Shared User Engagement Duties Among Reference and Research Services Department Members: A Case Study on the Development of Outreach Initiatives

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Author Note

Abstract

In 2019, the Samford University Library began revamping its outreach offerings to refocus on user engagement. With this goal of increased user engagement in mind, the Power Hour outreach series was launched in the Fall of 2019. Using both the ACRL Framework and student-centered learning as guidelines, Power Hours were a combination of social and academic events calibrated to increase student and faculty engagement with the academic library throughout the academic year. This article describes the collaborative approach the Reference and Research Services Department took to develop and market these outreach initiatives. Specific events are profiled to demonstrate how these initiatives were put into practice and provide a framework for potential reuse of successful events in future user engagement endeavors. Discussion includes an examination of the various iterations of Power Hours over the course of three academic years (2019 – 2022) and the data collected during that time.

Keywords: user engagement, reference and research services, ACRL Framework, programming, library outreach, library events, student-centered learning

Samford University (SU) began the fall 2021 semester with 347 academic staff, an enrollment of 5,758 students, 183 undergraduate majors, minors, and concentrations, and sixty-five graduate majors, minors, and concentrations (Samford University, 2022). Samford students' academic careers and the academic faculty and staff are supported by the Samford University Library (SU Library), the Lucile Stewart Beeson Law Library, the Career Development Center,

and the Curriculum Materials Center. Both the SU Library and the Beeson Library include reference services departments.

The SU Library Reference and Research Services (RRS) Department is made up of four reference librarians who serve the Samford community. Two of the librarians are designated to reference and instruction, one to government documents, and the other to library instruction coordination. While each is a reference librarian who is responsible for liaison duties to various departments, all four share user engagement duties. To fulfill the RRS mission to "…support the learning experiences and information needs of the University through provision of information, instruction, and access in the ways that best serve our patrons' needs…" (Samford Reference, 2019) the department must develop rapport with faculty, staff, and students. Previously the department structure included a designated user engagement librarian. Given that the model changed to one that relies on each RRS member contributing to outreach initiatives, the department began to evaluate engagement options. This process began in April 2019 by utilizing the Plus/Delta feedback tool as a mechanism to measure strengths and weaknesses and to evaluate current outreach practices discussed in academic literature. The Plus/Delta feedback tool was utilized to gain candid feedback. The + on the left indicates what is already working well, while the Greek letter Delta (Δ) indicates areas of potential improvement. The Plus/Delta tool enables a group to get quick, honest feedback using a simple mechanism. As a starting point, the four librarians agreed to share user engagement responsibilities based on each librarian's existing skill set while also being flexible to expanding skills as needs arose. Ultimately, the department determined that engagement could best support the RRS mission by encompassing a mix of resource and service promotion along with rapport building initiatives. The department posited that new user engagement opportunities would serve to introduce the Samford

community to library resources, enhance research skills, and rapport build with the Samford community via welcoming social experiences.

Literature Review

Outreach and engagement are topics discussed in the library literature in a variety of contexts. One of these contexts is outreach through library programming and marketing to increase student engagement. The first step in exploring this topic is finding out what outreach means in academic libraries. Defining outreach based on the library literature can be a difficult endeavor since outreach is a nebulous term that lacks a shared meaning in the literature. As Courtney (2009) writes, "Librarians seem to have difficulty agreeing on a definition of outreach, but like good art, they know it when they see (or create) it" (p.1). Alternatively, some libraries may define outreach as activities that take place exclusively *outside* of daily library services and operations. Dennis (2012) defines outreach as "reaching out to non-traditional library users, extending "beyond borders" of a physical library, and promoting underutilized or new library resources" (p.369). To reconcile disparate definitions into a workable definition using the concept analysis strategy, Diaz (2019) defined outreach as "work carried out by library employees at institutions of higher education who design and implement a variety of methods of intervention to advance awareness, positive perceptions, and use of library services, spaces, collections, and issues (e.g., various literacies, scholarly communications, etc.)" (p.191). With these varying definitions in mind, for the purposes of this study, it was agreed upon by Samford RRS librarians that outreach is some form of library work that can advance student/patron awareness of library resources and services. One form that the work can take is through library programming such as workshops and events.

