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Tips from the Experts

Curiosity as Outreach: Flipping Outreach on its Head

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Abstract

Science and Engineering Library staff at the University of Massachusetts Amherst visited several sites on campus in a novel outreach initiative that involved all nine staff members taking "field trips" without agendas. We demonstrate that outreach without the explicit goal of promoting a specific resource or service can be an effective use of time, and can build social capital that shares the goals of traditional outreach. Involving all staff in this outreach effort was a valuable

team building experience, exposing the depth of our interests and expertise to each other and to our campus community.

Introduction

Curiosity is an element of librarianship that is defined by Kathleen M. Fisher as "a relentless inquisitiveness about the world around and beyond us, a continual scrutiny and questioning of experience" ([Fisher 2000](#)). As librarians we take the role of helping people find information to satisfy some curiosity. In reference interviews we probe and ask clarifying questions, trying to extract details about a project, inquiry, or line of thought. We also make connections between people, resources, and services. We are curious in nature and honor that curiosity in others by our daily professional service.

Outreach in libraries is typically about offering our various services to others. In an organic moment, we turned that model on its head and let curiosity be our guide for outreach. Our curiosity-as-outreach initiative began when one librarian went exploring to track down a title on permanent loan to the Herbarium. From there, conversations often took the form of "you should visit" and quickly evolved to "we should visit" and finally "let's all visit." The group expanded to include all staff that work in the Science & Engineering Library. With whiteboard at hand, we created a list of "field trip" destinations, and our curiosity map took form. We visited people, places, and services on campus and asked: what do you do, how do you do it, and why do you do it? We let people tell their story, all with the idea of learning about them and what they do.

Literature Review

Outreach is an integral part of public services and plays an increasingly important role as libraries evolve in response to socioeconomic and technological influences. As early as 2001, outreach was articulated as a core component of the liaison role by the Reference and User Services Association; and more recently the Association of College and Research Libraries presented an outward-looking liaison model focused on engagement ([Jaguszewski & Williams 2013](#); [Silver & Trott 2014](#)). As Forbes and Keeran ([2017](#)) state, "the purpose of outreach is to 'reach out' to a library's clientele to actively educate them about the services a library may offer as opposed to passively waiting for them to come to the library." Outreach is critical to librarianship; it educates communities about the services and resources their library provides, it plays an important role in establishing and maintaining relationships, and it demonstrates the enduring value of the library.

What constitutes outreach is less straightforward, and definitions can vary from library to library ([German & LeMire 2018](#)). Initiatives can range from book clubs and film screenings, to curated exhibits and digital collections, to bookmobiles, computer literacy classes, yoga classes, story-times, and more. Handbooks such as Carol Smallwood's ([2010](#)) *Librarians as Community Partners*, Bradford Eden's ([2016](#)) *Marketing and Outreach for the Academic Library*, or Ryan Sittler and Terra Rogerson's ([2018](#)) *The Library Outreach Casebook* present a dizzying array of possibilities.

In academic libraries, outreach as part of the liaison role is often focused on teaching and research support. Liaison librarians promote their skills and services for providing information literacy instruction, performing collection development, and supporting the curriculum; liaisons participate in new student and new faculty orientations, serve on university and faculty committees, provide training for graduate student teaching assistants, or are embedded in departments ([Anthony 2010](#)). More involved outreach that is undertaken by liaisons or by

dedicated outreach librarians includes planning workshops on a variety of topics, hosting events such as book talks, lecture series, or scavenger hunts, creating exhibits, and developing programs that showcase the library's collections or services ([Fabian et al. 2003](); [Meyer 2014]()).

In science and engineering libraries, outreach activities fall along the same lines. The Science & Technology branch library at the University of Akron curated a permanent exhibit of science faculty journal covers to reconnect faculty with the physical branch ([McCullough 2015]()). The Zuckerman San Francisco General Hospital Library created an interactive display during two local events to promote awareness of library services ([Barr-Walker & Nevels 2018]()). The University of Tennessee John C. Hodges Library developed outreach programs for secondary-school students to expose them to science in the university setting ([Flash et al. 2017]()). A librarian at the Science and Engineering Information Center of the University at Buffalo utilizes a combination of one-on-one faculty lunches and on-site reference service to answer questions about library resources and increase visibility ([Wagner 2015]()). Other science and engineering liaisons employ various face-to-face efforts to champion library services to traditionally hard-to-reach graduate students and research groups ([MacKenzie 2014]()).

