

Building Inclusion: Student Outcomes from an Academic Library's Gallery Exhibit in Florida

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Abstract

In October 2022, University of Central Florida librarians created an interactive exhibit for students to express themselves on topics related to inclusion and diversity. At the main entrance to the library, there is a long gallery wall that typically showcases artwork or informational exhibits. To create a more inclusive exhibit of students' voices, librarians created a series of prompts, and students posted their reactions to the prompts on this wall. Librarians developing the exhibit purposely decided to reimagine the exhibit from one that tells a story about a traditional diversity topic to one that creates a positive sense of community among students. The popularity of the wall was overwhelming, with over 3,000 individual responses from students. The exhibit acted as a conversation prompt and a way for students to share their perspectives. This paper outlines the steps to creating a similar exhibit and an analysis of students' responses.

Keywords: diversity; exhibit; inclusion; interactive; student engagement

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Introduction

For the past decade, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Central Florida (UCF) has celebrated diversity during October. This event coincides with America's National LGBT History Month and Global Diversity Awareness Month, which is promoted by international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum. Previously, the John C. Hitt Library (UCF's main library) participated in this celebration through displays, workshops, and speaker presentations. For October 2022, UCF Libraries wanted to create a more interactive exhibit about inclusion and diversity for students instead of a traditional display. The 2022 UCF Libraries Exhibit was posted on a 72-foot gallery wall located on the busy main floor of Hitt Library. Historically, exhibits on this wall displayed artwork or copious informational texts.

There were two primary goals for the exhibit. The first was to generate a connection with students, which would enable them to share their voices on an important topic. The second was to allow students to identify aspects of themselves and highlight differences in a safe environment. To achieve this result, librarians created a series of posters with prompts for students to reflect on, answer, and engage with one another.

The exhibit was in a library space that is open past midnight on most evenings and would not be monitored. As a result, there were concerns about inappropriate comments changing the tone and impact of the exhibit, so prompts that explicitly asked questions about LGBT topics or racial identity were not included. The goal of gathering a reflection of the variety of viewpoints that compose the student body was timely because they occurred during a time when this topic was a part of the current state conversation. Later that same semester, an executive memo from the office of Governor Ron DeSantis was sent on December 28, 2022, requesting the provision of detailed information on the funding of diversity and critical race theory programs, as well as the subsequent ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion spending at Florida's universities and colleges (Florida State, 2023).

Although this exhibit was not initially developed as part of a research study, the overwhelming response by students engaging with the material offers insight into how conversation and education can be achieved through a low-cost and straightforward technique that can be replicated in various library settings. The motivation for an interactive exhibit was to increase engagement with the students. Anecdotally, organizers of the exhibit noticed an increased desire for personal connection by students post-COVID, most of whom were remote during the final years of high school. The organizers hoped to generate more interest in an exhibit focused on students' voices.

Literature Review

The current political climate in Florida is divided; thus, the most significant concern for the USF exhibit was the potential for inappropriate commentary, which could counteract the goal of bringing students together to share their voices in a positive light. Concerns about Florida's political climate were echoed in findings by Bresnahan (2022) in her study of library diversity in action. She identifies "concerns for political climate" as one of the three barriers to the success of library diversity initiatives (p. 435).

Instead of highlighting age, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, the prompts in the UCF exhibit asked students to identify preferences on topics to find common areas of interest. Examples of prompts included e-books versus print, waffles versus pancakes, and sneakers versus sandals. One could argue that this approach was a watering down or denial of the critical issues and conversations that need to take place in library spaces; however, these prompts aimed to showcase differences between students on benign topics and allowed opportunities for self-expression. Similarly, the librarians who curated the UCF Libraries Exhibit purposely wanted to highlight differences beyond the traditional diversity topics. This sentiment is supported by Woody (2017), who states that "[f]or 'inclusion,' there should be no insurmountable or impenetrable barriers between the members of diverse groupings. The goal of inclusion is bringing ingroup and outgroup people together" (p. 522). This concept is reinforced by Gilbert (2016), who states that "[t]he best programs are ones that reduce barriers to entry for all" (p. 526). In "What is Diversity: An Inquiry into Preservice Teacher Beliefs," Silverman (2010) finds that the terms 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' incorporate a variety of meanings that may vary widely based on individual experience.

