

Emilee Mathews and Scott Stone

# Show them what you got

## Throwing an epic open house

**P**icture this: all of a liaison librarian's students and faculty in one place, telling stories about how the library and its resources have been integral to their work, learning about resources and services they never knew about, and inspiring one another with their work and their own unique methods of working with the library. It sounds like an amazing dream, right? Two arts librarians at the University of California-Irvine (UCI) were able to turn their dreams into reality in October 2016, when



View of attendees at open house.

they worked together to throw an epic library open house for their liaison areas.

### Background

Prior to 2016, the UCI Libraries hosted a reception for incoming graduate students before classes began each fall. Attendance had steadily declined to the point where the number of student attendees almost equaled the number of librarians present. Finally, the libraries' administration decided to forego this event for the 2016-17 academic year. In lieu, librarians were encouraged to request a portion of these earmarked funds to hold events for their own

areas, in the hopes that this would have a higher impact than the general reception.

We had always struggled to get our new students to attend, due to the timing of this event coinciding with many orientation events that were specific to our departments of Art, Art History, Dance, Drama, Film and Media

Studies, and Music. Additionally, the departments themselves are located a brisk five-to-ten minute walk away from the libraries, which can sometimes be an almost insurmountable distance for a student who only has ten minutes between his or her two-hour

class and three-hour rehearsal.

Recognizing that this could be an exciting opportunity, we proposed a joint open house event that was intended to showcase the library's resources and services, and provide a fun, interactive experience for attendees to visualize their current and future research

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needs being met. Rather than only target new graduate students, we wanted to open our doors to all faculty and graduate students from our disciplines (and would have invited undergraduates as well, but were limited by available funds).

### What we did

- We pulled several hundred new titles in our areas, and displayed them on tables for open house guests to browse, and were encouraged to check these out. Since we don't have a "new books" area, this was a way to show what had been recently added to the collection. This is important because materials that we purchase are classified in many different areas (not just the Arts), so this allowed us to demonstrate the breadth of our collecting to support their needs and interests.



Detail of new books showcase.

- We pulled approximately 50 items from Special Collections and Archives (SCA) to represent some highlights related to the represented disciplines. This included an array of artists' books, notable items such as our copy of Shakespeare's *First Folio*, a pair of pointe shoes from Anna Pavlova, papers from important theorist and former UCI faculty member Jacques Derrida, and other materials.
- We created three looping slideshows that were projected onto temporary screens. One highlighted important databases for represented disciplines; one showcased interesting facts about the print collections through data visualization; and one featured services, such as teaching, creating course guides, and open access support.
- We created flyers that highlighted inter-library loan and document delivery services. Some pre-existing flyers, such as graduate

student services and how to file theses and dissertations, were also distributed at the event.

- We each asked a faculty champion with whom we had worked extensively to say a few words to the crowd about our collaborations with them over the years.
- We created name tags so that people would mingle and network. Going with a fun library theme, we each identified ten humorous subject headings in our areas and printed these multiple times, asking guests to find their subject heading pair.
- We set up an area where we piled up the *Grove Dictionary of Music* and the *Grove*

*Dictionary of Art* and asked guests to guess how much the sets weigh for the chance to win a prize.

- We used easel-size sticky notes and affixed them to the walls with markers for guests to provide feedback. One area asked the guests to vote for their top three items on display in the SCA reading room. Another asked an open-ended question about what they loved about UCI Libraries.

### Space, logistics, and timing

The event took place on the top floor of our library, which features a 300 square foot conference room, an open air patio, and the SCA reading room. Guests were able to wander through the three spaces, each of which featured resources and activities, and to mingle.

Due to the space chosen, the timing of the event, and the budget needed for catering, we requested and were able to get approval from our administration. We collaborated with several other departments in the library, including SCA, who pulled our requests for

materials, printed up checklists, and staffed their reading room during the event; our Communications and Events team, who helped us think through event logistics, let us borrow a set of speakers for music, as well as donated staff time to the event by helping to set up, welcoming guests, and taking photographs; and our Design Services, IT, and Facilities departments, who all helped to implement various details that made the event possible. An event of this nature can be quite the undertaking both prior to, as well as during, the event, so we highly recommend that you have someone assist with logistical considerations during the actual event, so that you can focus on the attendees.

