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“Let’s Try It!”: Library Outreach in a Culture of Yes

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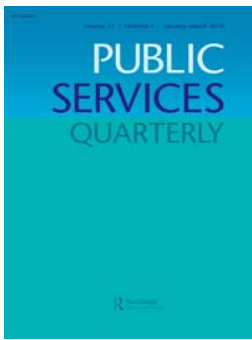
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MARKETING

Katy Kelly, Column Editor



Column description. *The Marketing column features essays about a variety of creative and innovative marketing strategies used to highlight collections or promote services in all types of libraries. Its purpose is to provide real examples of how libraries are using marketing and outreach techniques in interesting ways. The column offers practical insight from libraries engaged with marketing. In addition to marketing, the column also features essays on successful programs and events that promote the library. Readers are invited to suggest topics or projects by contacting the column editor, Katy Kelly.*

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KATIE BISHOP

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In the Research and Instruction Services department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha Libraries, a culture of yes drives our outreach efforts. This inclination to support non-traditional library services and events has allowed us to forge valued partnerships with student support services and learning communities, expanding the reach of the library into the university as a whole. In this column, we offer insight into how we have sustained a culture of yes as it relates to our student-focused outreach program. At the administrative level, defining the role of outreach for our organization and tying our outreach plan to the library's mission and strategic plan laid the groundwork for success. At the program level, we learned to articulate our intended outcomes and understand what success looks like. Our culture of yes embraces these successes along with any failures we have along the way. Moving forward, we continue to track and assess outreach and use each event or partnership to learn more about our students so that we may redesign our program according to lessons learned.

KEYWORDS *library culture, outreach, student engagement, student success, student support services*

Libraries are inherently service oriented. Despite the historical stereotype of the “shushing” librarian, we generally like to say yes, especially when it comes to helping our patrons. So, how can libraries turn this service-minded attitude towards outreach or programming that doesn't fit the traditional academic library model? Over the past two years, the staff at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) Libraries have turned an inclination to be helpful into a culture of yes. Using this culture shift, we expanded the reach of the library out into the university as a whole. Now the library is known not only for fulfilling the information needs of our campus community, but also as an unofficial arm of student support services.

We found that student affairs, learning communities, and student support offices are fully on board with any offer to engage their students. This type of outreach is important because learning communities and student support services have a positive impact on student engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Student engagement, in turn, can lead to higher persistence and retention rates (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). In addition,

we have found anecdotally that embracing a culture of yes and collaboration sends a strong message to students. Our students, especially those in leadership roles and in learning communities at the university, now view the library as more than a service provider or study hall. Student government and student-led organizations and clubs regularly approach us with ideas for events and additional services. They trust that we will take their ideas seriously, and because we do, these students become our greatest champions.

In this column, we offer insight into the thought processes of a newly-minted outreach librarian and the director who hired her. We discuss our outreach and management philosophies, share the steps we took to build our program, and reflect on our biggest failures to elucidate how and why we sustain a culture of yes for student outreach at our academic library.

Katie Bishop (Director of Research and Instruction Services):

About three years ago, I became director of our Research and Instruction Services department. As a new director I wanted to prioritize outreach for my unit going forward. A year prior to becoming director, I completed an Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Assessment in Action project examining the effect of librarian outreach to a student support services program (Bishop, Sorensen-Birk, & Boeckner, 2015). This project impressed upon me the importance of partnering with learning communities and student support. My transitioning into a leadership role left an open faculty line, and I rewrote the position with outreach and instruction as core responsibilities. I was able to advocate for this realigned position because I researched the impact of student outreach and conducted and assessed my own successful outreach initiative. If your library isn't quite fully at a culture of yes, having evidence that the initiative will be meaningful can help you get started. Success breeds success, so once that yes attitude starts to take hold it can quickly become a culture.

Tammi Owens (Outreach & Instruction Librarian): When I entered into this newly-envisioned outreach role I was pleased to learn about the history of the position and the possibilities for the future. In the first few months, Katie and I specifically defined my role as the liaison to our student learning communities on campus and the point person for special events for students at the library. This ensures our departmental scope for outreach remains student-focused and allows library staff to quickly route other opportunities, like community events or donor relations, to the appropriate person.

As an outreach liaison, I communicate to our partners and potential partners that the library wants to become part of their team and support their students in whatever way we can. For example, we designed undergraduate workshops for one of our larger learning communities that are open to all students. We also hold office hours in student support offices throughout campus. As a special events coordinator, I facilitate moments of delight, surprise, spectacle, and comfort for our students in the building. In my first year,

I had some very non-traditional programming approved with little fuss and soon learned that all ideas to promote the library are welcomed and celebrated. Even better, I often heard phrases like, "Let's try it!" or "Why not?"

