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Invigorating the academic library experience

Creative programming ideas

According to the recent OCLC report "College Students' Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources," libraries have an image problem: 70 percent of college students "associate 'library' first and foremost with books."[1] Many students are unaware of the variety of resources that libraries have to offer, and, when asked, they advise providing friendlier librarians and staff. Given these perceptions, the report concludes, "It is time to rejuvenate the 'library' brand."[2]

"Rejuvenating the brand depends on reconstructing the experience of using the library."[3] Now, more than ever, improving an academic library's ability to actively engage its patrons, while positively shaping their perceptions, is vital to the completion of the library's mission. Establishing the image of librarians as user-friendly is likewise critical to invigorating the library experience.

But in our online world, where much of our students' work can be done on wireless laptops from their residence halls, how do we demonstrate that our library is more than books; that it contains information and services relevant to students' lives? How do we make using the library more interesting and attractive to our patrons?

Students are eager for reference help during the "Library Mystery Thief" event in a darkened library at Saint Mary's College.

The concept

Wouldn't it be nice if all reference desks looked like the image below?

While academic libraries are frequently referred to as the social and intellectual heart of campus, they must continue to evolve in their methods of outreach and instruction in order to attract the technology-savvy students of today. Coffee bars and comfortable seating are good, albeit costly, means of drawing students. Directors with a keen sense of marketing and promotion, however, can encourage less expensive, but imaginative, endeavors that positively shape the character and reputation of the library on campus, thereby rejuvenating its image.

Programming, partnerships, and creative outreach all should play a significant role in offering students educational and engaging opportunities to frequent the library. Through these means, image management and skills training can be accomplished without crossing the line from a respectable institution of higher learning to a commercialized extravaganza; the devil is in the details.

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It is recommended that academic librarians add an extra dose of ingenuity when creating programming that incorporates research skills and traditional patron activities into events and services that actively engage their patrons. As Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman, authors of *Future libraries: Dreams, madness, and reality,* state, "…libraries and librarianship have a future and that future is there to be seized by those with insight, realism, and, yes, daring."[4]

The virtues of creativity and innovation likewise are extolled by Brian Quinn in his article "The McDonaldization of academic libraries." Citing the disadvantages of academic library environments becoming too efficient, predictable, hierarchical, and controlled, Quinn predicts that "as the field of higher education becomes more competitive and adopts more of a marketplace emphasis, academic libraries will likely experience additional pressure to come up with new products and services to keep users satisfied. Like their business-world counterparts, they may need to become less McDonaldized and more creative."[5]

To some extent, all academic libraries host events, such as lectures and poetry readings, which embrace the role of the library as an extension of the classroom. These offerings should be maintained, if not increased. Networking with academic departments, as well as with student affairs offices, can lead to new ideas for those with a creative bent.

Providing a multitude of different activities is not necessary; one or two well-conceived and well-executed projects a year will demonstrate the resourcefulness, versatility, and value of the library and its staff. It also will build a stronger sense of community. Additionally, emphasizing a hospitable atmosphere will diminish any hesitation or intimidation students may feel toward frequenting the library or consulting the librarians for their information needs.

Below are five suggested activities that will engage your students while furthering the various missions of the library. Feel free to put your own innovative touches on the basic concepts; the point is to create an event through which students engage in active learning. As the students become more involved, the library will become more significant, more attractive, and more relevant to their daily lives.

The ideas

1. Host a fair. Fairs come in many varieties: for example, job fairs, volunteer fairs, graduate school fairs, and science fairs. Partnering with the career office on campus demonstrates concern for the students' future, while providing them with valuable access to library resources and personal assistance in researching prospective employers.

The Cushwa-Leighton Library at Saint Mary's College is collaborating with the Center for Career Opportunities to provide access to the "Vault Guide to Top Internships 2006" and seven other e-books listing employers by industry.[6] Inviting students to the library at a particular date and time specifically to work through these resources with librarians is a logical next step. This will give the students practical hands-on experience and familiarity not only with the resources, but with the reference librarians, too.

Working directly with the students in an exposition format enhances the effectiveness of expensive research tools by reaching a wider audience. In the same vein, showcasing volunteer opportunities does more than illustrate good will. It also provides an occasion to highlight multidiscipline databases, particularly in the humanities. Graduate school fairs accomplish the similar goals of meeting student needs while teaching valuable research skills.

Consider partnering with a local high school science fair. Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville has been involved in a similar arrangement for years.[7] Go one step further by collaborating with the biology, chemistry, or physics departments (e.g., use students and faculty as judges or as assistants in coordinating the hosting of the event). Create a kiosk to encourage students to explore subject-oriented abstracting and indexing services and databases, such as Academic Search Elite, PubMed, or SciFinder Scholar.

2. Plan a mystery event. Following the lead of Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota,[8] Saint Mary's library staff planned a "mystery thief" event. Teams of students searched the

Cushwa-Leighton Library after-hours with flashlights to determine the identity of the "thief" who "stole" the rare Jerusalem Bible illustrated by Salvador Dali from the college archives. The clues required students to use the OPAC, periodical indexes, and electronic journals to complete a series of anagrams and crossword puzzles hidden throughout the library. Reference librarians were surrounded by clue-seekers eager to get ahead of the other teams.

