Library Triage: An outreach plan for an academic library

As digital technologies provide greater opportunity for interaction with wider audiences, academic libraries must balance time and resources allocated for outreach to both users and non-users. Traditional one-way communication models rely on the assumption that both audiences can be persuaded with the message that the library already has exactly what they need. Convincing non-users of the value of the library’s full offerings is a tall order when existing patrons aren’t fully aware or taking advantage of them. A two-way conversational approach considers the users point of need, or what they want.

This paper reviews recent literature on academic library outreach, analyzes the strategies used, and describes a potential outreach plan modelled through an imagined subset of non-users who have previously had negative experiences with libraries. Suggestions for potential campus partnerships to develop programming, an assessment strategy that allows for multiple perspectives, and ways this project can be implemented iteratively are considered.

Literature Review

Fontenot (2013) describes the general responsibilities of an outreach librarian as engaging “clientele to actively educate them as to the services a library may offer” (p.431). Johnsrud (2014) used a mixed method of listserv responses and job descriptions to compile a more detailed list of outreach activities that includes creating library marketing materials, planning and implementing programs, leading tours, hosting events, building relationships with campus groups and using social media promote new resources. Outreach messages are shared through physical (displays, branded giveaways), print (posters, flyers) and digital formats (websites portals, course pages, video tutorials) (Johnsrud, 2014). A tactile responsibility and
mode of outreach, which may be presumed but should not be overlooked, involves “shaking hands” and “talking to people” (Fontenot, 2013, p.432).

The literature finds both broad and specific conceptions of the audience for outreach. Johnsrud (2014) describes “existing patrons and the wider community audience” (p.20), which includes prospective students (Fontenot, 2013) and non-users (Fletcher, 2016). The Libraries Transform toolkit lists groups with varying distinctions such as faculty (post-doctorates, adjuncts), undergraduate students (first generation, first year) and graduate students (masters, Ph.D.), and discrete groups with differing needs: staff, veterans, adult learners, commuter students and students with accessibility requirements (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016). Fontenot (2013) notes that “events and presentations should accommodate and educate smaller specialized groups” (p.432) such as international students, student athletes and student organizations.

Outreach has limitations of time and scope. It is rarely the sole or primary function of a librarian and must be balanced with other expectations in reference, instruction and technical services (Johnsrud, 2014). Within the function of outreach as described so far, there must be an inherent division of time and labor based on the broad conception of audience, which can be grouped here as users and non-users. The latter can beg the question of whether some can ever be persuaded to use the library. The insights yielded by Fletcher’s (2016) efforts to determine the causes of non-use, which include distance, assumptions that the collection is limited to print, and perceived language barriers for speakers of limited English, make a compelling argument for allocating the time and effort “to go where the non-users are” and “ask what’s the best thing to bring them in” (para.3).
Willimen (2012) states that this conception of outreach as an approach “for library staff to work with communities to discover what needs they have and discover from target groups what the libraries role could be in fulfilling these needs” (para.3) does not fit the performative definition of outreach as “it shifts what we are doing when we are in the communities from talking to listening” (para.3)

The majority of the literature reviewed is at odds with this point, as “libraries are driven to focus more on users rather than the collection of information” (Mi, 2014, p.26). Fontenot (2013) emphasizes the importance hearing what your clientele says and thinks. Johnsrud’s (2014) survey of job descriptions includes “developing relationships with groups across campus”, which presumptively includes a view of relationships as involving both talking and listening. Citing a case study of reaching Latino non-users in Illinois, Fletcher (2016) again make a strong case for this contentious approach, assuring increased usage through the identification of potential improvements. It is of course impossible to satisfy everyone, as programming choices have the potential to offend and exclude, just as they have the potential to educate and enrich” (Johnson, 2016, p.56). It is also not realistic to believe outreach can be accomplished by one person, as “it takes a concerted effort on the part of many people at all levels to make outreach a success” (Fontentot, 2013, p.432).

Differing frames of outreach as monologue or conversation can both accommodate and allow for audience interaction through assessment, which appears to have its own inherent division between approaches that focuses on either the institution or the user. In the literature, the institutional model suggests a narrative frame in which assessment data is used to tell an evidence-based story about the library. This approach can be enhanced through the use of
infographics (Farkas, 2016) towards the goal of presenting data in a manner that is “concise and accessible” (Hofschire, 2016, p.29).