KB: Tammi came to me with a lot of wild ideas that first year.

TO: Let's be honest ... *most* of my ideas were pretty far out that first year. I was flush with the excitement of possibilities and was positive that doing something like blowing up hundreds of balloons to fill up our theater room during our university's finals week De-Stress Fest was a good idea. As it turned out, it wasn't the best use of our time, although the handful of students who did venture in had a good time.

KB: One of my philosophies as a director is to give my team the space to make mistakes. I've found that this fosters creativity and innovation. For every disaster there are usually multiple successes. At the same time, I do need to weigh the larger implications. How will a failure look to library leadership? Will a failure negatively impact students? If the stakes are low, it is easy to say yes. When someone on my team suggests a new event or innovative programming I ask a lot of questions. The two most important are "What are your outcomes for this project?" And, "How will you know if it is successful?" My department has learned that if they can answer these questions I'm very likely to say yes. Sometimes the answers to those questions are fairly simple. With the balloon room we wanted an event that broke from tradition and would demonstrate to students that the library was a fun and inviting space during De-Stress Fest. If a good answer to these questions can't be articulated immediately we will review the idea together. Usually I can offer suggestions or adjustments to get to some version of yes. After any event I ask folks to reflect on its merits, and unsuccessful ideas are discarded or reworked.

TO: It was refreshing when I came to UNO and had no problem getting to yes with ideas that seemed "out there" for most university libraries. In my previous position as an emerging technologies librarian, I proposed many ideas that were too experimental for other faculty librarians. I learned to separate my ego from my suggestions and assumed only a fraction of my ideas would be approved. In that culture, I got to yes only on the most important projects by building consensus with every decisionmaker on our team. I found out what each person valued and communicated the link between my project and their values or priorities. By speaking directly with each of my colleagues individually, I could expend political capital carefully and know whether any particular project was worth the challenges ahead. But that was tiring and took many long hours of emotional work.

Here at UNO, I know that if I have well-considered answers to Katie's two big questions, whatever project I have in mind has a decent chance of going forward with our leadership team's support. If things don't work out quite as planned, there is no blaming or shaming. We look at what went wrong, codify our lessons learned, and have another great story that is part

of our shared history as a creative and innovative library. The balloon room is one of those stories. When we were planning, I was certain that students would want to come play or relax in a room full of balloons. Our budget was minimal: about \$30 for 315 balloons. Our staff time, though, was astronomical. For three hours, shifts of three people were blowing up, tying, and corralling balloons for what was scheduled to be a two-hour event. As it turned out, students didn't understand our concept, our theater room was probably not the best place for the event, and we only had a few people venture in. Now we all laugh and commiserate when thinking about blowing up—and popping—all those balloons together that day. Katie and I have declared the balloon room a “delightful miserable failure,” and we now know that straightforward, easy-to-describe events are best for our students.

KB: Once you've demonstrated a few successes administration is usually more forgiving of interesting failures! Another way to get buy-in is to work your initiatives into the library's strategic plan. When I moved into the department director role the overall library strategic plan was just falling out of date. We were in a transitional period with an interim dean, so I knew it was important to have a strong unit plan as a roadmap going forward. I worked with my team to create actionable priorities for the next few years. We mapped our department strategic plan to the larger university plan wherever possible. Student success has long been a priority at UNO, so it was easy to make outreach to students one of our focus areas. When we hired a new dean who began the process of creating a library-wide strategic plan I could point to the successful initiatives from our department plan, show how they related to the larger vision of UNO, and advocate for outreach as a priority.

TO: It is helpful to have a director who has her eye on the big picture and who also has an open-door policy. Having regularly scheduled meetings with Katie and popping in to chat with her at any time ensures that all library outreach coordinated within our department aligns with our mission and doesn't compete with other library programming. Knowing what our goals are for the next semester, the coming academic year, and even three years from now keeps me from buying into quick fads or indulging expensive whims. Katie is a great sounding board and a voice for all our students. When my ideas get a little rowdy, she gently reminds me that we have a core constituency of students who still rely on the library as a space to focus and study.

