Community outreach initiatives at UNCG Libraries: the ROI of ROI outreach

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Abstract

The notion of "community outreach" can be complicated for academic libraries, because both "community" and "outreach" can have multiple meanings. While many academic libraries have a mission or administrative mandate to engage with local and regional communities, these initiatives are not always backed with material support, adequate staffing, or equal distribution of responsibilities within the library. Thus, it can be difficult for academic libraries to engage in community outreach while still serving the core constituency of the institution: students, faculty, and staff. In response to this issue, this paper discusses various strategic planning models that can be used to plan for community outreach initiatives within academic libraries, featuring a case study of a health information literacy outreach event planned and executed by a team of librarians from the Research, Outreach, and Instruction department within UNC Greensboro's University Libraries. Additionally, the authors of the paper propose a framework for determining the return on investment and feasibility of outreach opportunities, which is in turn applied to the case study.

Keywords

- community outreach
- strategic planning
- organizational development
- community workshops
- health information literacy

Introduction

UNC Greensboro (UNCG) is a public co-educational research university within the University of North Carolina System, with a full-time FTE of 15,750 undergraduates and 2800 graduate students (UNC Greensboro Fall Undergraduate Headcount & FTE, 2018). UNCG's new strategic plan is named "Taking Giant Steps." The plan is organized into "areas of transformation" (student transformation, knowledge transformation, and regional transformation) as well as interdisciplinary thematic "areas of focus" (health and wellness, vibrant communities, and global connections) (UNC Greensboro "Taking Giant Steps", 2013). UNCG University Libraries 2017-2018 Strategic Plan outlines the libraries' values as being "innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity; collaboration and teamwork; culture of diversity and inclusion; communication that empowers and fosters openness; accountability and excellence in service and programming; atmosphere of continual learning; and culture of sustainability" (UNCG University Libraries Mission, Goals and Customer Service Values, 2018). Instruction at the UNCG University Libraries is primarily performed by the Research, Outreach, and Instruction (ROI) department, with Special Collection and University Archives (SCUA) and the Digital Media Commons (DMC) also teaching on campus and in the community. The UNCG ROI department uses a liaison model, with liaisons assigned to each academic department and program on campus. The liaisons are divided into three large subject teams (Humanities Team, Social Sciences Team, and Sciences Team) that meet regularly and collaborate on professional development and other projects that arise, including community outreach opportunities. This paper discusses various models that may be employed to prioritize and plan community outreach events, provides a case study of a community outreach event planned and executed by a team of librarians, and applies a framework model for determining the return on investment of outreach opportunities to this case study.

The notion of "community outreach" can be complicated for academic libraries, because both "community" and "outreach" have multiple meanings. While most libraries serve a "community" of some kind or another, whether they are corporate employees, congressional staffers, or members of a

local or regional public, many academic libraries have a mission of serving two different communities with distinct needs. The core constituency of an academic library is its internal campus community, comprised of myriad individuals (students, faculty, staff, and so on) and units (campus offices, student groups, university task forces, and more). However, many academic libraries also serve a local community of individuals and groups who are not formally affiliated with the college or university but live in the surrounding region. he extent to which the library provides services to the external community varies, however, depending on its funding model and larger institution's mission. Thus, the first question is always, "What community are we talking about?"

Literature Review

Regardless of whether "community" means internal or external stakeholders (or both), what is meant by "outreach" is not always clearly defined in either the library literature or in individual library mission statements or goals (Salamon, 2016). Schneider (2003) points out that "outreach beyond the campus community is often part of the mission and obligation to the community" (p. 199) for academic libraries and combines some of the core elements of the philosophy of librarianship, such as "access to information, responsibility of the academy to the public, and creating useful partnerships" (p. 201). Yet, as Ford (2009) argues, many definitions of "outreach" in the context of libraries seem to fold in several separate functions: library promotion and marketing; general advocacy for the value and mission of libraries (such as intellectual freedom, privacy, and information access); and community-specific initiatives, services, and programs.