One of the key pieces of library outreach through programming is marketing. Intentionally marketing and implementing meaningful programming can increase student engagement and awareness of library services. Library marketing is most effective when it identifies "what products and services will be most valuable" from the user's perspective (Graesser & Sundell-Thomas, 2020, p.201) Properly marketed and promoted social and/or academic events attract students to the library and can be a way for students to acclimate to and become comfortable in shared library spaces (Seeholzer, 2011). A student who is comfortable in the library space and familiar with library services is more likely to utilize them, and programming can be a great way for a student to gain awareness of and confidence with library resources (Eshbach, 2020, p.3). However, before students can attend a workshop, they must be made aware of it through marketing and promotion. Creating a streamlined marketing plan through a "collaborative, iterative process....to prepare responsive, relevant content and efficiently promote workshop sessions" (Peacemaker & Roseberry, 2017, p. 564) can aid in getting a clear message out to students and boosting awareness of upcoming programming events. Advertising content needs to be clear and relevant, and not overly reliant on one method. It can take several encounters with advertising content to reach a particular student (Munro, 2017, p. 202).

Outreach through library programming helps the library begin to "bridge the academic and social pieces of the college experience" (Eshbach, 2020, p.1). The academic library is uniquely situated to bridge the gap between academic and social experiences of college life since it is often a place where students come both to study and to socialize. Programming is also a way for the library to make contributions to the broader culture of teaching and learning on campus (Kelly, 2020, p.337). Library workshops related to academics can cover topics that are necessary

to students that might not be covered in class, such as citations. However, just because outreach programming is offered and marketed does not guarantee students will participate. It can be challenging to attract students to a program that they are not required to attend. Witherspoon and Taber (2021) explain, "Students simply do not show up to optional workshops in any significant numbers" (p. 114). With so many competing demands on student time and attention, this lack of attendance is perhaps unsurprising.

A possible solution to this issue is to offer a variety of outreach events. Demeter, et al. (2018) explain that "a variety of outreach efforts yields better results in both visitor counts to the physical buildings and the website, as well a better familiarity with library resources" (p.86). This variety often comes from trying different types of programming to find what works for specific institutions and targeted populations. This reactive strategy has been noted in the library literature since outreach practices are often in response to a user request or a problem (Surbaugh, 2021, p.111). Strategic reaction is not necessarily a bad practice since theoretically a requested topic might yield better attendance numbers due to increased interest at point of need. Witherspoon and Taber (2021) discussed that a topic relevant to student needs was one of the most prominent factors for increased workshop attendance (p.118). However, outreach programming needs to be both well planned and structured, while still maintaining a flexible framework to be prepared for unexpected changes and opportunities (Batstone, 2020, p. 25).

It can be difficult to strike a balance between structure and flexibility, yet it can help to have programming tied to larger overarching goals in the library. Having outreach tied to library goals can help keep outreach from being overlooked. Outreach can often be overlooked in the wider scheme of library operations, since it is often simply viewed as "something everyone should be doing" (Owens & Bishop, 2018, p.79). Since outreach can be implicit, this can lead to

it not being prioritized with clearly outlined expectations that are potentially part of planning. LeMire, et al, (2018) explain, "If outreach is to grow and evolve like other library services, it needs to be more than just "nice to have" and instead seen as essential to student, faculty, and staff success..." (p.10). Programming, marketing, and public relations each played integral roles in the development and implementation of Samford RRS user engagement initiatives.

