Event Planning In the Library: The Open Mic Experience

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Abstract

The overall mission and goals of libraries are changing. Libraries are finding new ways to engage their patrons through a multifaceted approach. The C. G. O’Kelly Library at Winston-Salem State University has created several initiatives that have galvanized the university community. This article will focus on a specific unique initiative in which we will describe the steps and format for planning an open mic event designed to promote student engagement in the learning space of our library.

Keywords: event; open-mic; planning; collaboration; university

Introduction

Over the past decade, libraries have witnessed dramatic shifts and transformations. Academic libraries, in particular, are being held more accountable in demonstrating their relevancy and value across the university campus. While a university’s strategic plan should correlate with the library’s mission of providing top-tier services and resources, new strategies develop for engaging patrons.

A review of the literature shows that cultural programs are more commonly associated with public libraries (Clark, 2012). However, with the emergence of information commons and the need for academic libraries to reinvent themselves, cultural events are slowly being introduced. Chan and Spodick (2014) identify four core areas that make up the learning commons: a learning space, a research space, a social space for collaborative learning, and a cultural space. So the idea of a cultural or user-focused event belongs to the identity of a learning commons.

The literature shows that some cultural events, like an open mic, have some of the same benefits for the university library as they do for a public library. Brinkman and Yates (2008) provide an extensive list of benefits of cultural programs. At the core of these are the establishment of partnerships. This speaks to the need of being intentional and keeping a pulse on what library users want to see on our campuses.

Many libraries have used the terms “learning commons”, “learning spaces”, and “information commons” to define these new spaces as locations for practice and experience, as providers of not only high-end resources and services but also less-traditional social engagements. Some of these activities include live music, dance,
theater performances, gaming, and lectures (Bailey & Tierney, 2008). These atypical social activities permeate many libraries today. In the C.G. O’Kelly Library at Winston-Salem State University, we underwent a transformation as well and we have provided several opportunities for students to integrate within the library, notably through an open mic night, the subject of this essay.

**The Purpose/Planning**

At Winston-Salem State University, we have been able to provide many activities that some may consider unusual for a university library. Loanne Snavely (2012), author of *Student Engagement and the Academic Library*, states, “The ability to create an element of fun can go a long way to lighten up the atmosphere and enliven the activities related to introducing students to libraries and promoting comfort.”

One of the most intriguing and entertaining experiences was the development and execution of an open mic event. The concept came to fruition as a result of the Information Commons (IC) staff negotiating with the university’s strategic goals and learning outcomes. The event’s purpose responded to the University’s strategic goal to foster commitment to social justice through community engagement, oral communication, and information literacy. The latter two components, oral communication and information literacy, were also course outcomes in the newly revamped general education program. Secondly, the IC staff wanted to create an informal learning atmosphere that provided a platform for university students to express themselves about relevant topics. While the university hosts a number of open mic events on campus throughout the academic year, they had not yet been seen in the library space.

The IC staff met during our departmental meetings about devising a successful plan for creating this type of an event. The plan sought to address the following needs:

1) A coordinator who could work with IC staff and students
2) A target audience within the student population
3) Performers
4) A budget, which included but was not limited to promotion, marketing, equipment, time, refreshments, and any changes that might need to be made to the venue
5) The format of the event

The IC staff voted for the department coordinator to serve as the coordinator of the committee. The undergraduate and graduate student population was our target audience. As for the performers, the staff considered several local groups. We first pitched the idea to a student group called Community of Writers (COW). COW was a group that performed spoken word and poetry on campus. We felt positive about approaching COW with this idea largely due to their avid use of the library for their organization’s meetings. It made our pitch that much easier since most of the staff had a good rapport with them. Another group that we wanted to reach out to was Music in Action (MIA). This group was very similar to COW, but their membership comprised vocalists and singers as opposed to spoken word poets.
As a group, MIA rarely used our library services, according to our room reservation list, and staff were not familiar with its members. However, along with COW they agreed to participate in our event.

The next step was giving both groups the autonomy to come up with the theme, protocols, and format for the event. They were far more knowledgeable than us in understanding the actual process of an open mic event, since they were accustomed to performing. Plus, giving the student groups some control and independence provided them the opportunity to use organizational planning skills and team building. We definitely recommend taking this step, especially if your library staff are uncomfortable with the specifics in hosting any kind of event.

