

Florida State University Libraries

2018

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Michelle Demeter, Rachel Besara, Gloria Colvin and Bridgett Birmingham

Marketing Libraries Journal is an open access journal. <http://journal.marketinglibraries.org>



Send in the Crowds: Planning and Benefiting from Large-scale Academic Library Events

Michelle Demeter

Florida State University

Rachel Besara

Missouri State University

Gloria Colvin

Florida State University

Bridgett Birmingham

Florida State University

Abstract: Academic libraries produce a range of events. While large-scale events can be a lot of fun, the planning process can seem more daunting than the process for programming that targets smaller audiences. Planning and executing large-scale events—ones that attract one hundred or more attendees, involve partners, and meet the social and academic needs of students—can be very worthwhile in terms of marketing the library and networking. In this article, the authors detail four different events that can be replicated in an effort to show how easy and beneficial large-scale events can be within the academic library community.

Keywords: academic libraries, programming, large events, outreach, networking

Introduction

In academic libraries, outreach can have many meanings. Regardless of its multivalent nature, outreach ultimately means fostering connections with others, whether they be students, faculty, or the academic community at large. Most of these interactions and partnerships are on a small scale—in small groups such as presentations, instruction courses, workshops, and campus orientation sessions, or one-on-one interactions during tabling events. Florida State University (FSU) Libraries found that a variety of outreach efforts yields better results in both visitor counts to the physical buildings and the website, as well as better familiarity with library

resources. One area where the Libraries increasingly expanded outreach efforts was in the development of large-scale events. For an event to count as large-scale, it should reach more than one hundred people, include a partnership with a group or individual on campus, and advance interdisciplinary interactions among its participants.

At FSU, there is a designated Outreach unit within the larger Research and Learning Services division. Staff throughout the division approach the Outreach unit for assistance in planning, staffing, and budgeting all events in Strozier Library (the main library) and the campus's STEM libraries. In this article, four librarians at FSU Libraries detail four large-scale outreach events that effectively accomplished the above goals and that proved to be sustainable and popular among each of their core target groups of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. In each section, one event is closely examined to detail its ideation, planning, execution, and lessons learned so that each can be replicated at other academic libraries and modified for their unique user populations.

As noted above, FSU Libraries' large-scale events must meet the needs of both social and academic pursuits while also serving one hundred attendees or more. Attracting a large number of participants to a purely academic event is a difficult hurdle. In general, an event that is purely social does not automatically meet the goals of the library or its financial supporters and can be hard for some librarians to justify to their stakeholders. However, showcasing the library as a social center on campus is one way to contribute to the university's retention goals and make students feel like welcome participants in campus culture. Large-scale events require more resources and planning than smaller interactions, which is why FSU Libraries often collaborate with other campus departments or groups.

Research Symposia

In order to better align library services with faculty needs, liaison librarians in 2008 conducted interviews with FSU faculty across academic departments to learn more about how they worked and to better understand what supported or hindered their research and teaching. One issue that arose repeatedly in faculty responses was a desire for opportunities to get to know colleagues across campus and to be aware of research being done in departments other than their own. Their interests in knowing about what others were researching, making connections with colleagues, and identifying potential opportunities for collaboration were the impetus for the library's efforts to position itself as a place where faculty from different disciplines could come together to share their research and discuss ideas. One of the most successful efforts in accomplishing these goals has been hosting interdisciplinary research symposia that involve faculty in the planning and presentations.

Typically, FSU Libraries host two symposia each year—one symposium during the fall and one during the spring—and invite faculty to talk about their research or publications related to a broad, central theme. Most library symposia are organized by the Scholars Commons, the Libraries' graduate and faculty division. Every effort is made to include speakers from a wide range of disciplines and to attract attendees from across the campus. Interdisciplinary themes included genius, composing, coffee, ethnography, the persistence of evil, academic publishing,

digital scholarship, social media research and, most recently, water. Occasionally, symposia based on a specific topic, such as a newly published book or the anniversary of a classic, are used as springboards for discussion of larger issues. The books *Academically Adrift* and *Silent Spring*, for example, led to discussions of undergraduate education and of environmental issues, respectively.

Librarians usually select the theme for a symposium, but in some cases, faculty approach librarians with ideas and ask to organize a symposium on a particular topic. An individual librarian usually takes the lead in planning the program with faculty and works with a small group of librarians and Outreach staff in coordinating the logistics for the symposium, with assistance from colleagues and student workers on the day of the event. The Libraries' communications staff is instrumental in designing materials to publicize the symposia. In addition, the provost and the Office of Faculty Development and Advancement partner with the Libraries to promote the symposia.