Gilbert's (2016) survey of national liberal arts college libraries found that displays make up 50.9% of diversity-related activities for patrons. Bresnahan's findings (2022) further confirmed that displays are standard practice for diversity initiatives. In researching other diversity programs,

the current literature in library science focuses mainly on organizational and hiring practices, such as those outlined by Edwards (2016). We could not find any articles that described an interactive library display or exhibit to build inclusion. Many library programs focus on a specific aspect of diversity or representing a particular group (Duffus et al., 2016; Hanna et al., 2011; Yap et al., 2017). The few articles discussing interactive exhibits and diversity highlighted the use of new technology (Bresnahan, 2022; Gilbert, 2016; Woody, 2017), which was not conducive to the space or within the 2022 UCF Libraries Exhibit budget.

Methods

The 2022 UCF Libraries Exhibit was displayed October 10-31, 2022. Although initially scheduled for the entire month, the exhibit was up for 21 days due to delays from Hurricane Nicole. The exhibit began with an introduction poster that oriented students on how to best respond to and interact with the eight prompts that were also displayed as posters along the gallery wall. Notably, one student created an additional prompt on the wall: “What song do you see yourself represented in?” which elicited student responses that are also included in the findings. Intermingled with the interactive aspects of the gallery wall were quotes about diversity and facts about diversity efforts at the university.

After the exhibit’s conclusion, all sticky note responses were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet with a separate tab for each prompt. The total number of responses was counted for each prompt, except for stars placed on the “Share Your Origin Story” wall map, which garnered a large response of more than 600 stars across the map.

For the “Pass on the Positivity” prompt, the exhibit organizers independently coded the responses into three categories: positive, negative, and unknown/not relevant. A thematic analysis was used on the positivity responses. The other prompts were analyzed by counting and ranking the responses. “Unknown/Not relevant” comments were either in another language or used terminology or slang where it was difficult to determine whether the response was positive, negative, or irrelevant to the prompt. Regardless of intention, all comments were coded independently a second time to identify patterns, allowing the comments to be coded for multiple themes. Six themes were identified (see Table 1).

Table 1. Themes from Positivity Responses

Theme	Criteria
Don’t Give Up	Sentiments encouraging students to continue through a struggle, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t give up • Everything happens for a reason • It is hard but worth doing • You got this • It will be worth it • Keep going • Take things one day at a time

Happy Face	Happy face icon was included
Heart	Heart symbol was included
Great	Sentiments praising students for various characteristics, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are amazing • Variations of the word slay • You are beautiful • You are strong
Loved	Sentiments with the words love included
Worthy	Sentiments telling students they have value, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are worthy • You are enough • You are perfect • You matter

A comment could receive multiple themes. For example, the comment “Grow through what you go through ... You’re stronger than you think! (with a heart symbol)” was coded for positivity and the additional themes of worthy, heart symbol, and hang in there.

Findings

Students immediately started engaging with the exhibit as the posters were being installed. Over 21 days, there were 3,368 textual responses from all eight posters. The total responses do not include the more than 600 stars added to the “Share Your Origin Story” world map or the artistic drawings that students created as responses.

Negative comments were removed from the exhibit. Library staff handled these collectively as they walked through the exhibit daily. The initial concerns of organizers regarding hurtful comments proved to be a tiny portion of the responses.

Reactions to the Prompts

Prompt One: “Which do you prefer?”

No responses were posted.

Prompt Two: “Something I forget to be thankful for is...”

These prompts were full by the first day of the exhibit. Forty-six students added sticky notes from other prompts to it, but the content was not noteworthy compared to other prompts. The lesson learned from this exhibit was to provide more opportunities for students to share feedback in their own words instead of marking a selection.

Prompt Three: “Share your origin story.”

In addition to the 600+ stars added to the “Share Your Origin Story” map, this popular prompt generated 263 comments added by sticky note or by writing directly on the map. This prompt tapped into a way for students to display their heritage and the pride students felt regarding their cultural origins. Due to the popularity of this prompt, a subsequent display was developed that expanded on the global theme. A collage of the sticky notes shared by students during this exhibit was included as part of the supplemental display.

Prompt Four: “What can the library do to be more inclusive?”

Prompt Four generated 371 responses. Many of these responses addressed a different question than the one intended. Instead of the expected responses regarding library programming or the library’s collection, students used this prompt to address requests about the facilities, such as operating hours, additional study rooms, and other physical changes or improvements. Although initially surprising to exhibit organizers, upon reflection, this was a logical student response due to an ongoing library renovation. One floor was under construction and off-limits to students, faculty, and staff. The students have watched and heard construction workers leave the building for over a year. Responses included requests to open the floor under construction, update the bathrooms, as well as add more group study rooms, comfy chairs, sleep pods, natural light, electrical outlets, and water filtration systems. Due to construction, there was also a heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) issue in the library in October. Thus, there were numerous comments from students regarding air conditioning issues.

