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Aligning the Stars: Mapping Out a Collaboration Constellation

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ALIGNING THE STARS: MAPPING OUT A COLLABORATION CONSTELLATION

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OVERVIEW

Building meaningful partnerships with campus stakeholders and library colleagues is crucial to the success of any outreach and engagement program. No matter the size of the college or university, it can be daunting to find the partners needed, and it takes time and energy to strategize, sustain, and grow those relationships. This paper will show how an Outreach Coordinator and Student Engagement Librarian collaborated to build partnerships, leveraged their colleagues' expertise and campus connections, and developed outcome-driven programming. It will further show how they identified stakeholders and utilized partnerships to grow and support new events, some with university-wide impact.

OUTREACH CONTEXT

The University Park campus of Penn State University is home to over 46,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Over the course of ten-plus years, the Libraries outreach program has grown from a basic tour and orientation schedule to a more robust program of both larger-scale and small, student-driven events that depend on strong relationships with campus partners to succeed. In 2017, our outreach team reached over 20,000 people through 83 events. Our growth over those ten years is the direct result of an intentional, sustained effort to further develop established partnerships and re-envision what events can look like for an evolving student body.

The Libraries outreach program is spearheaded and coordinated by the Outreach Coordinator. In this role, she coordinates the largest outreach events. These events include: the Libraries' Open House; an orientation for incoming students held every fall; tours throughout the year to students, faculty, staff, community members, and more; and Destress Fest, an end-of-the-semester event with coffee and snacks for students studying for finals. She also coordinates a large number of smaller events, tours, and orientations.

As a result of this outreach programming success, and in response to the university's strategic focus on student engagement and engaged scholarship opportunities, the Student Engagement and Outreach Librarian position was created within the University Libraries in July 2017. The focus of this position: be a liaison with non-academic units on campus, such as undergraduate research, undergraduate education, the University Fellowship Office, student government, and more; coordinate an aligned approach to student engagement across Penn State University's 20 campuses; and work to ensure that library student employment work is meaningful. In this role, the Student Engagement Librarian believes in understanding the experience of a Penn State student and finding ways to leverage and amplify those experiences to campus stakeholders. She also works closely with the Outreach Coordinator on the development and implementation of a wide array of outreach programming initiatives.

STRATEGIES

There are multiple methods for building an outreach and engagement program. It could mean taking current campus relationships and using them as a bridge to new relationships and new programming; bringing together past partners to create new university-wide programming; or capitalizing on current relationships and collaborations to make the program stronger and meet the changing needs of our students. There are several strategies to help with this process. The first step is to identify campus stakeholders. Throughout the process, it is important to be intentional in regards to how we identify these stakeholders and develop those relationships. Once those partners have been identified, establishing learning outcomes and using them to leverage partnerships and gain the internal organizational buy-in is also essential to reaching new outreach goals.

Identifying Campus Stakeholders

In recent years, the Libraries outreach program has experimented with a variety of smaller outreach events, usually held throughout the spring semester. Examples of these events include a board game night, Blind Date with a Book, the Edible Book Festival, and a poetry slam. The major benefit of experimenting with these events is that it allowed us to see what kind of programs resonated with students. Following the hiring of the Student Engagement Librarian, however, we made the decision to be more intentional with our partnerships and the programming we sponsored. While we enjoyed hosting a wide variety of outreach events, we only had so much bandwidth to coordinate those events, and we also had relationships we wanted to build with critical partners across campus.

We began by identifying the groups across campus with which we only had surface relationships, but shared the Libraries' values, student-centered approaches, and respect for diversity and inclusion. We also considered our previous experiences with those stakeholders—both positive and troublesome. This was accomplished by creating a Strategic Alignment chart (Table 1). Strategic alignment can visually show what sort of partner relationships already exist: strong, surface, or weak. It also shows which partners could be used to help build bridges to new collaborators. In our chart, we were able to identify our stakeholders and could take a moment to consider if each stakeholder was an ally or an obstacle to our mission. This consideration provided a direction and a way to assess our progress throughout the year. We also listed all the potential ideas we had for working with each group and identified at least one goal for the 2017/2018 academic year.

