EDITORIAL

Dr. Kelli Johnson and Professor Sarah Mollette

Marshall University Libraries

Planning for Success: COVID-19 Outreach Experiences at Marshall University Libraries

Strategy and flexibility during the unexpected

The outreach experience at Marshall University Libraries & Online Learning (MU LOL) has evolved over the past several years into a robust multi-faceted, flexible program, which worked well during "normal times," but also turned out to be adaptable during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article describes how MU LOL's cross-departmental system has evolved, and how the finalization of its outreach plan led to a successful transition to online outreach in 2020. Specifically, the authors will address the history of library outreach at the university, forming the outreach librarian position, the outreach librarian's audit of current outreach practices, the creation of an outreach committee, and the development of the subsequent outreach plan guide.

> "While library marketing, communications, and outreach were not a priority under previous library administrations, there were numerous librarians and staff from different departments interested and involved in these activities."

Marshall University had a long-standing decentralized university communications system until 2014, when the university hired a vice president for communications and marketing. This position pulled together the siloed marketing efforts of campus departments and colleges. The new university communications team (UCOMM), developed and led by the new vice president for communications and marketing, established branding guidelines and implemented new, coordinated marketing strategies.

The MU Libraries were enthusiastic about the unified communications and marketing strategy, as there had been an uneven history with library marketing. Generally, some departments would advertise materials, programs, and services while others chose instead to rely on word of mouth. While library marketing, communications, and outreach were not a priority under previous library administrations, there were numerous librarians and staff from different departments interested and involved in these activities. This resulted in a strong and active outreach program, but one that lacked a cohesive approach in terms of marketing efforts, assessment objectives, communication, and overall mission goals. Despite this disorganization, several efforts achieved a level of success.

In collaboration with a talented graduate assistant (GA) with a background in art, graphic design, and marketing, a team of librarians reinvigorated their Facebook and Twitter accounts, with funding provided by UCOMM. The librarians focused on getting students, faculty, and staff into the Drinko Library (the main campus library), and using the materials and services provided there. The GA noticed that students were checking in on social media when they went to Drinko, saying things like "Studying at the Drinko" and "Met John at The

Drinko." With that information, they developed the "I♥The Drinko" campaign. Tabling events in busy student areas were held where branded swag—t-shirts, tote bags, water bottles, pens—was given away to anyone who liked and followed the library on social media. The campaign proved so popular, people who were not able to attend the tabling event contacted the library to ask for a tee-shirt. The other libraries on campus requested their own shirts and tote bags and held similar events. While the campaign ran only while that GA was employed, the student success librarian recently revived the campaign, and expanded it to "I ♥MU Libraries."

Additionally, the library maintained a social media presence in the form of one main Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram account, with the Special Collections Library having their own separate accounts. This approach, despite personnel challenges and somewhat infrequent posts, was generally considered successful because of a rise in interest and attendance for library programs and other outreach endeavors.

In 2018, the library decided that to have a successful unified marketing strategy, a dedicated outreach role with marketing responsibilities was necessary, and its first outreach librarian was hired. This moved MU Libraries into an era of actively providing displays, events, and workshops to connect with students in ways previously overlooked. The incoming outreach librarian had two years of outreach experience at a previous institution which allowed for a quick transition into the role, but with the added benefit of fresh eyes.

The first step toward developing a cohesive outreach program was to audit the list of current and previous activities to understand the state of programming, and then meet with all librarians actively engaged in programming to hear more about their individual approaches and priorities. The outreach librarian accomplished this via formal meetings, informal conversations, and a review of assessment documents. That last component was difficult to achieve because the library had not been using a single assessment or data-collection platform. Therefore, the outreach librarian created an outreach statistics form using SpringShare's LibInsight application, and librarians were encouraged to create assessments via SpringShare's LibWizard application. The outreach librarian found that some activities were being coordinated to fill a need with a specific audience (for example, freshmen), but were not well attended. Other activities had high attendance numbers, but were lacking any clearly-delineated goals or formative assessment methods.

