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Fishing for Followers: Putting Students in Charge of Library Outreach

Sarah Parramore

Jonathan Cornforth

Joy Lambert

Michael DeMars

FISHING FOR FOLLOWERS: PUTTING STUDENTS IN CHARGE OF LIBRARY OUTREACH

SARAH PARRAMORE, JONATHAN CORNFORTH, JOY LAMBERT AND MICHAEL DEMARS

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to make a university education more accessible, the California State University (CSU) has created the Graduation Initiative 2025. The goal of this initiative is to eliminate all equity gaps for underrepresented students and raise graduation rates for all students by 2025 (CSU, n.d.). California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) is one of 23 campuses in the CSU system. With an enrollment of almost 40,000 students in Fall 2018, it is also one of the largest. Located in Orange County, CSUF serves a diverse student population and offers 55 undergraduate and 55 graduate programs (CSUF, 2019a).

CSUF's contribution to the Graduation Initiative 2025 was to create and fund Innovation Grants (CSUF, 2019b). The authors will share their experiences of using an Innovation Grant to pilot a new outreach program at Pollak Library with student ambassadors at the helm. Included will be their challenges, successes, tools utilized, and the learning opportunities that arose for librarians and student ambassadors alike.

PURPOSE

This program, Student Outreach to Students (SOS), was funded by an Innovation Grant with the idea to let student ambassadors take the reins of library outreach. There were three main purposes of the program: to foster the leadership skills of library ambassadors; raise student awareness of services available to them through Pollak Library and partners; and work in collaboration with Information Desk students, called the Pollak Library Peers, to make a special effort to reach first-year students.

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment started with current student employees already working in the library. Coincidentally, SOS began around the same time as regular hiring for fall semester, so librarians were able to sit in on group interviews of potential new student employees as well. Initially intending to hire four students, there were five standouts at the interviews, so the five of them were hired as the first SOS Pollak Library Ambassadors.

ORGANIZATION

At the outset, a central goal of the overall program was to create a High Impact Practice (HIP) for the students. This required setting high expectations and taking a "hands off" approach as supervisors to allow for independent thought and work, while still holding them accountable for their work.

Each student ambassador was allocated 40 hours per semester. They were expected to work five hours each week for eight weeks mid-semester, as it was thought students would be most receptive to outreach efforts at that time. Main responsibilities included creating content for social media channels, conducting in-person outreach, and collaborating with Pollak Library Peers to connect with first-year students.

CHALLENGES

Initially, it was a challenge to maintain high expectations. Without guidance, team members could not adequately structure, delegate, and prioritize their work. Also, despite a general vision for the team, many of the expected results were unclear and not carried through to completion. Indeed, in an effort to maintain the balance between being “hands off” as advisors and supporting their needs, answering questions, and following up on challenges or lack of communication, librarians realized that better structure and continuous feedback were lacking.

Furthermore, there were no concrete repercussions in place to hold students accountable. This ultimately led to a dip in productivity in some areas. Work they enjoyed, were knowledgeable on, and could confidently complete—such as creating Instagram posts—were very successful in the initial phase. In other areas, such as creating graphics and doing in-person outreach, expectation levels were rarely met.

In addition, external factors impacted the team’s productivity to some degree. Access to tools and other resources were limited at first, due to the fact that relinquishing control of professional accounts to students was a concern to some librarians. Following necessary and in-depth training and onboarding procedures is essential to a project of this nature.

Finally, the amount of hours allocated to each student impacted their ability to meet all of their goals. Instead of working the expected five hours per week, in actuality, they did not follow these instructions and worked in a more random fashion. Some students signed in at different times, forgot to sign in at all, and/or worked fewer than five hours some weeks. All of these factors made scheduling difficult and even non-existent.

CHANGES

These challenges were a learning experience and opportunity to create some structural changes. It was evident that the current methods were not producing the anticipated results.

Tools

Initially, the use of software tools to aid in the creation of deliverables and communication were merely suggested. Later, the implementation of specific tools to aid in work productivity, accountability, and communication were a required part of the job. After implementation of this change, a clear agenda of upcoming posts and projects were visible to all SOS members and librarians, ensuring everyone was on the same page. The specific types of tools are addressed later in this article.

Accountability

Although the goal was to have this program be one that was student-led, giving too much freedom and flexibility wasn’t really working. Thus clearer guidelines and structure were created. Initially, students were asked to find time in their schedules and complete SOS work at some point during the week. A new change was to identify set hours during the week and stick to that schedule, with an additional hour given at the end of the project for small miscellaneous items that occur during off hours (e.g., posting to Instagram). They were asked to identify a common hour per week so they could meet together in person and delegate responsibilities. Also, the students were now required to email after a shift and explain the work completed during the shift.

Personnel

Two of the five students were significantly underperforming. These students logged fewer hours than the other three and their contributions weren’t very clear. Both students were given ample time to correct their productivity and take advantage of their work hours, and after failing to follow through, it was decided best to let them move on to other pursuits. They were replaced with one student, a journalism major with experience in video editing and production but, equally important, a highly enthusiastic attitude with strong communication skills.

TOOLS

Slack

According to its website, Slack is a “collaboration hub for work” (Slack, n.d.). An important feature are its channels, which house group conversations on projects, topics, and themes that relate to the work being done. For example, the SOS team has a #general channel where conversations happen that are relevant to everyone involved. In contrast, there are specific channels, such

as #onboarding, used to orient new team members. Slack also offers a search tool and the ability to upload materials in various formats for sharing purposes.