Table 1: Strategic Alignment Chart
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Establishing Learning Outcomes

As we brainstormed new programming, learning outcomes were one way to not only focus the program or event, but were also useful in connecting with new partners, as providing these learning outcomes for specific events demonstrated our motivation for collaboration and reasoning for what students would gain. In our initial meetings, our new or potential partners could tell right away if our proposed activities fit within their programming goals and mission as a unit. These outcomes could also help inform assessment measures, which was also appreciated. This communication laid a foundation for impactful programming and showed new partners our investment in this relationship. See Appendix A and B for examples of some of our programming and their learning outcomes.

An example of how we used learning outcomes to establish relationships was when we met with Residence Life Coordinators. We were interested in exploring how to provide support and programming for their Special Living Options (SLOs), where students live together under a common theme or interest in the residence halls. At our first meeting with the Coordinators, we were able to bring a suite of potential programming, including our Library Escape Rooms, that had learning outcomes attached to them. Having those outcomes helped the Coordinators see what their students could gain out of these experiences, and helped them see what potential SLOs might be interested in library focused programming. In this way, we were able to make significant inroads with new partners, even though we did not have a large event to propose.

Leveraging Partnerships

The circle of potential partners can at once seem both large and unmanageable, and incredibly tiny. This is when leveraging existing partnerships can be particularly helpful. In the case at Penn State, we used this strategy when planning and implementing the Human Library. Previous surface relationships had already existed with a number of Student Affairs departments, including the Multicultural Resource Center, LGBTQA Student Resource Center, Gender Equity Center, and Adult Learner Programs & Services. These departments were not only valuable in providing their expertise to the design and implementation of the program, but also had their own networks of cultivated relationships that we were able to tap into as a program resource. Our partnerships with these programs outside of the Human Library project have also seen improvements: we have partnered with the LGBTQA Student Resource Center on multiple programming opportunities and are discussing a forthcoming partnership between unit interns.

Another example is with our Leading Edge Academic Program (LEAP) partners. This is a summer program where incoming first-year students are placed in a cohort-based group and adjust to college life when the campus is not at full capacity. Students take two courses and have a peer mentor to help guide them through this program. In the past, the library had only provided instruction to some of these classes, or given a tour of the library to the LEAP students. As Summer 2017 approached and new leadership took over the coordination of LEAP, the Outreach Coordinator and Student Engagement Librarian wanted to change up library

programming. Through conversations and a willingness to try something new, the Libraries were able to provide library tour training to the LEAP mentors, host several Pop-Up Libraries in the residence hall where the LEAP students lived, and provide Library Escape Rooms the cohorts could elect to participate in. Since the libraries had regular facetime with both the students of LEAP, as well as the residence life staff during our five Pop-Up Libraries, it allowed new stakeholders to discover what the libraries could provide. This eventually led to hosting Pop-Up Libraries on a monthly basis throughout the fall and spring semester, and allowed the libraries to take a leadership role in further developing LEAP programming for Summer 2018.

Garnering Internal Buy-In

Outreach is done well when many people pitch in to support the event, especially for large-scale events. Building a culture of volunteering can be difficult, especially in a large organization, where some people become insular in their departments or do not understand the full extent of how outreach supports the library's mission. Just as it requires time to plan and coordinate an event, it takes an equal amount of time to cultivate a strong volunteer-orientated community in the library.