Methods

After conducting the Plus/Delta and discussing results, the librarians agreed to meet once monthly while being aware that impromptu meetings might need to be held as outreach programming developed. During the initial meeting, it was decided that programming would include RRS hosting workshops in the library and on campus. RRS does not have a designated user engagement budget but has found support from the library administration to finance programming. These initial events were scheduled as exclusively in-person offerings during the 2019 – 2020 academic year. However, for the next academic year (2020 – 2021) events were hosted via Zoom to comply with pandemic restrictions. After restrictions were lifted and face-to-face meetings were a more common option, RRS continued to offer Zoom for patrons who were unable to attend in person or preferred a virtual meeting option. As more RRS Departmental planning meetings occurred, the group explored resources such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Libraries Transform Toolkit: Outreach Strategies (2019). This toolkit provided a sensible framework for community outreach and assessment strategies. In addition to outreach and assessment, the toolkit assisted with considering the audience that would be targeted for programming with such questions as what appeals to the group, what are their broad needs, and what are their specific needs.

The ACRL Libraries Transform Toolkit (2019) states that "...it is critical that your efforts carefully target specific audiences." With this being the case, the librarians decided to focus on first-year students while also being open to all patrons on campus. This decision was made because first-year students often need more orientation to the library. Also, targeting this group enables the library to begin building relationships with students that will hopefully last throughout their undergraduate tenure. With marketing being a significant aspect of successful programming, the librarians developed a logo to brand all event communications. In time, these communications grew to include print fliers across campus, digital fliers that accompanied emails to targeted groups, digital fliers on the library home page, a LibGuide, chalk art across campus, social media, and being included in the university-wide email of upcoming events titled Campus Connection. It was also decided for marketing purposes that all programming would be called Power Hours. The name Power Hours was chosen because it is a general, overarching brand that allows RRS to develop captivating themes that are specific to each event while each event is marketed as a Power Hour**. A history of RRS Power Hours can be found at the RRS Power Hours LibGuide (2019).

Results

After starting the planning process in April of 2019, RRS was prepared to host the first Power Hour in September 2019. The first event was themed "Meet Your Librarians." This Power Hour was an opportunity for Samford students to enjoy cookies, take selfies with the Samford mascot, and meet all the SU librarians. The event was promoted across campus with paper and digital fliers, chalk art created by student employees, and social media. The marketing strategy was centered around the appropriate times and places to best reach the target audience. To that end, targeted emails were shared with specific departments and professors. The chalk art was a positive effort to attract students since it was a popular existing form of advertisement for clubs

and events on campus by students and for students. The meet and greet Power Hour was attended by approximately 200 students. This event has become an annual fall event; however, the event was not held during the fall 2020 semester due to pandemic restrictions.

As the planning and implementation of programming began to take shape, it was decided that RRS would host a minimum of two events each semester. All events were not necessarily targeted toward first-year students. The themed events had various goals such as a "New Faculty Coffee" held during the fall semester for incoming faculty to meet with their library liaison and learn more about library resources and services. This meet and greet is organized by RRS, yet all SU Library liaisons are encouraged to invite any new faculty members who might be in their liaison groups and to meet them at the event. This event does not include students; however, it does serve to develop relationships with faculty that can result in library instruction and consultations with students. Other programming that makes up most of the Power Hours was developed to assist students with accessing resources and developing research skills. These Power Hours include reading scholarly articles, learning about filter bubbles, and navigating specific resources such as Loeb Classical Digital Library. Some Power Hours are themed around holidays or special events; e.g., "Speed Dating with Resources" was held on Valentine's Day and "Step Sing Recharge" (Step Sing is a beloved student tradition) was held after the conclusion of Step Sing. As the Power Hour brand became better known, collaborations across campus started to develop with departments such as the Office of Research. At this point two collaborations have occurred with their office, including an Office Hours session at the College of Health Sciences that included both representatives from the library's liaison program and from the Office of Research. Additionally, the academic poster Power Hour was planned in partnership with representatives from the Research Advisory Collaborative to support the Samford Student Research Colloquia

poster session held in the library. Upon reflecting on the types of engagement, RRS began to consider the balance between introducing patrons to library resources, enhancing research skills, building rapport, and providing user engagement services in a welcoming social environment. This balance has been considered based on what RRS views as the immediate needs of Samford patrons.