Assistants waiting in the stacks kept the clues in order and aided players searching for specific LC call numbers. Players also were required to locate important areas in the library—such as

College students help elementary school children "build their own book" at the Cushwa-Leighton Library during National Library Week, 2006.

the book drop, the reserve desk, and the photocopiers—as an orientation to the building itself. Prizes were awarded to the team who correctly identified the "thief." Small participation gifts were given to all students, and refreshments were served. The budget for this event was under $150. And students are actually asking for another mystery event next semester!

3. Create a stress-free zone. Finals week might be the end of the semester, but it is an excellent time to foster the positive reputation of the library. In order to make a more pleasant study environment, many college libraries have sought to relieve the tension of studying by creating more tranquil surroundings.

At Saint Mary's, a conference room on the second floor of the library is designated a "stress-free zone" during finals week. The room is filled with board games such as checkers, Life, Uno, and Sorry. Crayons and coloring books are supplied. Jigsaw puzzles are left on the tables to be completed collaboratively. A campus employee with a license in massage therapy gives five-minute chair massages to students. Films are shown periodically throughout the week, as well. Sodexho Campus Services even provides free food and beverages.

The stress-free zone lasts from 7:00 p.m. to midnight. The students are grateful for the understanding and support demonstrated by

the library staff. Through this simple activity, students see the librarians as allies; that is a valuable lesson to learn.

4. Have a blind date with a book. This is another promotion that's sure to be popular with college students. This activity was promoted in libraries throughout the United Kingdom as part of their National Reading Campaign.[9] In an academic library, the program should be planned around Valentine's Day, between semesters, or over spring break.

The logistics of such an event can be handled in a couple of ways. One possibility is to sign-up students to participate and to find out what type of book (genre, author, etc.) each is interested in reading. Librarians select a title from the literature section, wrap it in brown paper, and attach a greeting card. Another option is to select the books first and write a brief "profile" for each book. Then students can choose which book they'd like to take a chance on reading.

The students will appreciate a needed break from their studies, and the library will build a bond with its patrons through creative outreach. This activity also promotes reading for pleasure. It's a win-win situation.

5. Invite children to the library. Provide underprivileged children the opportunity to experience college life by offering projects partnering with student mentors. National Library Week's motto for 2006, "Change your

world @ your library," provided the ideal impetus for Saint Mary's College to do just that.[10] Working with both Marquette Primary School in South Bend, Indiana, and the Early Childhood Development Center on campus, our library hosted a series of events pairing the children with college students.

In one area, a librarian/storyteller performed and the students read to the children one-on-one. The library staff and students assisted in a "build your own book" craft in a nearby conference room. In a different part of the library, the students and children were introduced to multimedia and audiovisual technology with support from the Huisking Instructional Technology Resource Center on campus.

The cost of this event, including supplies, goodie-bags, and round-trip bus transportation for the children, was $350. This expenditure was shared by the library and the college's Office for Civic and Social Engagement.

In the end, the event was highly successful because the students worked alongside the librarians and staff. The students and the children all gained a renewed respect for the types of resources the library has to offer. They also viewed the library as welcoming, and expressed enthusiasm for continuing to patronize the library in the future.

Conclusion

In today's world, imaginative outreach is crucial to overall library success. College students gain valuable skills and knowledge through experiential learning, especially if it is cleverly repackaged as fun. They also become comfortable with that which is familiar to them. Academic librarians can create experiences that shape the perceptions and heighten the enthusiasm of their students in order to make the overall library experience more appealing. This, in turn, will help to rejuvenate the "library brand."

Rather than competing with technological advances in an adversarial manner, libraries and librarians need to position themselves as offering complementary, attractive, and relevant resources that supplement their students'

media-filled lives. This can be accomplished by using the library's existing resources, but showcasing them for maximum effect.

Increased programming in academic libraries is a logical and effective step in any effort to reconstruct the library experience. Accordingly, library directors must recognize this need for change, and give their full support to staff members who dare to create innovative outreach opportunities. The experience can be invigorating for everyone. ✍

Notes

1. Cathy De Rosa et al., *College Students' Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2006), 3–23.

2. Ibid., 6–6.

3. Ibid.

4. Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman, *Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, and Reality* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1995), 1.

5. Brian Quinn, "The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries?" *College & Research Libraries* 61 (2000): 248–61.

6. Saint Mary's College, Center for Career Opportunities Pathfinder Newsletter, November 2006. "The Career Center has opened the Vault". Available online at www.saintmarys.edu/%7Ecco/.

7. Mary Ellen DeClue, Kevin Johnson, Howard Hendrickson, and Pamela Keck, "Stimulate high school science fair participation by connecting with a nearby college," *Journal of Chemical Education* 77 (2000): 608-609.

8. Carleton College, "How to host a murder mystery…in your library." Available online at www.carleton.edu/campus/library/reference/workshops/MurderMystery.html.

9. Australian Library and Information Association Conferences "Read all about it! The Moreland Reading Project and the UK National Reading Campaigns." Available online at conferences.alia.org.au/public2001/panozzo.html.

10. ALA, "National Library Week, April 2–8, 2006," www.ala.org/ala/pio/campaign/nlw/NLW.htm. ✍