Thirty-one responses mentioned an improvement regarding diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. The issues relating to inclusion that were brought to the library’s attention included making closing times and offering announcements in multiple languages, establishing a praying area, adding height-accessible tables for people of different heights, creating sensory-friendly spaces and chairs, offering ethnic food options at the coffee shop housed in the library, adding more disability-friendly seating, adding books in multiple languages to the collection, and hosting author talks highlighting a diversity of cultures.

Prompt Five: “What book do you see yourself represented in?”

Although Prompt Five received 485 responses, no specific title emerged as a leader in responses, indicating that the books students resonated with covered personal interests rather than interests from popular culture. It should be noted that even though *The Qur’an* and *The Holy Bible* were among the top responses for this prompt, they accounted for less than 3% of the responses for the entire exhibit. Other titles with multiple votes included *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997-2007), *Percy Jackson* (Riordan, 2005-2015), *The Alchemist* (Coelho, 1993), *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007-2023), *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (Moshfegh, 2018), and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999).

Prompt Six: “What movie do you see yourself represented in?”

Prompt Six elicited 714 responses, the most responses in the exhibit. Again, no clear leader emerged; the top movie titles included *American Psycho* (Harron, 2000), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022), *Encanto* (Bush & Howard, 2021), *Lady Bird* (Gerwig, 2017), *Shrek* (Adamson & Jenson, 2001), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018).

Prompt Seven: “What song do you see yourself represented in?”

Prompt Seven was added by a student and generated 314 responses. The highest number of responses for a single song was five, which was “Mirrorball” by Taylor Swift (2020). The remaining 99% of the responses came from a diverse representation of music genres, from K-pop to country, and spanned decades, with songs from artists such as Abba and SZA.

Prompt Eight: “Pass on the Positivity!”

This final prompt, “Pass on the Positivity!” had 713 responses. As with other prompts, students attached sticky notes to the surrounding wall when the poster was full.

As illustrated by the majority of positive comments (65%) and the emerging themes, students told each other they had value and could overcome the obstacles they faced. Students were observed taking photos of the exhibit, stopping to discuss aspects of the exhibit with one another, and commenting to library faculty and staff about how much they enjoyed the exhibit.

Some students thought outside the box and placed their comments, like “When you hit rock bottom, the only way to go is up,” at the bottom of the poster wall next to the floorboard instead of on the poster itself. This creative placement made students bend down to read the sticky note, only to look up and see a wall of more positive notes.

One student approached one of the librarians (who is one of the authors of this article) while the exhibit was being dismantled and relayed a recent encounter where she felt bullied. The positivity notes helped the student deal with the encounter and made her feel like she was not alone and that other students cared for her. She asked the librarian if she could be included in planning for similar future exhibits. The student spent about 30 minutes quietly removing the sticky notes alongside the librarian and reading the positive affirmations.

Implications

Academic libraries are looking for low-cost and effective ways to engage with students. Croxton and Moore (2020) noted that academic libraries are increasingly being called upon to demonstrate their impact on students when requesting funding. Student engagement is part of a larger initiative at most institutions in the 21st century (Schlak, 2018) that can help demonstrate that impact.

As illustrated by over 3,300 student responses to the 2022 UCF Libraries Exhibit, safe spaces for equitable social interaction in academic libraries can be created somewhat easily in a low-cost, low-tech manner, thus allowing students to interact with each other or express themselves on several topics. By selecting benign prompts, students can use socially interactive exhibits as an opportunity to share their voices and enjoy and appreciate their shared humanity. Although a plan to maintain the exhibit is crucial to prevent damaging or hurtful comments, overall, the responses by UCF students were perceived by the exhibit organizers as positive. The 2022 UCF Libraries Exhibit built a community of inclusion for students by facilitating the discovery of commonalities and expressing different words of support for each other. One recommendation is to allow flexibility in how the prompts are interpreted, as they can provide insight into what is most important to students. The comments created by this exhibit can be analyzed for

recommendations on students' perceptions of the library. They can be used as graphical elements in future exhibits to let students know their voices have been heard.

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