The second step was to use the information gathered in the audit to create an outreach plan that maintained a multi-department and multi-location approach while addressing problems of inconsistency. Essentially, any department could follow the plan—almost like a roadmap—to check all the boxes for programming which furthered the mission of the library, while also meeting the needs of the students, faculty, and community within its constituency. As one librarian could not be reasonably expected to intimately understand and address each individual department and/or location's marketing needs, this strategy allowed for a cohesive approach while also leaving room for independence across departments. The plan clearly defined what types of activities and programming were considered outreach, how to determine goals and assessments, and how to plan the logistics of an event. It was around this time that the university as a whole requested that any programming done by campus staff or faculty have defined goals that matched the mission of the university, so this component was incorporated into the outreach plan draft.

A temporary ad hoc outreach committee was tasked with finalizing the outreach plan. Over the course of several meetings, the committee members, who had all been involved in their own departmental outreach efforts in the

past, provided feedback on the document draft and discussed edits, reviewed considerations regarding each unique library department and location, and ensured the university's policies were being addressed. When all considerations were finished, the outreach plan was considered finalized.

In addressing procedures for social media, the outreach librarian formed a second temporary ad hoc committee of interested colleagues, in response to the UCOMM liaison's (as part of a larger UCOMM effort) suggestion for an internal audit of the libraries' social media accounts. The UCOMM office believed the staggering number of overall university accounts was simply too high, with engagement and interaction numbers being too low. The library reviewed data for their Facebook and Instagram accounts, and the statistics revealed that the engagement and interaction numbers for the main library Facebook page did not warrant its upkeep. The Facebook page for the Special Collections department was allowed to continue, because of their unique collections¬–such as genealogy and local history–and wider community audience. At that time, the main library was not able to find any stats for their Twitter account, so the UCOMM liaison implemented the Falcon IO platform to monitor this, which the outreach librarian would review in 2021.

The committee agreed that the GAs, supervised by the outreach librarian, could run Instagram, while the outreach librarian would run Twitter. This division was made because the outreach librarian had already had been creating content for the Twitter account, and the GAs were more interested in Instagram. In spring 2021, the outreach librarian performed the new Twitter audit, and those statistics revealed that the library's Twitter account should be discontinued for the same reasons as its Facebook page. Despite a reasonable number of faithful followers of the library's main Twitter account, the majority of the currently-enrolled students were simply not seeing the content. In late summer 2021, the outreach librarian will work with all interested library staff to provide a "batch" of library content to their UCOMM liaison at the start of each semester for scheduled content to be posted to the university's Twitter account, using a single hashtag (#MarshallULibraries) with any emergency or event-specific information being added as necessary. This means that a larger number of currently-enrolled students will see library content, but scheduling and maintaining the account will largely fall to UCOMM, and not to library employees.

While information about services, resources, and events drove social media content planning, the outreach librarian and GAs also emphasized engagement with students. Asking for comments on events, for suggestions for prizes, and why students were in the library that day aided in informing future content as well as other library activities.

During late spring 2021, the outreach librarian began working with a public relations (PR) faculty member to create a student ambassador social media role for the library's Instagram account, to begin during the fall 2021 semester. The PR faculty member is in charge of student internships, which are required for that major and are credit-bearing. The goal is to create a Social Media Internship position for Instagram because the last of the library's social media-savvy GAs have graduated, and it is always risky to assume future students will have the necessary skills. This approach was recommended by the library's UCOMM liaison, whose offices successfully use a similar model for their own content. Because the PR students are required to complete 300 intern hours, the outreach librarian hopes that the same student could fulfil the role for a full academic year (fall and spring semesters).

With the outreach plan and social media goals established, the outreach librarian created a standing once-monthly meeting with the UCOMM liaison.

The outreach librarian hosts each meeting, and shares the recurring meeting invite with all library staff at the beginning of each semester so those with programming or marketing needs can attend.