In the broad sweep of these engagements, the librarian always carries the purpose of "reaffirm[ing] the importance of their services, proactively promot[ing] the use of their services, and demonstrably involv[ing] themselves in the institution's missions of teaching and research" ([Anthony 2010]()). This means that when we do 'outreach' across disciplines we typically approach each interaction with an agenda. Emily Ford regrets front-loading the outreach endeavor, suggesting instead that "we have the ability to be in our communities, to engage them and offer specific targeted services" ([Ford 2009]()).

Curiosity, by definition, does not have an agenda. It is an inquisitiveness about the world that invites learning through exploration and asking questions. Curiosity is fundamental to the higher education experience and enables the development of a rich intellectual life ([Fisher 2000]()). Curiosity has been presented as a natural characteristic of librarians ([Smith 2018]()). Librarians discuss leveraging curiosity as a tool for information literacy instruction and modelling curiosity during reference and research consultations ([Deitering & Rempel 2017]()). Only Smith makes an explicit connection between curiosity and outreach, encouraging librarians to demonstrate their range of expertise beyond information literacy and library resources. Her discussion focuses on various classroom collaborations that stem from the librarian's natural curiosity and cultivated amateurship as a way of modeling scholarly inquisitiveness to students ([Smith 2018]()).

We present an approach to outreach that broadens Smith's account. Starting from a posture of unencumbered curiosity, we demonstrate that outreach without the explicit goal of promoting a specific resource or service can be an effective use of a liaison's time, and build social capital that shares the traditional objectives of outreach.

Methods

The University of Massachusetts at Amherst is a 1,450-acre campus located in rural Western Massachusetts. Established in 1863 as the land-grant Massachusetts Agricultural College (Mass Aggie), the University evolved into an R level research institution with approximately 20,000 undergraduates and 7,000 graduate students. The Science & Engineering Library (SEL) is the only branch library, situated on the north end of the campus near the science and engineering laboratories and classrooms. Approximately one half of the faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students on campus are in departments and programs supported by SEL, which employs five librarians and four full-time staff.

Our methods evolved after one of our colleagues visited the Herbarium on campus to resolve a library collections question. Interest in seeing the collection generated enthusiasm for an all-staff tour, which was requested and enjoyed by all who were able to attend. After that initial experience, a casual lunchtime conversation between staff generated a list of 15 additional, little-known campus locations. Brainstorming continued informally, and a whiteboard was used to record potential destinations. Due to a small staff at our branch, the lines between professional librarian and service point staff often overlap and an all-hands-on-deck philosophy is common. All staff members were invited to set up field trips and participate in visits. Staff with long time connections to the campus leveraged well-established relationships to add value to the destination list.

Once the list of destinations was created, a protocol was quickly established:

- Staff members volunteered to take point to set up tours of each of the sites. They contacted people they knew, or made cold calls to contacts in person or through email to set up tours for the nine-person staff.
- The point person checked schedules of staff and tour guides to determine dates and times for each tour. Timing of tours was limited to two a month during the academic year, with more frequent visits possible during the summer months. The calendaring system in use by the Libraries allows us to view all staff members' availability. This facilitated scheduling of SEL staff. Accommodating the schedules of as many staff members as possible was prioritized. A calendar invitation was sent to all staff members and the tour guide(s).
- Small gifts (library logo coffee/tea mugs) and University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries thank-you cards were procured and prepared before each tour. All staff attending each tour signed the thank-you cards.
- On visiting day, the point person led the library staff to the tour location at the scheduled time. Introductions were made at the beginning of each tour. Library gifts and thank-you notes were given to the tour guides. We provided a brief overview of our curiosity initiative, and obtained consent to take photos. Staff listened, learned, took photos, and made connections with tour guides in this person-to-person setting.
- Post-tour, follow up thank-you emails were sent. Photos were stored in a campus online digital storage location and shared with our hosts after interest was expressed in use for their own outreach.

Results and Discussion

SEL staff have so far visited eight science research locations on campus that sparked our curiosity:

Table 1: Sites visited during the initial months of the University of Massachusetts Amherst Science & Engineering Library curiosity initiative.