KB: Having collaboration and outreach as part of the strategic plan gives me space as a director to use resources to support our initiatives. Because it is often viewed as something everyone should be doing, outreach may not be prioritized with money or staff time. I understand that stepping into a new role can be stressful because expectations for success may not be clear. I wanted Tammi to see that outreach to students would be fully supported. To this end, I reorganized three department associate positions to report directly to her. These associates spend half of their time working

on developing our general education information literacy instruction curriculum, teaching IL sessions in the library, and participating in outreach programming. In addition, I currently allocate project funds to outreach events every semester.

TO: Acting as a team is fundamental to the success of our outreach efforts. The associates who report to me have embraced the culture of yes and are enthusiastic and imaginative in their approach to outreach. They regularly propose new events and workshops and are always willing to try out bold new ideas. They are willing to take risks with their programming ideas because Katie and I have demonstrated that we support them by building on both success and failure. Furthermore, this dedicated team of associates means we'll always have outgoing, well-trained professionals representing the library whenever we book a table fair, organize an event, or have a group tour the library.

KB: The library had already been participating in a few scheduled outreach events like Durango Days, the university's welcome week, so folks were accustomed to volunteering. It has been extremely gratifying to see staff from every department embrace our expanded outreach efforts and not only spend time working the events, but also help with planning and suggesting additional programming ideas. For example, for De-Stress Fest we now have a committee of employees from across the library who coordinate event planning and staffing. Library staff not on the committee also volunteer where needed.

TO: When university departments approach us with new ideas, one way we ensure we can continue to say yes is to focus on giving people what they need, not necessarily what they first request. When I meet with potential university partners, I ask questions from an intake form I developed the second year of my tenure. This form includes basic contact information as well as questions about the students served by that department. This "reference interview" allows me to think deeply about the specific needs of their students and offer creative solutions beyond library instruction, roving hours, or other time-intensive efforts.

If we have to say no, we are transparent about our reasons. This often strengthens our partnerships and allows us to continue the conversation. Last year, our International Programs department approached us to ask if they could hold Conversation Hour programs for their intensive language students at the library. International students are some of our most dedicated library users, so it was a natural fit. During the first semester of our partnership Conversation Hour was held over the lunch hour on our main floor. Our facilities team rearranged tables and chairs for the programs, and attendance was steady. For the following semester International Programs decided to hold the event in the evening to boost attendance. We have just one facilities employee working in the evening, so we asked International Programs to scale back the setup requests for the event, hold the event in a different part of the library where they can easily pull together furniture for their group on

their own, and request any special equipment at least two weeks in advance of their events. Our transparency about the need to scale back accommodations has resulted in more regular conversations with the Conversation Hour coordinator.

KB: Space is a premium at UNO as it is on many urban campuses. As part of the leadership team I have to be mindful of balancing the needs of our many partnerships across campus, students' need for space to study and collaborate, as well as library staff time and priorities. It can be a juggling act, and sometimes we do have to ask our partners to scale down events or find space outside the library. A culture of yes doesn't mean agreeing to every request that comes in; it does mean helping facilitate and problem solve by suggesting alternatives.

TO: As my second year at UNO comes to a close, I am pleased that our culture of yes results in more successful events, more often. When we are able to try new things, assess, and adjust quickly, we send a message to students that we support them and are in tune with their needs. With every interesting but ultimately unsuccessful or unsustainable event, workshop, or partnership, we learn more about our students. We learn which concepts speak to them and which concepts are confusing or boring to them. Unsuccessful outreach events are likely to be ignored or forgotten, but successful outreach creates a buzz about the library that can't be replicated with even the most targeted marketing or instruction efforts.

KB: It has been amazing to see the evolution of our partnerships and programming over the last two years. We've refined our workshop series to offer only the most popular workshops and adjusted the timing to meet the needs of busy students. We've found that holding office hours at student support offices strengthens partnerships, so we've opened office hours at new locations. We've even been repeating some events from semester to semester. During our first semester of formal collaboration with Student Involvement for De-Stress Fest we wanted to make a bold statement as an innovative outreach partner, and now many of our events have settled into familiar traditions that students come back to again and again.

A library that has a culture of yes understands that outreach creates positive associations with the library and encourages students to see the library as a partner in their success. We hope that students who stopped by our Durango Days tables to play Plinko and win swag, played Mario Kart or RIFT games with librarians, colored and created their own buttons during a library-hosted Crafternoon session, or picked up a doughnut and a high five for National Library Week see us as much more than "the library." All UNO Libraries employees who engage in outreach forge personal connections with students and send a simple but important message: we'll be there when you need us, and we'll do everything we can to help you succeed.

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