However, there were some hiccups that may have occurred due to giving students too much control. First, as the host location of the event, we overlooked major details that mainly involved campus student activities. For example, a Pre-Event Planning/Facility Request Form required by the student activities board is mandatory for any campus event. The form provides a series of questions to consider prior to engaging in an on-campus activity. Even though the IC staff/committee talked about most of the items in our meetings, we were not cognizant of the fact that the Student Activities Department needed this information as well. The type of material we needed to submit formally included estimated event attendance, mode of publicity, and approval for all documents related to the event. Unfortunately, the student organizations we were collaborating with did not complete the form. This slowed the planning process significantly. For instance, the student groups did not denote the number of individuals attending the event. The reason for doing this was financial; the student activities’ contract states that if an event exceeds a certain amount of attendees, the student organization involved must pay for security.

As a committee, we needed to investigate this process further. By speaking with the leaders of the student groups and the student activities coordinator, we concluded that we all needed to meet to discuss the intricacies of the event. The meeting was beneficial, and we all learned what every group was responsible and accountable for in planning the event. The students were in charge of initiating the Pre-Event Planning/Facility Request Form and we were able to assist with making sure the form was in compliance. The takeaway is that successful events typically require compliance to rules, regulations, and even laws, and collaborative duties should be properly understood and distributed.

We needed to decide on a time, date, and location for the event. The location of choice was the library’s learning common space so as to eliminate stigmas about libraries and also to create a socially engaging event for students. For the date and time of the event, we needed to research what was going on campus to make sure that the university calendar was clear of events that might deter attendance.

Once we settled on a few dates, we spoke with our media production team about recording the event. Our media production is an in-house team that not only produces marketing and promotional items but also video and audio productions for
the library. We wanted to make sure we could obtain the services of the media team because their presence gives the space a more cinematic ambiance. We figured the students would be excited about the professional arrangement of the event. We also have a graphic artist on staff in the library, so it was convenient to ask this individual to create fliers for the event. We wanted to have representatives from the student organizations meet with the graphic artist to consult about the theme and to co-design promotional materials. The convenience in interacting with “within your reach” seamless resources was beneficial, though not necessary—but, regardless of your situation, you should consider partnering with individuals or institutions who specialize in talents you may not.

The last item addressed was settling on a time and projecting attendance, a concern admittedly unique to our community’s regulations. Originally, the student groups disregarded that information on the form because they did not want to pay a fee for security. However, through the evening hours of operation our library has a security guard on patrol, which eliminated their concern. As far as time of event, the evening was ideal, as it is when most students are free and it coincided with availability of the library’s security.

**The Marketing**

Our goal for marketing the event was fairly straightforward. The plan was to focus on where the students convened and assembled. As a committee, we disseminated fliers on social media outlets and by taking a grassroots effort in visiting residence halls. These activities showed that the library was being active on campus. The staff assembled a social media team and posted several links to social media platforms using Hootsuite, a social media management system that allows users to manage numerous social media accounts. We were able to distribute 300 hundred fliers over the span of three weeks by 1) handing out fliers to library patrons; 2) posting fliers at the most trafficked library areas such as services desks; 3) meeting with Resident Directors to promote the event to student housing areas; and 4) partnering with the Office of Student Activities to promote the event.

**The Product and Assessment**

The event was well attended with 149 students according to an official sign-up sheet. However, there were many students or bystanders observing the event as well. Out of the 149 listed attendees, six were graduate students. Thirty-three students signed up to perform and 20 actually performed. The event progressed smoothly without any disruptions. Initially, there were a few concerns from library administration about this type of event being disruptive. The event resulted in zero behavioral issues and, although noise was prevalent, one of our major marketing ploys was to inform library patrons ahead of time that the commons space would be occupied and louder than normal. In regards to rules of the event, we only had one major rule: no profanity. Although a small percentage of students spewed a few derogatory words, most participants followed our rules and procedures.

We did not supply a formal questionnaire to assess the attendees’ attitudes; however,
attendees provided informal comments. Some of the student comments included:

“This is an awesome idea, are you all going to do this again?”
“I didn’t know we could be loud in the library!”
“What an ideal place to speak on social issues and freedom of expression, it is the library—it makes sense.”
“I’ve never been to the library all that much, but if you all do stuff like this, I will come more often.”

Several administrators of the university attended and made several comments about the effort of hosting an event of this nature in the library. They stated, for example, “I love how you all used the space” and “Are you all planning to do this in the future?”