Furthermore, Ford (2009) states that while all of these functions should be included in the core work of the library as an organization, too often, they fall to a specific department or individual who has other core responsibilities: "we have left 'outreach' outside of the inclusive library whole to be an afterthought, a department more likely to get cut, or work function of only a few, such as your subject librarian." Additionally, just because community outreach is nominally valued by an institution or library does not mean it is materially supported. As a result, when "community outreach" becomes part of an academic library's mission or strategic plan, the individuals

tasked with carrying it out often are unclear about whom to focus on, what successful outreach initiatives look like to library management and institutional administration, and how to balance developing programs and services for the external community with serving the needs of students and faculty in terms of staffing, funding, and time.

To this end, Boff, Singer, and Stearns (2006) proposed a model that clearly delineates both the subject and the object of "community outreach" into three distinct categories: services for registered students, programs for the campus community, and "specialized outreach" to community members and groups external to the college or university. However, what form specialized outreach takes in a specific library is dependent on a few factors Schneider (2003) identified from the literature about community outreach: "whether a need is expressed from outside the academy, whether they see their mission as an invitation to pursue an action on their own accord, or whether they construct a form of outreach in response to a specific problem or crisis" (p. 201). A library's resources majorly influence its capacity for community outreach services, regardless of whether there is a mandate from the state, parent organization, or library administrators. Schneider recommends that academic libraries examine existing outreach programs (such as those from other community groups or public libraries) before embarking on their own community initiatives. If requests for programming come directly from the community, Owens and Bishop's (2018) recommendation about conducting a "reference interview" with the community member or group can be used to determine whether an academic library outreach initiative is the best solution for the needs of the individuals it would serve and whether other "creative solutions" could be used as an alternative to time-intensive efforts by academic librarians (p. 80).

There are many examples of "specialized outreach" described in the library literature. For example, Gresham and Van Tassel (2000) provide a case study for a community outreach program at the University of Colorado at Boulder targeting secondary schools for teacher workshops and on-site information literacy instruction visits by UCB librarians. Similarly, Sidorko & Yang (2011), describe a series of "community engagement" initiatives developed by the University of Hong Kong Libraries in

response to a new university strategic plan placing "a renewed emphasis on partnerships with society" (p. 386). These initiatives included projects focusing on open access to scholarship, digitization and preservation of historical and cultural heritage records and artifacts, and community borrowing programs--as well as information literacy instruction for high school students, priority hiring for community members with mental and physical disabilities, and contributing to "community lifelong learning" by supporting the university's continuing education unit.

Meaningful assessment of specialized community outreach can prove difficult for academic librarians for several reasons. Two of the main challenges in evaluating the success of outreach programs are goal-setting at the outset of planning and data collection on participant satisfaction, learning, or attendance (Salamon, 2016, p. 12). Creating measurable objectives for initiatives involving community members or groups can be difficult because so many factors are outside of the academic library's control as compared to programs developed for students or faculty. Additionally, Salamon argues that assessment of community outreach initiatives is often "heavily based on educated guesses and common sense, because we are not always able to have a reliable set of data" (p. 12). However, while assessment of community outreach programs or events may be imperfect and sometimes frustrating, it still provides opportunities for librarians to reflect on the process and community members to provide input on the initiative in question, as well as how the academic library is serving the needs of the community.

Finally, while Owens and Bishop (2018) focus on outreach to intra-university departments and programs, such as student affairs, learning communities, and student support offices, they raise important points about "closing the loop" of outreach assessment. Because outreach programs are often hit-or-miss, having a supportive environment to fail without penalty is essential: "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" (pp. 78-79). Regardless of whether a specialized outreach initiative is successful, engagement with the local or regional community can set a powerful example for students in the campus community about the role of collaboration and developing partnerships in academic citizenship.

Strategic Planning for Outreach

Annual or biannual strategic planning is an essential part of determining the return on investment of your outreach opportunities. This process should include all librarians and staff who conduct outreach, statistics on the events from previous years (if applicable), and any feedback or assessment data collected from previous events. Once these stakeholders and this information is gathered, the strategic planning can begin. There are a variety of methods available for prioritizing which outreach opportunities should be undertaken. One of these is the Impact/Effort Matrix.