Most symposia are full-day events, though some have been half-day programs, with the format varying depending on the topic. The most common format is a series of talks by individual faculty, with each talk followed by time for questions or discussion. Some symposia include panel discussions and occasionally administrators or guest speakers participate in the program. The full-day symposium on academic publishing, for example, included a panel discussion on journal publishing with faculty who edit a variety of journals and a journal publisher; talks on book publishing by representatives of a university press and a book vendor; displays and activities related to open access publishing and the university's research repository; a conversation with the provost and a faculty member on publishing expectations for promotion and tenure; and a guest speaker who looked at the future of publishing. Attendees come and go throughout the day, some attending a single presentation and others staying for the entire program. Anywhere from 50 to more than 100 attendees is typical, and now that the talks are streamed online, attendance rises with 500 to 1,000 remote viewers. Time for refreshments and socializing is built into the day, with coffee and pastries available in the morning and a light lunch in the middle of the day. A budget of \$300 to \$400 per symposium covers the cost of the food.

Symposia are held in the Bradley Reading Room, a library space designated for graduate student and faculty study. The room can be reconfigured for lecture-style seating and can accommodate individual presentations or panel discussions. With the help of library technology staff, presenters may use Internet connectivity and a ceiling-mounted projector if they wish to incorporate media in their presentations.

The symposia have helped establish the library as a focal point on campus for academic programs and conversations with colleagues and the wider university community. They provide opportunities for faculty to connect across disciplines, as well as for students and librarians to learn more about research taking place on a particular topic. Finally, they led to collaboration with other departments in the library and with other campus organizations and units.

Marathon Reading

In fall 2010, an English faculty member approached the outreach librarian about hosting a spring 2011 event aimed at generating interest among her students in reading Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. This faculty member proposed a marathon reading, which involves the reading aloud of a lengthy book for 24 hours or longer in an effort to engage the community and expose people to literature they might not typically approach on their own. The library staff thought this might be a fun and unique way to engage with students and classic literature, and thus a partnership was born. The faculty member reached out to Athletics and the Student Government Association to recruit readers, while Outreach staff coordinated the production of a flyer and social media advertisements. Athletics proved to be a strong partner throughout all of the readings. FSU is well known for its athletic programs, and the new director of the student athletes was especially interested in emphasizing the students' academic involvement. In later years, Student Government continued to participate, and the Libraries also determined that the readings might be a unique way to include FSU's distance student population. The Libraries' Outreach budget provided funds to purchase snacks for the duration of the reading.

Individuals can sign up for 15- or 20-minute blocks using the SignUp.com website and can share their block as they please with one, two, or more readers. Readers are recruited prior to the event, but empty slots are available for audience members who are moved to participate on the spot. The reading is hosted on the main floor of the library, outside the Special Collections exhibit room. The space offers a very visible location near the entrance of the main library and its busiest checkout desk. Often Special Collections makes a small accompanying display highlighting items from its collection that align with the chosen topic. About thirty chairs are arranged facing a podium equipped with a microphone and speakers (see Figure 1).



Figure 1.

The readings also accommodate remote participation. The Libraries' Dean had prioritized outreach to and inclusion of FSU distance students in on-campus activities and, as a result, the

reading organizers worked with Libraries' Technology department to include FSU's extended campuses. In the third year, readers joined the event via Skype from Florence, Italy; London, England; Valencia, Spain; Panama City, Panama; and Panama City Beach, Florida. When readers participate via Skype, they are projected on a large Mondopad TV so the audience can see and hear them. Including the extended campuses helps make FSU's students and faculty abroad feel more connected to the main campus, which is an overarching goal of the university as well as the library.

Each year, when it comes time to choose a new book for the marathon reading, the directors from FSU's extended campuses and the English department are included in the decision-making. Titles read thus far include Dickens' *Bleak House*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*, García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* and, most recently, a variety of folk tales, legends, and myths from around the world. Numerous copies of the chosen book are on hand for readers at all locations. The Libraries purchase the same copy to make following along easier throughout the event. Food is also provided to entice and reward readers and passers-by who participate. The budget for this event is usually \$75 to \$100, which includes breakfast pastries and other snacks that have a long shelf-life, since they are out for more than 24 hours.

In 2017, the event was live-streamed online for the first time, which added 150 virtual participants to the 160 attendees in the library. Audience numbers shift throughout the day, as people are encouraged to come and go as they please. The Libraries plan to continue the readings, possibly increasing them to twice a year. With the folk tales and legends reading, it became clear that the audience might like an opportunity to discuss the history and origins of the readings as well as share personal stories about why the selections were meaningful to them. The organizers seek out opportunities like these to keep the readings fresh from year to year and encourage audiences locally and abroad to engage with literature in new and meaningful ways.