Weeks before a big outreach event, the Outreach Coordinator, or another member of the planning committee, sends out an email asking for volunteers. Those interested in helping with the event can sign up on a SignUpGenius (website). This website is easy to use and sends volunteers an email a day before they are scheduled to volunteer. Additionally, for all new and large-scale events, we host volunteer training sessions leading up to the event. In the training session, we review how the event will work, discuss the learning outcomes we have to focus and ground our event, cover any standard messaging we would like them to provide to those who attend the event, and discuss anything else they might need to know to do their job well. As people begin to feel they are a part of something bigger, we are able to garner that internal buy-in. They also feel more confident in their roles when they head out to represent the Libraries.

The power of simply appreciating people should never be undervalued, as it goes a long way to ensuring continued buy-in to the outreach program as a whole. This can be done in a variety of ways. For example, after an event like Destress Fest, our Outreach Coordinator will send out an email to the library listserv, letting all employees know how many students attended our event, and listing all those who volunteered to make the event a success. This small thing, one simple email, can go a long way to not only thank those volunteers publicly, but also encourage those who did not volunteer to perhaps volunteer for the event in the future. For our Open House, we host a volunteer thank you party after the event, where there are snacks and raffle prizes given out. We also present a travel trophy to the department who has the largest percentage of their staff volunteer for Open House. This sort of friendly competition helps to not only gain more volunteers for our event, but also builds morale and collegiality among our library colleagues.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment not only documents the successes of an outreach program, but is also a way to gather feedback and build new partnerships. A wide variety of assessment tools, beyond just numbers in attendance, can measure the success and impact of a program. Surveys, debrief meetings, conversations with students during an event, and other student artifacts provide meaningful feedback and influence planning for the future. Having this combination of assessment measures gives you flexibility to cater to the audience you are working with. For example, showing an increase of students attending an outreach event semester after semester is a great way to ask for additional funding in another budget year, while having student impact statements can be a good conversation starter with a campus partner who is not quite sure what the library outreach program looks like, or whether that program will be useful to its students. Not matter what, we continue to review our assessment strategy for intentionality and to ensure we are documenting our processes. The result of this work is a highly successful outreach and engagement program that continues to grow each year.

CONCLUSION

Building an outreach program that reaches over 20,000 people in one year has taken time, energy, and investment from a wide variety of stakeholders. It requires those leading the outreach program to be highly collaborative, strategic, and intentional in order to sustain that success. While this might seem daunting at times, there are strategies that can help this process run smoothly. From mapping out your collaborators, planning goals for the year, creating learning outcomes, leveraging your partners, gathering internal buy-in, and adding assessment measures—any and all of these strategies can help you implement impactful programming. At the end of the day, these programs benefit our students, students who are changing and evolving each year. It's our responsibility to keep these events fresh, and having a large network of stakeholders and partners allows us to do that.

APPENDIX A

Human Library Learning Objectives

Participants will recognize their privilege and others' barriers, as well as their personal prejudices.

Participants will recognize that some individuals have had to cross social barriers that they have not.

Participants will relate the experiences of others to the experiences of their own lives.

LOEX PRE-PRINT

APPENDIX B

Library Escape Room Learning Outcomes

Participants will be able to effectively navigate the Libraries' physical spaces in order to locate needed resources and/or assistance from library staff and faculty.

Participants will be able to recognize that there are a variety of online resources available to them, including the Libraries' homepage and subject guides.

Participants will be able to feel comfortable approaching library faculty and staff for assistance.

Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)

Table 1

Collaborator & Main Contact	Ally, Obstacle, or Other?	Potential ideas for working with them	2017-18 Goals
Multicultural Resource Center	Ally	Library inclusion in Penn State Treasure; inclusion in Human Library Planning Committee; Library inclusion on Multicultural Council (someone from Diversity Committee)	Connect with new director (meeting?)
LGBTQA Center	Ally	Movie event; book club support	Two scheduled movie nights in April to support Pride Month.
Student Athletes	Ally	Instruction session in the fall (after open house); spring event at their home location	Contact made for Spring event but no response.
Presidential Leadership Academy	Other	Library instruction	Connect with director Fall semester; plan for Spring involvement?