The Impact/Effort Matrix appears frequently in the business literature, particularly in the Six Sigma methodology ("Impact Effort Matrix - Template & Example," n.d.). The Impact/Effort Matrix is a two-by-two grid where the X-axis represents effort (divided into low and high) and the Y-axis represents impact (divided into low and high).
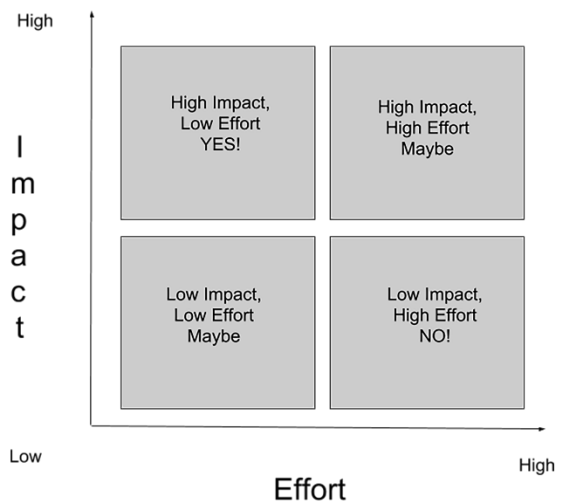

Figure 1: Impact/Effort Matrix (adapted from https://goleansixsigma.com/impact-effort-matrix/)

The Impact/Effort Matrix is a valuable tool for planning and prioritizing outreach opportunities in advance. Once the potential outreach opportunities have been plotted into a quadrant (high impact/high effort, high impact/low effort, low impact/high effort, or low impact/low effort), the planning group can determine which outreach opportunities have highest

priorities, which can be done if there is time, and which should be eliminated from consideration. Typically outreach efforts that are considered high impact/low effort should be a top priority, followed by high effort/high impact and/or low impact/low effort. Programming that is determined to be high effort/low impact should be seriously considered for discontinuation (Gibbons, 2018). This method can also be used for new outreach opportunities, but librarians must estimate the potential effort and impact.

In addition to using the Impact/Effort Matrix tool, academic libraries can analyze how community outreach initiatives fit into their larger departmental or organizational plans using frameworks from organizational development, project management, and market research contexts. One such tool, SOAR, is an organizational development framework grounded in the appreciative inquiry (AI) philosophy, which emphasizes optimism, possibility, and cooperation over competition. SOAR is similar to, and overlaps with, another strategic planning framework: SWOT. However, in contrast to the negative competitive framing of SWOT, which focuses on weaknesses, threats, and gaps, SOAR is framed positively and asks planning participants to also analyze the group's aspirations and desired results (Zaretsky & Cole, 2017).
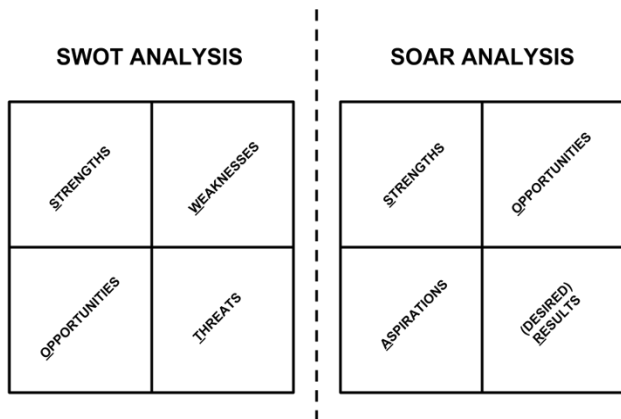

Figure 2: SWOT analysis compared to SOAR Analysis.

