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Sharing the value and impact of outreach: Taking a multifaceted approach to outreach assessment

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ABSTRACT

Although outreach is a common activity in academic libraries, little has been written about strategies for assessing library outreach efforts. Assessing outreach efforts is important in order to measure the success of the outreach activity, identify areas for iterative improvement, and demonstrate the value of the outreach activity to stakeholders. This article is a case study describing the multifaceted strategies employed to assess a major outreach event, Texas A&M University Libraries annual Open House event. It details demonstrating value and programmatic improvement as the articulated goals for outreach assessment as well as the specific strategies used and the insights gleaned from each assessment strategy.

Introduction

Outreach is a common activity in academic libraries. The library literature abounds with articles and case studies detailing library participation in outreach activities ranging from resource fairs to library luaus to orientation presentations. Although most, if not all, libraries engage in assessment related to their collections, instruction programs, and reference activities, the literature is scarce in providing robust examples regarding how libraries are using assessment to connect their outreach activities to programmatic goals and objectives. While assessment is a long-standing valued practice for libraries, from the literature it appears that connecting assessment to outreach in an intentional and goal-oriented manner has yet to emerge as a common practice.

Some of the difficulty in finding examples of robust and programmatic approaches to outreach assessment may be related to the murkiness surrounding how librarians identify and define outreach. Although most librarians are familiar with the concept, there is a variety of definitions for what counts as library outreach. For example, what one library may term “public engagement” or “marketing,” another library may term “outreach.” Courtney (2008) observes that “Outreach is in the eyes of the beholder. Librarians seem to have difficulty agreeing on a definition of outreach, but, like good art, they know it when they see (or create) it” (p.1). Some libraries include traditional subject liaison responsibilities such as information literacy instruction within their library’s definition of outreach. Others include more passive outreach strategies, including marketing and public relation efforts such as websites, newsletters, and blogs (Carter & Seaman,

2011).

For the purposes of this article, library outreach includes student or faculty oriented events and programming that are aimed at general library resource awareness, library service awareness, and reduction of library anxiety. Examples of library outreach activities that are included in this definition are resource fairs, orientation presentations, events, and exhibits. This definition does not include other student-oriented activities such as instruction or reference services, which are more directly connected to information literacy, or passive outreach such as flyers, brochures, or LibGuides.

Although little has been written about assessing outreach, it is an important aspect to any outreach program. In a recent article calling for an increased focus on outreach assessment, Farrell and Mastel (2016) ask, “Without goal-driven activities and assessment, how is the time, money, and energy justified?” (Introduction, para. 3). Library budgets may have little room for spending on unproven initiatives. A survey of outreach initiatives in academic libraries reveals few outreach projects that cost more than a few hundred dollars, and many had no cost other than librarian time and existing resources (Dennis, 2012). To demonstrate the impact of library outreach activities and, as Farrell and Mastel (2016) suggest, “demonstrate a return on investment for our constituents,” library outreach event and activity organizers must implement thoughtful and robust assessment activities aimed at measuring the achievement of specific programmatic outreach goals (Conclusion, para. 1).

This article is a case study describing the multifaceted strategies employed to assess a major outreach event, Texas A&M University Libraries annual Open House. The article begins with a literature

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review of outreach assessment. Following, the context of Open House is described as well as a discussion on the differences between the outreach goals of Open House and the assessment goals for the 2016 Open House. Next, the multifaceted approach to assessment is detailed with the descriptions, rationale, and logistics of the various assessment methodologies used in the 2016 Open House. Next, the results of the assessment are reviewed both in terms the findings of Open House and the importance of assessment reports. Lastly, the article concludes with suggestions on how libraries can adapt these assessment methodologies to their own outreach.

Literature review

Outreach has long been a popular topic in the library literature. However, what librarians mean by outreach has changed significantly over the years. Earlier mentions of outreach in the literature frequently refer to engagement with off-campus populations, now commonly referred to as extension and public engagement. For example, academic librarians frequently used the term outreach to describe engaging middle and high school students, professional continuing education programs, and members of the local community (Boulanger, 1990; Glogoff & Glogoff, 1998; Debra & Van Tassel, 2000; Jesudason, 1993; Kudlay, 2000; Rankin & Sayre, 1993). While many librarians still use the term outreach to describe this type of activity, the literature increasingly reflects the term outreach being used to describe efforts to promote library awareness and library services to on-campus populations.

This shift in definition of outreach has been accompanied by an increased interest in outreach in academic libraries. A search in databases such as *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts*, *Library & Information Science Source* and *Education Sources* reveals over 250 articles published on this topic in the last ten years. While many of these articles share creative and innovative outreach success stories, a number of them fail to discuss substantive strategies for assessing the impact and efficacy of the outreach. This may be because, as Carter and Seaman uncovered in their research, “many libraries perform the task of outreach informally or on an *ad hoc* basis, with little or no guidance from their institutions” (2011, p. 169).