From the user model, Farrell and Mastel (2016) describe several assessment strategies that vary from traditional methods (documentation, observation, interviews, surveys, focus groups, head counts) to contemporary approaches, such as capturing and compiling comments through the use of multiple media (white boards, audio, video and social media) and the deployment of mystery shoppers. A challenge to implementing this assessment strategy is that the proliferation of surveys across multiple campus units can possibly cause survey fatigue (Macarthur & Conlan, as cited in Camacho, Wages & Harris, 2019).

The Libraries Transform toolkit describes a limit of the user model in that “relationships, satisfaction, and values are very difficult to measure” (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016). Deciding which model is appropriate depends largely on audience and both models agree that the use of statistical or professional jargon should be avoided (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016, Hofschire, 2016).

The practices described so far have been focused on immediate and short-term objectives. Outreach librarians must also “connect with users in a meaningful manner that encourages future interactions with the library” (ALL-SIS Task Force on Library Marketing and Outreach, as cited in Johnsrud, 2014). Fontenot (2013) complements this definition with the important assertion that academic libraries must be proactive and iteratively “rethinking how and why we do outreach” (p.432).

Analysis

This section will discuss basic ideas inspired by, and occasionally critical of, the literature. The literature described various groups of library users based on status
(faculty/student), level (graduate/undergraduate) and areas of interest or need. There are many other kinds of user within, across and beyond these descriptors. Faculty can include visiting scholars while undergraduate students may be transfer students, graduating seniors, in work study, in or out of state residents, distance students or those studying abroad, and residents who stay on campus during holidays and breaks. Undergraduate and graduate may be career changers, returning students, parents, or, increasingly, caring for elders. The digital divide affects many students, as do issues of poverty and financial wellness, such as managing debt or budgeting. Then there are students whose situation might be critical, from disinterested in their studies, underserved and alienated via their identities, and otherwise at risk. An office of Student Affairs would be a good contact for identifying small, specialized campus groups who might wish to develop programs and events.

The differing conceptions of outreach as monologue or dialogue is an important problem. Willimen (2012) writes “the issue is not that people don’t appreciate libraries or librarians, the issue is that they need to see themselves, and their needs reflected in the services provided” (para.9). Perhaps this passage is misunderstood because it would seem a contradiction, as this can only be accomplished by “talking to people” (Fontenot, 2013p.432), and not talking at them.

An example where this could benefit a library is seen in an additional user group not yet mentioned, alumni. An academic library could solicit input from alumni, who possibly might have a desire to help graduates find entry into the workforce or to hire qualified candidates themselves. An alumni outreach program could lead to collaboration with IT and a campus center for career and professional development to create a LinkedIn type alumni employer and job search database and platform, for which the library faculty could create real-world information literacy assignments to allow students to compete for positions. Another potential
area of interest to alumni, and the wider community, is the sharing of creative works. Public libraries have developed programs with local musicians to license their music and make it available for download (Farkas, 2017). MUSICcat is “an open source platform that allows libraries to curate and host collections of local music for streaming and download” and “provides libraries with the tools to license albums and share music freely with library cardholders” (Smith, 2016, p.61). Like the previous example, an academic library could take the lead on developing a digital catalog and database that would include visual material as well. Collaboration could also include help from archives and special collections and working with a law or business school to develop guides and courses instructing students in publishing, copyright, licensing and distribution, which students could use in considering their own submissions or as peer and community advisors.

The institutional narrative approach has strengths and weaknesses. Farkas (2016) suggests infographics because they “use familiar images and icons” (p.54). While likely better than academic or library jargon and acronyms, it is important that these images are familiar to the audience, and not the librarian presenting them. The recommendation presenting data that “best express the narrative you want to tell” (Hofschire, 2016, p.29) is likely well intended and biased towards being truthful. In some hands this approach can blur the line between truth and propaganda. Both scenarios raise the question of whether assessment should tell the story of the library or the user?

Assessment strategies that focus on quantitative data, specifically those framed from what the library wants to expose or confirm, can restrict the ability of respondents to both express their needs and do so in language that is comfortable to them. Social media offers simple, direct ways
for users to express themselves. The concept of self-reflection, similar to current learner-centered educational theories, is also a useful technique for countering this limitation.

**Discussion**

The literature describes the general responsibilities of outreach in academic libraries, limitations and different perspectives as to the specific character of those functions, and the need to imagine new, uncharted scenarios. This section will extend the latter by projecting an iterative outreach strategy designed to engage a specific audience, with potential strategies for programming partnerships and assessment. The model is called Library Triage and it will focus on a subset of the non-user, those who have potentially had a difficult experience, or trauma, that caused them to leave a library and never return.