These meetings have not only built a stronger relationship with the UCOMM liaison, but also a better understanding of the types of marketing services the university could provide. For example, "should this event be marketed to only undergraduate students, or the entire university?" And, "Does it require graphics only for digital signage, or printed materials as well?" Another example pertains to finances. For any outreach purpose, the library's print needs are covered by the UCOMM office, rather than from the library's budget, as are any physical materials, such as giveaways like ink pens and silicone straws, because they feature the university library logo.

These monthly meetings also make it easier to maintain a clear schedule of events. The outreach librarian sends monthly reminders for the meeting itself, in addition to reminders to anyone who had recently completed programming to input their statistics into the LibApps data form. The first 30 minutes of each meeting are used for internal library discussion, such as brainstorming and planning, and the UCOMM liaison attends the final 30 minutes to create the project tickets needed to start the process of print and/or digital content creation and distribution.

It was because of these efforts that MU LOL's outreach approach was prepared to address the challenges of the global pandemic that began to affect the library in late winter 2020. A side-by-side glance at the library's 2019 activities dataset versus the 2020 activities dataset is enlightening, as while the number of activities decreased (from 50 in 2019 to 26 in 2020), the attention to the needs of the students, the ongoing technological considerations, and the distinctive limitations inherent in conducting outreach during a pandemic resulted in a remarkable effort to connect with the campus community.
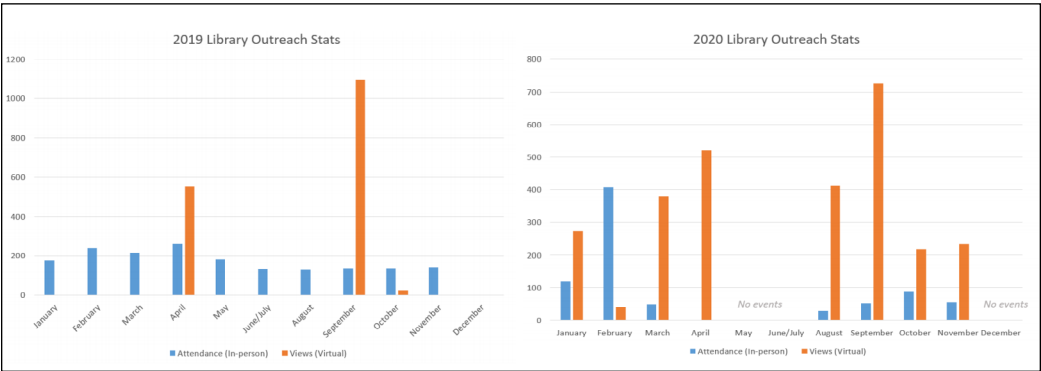

Table 1. Comparison of 2019 and 2020 Outreach Statistics. 2019 included 50 total events, 1,744 total attendance, and 1,672 total views. 2020 included 26 total events, 799 total attendance, and 2,807 total views.

At this point, the authors must point out an internal decision that was seemingly prophetic considering how much the world would change in early 2020. The outreach librarian transitioned from outreach into a new role: online learning librarian. This was because everything the librarian had been able to accomplish in outreach—creating the outreach plan, finalizing the social media tasks, and organizing the monthly UCOMM meetings—culminated in a significantly less urgent need for a dedicated outreach position. Because the main problem had been too many things happening at the hands of too many people in too many different ways, when that was solved and all policies and procedures were in place, the outreach librarian decided it was time to migrate to a new role that the library needed filled.

In moving from outreach to online learning, with the librarian's outreach experience coupled with their passion and skillset for online technologies, they were able to easily translate in-person activities to online modules, guides, or meetings that lived on various virtual platforms. Because of their UCOMM liaison relationship, and because of the university's approach to innovation and technology, the librarian was always able to find answers to questions from either existing partnerships gleaned over the years at MU LOL, or partnerships that were generated while forming the outreach plan. In their first few months as the online learning librarian, they were also able to take advantage of the fact that the entire world had shifted its focus to being more successful in online education, and so there was no shortage of library-related virtual outreach ideas, resources, and DIY's for the librarian to stretch their online outreach skills regarding both mental health and academic support.

