

Yunshan Ye

The Outreach Symposium

A model of library collaboration

Academic libraries today face the challenge of finding effective ways to reach out to their patrons and promote the use and visibility of library resources and services. Given the strategic importance of outreach and marketing, three college libraries in Central Pennsylvania—Dickinson, Gettysburg, Franklin and Marshall—decided to collaborate and create a platform for library professionals in the region to come together and share ideas and experiences. The goal was to help each participating library upgrade its outreach programs and provide more effective services to its college community.

The result was a library symposium entitled Outreach Solutions for College Libraries, co-hosted by the three libraries and held on the campus of Dickinson College on April 25, 2007. The event attracted 61 participants from 24 college and research libraries in Pennsylvania. The highlights of the event included a keynote speech by Diana Vogelsohn, acting university librarian of American University; a panel of library patron representatives; and seven presentations on various themes of library outreach and marketing (outreach to students, outreach to faculty, community outreach, and outreach to multicultural population).

The symposium received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the participants. Besides the stimulating presentations and discussions, it was also commended for its well-balanced program, well-coordinated activities, and meticulous attention to details. The purpose of this paper is to share our experience in organizing this successful library event.

The planning

A tri-library collaboration

Early in the fall of 2006, a planning committee

was formed to develop a program on library outreach and marketing. Headed by Yunshan Ye (Dickinson College), the committee consisted of four librarians from Dickinson College (Yunshan Ye, Theresa Arndt, Ann Margaret Thompson, and Maureen O'Brien Dermott), two from Gettysburg College (Cinda Gibbon, Kerri Odess-Harnish), and one from Franklin and Marshall College (Lisa Stillwell).

The collaborative nature of the project lent itself naturally towards funding from the Central Pennsylvania Consortium (CPC), a regional consortium whose mission is to combine [local] resources to create opportunities for interaction and mutual support among the member institutions (Dickinson, Gettysburg, and Franklin and Marshall).¹ CPC quickly approved funding for the tri-library collaborative project. With funding secured, the planning committee lost no time in moving the project forward.

Over the next six months, the committee convened four times in preparation for the event, in addition to numerous e-mail communications. All seven members of the planning committee worked closely together over each step of the planning process, from brainstorming for program ideas, soliciting and selecting the keynote speaker and presenters, to finalizing the program and publicizing the event.

The most challenging part of the planning process was to stay on top of the sprawling details that the project involved. Besides working on the project, we all carried our full load of usual job responsibilities. As we moved closer

Yunshan Ye is liaison librarian at Dickinson College, e-mail: yey@dickinson.edu

© 2008 Yunshan Ye

to the final event date, our work became increasingly more detailed and multifaceted, and consequently, more demanding. To ensure everything was on track, we created to-do lists for each stage of the planning process, and the committee chair sent out updates to everyone periodically. We also created a shared network account to document all major decisions and carefully preserve the paper trail to avoid possible miscommunication.

In retrospect, the well-orchestrated effort of the planning committee, besides the hard work of each member, was the most crucial to the success of the collaborative project.

The Program²

Looking for dialogue and conversation

What made our symposium a unique experience was our explicit goal of creating a seminar-style platform to promote information sharing. We were not just looking for a few presentations of outreach ideas, but wanted to generate genuine dialogue and conversation among all participants (presenters and attendees alike). Given the practical nature of the topic, we believed that everyone could contribute something to the conversation, and that a well-structured, stimulating conversation would be the best way to maximize the richness of the symposium.

With this specific goal and format in mind, we called for conversationalists rather than talkers in our Call for Submissions. We evaluated proposals based in part on their potential to engage the audience. In our subsequent communications with selected presenters, we stressed time and again the conversational nature of the event, and urged them to come up with creative strategies to draw in the audience. Finally, to allow as much discussion time as possible, we limited each 75-minute session to no more than two presentations.

The program itself consisted of two parts: morning and afternoon sessions. The objective of the morning sessions was to contextualize outreach. The keynote speech by Diana Vogelsong aimed at providing a larger, overarching framework for the entire event. Vogelsong's hour-long talk, entitled "Would

you recommend your library to a friend? Outreach and marketing to make a difference," started with the question, "Why emphasize marketing and outreach?" Quoting from an OCLC report on college students' perceptions of libraries and information resources,³ Vogelsong reviewed the environmental changes (including the changes of lifestyle of a new generation of college students) and pressures in the information and communication arenas (such as "Googlization") that make library focus on outreach an imperative. Vogelsong's theoretical discourse on principles of outreach was enlivened and made concrete with examples of her experience at the American University Library, an award-winning library that had gained national recognition for its outstanding outreach and marketing practices.⁴

Following the keynote was a panel of library patrons, including two faculty members, one community member, and two students (all from Dickinson College). The panel was designed to provide another kind of context or grounding for all this talk about outreach: the library patron perspective. Prompted by questions from the facilitator and from members of the audience, the panelists offered their opinions about the importance of the library as a physical place (a central place to meet and discuss), and about issues of advertising library services to the college and local community (be more visible). Both the faculty and students expressed the wish that librarians should get out of the library building more often and have more interaction with the campus community ("Be more human, as one student put it").

The afternoon breakout sessions included four tracks on different outreach topics (outreach to faculty, students, community, and multicultural population). For each 75-minute time slot, we had two tracks running concurrently. The presenters were given full authority and responsibility to run the show. The seven presentations in the breakout sessions introduced fresh, practical ideas and some of the most innovative solutions to common outreach challenges.

For example, Margaret Montet and Linda McCann's (Bucks County Community College) presentation, Outreach to Faculty via the Information Literacy Institute, tackled a major challenge facing academic librarians today, namely, how to sell information literacy to the teaching faculty and foster campus-wide faculty-librarian collaboration.

