

# The library as an incubator for multicultural awareness and engagement

## Cultivating shared experiences

**A**s libraries across the globe are making a firm commitment to support diversity, librarians are adopting and supporting new services and programs that attract diverse users. Since the appointment of a permanent library diversity committee in 2007, the University Libraries at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro (UNCG) have been re-emphasizing a commitment to diversity. This led to a several new programs and initiatives, such as the Post MLS Diversity Resident Librarian program.

In the summer of 2014, I started working as a diversity resident librarian at UNCG. My roles as diversity resident librarian included liaising between the University Libraries and the Office of Intercultural Engagement and expanding the libraries' outreach efforts. The Libraries do not have a dedicated outreach librarian; therefore, the responsibility falls on liaisons to explore opportunities to create a more welcoming and inclusive library environment.

During my quest to understand the culture of the library and the institution, I conducted informal interviews with students to understand their views on the environment. The responses fed into the narrative that interactions between international students and their American peers do not happen frequently enough. In fact, lack of cultural interconnection is a phenomenon that happens quite often on diverse campuses. Xinran Y. Lehto, Liping A. Cai, Xiaoxiao Fu, and Yi Chen suggested that interactions may become less frequent as the number of international students from a particular country increases

so significantly that they begin to develop a critical mass and form their own communities.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, early works of education theorists such as Vincent Tinto have indicated that student engagement and interaction plays an important role in retention.<sup>2</sup> With that in mind, I consulted with my colleagues and decided that a Diversity and Global Engagement Expo would be an effective way to create a more inclusive atmosphere that could lead to an environment in which students are more likely to succeed.

### **Outreach: Creating a bridge between the libraries and student organizations**

In an attempt to assess the libraries' environment as it relates to accessibility and inclusion, I conducted informal interviews with students. The general theme that resulted from the inquiries centered on the lack of programs and initiatives to encourage student engagement. One student stated, "I see students on a daily basis (in the classroom and throughout campus) that look and speak differently, but I almost never get to engage with them, mainly due to fear." This statement is an example of the inherent fear that hampers intercultural communication; the fear of being judged, misunderstood, or viewed as being offensive is a major barrier to intercultural interaction.

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As an immigrant who was involved in athletics, I am in a unique position to validate the idea that programs, clubs, societies, and social events both formal and informal facilitate intercultural engagement and interaction. With the support of the University Libraries' Diversity Committee, I decided to create a more interactive and student-centered library outreach initiative in the form of a diversity expo. I invited student organizations, including numerous multicultural student groups, into UNCG's main library to share their initiatives, collaborate with other organizations, and recruit new members.

The event created a spotlight for the multicultural students groups that enabled them to generate lots of membership interest. It gave new and existing students an opportunity to learn about and join various student organizations while engaging in the diversity on campus. Students appreciated that they were able to learn about other cultures, sample exquisite cuisines and listen to global melodies while cultivating shared experiences.

The expo was scheduled for four hours. It started with an exhibition and ended with a panel discussion. Twelve exhibitors took part in the exhibition, which lasted for three hours. Entertainment was provided by a volunteer guitarist from the UNCG School of Music, Theatre, and Dance. The event concluded with an hour-long panel discussion, where students, student leaders, and members of UNCG's administration and faculty convened to discuss global issues affecting society.

The panelists included the department heads of the sponsoring units and was moderated by an associate professor representing the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies. It was an open forum and students used the opportunity to engage the panelists in a discussion about the 2014 killing of two unarmed black men by police officers and the emergence of ISIS and its contribution to the negative perceptions of Islam and Americans Muslims. Panelists also spent a brief moment identifying internal and external resources and safe zones (support for the presence of a culturally and otherwise diverse campus community).

The event was well attended by more than 200 hundred students with participants representing all inhabited continents. Fifty-three percent of the survey respondents indicated that they were natives of a country other than the United States. Also, 60% of the respondents indicated that they learned something new about another culture. This speaks volumes to the level of cultural diversity and interactions and prompted participants to request that the event continue annually.

## **Planning and promotion**

Usually a major time commitment is associated with planning these events and the Diversity and Global Engagement Expo was not an exception. My time log reflected that I invested approximately 140 hours into the project. With greater administrative and logistical familiarity, the time commitment could be reduced by 25 to 45%. I had been working at UNCG for only two months when I conceptualized the expo. Consequently, I spent a significant amount of time engaging and building rapport with student groups. I also spent a lot of time identifying prospective partners/allies and sponsors.

A small group of staff was all that was needed to plan the expo. The event coordination was spearheaded by myself and supported by the Libraries' Diversity Committee. The planning process for this event created a unique opportunity to collaborate within the library, as well as externally with other campus units. Working on this event created an opportunity to strengthen the University Libraries' relationship with faculty, staff, and student leaders. It also gave me an opportunity to gain leadership and programming experience.

Advertising or promoting an event is very important to drive physical attendance. It is also a vital component of the planning process and can be done in many forms. Promotion for the expo was initiated approximately two months prior to the event date. However, most of the interest was generated in promotional activities that occurred within seven days of the event. The expo was advertised through several media outlets, including a press release in UNCG's Campus Weekly (online news source

for UNCG faculty and staff), emails to the university community, banner announcements on the library's website, flyers throughout campus, and social media. Facebook and Twitter were the most effective media for promotion mainly because they were instrumental in generating interest on the day of and during the event.

