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Building Community Through Festival: Library Orientation on the Quad

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Building Community through Festival: Library Orientation on the Quad

It's a cliché among academic librarians: the student who has somehow, despite a rigorous college curriculum, reached senior year with no knowledge or experience of the library. We tell these stories lightheartedly, but the concern is real: why are so many students slipping through the cracks, and how do we catch them? Ideally, students would meet their library (and librarians) as part of a mandated, institution-wide orientation. However, librarians often find that increasingly-packed orientation schedules leave no room for this kind of introduction. "LibFest" is our response to this challenge.

The College of the Holy Cross is a 4-year liberal arts college located in Worcester, Massachusetts, with a close-knit community of 2,900 undergraduates. Since the college has no specific required courses, many students get past their first year without the benefit of library instruction. While the main library, Dinand, is a popular and crowded study space, our subject branches are less well-known, and many students are unaware of general services such as research assistance and Interlibrary Loan. Although a library tour was once included in the general first-year orientation program, this was eliminated to make room for other content, leaving us with no means of reaching the majority of incoming students.

LibFest was developed to compensate for this gap. By incorporating learning opportunities along with food, fun activities, and a generally-relaxed atmosphere, we hoped to present ourselves as a helpful resource, and to get students to engage with us where they might usually shy away. At LibFest, students are able to meet with library staff face-to-face and learn about a variety of library (and associated) spaces and services.

Since its inception in 2010, the event has expanded to include not only library departments and branches, but also a number of other campus departments whose work closely intersects with our own -- Information Technology Services, the Center for Writing, and Academic Services & Learning Resources. While we struggle with the challenges of drawing students to yet

another optional event, LibFest is more successful each year, and we are confident that it will remain a viable, successful and valued component of our outreach program.

Literature Review

Based on a survey of the literature, at least a handful of other libraries have hosted their own library orientation festival. The Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis Library, the University of Alabama Libraries and The University of Albany Library take part in their campus-wide orientation celebrations. According to Miller & Cooper (2014), the IUPUI Library participates in their campus' two-week orientation by hosting a table in the library's lobby. This table hosts activities such as library trivia, photo matching a librarian with their subject area, and LC classification games. They also give away prizes, including a popular library t-shirt. The University of Alabama Libraries host a carnival as part of the college's week-long "Week of Welcome". Fortson, Sahib & Spencer (2011) describe how the their libraries collaborate with Student Affairs to sponsor an informational booth, "roller coaster tours" of the library, drop-in instruction sessions, and grab-bags. Finally, the University of Albany's "LibraryPalooza", held the day before the start of the fall semester, sees participation from library departments, campus offices, student groups and mascots. LibraryPalooza has a different theme every year, but sustains the goal of bringing students into the library and increasing their awareness of library services, resources and facilities (Anderson, 2012).

Other libraries offer festival-style orientations similar to LibFest, independent of campus initiatives. The Indiana State University Library puts on a "Library Extravaganza" each September which offers a DJ and live music, product demos, games, and prizes donated by local merchants. Some faculty require students to attend the event for course credit (Evans and Blevens, 2013). In their 2004 article, Cahoy & Bichel described Penn State University Library's "Library Luau", meant to introduce students to different areas of the library and staff relevant to their major. There are self-guided tours, greeting stations with

faculty and staff volunteers, games, prizes, raffles and giveaways. Similar to Indiana State University, some faculty require students to attend this event.

There may be other festivals of this kind; however, from our review of the published library literature, we were unable to identify another festival with the unique combination of philosophy, incentives, atmosphere and location found in LibFest.

What is a “LibFest”?

LibFest originated in the Fall 2010 semester, as the “Information Faire & Festival” (or IF²), and was intended as a low-pressure opportunity for students to interact with staff from the library and related departments while learning about services available to them. Although the event was open to everyone, it was aimed primarily at freshmen. Since the Libraries had invited associated campus offices to participate, “Information Faire & Festival” was selected as an inclusive title. At the time, there was no dedicated outreach position, so planning was a group effort, consisting of an ad hoc outreach committee combined with a sizable portion of the library staff. To draw students’ attention, the first IF² used guerilla marketing tactics, with the idea that students might be more likely to generate “buzz” about a new event if they didn’t immediately associate it with the library (see Hibbler, Scheier & Zeller, 2011).

At first, IF² was held inside the main library on a Sunday evening, in an attempt to catch students while studying. However, this arrangement proved problematic: in addition to the general disruptiveness of the event, the off-hours made participation difficult for staff. An additional issue arose in 2013 when the selected date conflicted with a major sporting event, prompting us to reschedule for a weekday afternoon. With the revised schedule, we took advantage of the recent addition of a popular, central green space to experiment with a new location. Our hope was that the new venue, situated outdoors between the library and campus center, would catch students’ attention on their way back from lunch.