Montet and McCann's presentation demonstrated how they accomplished this by successfully incorporating their information literacy program into their college strategic plan, thus securing institutional support and funding, by gaining crucial support from key faculty, and last but not least, through their own creative programming that made the two-and-a-half-day workshop (the Information Literacy Institute) not only educational but also fun.

Another example of innovative programming was the outreach to students presentation by Bonnie Imler and Michelle Tomaszewski (Pennsylvania State University-Altoona). Imler and Tomaszewski described their experience of taking library services out of the library to where the students were—the campus sex fair! Sex on Campus was a popular annual event at the university. Seeing this as a good opportunity to reach out to students, the librarians at Altoona were undaunted by the fact that the library was not invited, and volunteered to staff a booth at the fair.

In addition to a display of sex-related books and library materials, the library booth also offered a variety of giveaways and entertaining activities. Among them were free condom packages labeled with the library slogan, Facts You Need Between the Covers, and an interactive sex trivial quiz via a Flash movie. Both the condoms and sex quiz turned out to be tremendously popular. Students came in groups to take the quiz and compete with each other, and they walked away with stickers that said, I am sex savvy. Hundreds of condoms were given out at the booth. Some faculty took the condoms back to their offices and stuck them on their bulletin boards, which led other faculty to call the library if there were more library condoms left. In the end, the

bold move by the Pennsylvania State-Altoona librarians brought a lot of approachability and visibility points for the library, and a good laugh for everyone.

Outcome

Feedback from the audience

Thirty-five attendees filled out the evaluation forms, representing more than 58 percent of all participants. Judging from the evaluations, by far the majority of participants felt that the day was well organized and they had a fantastic time learning new ideas and networking with colleagues from other institutions. Many said that they were deeply impressed by the very innovative [outreach] strategies presented in Vogelsong's keynote speech, and felt excited by the variety of creative possibilities.

Most participants also found that the library patron panel was a good idea—first panel of its kind. They felt that the panelists were very insightful, and said that it was great to hear the diverse perspectives. The afternoon breakout sessions were also highly rated. Most attendees found the presentations and discussions very interesting and informative, and they loved the good, practical ideas, as well as the interaction between panelists and audience.

The only complaint on the evaluation forms was about the symposium site. We had arranged to have the entire event (except for lunch) in one building, which was an auditorium sectioned off into rooms of different sizes. We thought it was a great idea because it would make it easy and convenient to move people from one session to another, and save time for socializing over breaks. What we failed to anticipate was the noise issue when two concurrent sessions were taking place in adjacent rooms (with a movable wall in between). In addition, the physical setting of the auditorium was not conducive to the seminar-style discussion that we had envisioned.

Another issue some attendees raised was that the agenda for the one-day event was too packed, leaving little room for prolonged discussions or activities outside the agenda.

Conclusion

Our recommendations

Based on our experience in organizing the outreach symposium, we would like to make the following recommendations for anyone interested in hosting a similar collaborative library event:

Choose a topic that grows naturally out of your work. Chances are that if you encounter a persistent issue in your work, colleagues in other (similar) institutions may very well be concerned about the same thing. The shared need to learn will naturally draw people together and make a successful conference.

Get support from the administrators from the very beginning. Don't hesitate to share your idea, even in its rudimentary stage, with your supervisor and/or administrator. Institutional support is really fundamental in organizing a professional event. You need to make sure you have that support before any real work starts.

Organize a team that shares your interest and passion. For the planning committee, you will need a group of people who are genuinely interested in the project, who are committed to the work and ready to contribute, who are open-minded and flexible. Good teamwork is the key to success.

Try your best to secure external funding. Organizing an event can be costly. It is not realistic to expect your institution to foot the bill. Get as much outside funding as you can. If necessary, it is absolutely okay to disperse some of the expenses to participants.

Document everything along the way. Once you start the planning process, be sure to create a centralized location (a shared network account, for instance) for all the documentation.

Set realistic goals for your event. If we could redo our event, we would probably be less ambitious and have a more focused agenda. A less packed schedule would allow more flexibility for contingencies and make it less stressful for both organizers and participants.

Find a facility best tailored to your need and purpose. In our case, a roundtable conference room would be a better choice than the auditorium, especially for the breakout sessions.

ference room would be a better choice than the auditorium, especially for the breakout sessions.

Get as many colleagues involved as possible. To run an event smoothly, you will need as much help as possible. For our event, we were very fortunate to have many of our colleagues on board. They volunteered as facilitators, note-takers, registration/information table staff, and library tour guides between and after the sessions. All this no doubt added to the overall satisfaction of the participants in their symposium experience.

Hosting a collaborative library event is challenging, and most rewarding. At the end of the day, all our committee members found great satisfaction and pride in what we had accomplished. It took the hard work of a dedicated team, plus collaboration of all three institutions and their members, to make our symposium a great success.

The attendees' feedback clearly testified to the remarkable result of this collective effort. In this sense, the symposium exemplifies the potential and meaning for library collaboration, and what a difference we can make to our institutions and profession, and ultimately, to the communities that we serve, when we come together and work as a team.

Notes

1. Central Pennsylvania Consortium, Mission Statement is at alpha.dickinson.edu/prorg/cpc/.

2. This part has drawn from notes by the five note-takers: Cinda Gibbon (Gettysburg), Chris Bombaro (Dickinson), Malinda Triller (Dickinson), Mark Wardecker (Dickinson), and Kate Pettegrew (library intern at Dickinson).

3. OCLC, College Students Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources, www.oclc.org/reports/perceptionscollege.htm.

4. ACRL, 2005 Best Practices in Marketing Academic and Research Libraries @ your library Award Winners, www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/marketingyourlib/marketingwinners.htm. *zc*