There are several common strategies for assessing outreach referenced in the literature. Meyers-Martin and Borchard (2015) found that the most common strategies reported for assessing the impact of finals programming were gathering feedback from users in person and counting the number of attendees. These findings are borne out in case studies throughout the literature. Counting the number of attendees is a popular strategy, likely due to its ease of implementation even at hectic outreach events, and is the gauge used by several librarians to demonstrate the success of an outreach activity (Brinkman & Yates, 2008; Cahoy & Bichel, 2004; Dodsworth, 1998; Fabian, D’Aniello, Tysick, & Morin, 2003; Martin & Martin, 2015; McCullough, 2015). Similarly, librarians report observing participants and collecting anecdotal feedback as a means of outreach assessment (Angell & Boss, 2016; Vanden Elzen & Roush, 2013).

Another common method of assessing the impact of outreach events is by surveying outreach event participants, which can be helpful for programmatic improvement, as it provides participants with the opportunity to comment directly on the outreach event (Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015; Lannon & Harrison, 2015; Nicholas et al., 2015; Oravet, 2014). Other librarians have implemented regular Plus/Delta meetings where those who staffed the event have an opportunity to reflect on the event and share their ideas for future changes (Otto, Meade, Stafford, & Wahler, 2016). Still others have collected reference or circulation statistics as a measure of impact of outreach programming (Aguilar & Keating, 2009; Maloney, 2012; Torrence, 2015).

Many librarians have used two or three assessment methods in order to create mixed-methods approach to outreach assessment. For example, Flynn (2017) tracked attendance and collected feedback forms

to evaluate the success of finals week outreach activities, and Vanden Elzen and Roush (2013) supplemented their observational assessment with a survey. Langer and Kubo (2015) used a combination of attendance tracking, a survey, and anecdotal feedback to assess their library’s international student outreach program. Sclipa (2017) tracked attendance numbers, social media views, and survey results in order to gauge both event reach and potential areas for improvement. And librarians at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities counted attendees at pilot library gaming events, solicited whiteboard and anecdotal feedback, and followed up with a survey of first-year students to gauge their interest in future gaming events (Bishoff, Farrell, & Neeser, 2015).

This article takes assessment of outreach a step further, encouraging librarians to consider a multifaceted approach to outreach assessment. It demonstrates how to use both formal and informal assessment methods in concert with one another in order to achieve predetermined assessment goals.

Library Open House

Texas A&M University is one of the largest public universities in the United States, with attendance in the fall 2016 semester exceeding 60,000 students at the College Station campus (Texas A&M, 2017). Each August, before the beginning of the fall semester, Texas A&M holds an orientation week dedicated to events and programming aimed at welcoming new students to campus. Since 2009, one of this week’s “signature events” is the Libraries’ Open House, an event held annually by the five libraries that make up the University Libraries. During this event, the Sterling C. Evans Library, the main library on campus, opens its main floor to welcome thousands of students and familiarize them with the Libraries. Students are invited to play library-themed carnival games, eat free pizza, and receive a free library-branded T-shirt. Open House is the largest event put on by the University Libraries; attendance over the past few years has averaged around 4000 students per year. The Libraries markets Open House heavily at the various new student orientation events held prior to the fall semester at which the Libraries sees thousands of incoming and transfer students.

For the past three years, Open House has been styled as a carnival. The 2016 Open House included thirteen separate booths including game booths such as the Preservation department’s “Save the Book” beanbag throw and programmatic booths such as for pizza and T-shirt giveaways. As participants enter Open House, they are given a “passport” that includes three empty checkboxes and a tear off ticket for a T-shirt. Each participant is required to visit three booths and have their passport checked off at each booth to receive a T-shirt. The University Libraries’ branded T-shirts are the signature giveaway of Open House and are incredibly popular with students, staff, and faculty across campus; it is not unusual for the Libraries to receive requests for T-shirts from patrons who were unable to attend Open House or to receive requests to begin selling the T-shirts at the Libraries’ service points. Additionally, participants must turn in their passport for free pizza and they are invited to eat and socialize outside on the Evans concourse.

Open House is an enormous investment by the University Libraries, not just financially, but in terms of human resources. Due to the scale of the event, Open House is an “all hands on deck” situation for the Libraries. Well over one hundred librarians, staff, and student workers from across the University Libraries, as well as the University Writing Center, come together to help organize the event, design the carnival games, manage and staff the game booths, hand out pizza and T-shirts, and manage the crowd. The event volunteer structure has taken several forms over the course of the years. In 2016, the First Year Experience Librarian, the Director of Learning and Outreach, and the Marketing Manager served as the event organizers with the First Year Experience Librarian serving as the event manager. In addition to the event organizers, sub-teams were created for the planning and staffing of each of the booths as well as for an assessment team. For each of the booths, there was an assigned booth leader as well as several volunteers. The

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