At UNCG Libraries, the ROI department performs many information literacy community workshops. A SWOT analysis of the UNCG Libraries ROI department as a department would likely touch on some of the negative aspects of community outreach, including the threat of burnout due to "job creep" (Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004) and the weakness of unevenly distributed outreach responsibilities among different liaison librarians. However, when we conduct a SOAR analysis of the UNCG Libraries ROI department, we find that community outreach has little connection to the best opportunities, aspirations, or desired results for a team of liaison librarians serving academic programs and departments; this leads us to conclude that in an ideal world, the majority of outreach work with external community groups would not be the best use of our strengths or our time.

Figure 3: SOAR Analysis of UNCG Libraries ROI Department.

Framework for Assessing Ongoing Outreach Opportunities

While strategic planning using an Impact/Effort Matrix or a SOAR analysis is the ideal way to allocate resources for outreach, in the real-world opportunities for outreach arise throughout the academic year. These new opportunities may be the result of existing partnerships, university strategic direction, administrative demands, or word-of-mouth. Before taking on new outreach opportunities that have not been prioritized during the planning process, serious consideration must be given to the time and human resources that would be required to take on additional outreach opportunities. These questions can help determine if a new opportunity is a good fit for the department:

- Does it align with library and/or university strategic plan?

- Is this outreach in response to a specific need in the community?
- Is it scalable?
- How much staff time will be involved in planning and executing the outreach opportunity?
- Are the staff who will be involved in this opportunity already doing other community outreach?
- How can the impact be assessed?
- Is the outreach opportunity mutually beneficial?
- How will the department know if an outreach opportunity is successful?

Does the outreach opportunity align with the library and/or university strategic plan? When considering whether or not a new opportunity for outreach is worth pursuing, one important factor is the strategic direction of the institution. If an institution is focused on the performing arts, outreach opportunities with local arts nonprofits may be a useful form of outreach. This type of outreach serves to further the mission of the parent institution, which increases the value of the department to the larger institution.

Is this outreach in response to a specific need in the community? All outreach opportunities undertaken by the department should be seeking to fill a specific need, not because a particular opportunity is easy or convenient. Also, it is important to consider if there are other institutions in the community, such as public libraries, who can provide the services needed.

Is it scalable? When considering a new outreach opportunity, librarians should consider if the programming can be reused for a different audience or repeated for the same audience at a later date. If a program can be repeated multiple times in different contexts, the amount of preparation time is greatly decreased after the first outreach event.

How much staff time will be involved in planning and executing the outreach opportunity? While community outreach is an important endeavor, it is typically outside the core mission of academic libraries. When planning a community outreach event, it is important to think realistically about the amount of person-hours that will be spent planning and executing the event. The time of year and the workload of the staff involved at that time should also be considered. For instruction/liaison librarians, the

workload is typically smaller in the summer, so that can be a good time to plan and execute outreach events. If the library is able to do strategic planning for outreach events, the planning could happen during the summer or semester breaks or when workloads are the lightest, for outreach to be carried out during the academic year.

Are the staff who will be involved in this opportunity already doing other community outreach? Along with the previous question about time, which staff members are involved is an important consideration. After a successful outreach event, word-of-mouth may cause other community members or groups to request similar events. Of course, positive buzz about the library is a desired outcome, but it can also lead to additional work. And subsequent outreach opportunities often fall to the same people if they executed a successful event. When possible, volunteers should be solicited widely from the library staff, both from public services and from other areas, so that everyone can participate.

How can the impact be assessed? Assessing impact can be difficult. Conducting a survey of participants can determine if a program was successful but determining if a program had an impact on participants is much harder to quantify. A follow-up survey several months after a program could determine if participants still remember the information learned at the outreach event, but this presents logistical challenges. If the librarians feel that the preparation and execution event were a good use of their time, and other factors are positive, the session could be considered to have a positive impact.

Is the outreach opportunity mutually beneficial? The benefits of outreach are difficult to quantify. In many cases, positive word-of-mouth is a successful outcome, in the absence of something more tangible. However, librarians should avoid taking on outreach opportunities that do not benefit the organization in some way.

