RACING TOGETHER TOWARD THE FINISH LINE: PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUPPORTING A LIBRARY OPEN HOUSE

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OVERVIEW

Over the course of 15 years, the Open House at Penn State Libraries has grown from a simple walking tour into an important educational event with strategic learning outcomes designed to reach over 7,000 students. This paper will explore the evolution of the Open House with a focus on the key internal and external partnerships required for successful program implementation, situating the event within the libraries’ teaching and learning program curriculum, performing meaningful assessment, and scaling the event for other institutions.

STRUCTURE OF THE EVENT

The Libraries’ Open House takes place over two days in early September, usually the Wednesday and Thursday after Labor Day. Essentially a self-guided tour for new students, the Open House features a varying number of “stops.” The tour stops can differ somewhat from year to year, but consistently includes the Commons Services, or lending area, the Research Hub (a reference services point), the Knowledge Commons, and three subject libraries within the main library complex (strategically selected to move students throughout the buildings). The tour also includes the four branch subject libraries out on campus within the colleges they support. Each stop develops its own learning activities and students must complete a designated number of stops to receive course credit for attending and to be eligible to win prizes. As the largest library outreach event of the year, Open House is a high-energy effort to welcome new users and familiarize them with the many library services and resources available both on-site and online.
COMMITTEE STRUCTURE: RESPONSIBILITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS

The size of the Open House planning committee has grown dramatically from two people in 2001 to a record high of twenty members for the September 2017 event. Currently, the committee consists of a six-person steering group and five subcommittees: Curriculum, Development, Public Relations, Local Arrangements, and Volunteers. There are pros and cons to having such a large committee: more members provide a wider array of perspectives, but also necessitate more meetings and create a compartmentalized structure that may leave people feeling disconnected from the event as a whole. The subcommittee structure is new this year and will be assessed and adjusted as needed following the event. Overall, planning the Open House is a nine-month process that begins in January. Deadlines are closely tied to budget needs, public relations timelines, and partner schedules.

Curriculum

The Curriculum subcommittee is responsible for updating, creating and maintaining the Open House learning outcomes, and works with the faculty and staff at each stop to create engaging activities that directly reflect and support those outcomes. Examples of successful stop activities include staff-led guided tours, subject guide Jeopardy, and a maze. This subcommittee also manages the number and location of stops and implements the student assessment survey following the event. In order to determine the appropriate stop location for each year’s Open House, the Curriculum team decides what is important for students to know about the library in accordance with the latest strategic directives from the Library Learning Services department and library administration.

The biggest external partners for the Curriculum team are academic instructors, primarily those teaching courses designed for new students: First Year Seminars, Freshman Composition, and Freshman Communication and Speech. On a campus of over 47,000 students, it is important to focus advertising strategically on the classes supporting our target population: mainly, incoming freshman. By developing and sharing (through liaison relationships and a heavy PR campaign) specific learning outcomes with instructors, the committee is able to show exactly why their students should attend, and what their students will get out of the event. As a result, many instructors in those courses will assign the event as a homework or extra credit assignment.

Figure 2: Libraries Open House Learning Outcomes

After completion of the Libraries' Open House, students will be able to:

1. effectively navigate the Libraries' physical spaces in order to locate needed resources and/or assistance from library staff and faculty;
2. identify that the Libraries groups its collections, people, and resources into subject libraries in order to identify which subject library supports their major;
3. recognize that there are a variety of online resources available to them, including the Libraries' homepage, subject guides, and the Ask a Librarian service; and
4. feel comfortable approaching library faculty and staff for assistance.
Development

The Development subcommittee is responsible for soliciting annual contributions to the Open House Funds, maintaining updated records of donor contacts and donation levels, and sending thank you notes. The Libraries Office of Development is the most important internal partner for this group as they provide guidance and contact information for library donors who may be willing to sponsor or volunteer for the event. They also vet the list of potential community business donors to avoid overlaps in funding requests. Donations include money or gifts-in-kind like food and prizes. Restaurants, grocery stores, bookstores, and local college apparel vendors are frequently a good fit for this type of event. The list of potential prizes and giveaways is endless and, depending on the funding you acquire, can be as small as a pencil or as large as a laptop, and everything in between.

Public Relations

The Public Relations subcommittee works closely with the Libraries Public Relations and Marketing Department (PRaM) in order to develop all promotional materials for the Open House, including print and social media, digital signage, t-shirts, branded giveaways, the event website, and videos. This subcommittee arranges for the distribution of marketing materials in campus buildings, at orientation events like student resource and activity fairs, and via student-run newspapers, radio, and blogs. This subcommittee has some of the earliest deadlines due to their partnership with PRaM, since that department schedules design work far in advance.

Local Arrangements

The Local Arrangements subcommittee is in charge of way-finding and logistics. In addition to developing navigation strategies (see Figure 1), this team reserves rooms and banner display space; orders and distributes decorations, giveaways, and student prizes; and orchestrates event set-up and tear-down. This subcommittee relies on internal partnerships with PRaM, Libraries Facilities, and Libraries employee volunteers able to assist before, during, and after the event.