Location	Description	Date
Institute for Applied Life Sciences https://www.umass.edu/ials/	Multiple core facilities translate fundamental research into innovative product candidates, technologies, and services that deliver benefits to human health and well-being.	2019-2-22
Herbarium https://www.bio.umass.edu/biology/facilities/herbarium	Regional resource with roughly 241,300 mounted vascular plants, algae and bryophytes as well as a fruit and seed collection. Currently undergoing digitization for inclusion in online catalogs.	2019-2-26
North Chiller Plant https://www.umass.edu/dcm/chiller-plant-upgrades	Provides consistent uninterruptible chilled water to several research buildings. In addition to providing a critical service, the 2017 building is LEED-certified and an engineering infrastructure demonstration site.	2019-3-28
Glassblowing Laboratory https://www.cns.umass.edu/research/glassblowing	A core facility providing high-quality affordable priced standard and non–standard labware, glassware modifications, repairs and custom designs for instructional and research needs.	2019-4-5
Human Performance Lab http://www.ecs.umass.edu/hpl/	Researches automobile driver behavior and driver safety using driving simulators and equipment such as eye trackers, head trackers, and portable camera systems.	2019-5-5
TickReport Lab https://www.tickreport.com/	A tick testing service available to public individuals and agencies determining whether or not found ticks carry the pathogens that cause Lyme Disease and more than twenty other tick-borne diseases.	2019-7-11
Franklin Permaculture Garden https://www.localumass.com/franklin.html	Engages visitors to learn about organic food production, rainwater harvesting, solar charging stations, beekeeping, mushroom cultivation, and more.	2019-7-24
Soil and Plant Nutrient Testing Laboratory https://ag.umass.edu/services/soil-plant-nutrient-testing-laboratory	A soil and plant nutrient testing service available to public individuals and agencies. Test results identify soil nutrient levels, soil pH, excess nutrients that can pollute local waterways, and elevated levels of lead or other toxic heavy metals.	2019-7-31

In the wake of these visits, we found that we have been able to fulfill some of the needs described to us, and often in mutually beneficial ways. At a minimum, every visit resulted in a positive new connection with a researcher and new campus knowledge for liaisons and service point staff. In addition to gaining knowledge for ourselves, we are better able to promote and describe any services provided by the researchers to patrons and fellow staff at the library. This social capital is a valuable benefit to many groups we visited, as they provide a cost-recovery service to the campus community or to the public, and rely on use of the service to fund the work. In addition, the majority of our tours sparked tangible benefits for both researchers and library staff:

Institute for Applied Life Sciences

A strong partnership and mutually beneficial event grew from our very first visit. The Institute for Applied Life Sciences (IALS) will exhibit materials produced by and photos of their core facilities in SEL in spring of 2020. SEL will gain an amazing spring exhibit and IALS will promote the capabilities and services of their core facilities to the campus community.

Herbarium

During our visit, Herbarium staff mentioned a need for a summer intern, as they had many projects over the summer that would benefit from an intern's time and attention including a digitization project. This seemed a good fit for an archives-track library student, and we were able to advise on posting a position to the local library school job board. Shortly thereafter, the life science liaison was serendipitously put in touch with a biology and classics student from another campus, who was in search of a summer internship that would be good experience for their current interests as well as future plans to pursue a library degree. The Herbarium gained a summer intern to continue their collection digitization project into an Open Access repository of Herbaria (see Figure 1). The librarians involved at both campuses were able to facilitate student success and improvement of the accessibility of the Herbarium's collection.

Figure 1: Photograph of one of the many pressed flowers from the Herbarium's collection that are being digitized.

North Chiller Plant

We were delighted by the concept of a working facility deliberately designed with a "visual learning" element to engage and assist mechanical engineering students in learning about the real-life infrastructure around them. This concept of incorporating learning opportunities into the functioning of the academy is something we hope to bring into our own practice.

Glassblowing Laboratory

We are able to accurately describe this service for researchers on campus. This is particularly useful for the chemistry and chemical engineering liaisons. Ideally, increased use of this service will allow our campus to fund an assistant or second full-time glass blower, which would enable the glass blower to teach a glassblowing course for graduate students (see Figure 2).
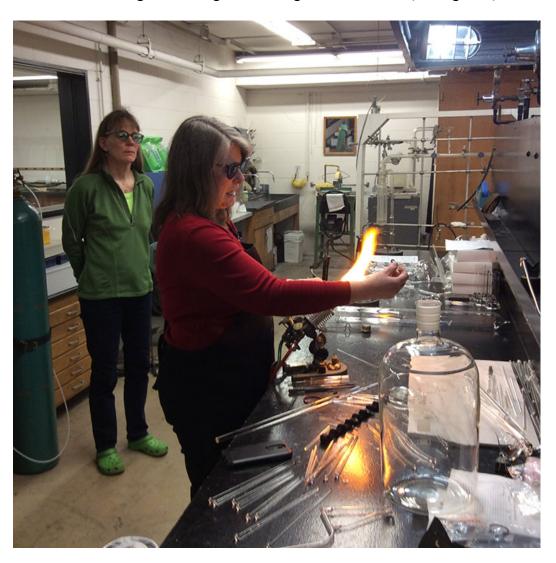

Figure 2: A demonstration of glassblowing by Sally Pratsch at the Glass Lab.