How will the department know if an outreach opportunity is successful? When planning an outreach event, assessment should be part of the discussion. Determining what is considered beneficial to the organization and if an opportunity was successful is highly subjective and will differ for each outreach opportunity. Some possible measures of success could be: number of program attendees, participant surveys,

or informal feedback from participants or the cooperating organization.

Answering these questions honestly can help a department determine if an outreach opportunity is appropriate for immediate execution, if it should be discussed as part of the following year's strategic planning process, or if the department should pass on the opportunity entirely.

Case Study: Health Information Literacy Community Outreach

It's important to determine if an outreach opportunity is appropriate for an academic library research, outreach, and instruction department by applying the Impact/Effort Matrix and SOAR analysis to a specific library community workshop. UNCG Libraries performs many community outreach events and the ROI department divides librarians into subject teams. The Science Team is comprised of the Health Science Librarian, Science Liaison Librarian, and Online Learning Librarian (who serves as a liaison to Kinesiology and Public Health Education). Based on UNCG's overall Strategic Plan's Core Element focus on Health and Wellness (UNC Greensboro, 2013), the libraries' Science Team decided to plan health information literacy workshops for the Greensboro, North Carolina community.

UNCG Libraries ROI Science Team created and implemented a series of workshops on "Searching for health information on the Internet." The librarians wanted to engage community members in conversations about how they searched for their personal health information online, specifically looking at Google and MedlinePlus. The librarians wanted to ask the audience a set of questions within the workshops:

- What makes a trustworthy health website?
- How do you search for health information?
- How does Google search work?

These workshops included: explaining how Google works (algorithms, bias, and website profits); search engine optimization (SEOs); cookies and advertising incorporated into health websites; and scenarios where searching in Google is showcased versus the recommendation of the free resource MedlinePlus. Throughout the workshop, activities and conversations were incorporated.

In order to effectively reach community members, the librarians decided to use health scenarios specific to audiences. For example, the scenario used with UNCG staff is: you go to the doctor and they tell you that you are pre-diabetic, so you go home and Google "pre-diabetes". Librarians showcase the ABCD (authority, bias/balance, currency, and documentation) framework to Google search results on "pre-diabetes". Next, the librarians then lead a fluid conversation about personal health information within blogs and links found on social media. Then these scenarios are change based on the audience. For example, with the Cone Health Women's Hospital workshop for new mothers there was a discussion on companies running blogs on baby products and getting information from Facebook.

In order to supplement the health information workshops, the Science Team created and published a Springshare LibGuide, with an embedded Google Slide presentation "Finding Reliable Health Information Online", as well as links to health resources for community members. If the Internet was available, librarians also used the LibGuide to house activities and links to health-related websites for evaluation. Librarians used handouts with URLs to the LibGuide and MedlinePlus. For the Think, Pair, Share activities, librarians created handouts for participants to take home and write notes. Lastly, PDF handouts were created to advertise the workshops using Canva, using the phrasing "Where do you get your health information? Blogs? Google? Facebook? Your great aunt Betty?" This phrasing was created working with HealthyUNCG, aUNCG organization "providing UNCG employees with information, programs, and services that help to promote a happy, healthier lifestyle and a better quality of life" (Healthy UNCG, n.d., para. 1). Overall there have been 6 health information literacy workshops with a total audience of around 30 people, in collaboration with health programming at UNCG, a city hospital system, a local church, and library staff. The audiences have been adults, with some focused on new mothers, UNCG staff members, and senior citizens.

There are challenges when executing community workshops, including environments, audience, and staff time. Since many of these workshops are performed out in the community, there is often a lack of a projector or even Internet access to perform topic searching. This means that workshops must be adjusted to different rooms and environments, making them more conversation-based. There is rarely an opportunity to perform pre-assessment, so the experience level of the audience is unknown. Post-assessment is also a challenge due to lack of time and devices. Future plans include creating more paper assessments for audience members to fill out as they are leaving. Some audience members might have extensive experience with Internet searching and health literacy concepts, while others have little to no experience using search engines such as Google. And lastly, finding staff time to plan and execute these

When thinking about librarians working with the community, there are many elements: planning events, creation of promotion materials, communicating and working with outside partners, and challenges of working with the community. Applying a framework to a specific community outreach event (such as the one discussed above) can be helpful when developing and executing specific outreach events in a university setting. Implementing the framework questions can be performed either at the beginning of the planning process when trying to decide if an outreach opportunity should be undertaken, or during the planning process to determine the feasibility of specific ideas or strategies.