Discussion

The RRS library instruction model is largely built around the ACRL Framework while also employing student centered learning (SCL). This requires that instruction librarians consider threshold concepts, liminal spaces, and metacognition while developing programming. In theory, Power Hours invite students to a situation where they engage a liminal space that allows them to make decisions about how they will proceed when introduced to unfamiliar, uncomfortable information. In addition, RRS believes that a fun and interesting environment is key to motivating students to engage with unfamiliar and uncomfortable information. The question is how effective Power Hours are when one asks if the ACRL Frames were sufficiently woven into the programming to: 1) provide students with a threshold/portal that, when engaged, opens new ways of thinking, 2) engender a significant shift in the perceptions of a subject, and 3) are integrated into a new understanding or practice that is irreversible. Ultimately, these questions serve as a tool for guidance when creating user engagement opportunities.

At the onset of RRS developing user engagement Power Hour opportunities, the goals were to develop rapport that facilitates supporting the information needs of the SU Library community with an emphasis on first-year undergraduates. These goals were general and ideally would become more focused as planning proceeded. What RRS discovered was that some Power Hours were attended predominantly by non-students, while others were attended by first-year students.

For example, the Loeb Classical Digital Library Power Hour was attended by 16 participants with 80% being faculty and staff. This turnout suggests that students who are not required to use Loeb Classical Digital Library for an assignment will not, as Witherspoon and Taber (2021) suggest, attend in significant numbers. Perhaps one of the motivations for a student to enter a liminal space is the element of an assignment-based requirement. Another Power Hour that was attended by 20 students was one that introduced students to the fundamentals of creating a poster presentation. These students were part of the 58 students who applied for and were accepted to the Samford Student Research Colloquia. Each student was required to create and present a research poster. This Power Hour was one of the two collaborations with the Office of Research. In addition, the session included an associate dean and professor of math as a guest speaker. The poster presentations were hosted in the SU Library and were well attended by faculty and staff. This session appears to be an example of students engaging in SCL as they made choices that led them to autonomy in their learning experiences while being active participants. It can be challenging to collect data that reflect if students entered a liminal space or to determine if they crossed a threshold that resulted in a transformative experience. Conversely, RRS could benefit from considering what additional data could be collected to best support both evaluating success and developing future programming. In addition, this data might further the goal of determining which Power Hours merit being refined and repeated for incoming first-year students. A significant issue with one-shot user engagement is the difficulty in conducting ongoing performance-based assessments.

Data collected for Power Hours has included number of participants, photographs of the events, location, and associated cost. Initially, it was thought that the number of participants who attend Power Hours would be an important piece of data. An event that challenged RSS Librarians

on this theory was one of the partnerships with the Office of Research. This collaboration was held at the Samford College of Health Sciences and was developed to meet potential patrons and make research support available from the SU Library health sciences liaisons and the Office of Research. One faculty member from the Pharmacy Department attended the event. This one interaction resulted in health sciences liaisons partnering with a research pharmacist, and, at this point, the collaboration has resulted in the realized short-term goal of adding content to the professor's Canvas course and embedding a library liaison in the course. A long-term goal is to develop an information literacy badge/micro-credential for pharmacy students. In addition, the pharmacy professor referred health sciences liaisons to another professor who ultimately requested that each of his students meet with a librarian for research consultations. This is an excellent example of an event that if measured simply by number of attendees could potentially be viewed as unsuccessful, whereas if one analyzes the outcomes of the single interaction, the results are more favorable.