❝Assessment programs are critical to growth, because to make decisions, you must know what has been done, whether or not it worked, and why or why not..❞

For example, a popular, recurring, in-person MU LOL event was Finals Week Stress Relief, which includes a schedule of activities that ranged from DIY activities (make your own stress balls with the provided materials and instructions) to staff-led activities (make a button, key-chain, or magnet with our machine while a librarian guides you). Previous stress relief activity examples included Legos and board games for checkout, a "relaxation station" with free snacks and supplies, a "meditation tent," and a giant community coloring sheet.

When the campus closed in March 2020, the librarians wanted to provide stress relief activities (which were certainly needed more than ever) that students could do from home at the end of the semester. The solution was twofold: first, to create a LibGuide that housed several at-home stress relief options, and, second, to retain some level of consistency regarding the more popular events.

In their previous role as the outreach librarian, the new online learning librarian had already created a Stress Relief LibGuide, featuring the pre-COVID activity schedule. In spring 2020, they updated it to focus more on things students could do on their own, with one page featuring link-lists guiding students to activities they could do for no (or low) cost while the stay-at-home orders were in effect. These were divided into three categories: DIY, Relaxation & Calming, and, Just for Fun. Other pages featured planning pages encouraging students to stay on track during the hectic end of the semester, downloadable coloring pages, and links to some online jigsaw puzzles. The librarian also made sure to feature information about the university's counseling resources.

To retain some level of consistency that mirrored the most popular of the in-person events—the MU PAWS emotional support dog visits—the team coordinator for the MU PAWS dogs and handlers suggested creating videos that featured the dogs doing tricks or "recommending" stress relief activities, and a Zoom meet and greet was scheduled. An extension of the spring activities to the fall included an in-person scavenger hunt for students who had returned to campus, and three virtual yoga sessions led by a fellow librarian. It is clear from the attendance, views, and engagement data recorded in the individual activity data sets that the students were comfortable participating in these activities, and the librarians have decided to maintain the virtual events even when campus fully reopens.

Additional programming examples that were held virtually (synchronous) or online (asynchronous) after originally only being offered in-person include

escape room activities, a scavenger hunt using the Special Collections archives, career education week, art exhibits, and "snack chat" workshops. The online learning librarian continued to work with library colleagues to determine which events could be well-suited for a virtual component, and everyone planned their activities around the academic needs of the students while being considerate of the technological limitations that some students may have been experiencing.

Because the work had already been done to create a cohesive library-wide outreach plan, the online learning librarian could focus more on the new strategies necessary for the Research and Instruction Services team to continue providing academic support. This meant library colleagues could use the outreach plan to replace any in-person responsibilities with virtual outreach activities, which ultimately highlighted the growing number of online resources and services the library makes available to students and the campus community. Had the plan not been in place, the online learning librarian may have been stretched too thin in their desire to support colleagues, and could therefore have possibly ignored the very community which she needed to be focusing on.

The path to a unified outreach strategy was both complex and direct for MU LOL, but one which successfully includes staff and librarians from multiple departments across three libraries on two campuses. Of course, this process took time, collaboration, and buy-in from library administration. Institutions looking to create a library-specific outreach plan should connect that document to the strategic plan of their library and possibly even their institution, as goals and objectives can be easily linked with a holistic mindset. Additionally, assessment programs are critical to growth, because to make decisions, you must know what has been done, whether or not it worked, and why or why not. Lastly, developing partnerships with both library and non-library entities, such as the UCOMM liaison partnership detailed here, expand opportunities for connecting with your students, and may lead to new connections with your faculty, staff, and the surrounding community.

Supplemental Resources:

- While the MU LOL outreach plan is an internal document, the step-by-step guide for library employees can be viewed online: https://libguides.marshall.edu/outreach.
- The Stress Free guide, which at the time of this writing also featured the list of activities for fall 2020, can be found online: https://libguides.marshall.edu/stress-free.

Author Details

Dr. Kelli Johnson, Professor and Head of Collection Services, Marshall University: kelli.johnson@marshall.edu

Sarah Mollette, Assistant Professor and Research and Instruction Services Librarian, Marshall University: sarah.mollette@marshall.edu