Volunteers

The Volunteers subcommittee is responsible for recruiting, training, and deploying volunteers in specific roles during the Open House; planning the Volunteer Kick-Off and Thank You parties; selecting and distributing Volunteer prizes; and administering the Volunteer Feedback survey. Event volunteers are nearly all Libraries employees, although a small percentage are alumni and members of the Libraries Development Board. There are four types of volunteer roles: Greeters, who welcome students and explain the event; Finish Line attendants, who distribute prizes and administer the student survey; Navigation volunteers, who direct students through the building; and Set-Up/Tear-Down teams, who help before and after the event. Securing enough people to staff the event can be challenging and success depends on obtaining buy-in from internal partners like Libraries Administration, employee supervisors, and the employees themselves. In particular, administration support is crucial to recruiting volunteers. They support the event most by encouraging everyone who works in the libraries to volunteer and sponsoring the popular volunteer Kick-Off Ice Cream party.

ADDITIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Technology

To receive credit for completing the Open House activities, students swipe their ID cards at each stop and at the Finish Line, generating an email “certificate” that they can submit to their instructors. In order for this complex system to function properly, the Open House committee partners with the Libraries Department for Information Technologies (I-Tech) to develop, test, and troubleshoot the application managing student participation data. Students who complete at least six stops will receive an official certificate for the event and those who complete all ten will receive a library t-shirt (while supplies last). The system also allows the committee to access data regarding our students that then informs the direction of the event.

Assessment

Since the Open House is designed around specific learning outcomes, assessing the outcomes’ success is crucial, not only for designing next year’s event but for maintaining continued goodwill and support from Libraries Administration and other key partners. When students swipe into the Finish Line, they are directed to a self-assessment survey reflecting on their progress with the learning outcomes (see Figure 3), and are only eligible to win grand prizes by completing the survey. Additional questions seek to determine where students heard about the event, why they attended, whether the prizes were motivational, what they liked best (see Appendix A), and suggestions for improvement. We allow this feedback to drive the direction of the event.
Aside from students, the other significant piece of assessment is the Volunteer Feedback Survey, which asks respondents to comment on the training they received, the relative merit of the incentives offered, and, most importantly, what was successful or in need of improvement during the event.

**Figure 3: Student Self-Assessment Results from 2016 Libraries Open House Feedback Survey**

![Survey Results](chart)

**SCALING THE OPEN HOUSE**

In order to scale the Libraries Open House for another institution, there are a few points to consider:

- **Funding**: How much will your institution be able to contribute, and how much will you need to fundraise? If the institution has no existing budget for outreach events, it may be necessary to request money far in advance of the actual Open House date.

- **Audience**: Who is your audience for this event, and what do they need? Does your campus have a large number of first generation college students, or a specialized academic focus like law or business? The Open House stops can be tailored to each or all of these groups.

- **Timelines**: How much time can you dedicate to planning the event and what are your partners’ time constraints? Try to avoid scheduling the Open House at the same time as other larger events on campus, or determine whether your event can build off of an existing program or activity. Partnering with another orientation program or academic department could lead to new collaborative opportunities for the library.

- **Previous Orientation Events (Attempts)**: Finally, what have you tried before? Is there a history of library orientation events you can mine for ideas or, at minimum, pitfalls to avoid? Look for specific librarians or departments who may be able to share their expertise.

**CONCLUSION**

When planning an Open House for the first time, don’t be afraid to fail. Even if it doesn’t go as planned, the attempt will generate attention from the administration and instructors, and you may receive more assistance for the next time. By building your event around specific learning outcomes and designing an assessment plan up front, you will be able to demonstrate value and measure how well you achieved your goals. Most importantly, remember that you don’t have to go it alone. Seek out partners within the library, on campus, and in the community—working together is the key to a successful Open House.
APPENDIX A

Quotes from 2016 Libraries Open House Feedback Survey

- I like the connections that I was able to make with faculty and even other students.
- I liked learning about all the resources and that it showed you where all the branch libraries were.
- Everyone was incredibly friendly and kind, awesome!
- I am so glad I did it!
- The tour was actually really helpful and I am now more confident coming into the library for help with school work.
- This is my last one as a senior, but it’s been real. I would not have succeeded as I have at Penn State without the library services
- The library open house is a well thought out and implemented event! I enjoyed every moment of it, and even got some more exercise for today!
- I will definitely come here to study more often now!
- I liked it very much. I truly feel like I learned more about the resources available to me as a student; I was not originally sure where specific sections of the library were located or what specific things I could do in the library.
- I think this was extremely helpful and I feel more comfortable in the library
- I'll do open house until I graduate
- I actually enjoyed it, although I thought I wouldn't.
- I now know where I can find specific parts, and it will be much easier to navigate the library now.