Conclusion

A primary goal of RRS is to keep students at the center of all that is done in the department and that is certainly true when developing user engagement. This principle was highlighted in *The Crimson* article titled "Samford Library Hosts Power Hours Virtually this Semester" when one of the RRS department members was quoted as saying, "Samford students are at the heart of the work we do, and Power Hours keep them there" (Young, 2020). The overarching goal of keeping students at the center of the work done by RRS is supported by the goals that encompass Power Hours. Engaging students, staff, and faculty facilitates gaining access to students through rapport building with the goal of introducing students to library resources and enhancing their research skills in the process.

Samford RRS will continue to develop Power Hours that provide the campus community with opportunities to learn about and benefit from their academic library. Given the short window of time to engage first-year students and convey to them the benefits of utilizing library resources throughout their academic careers, Power Hours serve as an important starting point for students who participate. Whether this is a social event like "Meet Your Librarians" where students take selfies with the Samford mascot, or a more serious endeavor such as learning how to create research posters in preparation for presentations that are attended by large numbers of their teaching faculty, RRS wants students to know that the department is available to support their learning experiences.

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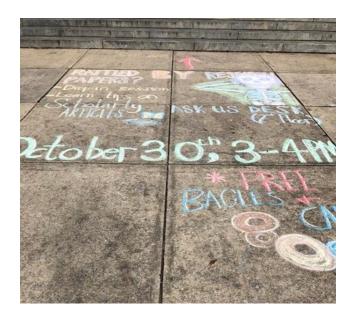https://doaj.org/article/279c0e9f92cc40a8a9

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SHARED USER ENGAGEMENT DUTIES

Appendix A

Marketing Materials

SHARED USER ENGAGEMENT DUTIES

Appendix B

Power Hour Event Chart

Title of Session	Date	Description	Attendance	Target Audience
Meet your Librarians & Take a Selfie with Sam	9/18/2019	An in-person session where Insomnia Cookies were given away to students who came to meet their librarians. All librarians in the building were	192	First-year Students

		invited to participate.		
Rattled by Research Papers: How to Read a Scholarly Article	10/30/2019	An in-person workshop on reading scholarly materials where students either brought their own scholarly article or completed an activity.	17	Undergraduate Students
New Faculty Coffee	12/5/2019	All new faculty were invited to the library for free coffee and bagels to encourage them to come to the library and learn more about library resources.	7	Faculty
Pizza for Finals	12/9/2019	Pizza was given out in the library at night during finals week.	200	Undergraduate Students
Speed Dating with a Library Resource	2/12/2019	A workshop for students to	19	Undergraduate Students

		introduce them to different resources.		
Social media "study buddy" campaign	4/2020	Social media campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic that encouraged students to share via social media who they were studying with from home.	12 engagements 24 likes 2 shares 2 retweets	All students
Filter Bubble, "Your Google vs. My Google"	10/22/2020	Zoom session to help the SU community better understand filter bubbles.	17	SU Community (faculty, staff, students)
Bad Science	11/14/2020	A Zoom session discussing science literacy and the various ways that scientific data can become distorted.	14	SU Community (faculty, staff, students)
Getting to the Heart of Digital Loeb Classical Library	2/16/2021	A Zoom informational session to introduce people to Digital Loeb Classical	16	SU Community (faculty, staff, students)

		library, a relatively new library resource.		
Davis Library Top 5	4/20/2021	Zoom session introducing the Top 5 library resources chosen by the RRS department student workers.	23	All students
Meet your Librarians & Take a Selfie with Sam	9/15/2021	Free Insomnia cookies were offered for students who came to meet their Librarians. Selfie opportunities with the school mascot were also offered.	200	First year students
New Faculty Coffee	9/23/2021	All new faculty members were invited to the library for free coffee and bagels.	2	Faculty
Samford Library and Office of Research	10/20/2021	Representatives from the Office of Research and library liaisons for	1	College of Health Sciences Faculty

Collaborative Office Hours		CHS had office hours devoted specifically to CHS faculty.		
Recharge Extended Hours Event	1/30/2022	RRS offered extended librarian hours and healthy snacks for students studying in the library after Step Sing.	41	Undergraduate Students