The 2013 festival occurred shortly after the hire of our first Outreach Librarian. In the months that followed, she instituted substantial changes,

including establishing an official Outreach & Engagement Team. We also learned that we'd overlooked a significant point: freshmen, our target audience, could not buy lunch in the campus center. With these experiences in mind, we were ready to change things up in Fall 2014. The festival moved to the quad outside of the main dining hall (where freshmen typically eat lunch) and to the busy lunch hours. We also sought a catchier, library-focused name that would be more social media-friendly; after consultation with student workers, we settled on "LibFest." Finally, we eliminated most of the edible giveaways in favor of bringing in a local frozen yogurt truck, significantly trimming our budget. At the new LibFest, students were required to collect stickers at a minimum number of tables in order to fill a coupon for free frozen yogurt. The addition of the truck and new location were wildly popular, and plenty of students, faculty, and staff opted to treat themselves; in fact, many students stayed to attend all of the tables, even after getting their froyo.

LibFest has followed a similar format since the original IF², featuring tables ranging from "You Want It? We Can Get It!" (ILL) and "Behind the Scenes" (cataloging) to the College Archives, Science Library and Library Advisory Board. Each table chooses and brings their own incentives, brochures, displays, and other materials which best represent their work; in recent years, these have been supplemented by library-branded giveaways and swag requested from our vendors. Each table is different, but the overarching themes are visibility and fun. Throughout the years, we have offered a number of larger incentives for attendance; some (such as an iPad raffle) were reasonably successful, while others (e.g., restaurant gift certificates) drew less attention and still others had unforeseen consequences (one year, librarians ordered pizzas, only to have the football team abscond with most of them). This aspect of LibFest is heavily adjusted each year based on what we've learned from successes and failures.

Assessment & Growth

Annual evaluations have allowed us to improve LibFest each year. Attendance numbers have significantly increased in the past few years, and LibFest 2016 welcomed approximately 180 students -- 6% of our student body. To

track attendance, we determine the number of froyo coupons redeemed. Staff members also record a hash mark for each student they speak with during the festival. While these methods still do not generate a precise attendance count, they give us a good idea of how many students visit LibFest. While we look forward to continuing growth as LibFest moves into its seventh year, these are already positive results for an event that is informal, optional, and fills what was previously a significant gap in outreach.

For qualitative assessment of LibFest, we rely on feedback from staff participants and student attendees. The Outreach Team conducts a “debrief” session after each festival to discuss what went well during the planning process as well as during the festival itself, and what should be changed for the next year. We survey all staff participants to request feedback about their experience at LibFest. In the future, we would like to gather more formal feedback from students, as well as getting input from faculty, which might give us better insight into what we should typically emphasize during this orientation.

Looking Forward & D.I.Y.

We are always looking for new ways to improve on past practices. At LibFest 2017, database vendors will attend to demonstrate recently-acquired databases, and may partner with us to offer a large raffle prize. We also plan to streamline the froyo coupon system. We are continually investigating new branded giveaways, for example earbuds for the Music Library table, and thinking about different games and activities that could be created. Moving forward, we plan to collaborate with the Worcester Public Library to highlight ways that their collections supplement our own. To bolster attendance, we also hope to partner with first-year program faculty to require students to attend.

After many years of hosting LibFests, we can confidently recommend some best practices for creating your own. First, start as early as possible -- our planning begins in May for a September festival. Ask your colleagues to help, and identify a festival team. Next, choose your target audience -- are they freshmen? international students? transfer students? Determine what message you want to share, and decide how you will convey it. Will you offer information sessions,

vendor demonstrations or games? Will you invite other campus offices to participate? Will you have giveaways? Make sure to prepare an itemized budget for any supplies, prizes, food, equipment, etc. Decide how you will market the festival to your audience and inspire them to attend. Before moving forward, make sure to get buy-in from library administration -- as well as any other parties relevant to your campus culture -- and have them review your event plan and budget. Finally, make sure to document logistics, changes and decisions from year-to-year, to assist with future planning.

Why LibFest?

LibFest is undoubtedly a labor of love. With a lengthy and complex planning process, it is a significant commitment -- but one that we are more than glad to make. As a general orientation, it provides opportunities to introduce students to our array of research resources. As a social event, it connects students and faculty with the staff behind the books. Most importantly, as the festive centerpiece of our outreach program, LibFest represents the 'best of' our libraries, showcasing collaborative relationships, the variety of student-centered services, and above all, the strong sense of community which links our campus' faculty, staff and students.

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