as to the services a library may offer, as opposed to passively waiting for them to come to the library.

As an outreach librarian at a large university library, I work with our students to educate and publicize our services, as well as extend those services to the public and prospective students, who may not realize they are welcome to use our library.

Statistically, our outreach statistics have grown from participating in 14 events in 2006 to an average of more than 60 events per year over the past couple of years. Large events such as freshmen orientations over the summer and recruitment events in the fall and spring still prevail, but smaller more focused events with specific groups of people are on the rise. Specialty groups such as graduate students, international students, student athletes, and participants in summer scholar and study abroad programs are

increasingly prevailing upon outreach librarians for specialized assistance and education. How did this all come about and what are some best practices, ways to proceed, and trends I see for outreach in general?

### **Outreach on a budget**

First, you do not have to spend as much money as in the past with regard to advertising and handouts. With the economy such as it is, and much to the chagrin of administrators and budgets everywhere, libraries do not have the money they used to have for many things, it is a simple fact.

I have noticed that invitations to outreach events these days impress upon the participants to go green in the way of handouts, especially paper and plastics. Connect this with the fact that with the rise of social media, an entity does not have to spend money on advertising with the availability of Facebook, Twitter and blogs, along with free advertising opportunities on campuses such as access televisions, computer lab screen savers, etc. Learn how to outreach on a lean to nonexistent budget in these troubled economic times.

### **Find people who will really network**

Second, find outreach people and volunteers who know how to shake hands and meet

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and greet the people (i.e., true networking). I have observed outreach situations as varied as two people who were such good friends they would spend the entire outreach event speaking to one another (as opposed to talking to attendees) to people who would ask not to be scheduled on the same shift with other persons. Consider carefully these types of volunteers as both of the extremes that do not work successfully for outreach events.

Find the person or persons who when they volunteer will concentrate on the task at hand (i.e., outreach, networking, shaking hands, talking to the people) and conscientiously work to make an outreach event a successful one. Basically, outreach is fun but it is still a business and a job, treat it as such.

### **Tailor your outreach approach**

Third, outreach events are becoming more precise and even specialized. While large events like freshmen orientations and book festivals still exist, they have become too costly for many entities. Smaller specialty groups such as individual school classes and student organizations are requesting outreach at higher levels for more of a personal one-to-one approach. Start tailoring your outreach events and presentations to accommodate and educate smaller specialized groups. If feasible and possible, bring in expert volunteers who may understand, be a part of, or have a strong desire to work with certain specialty groups.

### **Teach**

Fourth, use instruction as outreach and outreach as instruction. If you are an outreach librarian, stay in the classroom and teach whether it is formal classes, one shots, or tours for or visits to schools. If you are an instruction librarian, volunteer for outreach events. I find that the best way of learning about your clientele is to teach them, and see and hear what they are saying and thinking. In the case of educational institutions such as high schools or colleges, outreach may factor quite heavily into recruitment endeavors and statistics. In the last three to four years, I

have seen an upsurge in the amount of high school, middle school, and even elementary school requests for presentations, tours, or visits to the library. Outreach colleagues around the country at state and national library meetings have said the same thing to me and, as such, participate on committees dealing with issues of transition and connecting high school to college students, teachers, and librarians.

### **Look for help at all levels**

Fifth and finally, have the support of people at all levels. Administrative support for outreach is critical and many fellow outreach librarians enjoy this, as do I. Of equal importance are co-worker support and a strong sense of volunteerism. Many will have ideas, but far fewer have the talents to implement or be a good outreach volunteer, so pick and choose said persons wisely. And realize that one person cannot be all outreach, even though they may have the title. It takes a concerted effort on the part of many people at all levels to make outreach a success at any institution, never forget that.

Outreach, like our profession, is constantly changing, and in order to stay fresh and on top of things, and avoid burnout, it is always advisable to keep rethinking how and why we do outreach.

### **Note**

1. Mitch Fontenot, "A 'Typical' Year in Outreach Services at Louisiana State University," *Louisiana Libraries* 69 (Winter 2007): 3–5. ♪

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