Human Performance Lab

The Human Performance Lab gained a volunteer on the spot for a study one of us qualified for, and we now post their "volunteers needed" flyers in the library. Our staff person was intrigued to be involved in their research, and we are actively supporting research on campus. In addition, the PI later invited the Engineering liaison to teach a graduate-level research methods class.

TickReport Lab

Two of our staff have already made use of the service, and found peace of mind in pursuing their love of hiking. We found the research conducted in this lab to be a natural expansion of the information and resources provided by the Mass Aggie Seed Library, a program offered by SEL, and we actively promote their service to those interested in gardening. A recent seed librarians' symposium at SEL boosted the signal of this service yet further, as seed librarians brought pamphlets back to their home libraries.

Franklin Permaculture Garden

Our visit to the Franklin Permaculture Garden may result in our most impactful partnership yet. Our host, the head of permaculture gardening on campus (see Figure 3), stated a goal of converting underutilized, high-maintenance monoculture lawns on campus to productive permaculture gardens. We suggested the lawns in front of our building as a prime candidate. We have submitted a joint proposal to the facilities group in charge of the grounds. We have hopes that our proposal will be accepted and the work can be carried out by the Permaculture undergraduate class taught by our host in fall semester 2019. Not only do we gain a lovely and productive permaculture garden, but we put into practice the North Chiller Plant-inspired idea of supporting learning with real-life applications.

Figure 3: Tour of the Franklin Permaculture Garden led by Daniel Bensonoff.

The soil and plant testing services of this lab are another natural fit with the Mass Aggie Seed Library. We have been actively promoting the service, and are able to speak knowledgeably about it. Fellow seed librarians agree, and took resources on this service back to their home libraries as well.

Our explorations have resulted in eclectic new pockets of knowledge for our service point as a whole, and helped us build diverse and impactful partnerships. Of course, as with any outreach activity, there are costs and challenges. One third of researchers approached did not respond to cold calls or emails. Scheduling the visit takes the time of a librarian or staff person: consulting and coordinating nine calendars is not simple. For each visit we committed an hour of up to nine people's time. One of our particular challenges is that as a branch library, SEL must be staffed at all times. Service-point staff or librarians who must stay behind to ensure coverage miss out not only on the tour itself but on a relationship-building exercise with our colleagues.

Conclusion

Many outreach efforts are based around either a "Look what we can do for you" or the more open-ended "What can we do for you?" models. Even in more traditional face-to-face interactions such as new faculty welcome events, a librarian's outreach goal is to educate on library resources and services. Our curiosity-as-outreach initiative, premised on asking "What do you do?", allowed for a more organic and extended interaction in which learning about the day-to-day operations, upcoming projects, and overall goals of our hosts surfaced ongoing or upcoming needs of the researchers. We did not always have an immediate solution for these needs, but we are librarians. We make connections, organize information, and share it with our patrons.

Our novel outreach initiative has been a resounding success. Tapping into the curiosity that makes us good librarians—asking questions, learning about new things and meeting new people—has been rewarding and engaging. The visits enliven us and excite us as we learn about tools and resources our hosts use. We feed on the interactions and they make us even more curious!

We believe the relationships we build through our field trips generate a return on investment that is worth the time it takes for planning and attending them. Although we are taking an hour of several staff members' time at once, the total number of hours for these visits is comparable to the time spent in planning, preparing, and executing many of the more traditional types of outreach events. Since we are the attendees for these events, our time is not idle, and there is no wasted investment in food or beverages. We have already connected researchers to test subjects, matched an eager student with a group that needed some assistance for the summer, and provided a newer institute on campus with the opportunity to share and educate those who visit our branch library.

In addition to exploring eight science research locations on campus, we have used this project to develop new and deeper relationships within our library system. Members of our Scholarly Communications unit joined us for the tour of the Institute for Applied Life Sciences. We visited the basement of our main library, learning from our colleagues about science-related materials that are stored there. An anthropology professor who has partnered with the library for several years of ethnographic research joined us on tours of two off-site storage locations shared by the Five College Consortium (University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst College, Hampshire

College, Mount Holyoke College, and Smith College). The original facility is located in a former Strategic Air Command Bunker and the newer facility was completed in 2017.

We intend to continue letting our curiosity guide us to learn about and explore our campus. We have made lasting connections and have built evidence that being curious is an effective way to 'reach out' to our communities. We encourage you to unleash your own curiosity and begin your own fun and rewarding outreach experience. You do not need to choose science-related locations like those we focused on: look for places or events around your campus that spark your curiosity, or take the opportunity to learn about the interests of your faculty.

Acknowledgements

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