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Social Media Outreach: How the Ernest J. Gaines Center Explores New Platforms

Derek T. Mosley

The Ernest J. Gaines Center at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (UL Lafayette) is an international center for scholarship on Ernest Gaines and his work. The center honors the work of UL Lafayette's Writer-in-Residence Emeritus and provides a space for scholars and students to work with the Gaines papers and manuscripts. Born in 1933 on a plantation near New Roads, Louisiana, Gaines based his award-winning novels on the African American experience in the rural South. His works include *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, both later produced as award-winning films. Having a great research collection is a start, but it is important to attract patrons that will utilize these important resources. As a new and growing research center, the Ernest J. Gaines Center presents and introduces itself using social media platforms such as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/ErnestGainesCenter>) and Twitter (@Gaines_Center). The results of this type of outreach have been positive and very easy to continue.

It is very easy to become lost in the maze of special collections and the library. The Ernest J. Gaines Center saw that creating an online presence should be the first step in promoting the mission of the center. A limited budget and small staff meant using free technology to enhance and broaden the effective outreach of the center. Having an online presence has not only saved money but it has brought the voice of the patron to the archivist and director. Utilizing social media brings voices from the surrounding area and an international perspective to the center. The mission of the Ernest J. Gaines Center is to foster research and scholarship on the life and works of Dr. Gaines, to archive, house, preserve, protect and utilize the "Collection of Ernest J. Gaines," and to make the collection available to scholars in perpetuity. New media platforms have enabled the center to fulfill and enhance their initial mission. These platforms create an inviting effect for the center in a way that archives sometime do not come across.

The biggest audiences that the center seeks to provide research services to are students. Debates are now emerging about the social and learning benefits of social media technologies on the traditional undergraduate student experience and how it shapes their learning experience. Emerging research seeks to understand how the use of Web 2.0 technology, particularly social media, is enhancing academic and social engagement. Examination of these issues will ultimately lead to greater understanding of how colleges and universities can utilize these technologies responsibly, ethically, and for the enhancement of student learning. A very effective way to promote the archives is to understand the student demographics and the surrounding community. The next step is to pinpoint the flow and objective of your online outreach.

Student employee participation is an effective strategy to attract other students. The Ernest J. Gaines Center spoke with our student employees and asked them to join and promote the center on our social media platforms. The students were then asked to share the information with their social media network. Another way to engage the student population is to let them preview and critique the social media posts before making them live. Students know how to target other students and come up with ideas that the staff would have never thought of. They also are able to add content that they feel will interest a diverse user population. The student voice has been very important to promoting the Gaines Center due to their advance knowledge and experience with

these platforms. They also have the ability to change layouts and make the pages more appealing to their peers. By promoting the center to fellow students, as well as finding interesting artifacts in the collection to highlight, our student employees help promote and encourage the mission of the center.

The Gaines Center's social media platforms are used as advertising space to promote programming. Every event is posted and sent out to a worldwide audience. The events are enhanced with quotes, and photographs that relate to the event posted on the various social media platforms. For example, the center hosts a monthly movie series. Leading up to the movie presentation, unique and related materials are posted to show the relationship between the movie and Ernest Gaines. This has created dialogue and discussion that helps to bring people to the events. Games, trivia and polls can be created on Facebook and these tools have also helped spur dialogue. The polls are also a great way to see what type of events the patrons would be interested in for future planning.

The surprising result of this outreach has been the local community response. The Gaines Center easily draws students to the events on campus, but the social media presence has drawn community members with no ties to the university. These community members would have not known about the events if not for the social media presence. For a recent movie screening in the Gaines Center, we posted a few facts about the original release of the film. The community users of our social media pages posted about the original perception of the film and the reaction when it was release. This type of discussion is a great way to teach the students about the history of the film and help the community feel compelled to attend. In the future the Gaines Center will work on streaming events through social media networks. Every week Facebook sends an email with insights from the page to the owner of the account. Administrators of the Facebook page can log into the account and see a week by week chart of how your page is being viewed and whether people are talking about it. It also shows if friends of the people viewing your page are also getting information. These valuable statistics and data help provide evidence of which social media networking efforts are working.

University wide social media pages have also added to the success of the outreach in the Gaines Center. The University of Louisiana at Lafayette has a large social media presence and they help other university pages promote themselves. Various colleges, student groups, alumni chapters and departments around the university have social media pages to promote themselves. The center uses these university pages and asks that they repost items and encourage their users to visit our pages. It has created a shared network of social media pages that all relate to UL Lafayette. By utilizing this broad audience base, the Gaines Center has been able to bring in a wide pool of visitors. This help has been vital for the promotion of the Gaines Center. Collaboration is imperative for an effective online social media presence. Contacting other repositories in the area or ones that have similar research focuses can help researchers know where to search for information and can provide the foundation for joint events and projects.

One of the most important rules for having an effective presence online is to be dedicated. The Gaines Center updates its online presence 2-3 times per week. Once you start using social media platforms you have to have a continual online presence to promote your repository. It can be very easy to forget to maintain your social media pages and your presence becomes outdated. Visitors are highly mobile and your information must be current in order to promote and showcase your collection and repositories mission. Patrons will visit seeking up to date information and may never understand the great research and cultural opportunities if the page has not been updated.

Thinking outside of the box can attract a diverse user population. Social media platforms are very

easy to use and everyone in the repository can participate and bring their perspectives to the site. These sites can also aid in website integration and content development. Social media may be used as the official online presence for smaller repositories. It can be more efficient than maintaining and updating a full website. The advent of social media technology offers possibilities for dramatic shifts in the delivery and accessibility of archival collections. As archivists, we have an obligation to study how our user population utilizes such technology. As we understand the use, we can develop practices that will assist us in continuing to achieve effective outreach.

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