There is a substantial amount of literature dedicated to the subject of public and media perceptions of librarians. Most of these studies indicate that these depictions generally promote a lack of understanding with regards to librarians’ skills and duties and that concerns about stereotypes such as pushing book carts and harshness are stronger within the profession than at large (Robinson, 2006, Luthmann, 2007, Shaw 2010). That does not preclude the continued existence of severe characterizations in film and television. As elements of mass entertainment, these depictions are inherently broad and hyperbolic. That does not mean they are not rooted in or entirely without some base truth. It is no accident that many of the changes occurring in libraries, from eliminating shushing and fine alternatives to broader concepts of moving away from gatekeeper and steward mentalities, embracing customer service culture and meeting users at their point of need, can essentially be distilled to treating people less like subjects of bureaucratic discipline and more like human beings deserving of respect and dignity. It is not hard to find implied and tacit admissions of this issue within the literature. This article alone has
noted both the necessity to emphasize basic social skills (shaking hands, eye contact) and the divisive issue of talking to people and not at them. When ‘human touch’ (Yi, 2016, p.15) needs quotes, there is still some work to be done. In their recent study of academic librarian turnover, Fyn, Heady, Foster-Kaufman, and Hosier, (2019) observed that respondents cited issues with culture and morale caused by bullying, toxic environments and unfair recognition and reward.

Taking all this into account, it is possible that some people stop going to libraries because when they did, they felt that they were not helped, weren’t welcome, and weren’t valued. Now that libraries are faced with demonstrating their own value, it is productive to acknowledge and confront this truth by seeing it as an opportunity to move forward and grow. The Library Triage strategy for accomplishing this relies on partnerships for developing programming. Potential partners for creating a Library Triage programming are include nursing, psychology and social work. Faculty and students in any of these tracks could help library faculty recognize and engage non-users with stress indicators or signs of “library trauma” at outreach events, pop-up libraries or as a focused form of roving reference. These partners could provide information for outreach materials and advise librarians on how to turn negative experiences or comments into healing dialogues, in person or on social media. The library could incorporate the method of bibliotherapy and work with archives and special collections to exhibit at-risk works and media types, as well as lead a campus wide assessment similar to those conducted at Indiana University Bloomington (Casey, 2009) and the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (Laskowski and Teper, 2014).

The assessment strategy for this plan embraces multiple perspectives that allow the imagined audience to provide feedback in more natural ways than quantified or even structured qualitative strategies may allow. Alternative means of expression would be encouraged, whether
that be art, writing, computer programming, media production or some form of physical or verbal expression. As described, this strategy can be iterated for different audiences. Students in the Library Triage partner programs might wish to provide an overall health assessment of the library environment. Computer programming students might create an environmental scan by building an app that use color filters or emojis to tag library floorplans. The library could capitalize on the popularity of dance competitions and host a contest to choreograph a library dance based on a library theme or anthem composed by music students. Media majors could incorporate these works into video while students interested in writing could compose essays, poems or work with art students on a comic book or graphic novel. Some of those artists may prefer to create their own sketches or portraits of the library. All of these products could be showcased in a library exhibit and included in the aforementioned database after receiving advice from business students, who may wish to develop their own case study of the library. A user design model that engages these groups in the planning stage would generate an even greater range of ideas than those presented here. There are as many possibilities as there are types of users, which are far from finite.

**Conclusion**

The project described here is intentionally ungrounded and ambitious. It is meant to explore possibilities over boundaries and view problems as opportunities. In that light, limitations of the described project will be discussed along with the opportunities they present. Clearly those who see outreach as the art of persuasion would not see the value of engaging users who left the library and never returned. Finding out what users want can only hurt if it uncovers painful truths that lead to difficult reckonings. For example, you may find that frequent users go
for reasons other than you believe, which forces the library to examine who the existing resources and services are really for?

The analysis and discussion intentionally focused exclusively on students over faculty. Some library faculty may respond to the notion of outreach as a collaborative effort as defeating the purpose of creating a dedicated position. Other faculty may also have had negative experiences. Ultimately, any outreach plans for faculty would more likely be tied to advocacy, which is also beyond the scope of this paper, as that may uncover a more political duty of an academic outreach librarian, related to keeping up appearances while schmoozing with major stakeholders over dinners at the home of the University president.

The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education notes that “communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations” (ACRL, 2015, p.8). One academic library recently experimented with a joint service desk shared by reference librarians, IT, and user services. In the trial period, no students approached the librarians for help. Adhering too strictly to older communication models can reinforce and reproduce behaviors that marginalize users and non-users alike. Digital technologies create opportunities to engage both groups and communicate the value of academic libraries with shared voices.
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