During the event, graduate interns employed at the Libraries' reference desk took and uploaded live photos and short videos on social media. The social media posts assisted in driving physical and virtual support for the event. It captured the vibrant atmosphere that included global music, food, and engaging conversations.



Author Orolando Duffus talking with students at the 2015 Diversity Expo.

### Marketing library products and services

The promotion for the expo fit well into the Libraries' overall philosophy of marketing its services. The UNCG University Libraries recognizes that marketing information products and services is integral to student awareness, use, and engagement, which will inevitably contribute to student success. The University Libraries capitalized on the expo by using it as a platform to engage and inform the Libraries' patrons about some of the products and services that are available to support the diverse student population.

For example, an informal observation at the diversity expo found that about 70 to 80% of students did not know the library had a 3-D printer. This is true for a number of other valuable services and resources clearly visible, as well as those hidden away in closed stacks in areas such as Special Collections and University

Archives. Each library department participated by manning display booths showcasing new and underused resources and technologies.

During the expo, I also issued surveys with questions designed to collect demographic information and conduct a needs-based assessment. The survey responses helped us identify some critical areas that the Libraries needed to improve in order to create a more welcoming and inclusive library environment.

I learned that aesthetics or sensory cues weigh heavily on students' perception of the library and their willingness to approach librarians. Students, both international and local, indicated that visual cues such as multinational flags and banners and artifacts of cultural or historical significance are helpful in reducing anxiety and creating a sense of belonging.

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### Partnership: Creating strategic alliances

The expo was very effective in creating relationships with other campus units. The University Libraries formed a strategic alliance with the Office of Intercultural Engagement, International Programs Center, Campus Activities and Programs, Human Resources Department, Quality Enhancement Plan, and the Student Government Association. Those units are key stakeholders in campus diversity and they came together, in a structured way, to have a collective impact. The success of the expo was greatly enhanced by the contributions of those campus organizations in funding, promotion, and program ideas. This partnership helped to strengthen the relationships among the various campus units. It also demonstrated

their willingness to partner with the Libraries, and it certainly laid the foundation for future collaborations.

The event partners helped to generate traffic by advertising the event throughout their channels of communication, including social media. They were also a great source of funding to subsidize decoration and refreshments costs. The panel moderator was very experienced with organizing campus forums, and his ideas, suggestions, and support were instrumental in shaping the format and success of the panel discussion. He conducted the discussion in a dynamic way that empowered the audience to speak freely on any topic of interest. His technique was brilliant and endearing, it stimulated fruitful conversations, which resulted in high levels of student engagement.

## Conclusion

It is important that libraries of all sorts continue to be innovative and resourceful amid unrelenting budget constraints and rising inflation. The expo exemplified a cost-effective way to raise the Libraries' profile in the critical area of diversity and to publicize our resources to a broad array of students. Some students reported feeling empowered and enlightened by the discussion forum.

There was a general feeling of excitement and enthusiasm among the exhibitors. Many requested that it become an annual event and indicated that they would like to participate if

the event continues. The expo also enjoyed the highest attendance for a library event in recent years when compared to all other similar events, such as book swap, game night and film festival, animal therapy day, etc.

Libraries have long been recognized as the information hub and, in recent times, the cultural hub of the community. It is crucial that libraries leverage their prominence and influence to consolidate resources with external entities and make a collective impact on student success and community advancement. This outreach initiative has established a blueprint for long-term collaborations among students, faculty, and staff. It is low-cost, and the time commitment is comparable to planning a book swap. The return on investment is exponential, since it provides an opportunity to market library products and service, create strategic alliances or partnerships with stakeholders, create advocates, and expand the library's outreach efforts.

## Notes

1. Xinran Y. Lehto, Liping A. Cai, Xiaoxiao Fu, and Yi Chen, "Intercultural Interactions Outside the Classroom: Narratives on a U.S. Campus," *Journal of College Student Development* 55 (8): 837–53.

2. Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). *ZZ*

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*("Baltimore—Charm City," continues from page 433)*

Point is the home to 18th- and 19th-century homes. Seasonal walking tours are one of the highlights of Fells Point. Hampden, the center of kitsch, includes "The Avenue" (36th street) and has unique shops and a variety of restaurants. Little Italy, easily accessible from the Inner Harbor, has a variety of restaurants. Mount Vernon includes mansions from the Gilded Age that are now home to restaurants, museums, and galleries. The Westside/Bromo Tower Arts & Entertainment District is home to the Hippodrome Theatre and the Everyman Theatre. It's also is where you can find the

final resting place of Edgar Allan Poe, who is buried at Westminster Hall Burying Ground.

## Visiting Baltimore in 2017

We hope you're making plans to join us in Baltimore for ACRL 2017. Besides the sights in Baltimore, we invite you to take a few days to explore Annapolis, the Eastern Shore, and the Civil War memorials and battlefields, including Gettysburg and Antietam.

Future issues of *C&RL News* will provide you with more information about "Charm City" and the opportunities that await you. *ZZ*