Trello

Trello is a powerful, though deceptively simple, task management tool. It uses “intuitively simple boards, lists, and cards” (Trello, n.d.) to help individuals and groups organize and prioritize work, stay on task, and be held accountable. Team members are invited to work within boards on various cards that can be expanded with additional details and commentary. This tool proved very useful as the need to check in and hold students accountable. Team members can see at what stage a particular project, such as a contest, video, or graphic, has moved from staging ground to going live by simply moving the card to a different location on the board.

Canva

Canva allows users to create and collaborate on graphics amongst a range of formats. The “Canva for Work” pricing level has proven to serve the purposes of the outreach team, as it allows them to produce signage, labels, announcements, and other visual content. This particular service tier allows for easy sharing, resizing, and formatting.

Adobe

While editing within Canva is more than adequate to fulfill most purposes, advanced processes required more extensive access and use of additional software. This includes Adobe products, specifically Premiere and Photoshop. The video editing and production capabilities enabled intermediate-advanced skilled student employees to create high-quality videos and images.

Instagram

The mobile social media application Instagram is a high-traffic platform used and preferred by students on campus. The SOS team focuses primarily on this communication tool as a result. They produce “Stories” and other posts on library events (both upcoming and in real time), make announcements, hold contests, and generally engage followers with information about the library and its partners.

Figure 1: Graph of preferred social media from 2019 survey
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Linktree

One limitation of Instagram is the inability to readily provide links. One viable workaround is to use Linktree, which places links in the profile (or “bio”) of the account. Followers will then see options to link out. As an example, SOS included one that led to a campus-wide survey.

DELIVERABLES

In addition to social media efforts, the SOS team performed in-person outreach as well. An increasingly popular method on campus involves use of a wagon to pull giveaways, such as candy, scantrons, swag, and other materials. Based on how the student governing body “wagoned,” the SOS team selected particular dates and times, such as orientation fairs or mid-terms.

During this form of outreach, students were incentivized to follow the library’s Instagram account. Moreover, they held several contests that promoted the library, including new student-centered spaces, services, partners, and other programming activities. Contest rules often required students to become followers on social media, or comment on posts. Eventually they were able to poll followers and gain feedback as well.

Another deliverable came in the form of digital librarian “trading cards.” Designed using Photoshop, these contained personalized “powers” and “stats,” and were very popular on Instagram.

Finally, they held an in-person social event, a video game night that was promoted through social media and other means. At this event, a Pollak Library Peer ambassador taught a brief workshop on “surviving finals at the library.”

SUCSESSES

Specific indicators were used to determine if the team succeeded at achieving goals related to the library's social media presence, specifically Instagram, and participated in a meaningful HIP. As indicated by the following measures, not only did they achieve a sizeable increase in followers, they also helped spread awareness of the library and partners, and gained transferable career related skills throughout an overall positive experience.

Size of Followers

One of the projected measures of success was growth in Instagram followers by 30%. As a result of this project, the number of followers has increased significantly. Through SOS Ambassador efforts, the actual growth is more than 100%, exceeding expectations.

Survey Results

A student survey was sent out to gauge awareness of library partner services the SOS Ambassadors were tasked with promoting. Familiarity in the services of the Writing Center grew from 3% to 71%, and more than 50% of students surveyed were aware of the cultural and diversity centers.

High Impact Practice

An essential part of this project was providing an HIP to the students. Despite the initial challenges as indicated above, they were given a significant amount of responsibility and independence to complete their work, both as individuals and as a team. The quality of their experience is indicated in the interview questions and responses provided here.

Reflection Questions and Responses

Modeled after the Iowa GROW (Guided Reflection on Work), which is a tool used to help students make connections between work and classroom, a five question anonymous reflection survey was sent to the students. Here is a sampling of results:

What have you learned in your experiences as an SOS Library Ambassador?

"Through my outreach to other students I have not only helped students get better acquainted with the library but I also learned about the various programs and resources the library has to offer. The library is so much more than a study space and this program helped me see that. I developed a stronger sense of time management and better communication skills. I learned how to positively promote services by doing creative outreach."

How can you apply what you've learned to your future career?

"I have more knowledge in public relations, in networking, and social media. With this being said, I can use the work I did for SOS to create surveys in the future and to communicate better with the public and the audience I am specifically targeting."

What were some successes you encountered along the way?

"We networked with library partners. We got the official school account to follow us. We more than doubled our following by breaking 1,001 followers. We provided resources to students and highlighted the librarians that are here to serve students. We also started a Linktree to help students find more resources."

What were some challenges you encountered along the way?

"Some challenges encountered while an SOS ambassador consisted of the different time frames my coworkers had compared to me. However, we worked out days to meet up and it turned out well."

If the SOS program continues, what advice would you give the next cohort?

"Be proud of representing the library and make time to go to the events offered, even if it's to take pictures. Most importantly have fun and enjoy your time in SOS! It's not hard work or boring, just be creative and do your best!"

CONCLUSION

The Student Outreach to Students (SOS) library ambassador program was critical in spreading awareness of the services and offerings the library has that contribute to student success. Not only did the program reinvigorate the library's online presence, it taught valuable career building skills to the ambassadors and helped them become more self-directed, self-confident, and team players. Although funding from the grant has been depleted, the authors hope the success of the inaugural group will justify continuation of the program.

LOEX PRE-PRINT

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Images for Tables and Figures

Figure 1