Lessons Learned

In the spring of 2016, we plan to deliver another open mic event to the university committee. Before preparing for that event, we wanted to share our lessons learned from this open mic experience:
• Adhere to local regulations and policies. For us, this meant obtaining and completing the Pre-Planning Event form.
• Although collaborating with students can be productive and rewarding, supervision is still needed.
• One can never do enough marketing and promotion—focus on areas where the students socialize, whether a physical space or social media—and be persistent.
• Anecdotal assessment is passable, but something more formal as a survey at the end or during the event would be more conducive to our outcomes and objectives.

The next open mic event will be collaboration with the English Department, largely thanks to one of our event’s attendees, English professor Dr. William Boone, who wants to involve his students into this type of collegial setting of speaking and poetry. He wants to create an environment, with the help of the library, that promotes public speaking and freedom of expression.

Technology Needs
As mentioned before, we were very grateful and thankful for certain resources close to our proximity, one of them being the media production team. The specific technology used to support our event included a PA system (the Anchor System, two speakers and two microphones), two cameras for recording the event, and a component called a Switcher, which allows one to record audio and visual footage from each camera on demand.

However, most public libraries, and some academic libraries, do not have access to this equipment. So the question is, does one need these components to hold an event like this? The answer is no! As mentioned earlier, a reason for using these production components was to create a professional environment to attract attendees and performers. This does not mean, however, that the library needs professional-level production. Further, you can always contact someone in your area who may be willing to partner with you at a discounted—or even voluntary!—rate.

Conclusion
Event planning for an open mic event was definitely foreign to us. Many factors go into event planning, and many entities may need to be informed about the process, not just the library. In a public library, this is likely municipalities to ensure compliance with local codes (such as number of people allowable in a space). We also learned that students will be students. Collaborating with them warrants supervision.

Moreover, the ultimate lesson relates to the event itself. All in all, the library staff sought to tap into the social engagement of the college experience, which for one or more reasons we are often excluded from. We accomplished this, in addition to gaining valuable partnerships and witnessing amazing talent we definitely do not get to see amid the traditional reference interviews, small group consultations, and library instruction sessions.

In fact, this experience may have enhanced our traditional services because of
the comfort and trust developed by students. The evidence of this shows in initial contact from students within the library and throughout campus. Consider the previous comment from a student provided in this article: “I’ve never been to the library all that much, but if you all do stuff like this, I will come more often.” The improvement in traditional services are observable when these students do “come more often” or come back to the library for academic support. We will certainly be monitoring this effect going forward.

Within the research literature this is referred to as social capital. Joshua Rew cites sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who, along with James Coleman, are credited with coining the term. Rew (2008) states that Bourdieu defines social capital as “the cumulation of actual and potential resources located within a network of relationships between actors with shared attributes.” Kranich (2001) writes that “libraries and librarians have a unique, if fleeting, opportunity to carve out a new mission as creators of social capital for their communities” through developing opportunities for social engagement. Finally, if we take that same student’s statement and compare it with student feedback from one of our core services such as library instruction, it can be said that social events have equivalent impact. For example, here are statements taken from the library’s minute assessments, which are responses to the question: What is the most useful thing you learned today?

“I did not know that you could find all that information on the O’Kelly library site”
“New databases I didn’t know about.”
“Everything that I learned today was useful because I did not know any of the information that was given to me today in class.”

Feedback in both cases focuses on a sense of discovery. The issue is that students, like the ones cited here, learn about the library’s value only by participating in library instruction which would not occur without the permission and communication with the teaching faculty. However, an open mic may have value because the attendance is purely by choice and is not tied to a third party. Then the benefit of “I’ll come more often” opens the possibility for information shared about the library’s space and resources that is far and away beyond an experience such as information literacy instruction.

**Summary of Points**

1) Form a committee: Meet with relevant stakeholders.
2) Identify the leader of this committee.
3) Identify and adhere to regulations, codes, and laws (for us this entailed meeting with the Student Activities Department).
4) Target audience.
5) Find performers.
6) Meet about budget and auxiliary affairs–promotion, marketing, attendance, equipment, time and venue.
7) Obtain approval and clearance with appropriate supervisors.

8) Create format of event (for us this meant deferring to expertise in our student groups).

9) Create fliers: collaborate for maximum distribution.

10) Market and promote event.

11) Settle audio and video production concerns.

12) Final meeting for clarity.

13) Hold the event.

14) Assess the event.

**Author Information**

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**References**