Graduate Social

Since 2014, FSU Libraries have hosted a social for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. The social is primarily an opportunity for graduate and postdoctoral students from departments across campus to meet, talk, and make connections in an informal environment, but librarians also promote library services, spaces, and programs designed for the students.

The idea for the social came from members of the Libraries' Graduate Advisory Council, whose members lamented that there were not opportunities to meet other graduate students outside of their own departments. The librarians in the Scholars Commons seized on this idea and received support from senior administration to move forward.

With the help of members of the Graduate Advisory Council, librarians planned the first social for two hours on a late Friday afternoon early in the 2014 spring semester. They chose this time because the graduate students indicated that they did not teach or attend class at that time of day, but they tended to be on campus grading papers and catching up on other work.

The Bradley Reading Room, which is restricted to graduate students and faculty, was a natural site for the event. A budget of \$1,000 covered appetizers, fruit, vegetables, desserts, and beverages. In addition to soft drinks, librarians successfully requested permission from the university administration to serve wine. To keep costs manageable, especially when purchasing wine for 150–200 attendees, food is bought on sale or wholesale at Sam’s Club. Student workers plate food items ahead of the event and keep everything replenished throughout the event.

The Libraries’ graphic designer produced an invitation that was widely distributed to graduate students by liaison librarians and a digital sign that was posted on monitors throughout Strozier Library and Dirac Science Library. Announcements appeared on the library and Graduate School websites. On the day of the event, librarians took turns staffing a welcome table outside the Reading Room where attendees could sign in and get name tags, and pick up brochures and flyers about the Libraries. The Libraries hired a bartender, but did not card students, because the social was taking place in a self-contained room and students signed in before entering (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

This first event attracted 150 to 175 graduate students, who quickly filled the room. There were many animated conversations. Liaison librarians also mingled with the students, answered questions, and shared information about the Libraries. Later socials attracted a similar number of attendees; attendance peaked at about 180, excluding librarians.

Based on the success of the first graduate social, librarians decided to host another one in the 2014 fall semester, an optimal time to reach out to new graduate and postdoctoral students. Librarians planning the event kept a similar format but made several adjustments. Because the Libraries did not have access to a conventional oven, preparing warm appetizers proved difficult, so they were no longer served. During the first social, music played in the background but was drowned out by conversation, so planners eliminated it. To encourage

students to use the space outside the Reading Room, Outreach staff placed the desserts there. Students came out to the desserts but took them back to the Reading Room, preferring to be where most of the activity was taking place.

The Graduate School partnered with the Libraries in promoting the socials, and administrators from that office dropped by to talk with students. Each spring, the Graduate School conducted a survey of first-year graduate students to learn more about their experiences and their views of their programs and various support services. The Libraries consistently received high ratings, and quite a few comments referenced the Libraries' socials. As a result of the positive comments about the socials in these surveys, in summer 2015, the dean of the Graduate School proposed that they partner with the Libraries to host the socials and match the Libraries' funding so that two socials could be held each year, one in the fall in the main library and one in the spring in Dirac Science Library. The success of the graduate socials was noticed by other partners on campus, and in fall 2017 FSU's Center for the Advancement of Teaching approached the Libraries and asked to cohost monthly faculty socials.

Graduate students continue to be enthusiastic about the socials, and attendance is consistently around 150. Some postdoctoral students also come, but they are much fewer in number. Librarians have tried to communicate information about the Libraries at the socials. However, while the students do get to see the library spaces and talk with librarians, the students are mostly interested in talking with each other and enjoying the food and drink. The most positive outcome for the Libraries is in the goodwill that the event creates among graduate and postdoctoral students.

Hackathon

In 2014, HackFSU, a registered student organization at FSU, planned its first hackathon, which is a technology-based inventor marathon. It is an intense, fun, immersion experience wherein experienced computer programmers and those brand new to coding gather, form teams, and create technology-based solutions to problems. The teams work together on self-selected projects and develop them as far as possible for 24 hours, with the support of mentors and workshops. The projects are then judged in a showcase exhibit involving all of the hacker teams at the end of the event. The HackFSU hackathons have all been a part of Major League Hacking, the official national student hackathon league.