Does it align with library and/or university strategic plan? Health literacy for the local community exists at the nexus of two Areas of Focus in the current UNC Greensboro strategic plan: Health and Wellness

Figure 4: UNCG Libraries LibGuide on "Finding Health Information"; http://uncg.libguides.com/healthinfo

workshops is hard since some of the workshops are off campus and outside of the hours in a typical workday. Using a SOAR analysis to confront these challenges can be helpful.

Looking at the UNCG Libraries ROI Health Literacy Case Study Through a Framework Lens:

and Vibrant Communities (UNC Greensboro, 2013). "Searching for health information on the Internet" allows librarians to use their expertise in health science information to benefit both UNCG employees and the larger Greensboro community.

Is this outreach in response to a specific need in the community? According to the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), only 12% of

Americans surveyed were proficient in health literacy, and 35% had a basic or below basic proficiency (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). According to the Health Literacy Data Map from UNC Chapel Hill, the highest ranking census block in Guilford County has 15% of adults scoring at basic or below basic proficiency and the majority of Guilford County is far lower (2014). So health literacy is an issue for not just Guilford County, but also the entire United States.

Is it scalable? As the case study indicates, once the session was planned and the materials created, the librarians were able to substitute different health topics that were relevant for different audiences.

How much staff time will be involved in planning and executing the outreach opportunity? As mentioned in the case study challenges, significant time was spent planning and executing the health literacy workshops with the community.   The two health science librarians who planned and executed these workshops did not track the workshop planning time, though the instruction sessions were tracked. Moving forward, tracking time of planning will help to determine if these workshops should be adjusted or continued with another information literacy theme. Some workshops did take place on campus with UNCG staff, while others were off campus at a church and at a local hospital, and taking into account travel time will be important for future community workshops.

Are the staff who will be involved in this opportunity already doing other community outreach? At the time of the outreach, neither of the librarians involved were involved in other community outreach.

How can the impact be assessed? While no formal assessment of this outreach opportunity occurred, possibilities exist for assessing impact. Librarians could administer a survey to assess attendee satisfaction. They could also look at the page views for the LibGuides used in the session to see if participants are visiting the guide after the session is over.

Is the outreach opportunity mutually beneficial? This community outreach was mutually beneficial because the librarians were able to provide relevant programming to community groups that supported the strategic plan of the university.

How will the department know if an outreach opportunity is successful? This outreach opportunity could be considered successful by the department if the feedback from participants is positive or if the librarians are asked to present in another venue.

Conclusion

Community outreach can be a worthwhile endeavor for an academic library, but it is important to balance these outreach opportunities with the core mission of the department and institution. Luckily, tools such as the Impact/Effort Matrix and the SOAR analysis exist to help an academic library plan their outreach events strategically in advance. Additionally, the framework discussed in this article may be used to assess the viability of outreach attempts that arise throughout the year. Outreach opportunities such as the Health Literacy workshops undertaken by the Science Team at UNC Greensboro provide an excellent example of an outreach opportunity that allowed librarians to use their expertise to support the institutional strategic plan and benefit the community.

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2018; Shapiro, 2016). At the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, each and every department is committed to promoting diversity and inclusion in one way or another. The Libraries can serve the campus community by partnering with individual departments to offer and support programs and initiatives in line with these efforts, thus easing the burden to many. The program ideas presented in these proceedings are only a few ways librarians can reach out to the campus community to support international/ intercultural ideas. However, the most crucial point is that it is up to librarians to reach out to departments and offer them what they need rather than asking them what they want. From these experiences, UT librarians have learned to research what colleagues in other academic departments are doing and learn where they are coming from before making offers of help and collaboration.

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