The first hackathon was a bit chaotic, but each subsequent event has been much smoother. The formation of the Libraries' initial partnership with HackFSU was an intense experience with little time to prepare. Hundreds of participants from more than a dozen universities had registered for the hackathon and, with less than a week to go, HackFSU had not yet secured a venue large enough and flexible enough to house the event. The provost's office heard of the situation and asked the Libraries' administration whether the Dirac Science Library would be willing to host the 36-hour event. This library was the ideal space, with plenty of gathering spaces, work spaces, power outlets, and wireless internet access, and it was already accustomed to providing services and facilities to hundreds of students. The library staff and the HackFSU organizers spent more than 72 hours working closely together in the week of the

hackathon to make the event successful. The combination of amenities and the library staff's enjoyment of the concentrated collaborative work continues to make Dirac Science Library HackFSU's venue choice year after year.

While the partnership began in name when the Libraries' administration approved the first event, it began in earnest when the librarians and staff started working out the logistics of the unfamiliar event. This involved many constructive discussions between the HackFSU organizers, student leaders (who were unfamiliar with many campus operating policies), and the Libraries' managers. Libraries' staff created a physical layout of the building to identify the best locations to serve meals and set up stress-busting games, sponsor booths, storage areas, and nap stations. Because the participants included FSU students, corporate sponsors with expensive equipment, students from other universities, and high school students from the region, the Libraries and campus police worked together to identify any potential safety issues. Finally, the local news media and social media covered the hackathon, and the Dirac Science Library was mentioned in all the stories. Coverage emphasized that it was one of the first hackathons of its size to be held in a library space versus other campus locations, something even the vendors found unique and intriguing (see Figure 3).



Figure 3.

The first event led to an ongoing relationship between the library, HackFSU, and other technology-focused registered student organizations. Four hackathons have been hosted by Dirac Science Library to date. Since hackathons by their nature are student-organized and students come and go throughout, the event has posed some unique challenges. The Libraries' charge anywhere from \$4,000 to \$6,000 to cover costs associated with additional staffing, security, and facilities required for the event; Dirac is usually closed during half of the event hours and, during its normal

open hours, its usual patrons are displaced. Throughout the planning process, the Libraries and HackFSU meet to discuss dates and hours of the event, permitted activities, logistics, deliveries, staffing, security, and equipment. The students are responsible for arranging all deliveries of food, technology, and furniture.

Librarians also help coach each hackathon leadership team through the local logistics of holding the event. All fundraising is conducted by the students. They work with Major League Hacking, potential sponsors, and other donors to secure the funding for building use, meals, security, equipment rental, t-shirts, and other affiliated costs. During the event, all meals and snacks are provided for participants. In addition, extra furniture is ordered so students have nap areas and the organizers can set up a sort of command center on the floor. HackFSU is responsible for these orders, deliveries, and payments. The librarians often assist with setting up food distribution and identifying locations that allow traffic to flow easily. When furniture is delivered, it is stacked in the bottom of the library stairwell and flagged with notes advising regular patrons not to distribute it across the floor.

Librarians, staff, and security are on hand at all times during the event to ensure the building is being used properly, to let students in and out of the building as needed, and to make sure things stay civil. Students stay awake for more than 24 hours while trying to manage the logistics of running meals and various activities (such as a photo booth, cup-stacking contests, DJ dance parties to reenergize the hackers, and interviews for jobs and internships with sponsors) as well as providing crash-course trainings on coding throughout the event. Tensions therefore can run high as sleep deprivation increases. Often the librarians serve as mentors and sounding boards, stepping in to help when students are running a bit low on energy or need advice on how previous years' coordinators handled certain issues.

The hackathon's benefit to the campus community is worth the extra work. Since the Libraries are a partner in the event, HackFSU is only charged the direct staffing costs of hours the library is open beyond the regular schedule. In just one event, some 400 students from almost 20 universities, as well as local community members, can learn about coding, gain concrete skills, and have the opportunity to be noticed by corporate sponsors and recruiters in attendance, such as Apple, MailChimp, and State Farm. While the students complete the bulk of the work, library staff coordination is essential. The event continues to bring campus and local-media attention to the exploratory teaching-and-learning role of the library—which is invaluable.

Conclusion

Large-scale events offer unique opportunities to reach out and connect with a wide range of students and faculty across disciplines. They can allow for lengthy discussions and interactions that do not occur at smaller, shorter events. However, all of the benefits gained from conducting such events should not detract from the value of smaller events. While FSU Libraries have hosted many large-scale events, including resource fairs and undergraduate research symposia, the majority of its programs continue to be smaller events because of their ease and flexibility of planning and execution. The agility afforded by small-scale tabling, book discussions, finals events, and other activities is not to be discounted. Each type of outreach event is meant to not only encourage visits

to the Libraries but also to educate potential and existing users about the various resources the library has offer.

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