The event was timed to be close to the beginning of fall quarter without being during orientation week, as this is already completely full for the incoming graduate students. Additional scheduling complexity came from SCA staff availability.

The event was held from 5 to 7 p.m., Wednesday, October 19, 2016. This was identified as a good time during which a preponderance of the first-year graduate students would be free. This also avoided interfering with regular daytime functions of the spaces and services affected, like the SCA reading room which normally closes at 5 p.m. The timeline was as follows:

- 5:00 p.m.—Attendees begin to arrive
- 5:30 p.m.—All attendees gather on the patio for a brief welcome, overview of the offerings of the evening, and faculty champions each speak for three-to-four minutes

- 5:40 p.m.—SCA reading room opens
- 6:30 p.m.—Announce prize winners
- 6:45 p.m.—Wrap-up begins

## Marketing

We began to plan the event in earnest in August, with the intention to finalize as much as possible so that we could advertise during orientation week. We did standard marketing for library events, including a digital flyer, sent announcements, sent personalized emails to department chairs, and



View of attendees interacting with special collections material.

talked up the event to constituents in person. We were nervous about attendance due to schedules, timing, distance concerns, and so on. Anecdotally, many people

comment that it is difficult to get people to come to UCI events, not just those hosted by the library.

## Results

Because we projected approximately 20 attendees, we were completely taken aback by almost 80 showing up. Needless to say, there was no leftover food. The collections showcases were a big hit, particularly the SCA material. This was a great learning opportunity for many of our constituents as they, like many other scholars, generally don't think to look for relevant material in their own home institutions.<sup>1</sup> By introducing our constituents to relevant materials held locally, we were able to create more opportunities for them to incorporate the material in both teaching and research. One faculty member began to integrate material

in her classes and departmental recruitment events, and collaborate with us on an exhibition. A student discovered materials that she eventually used as the focus of her MFA thesis and in a spin-off exhibition with the Orange County Parks and Recreation Department.

While the slideshows we created were not as popular as the physical displays, in one instance they made a big difference: standing in front of the presentation detailing electronic resources, an Art History faculty noticed a music database that she was interested in, as her current book project drew from visual culture of record covers. Without that serendipitous connection, it is far from likely that she would have stumbled on this resource on her own.

Another thing that surprised and delighted us was that many people came not just to interact with resources or to mingle, but to show their support for us. One graduate student in Visual Studies said, "I couldn't not come after all the things you've done for me over the years." In a similar vein, the chair of the Drama department attended with his entire staff and simply said, "You come to so many of our events and help us in so many different ways, it was a given that we would be here to support you."

Not everything that we prepared was a major success. We had planned to give away swag toward the end of the event, but most attendees came and went within the first hour. In the future, we might instead choose to give away items throughout the course of the event to keep energy levels high and entice attendees to stay and try to win something the next time.

Some of the planned activities didn't work as we had hoped. For example, the feedback from the sticky notes weren't particularly effective. We were so busy interacting with people that the laptops went to sleep and shut down the slideshow. The collection visualization slideshow didn't resonate at all with attendees. Future open houses will probably have us simplify some of our offerings both to ease the workload as well as create an environment not so actively crowded with information, thereby allowing the attendees to more easily navigate everything there.

## Big picture

It's nothing new to hear about the value of the "library as place," but this event could practically stand as the definition for this concept. Not only were we able to successfully bring a large number of our primary users, many of whom had never or rarely ever visited, into the library to engage with our materials and learn about how we can help, support, and work with them, but we were also able to help them create interdisciplinary connections that don't regularly occur. Additionally, many of them learned about resources from other disciplines they were not familiar with but could be extremely useful to their work.

Some believe that you need to choose either quality or quantity; however, this event demonstrates that you can have both. Our initial goal for attendees was set at the modest amount of 20, so we were absolutely flabbergasted when almost four times this amount attended. While the numbers alone thrilled us, we were also extremely pleased with the quality of the interactions we had throughout the night. We believe we were successful in talking individually with every attendee, and these conversations paid dividends throughout the academic year, as was previously highlighted.

As libraries are increasingly pressed to prove their value to administration, we should curate new and existing users alike by inviting them into our space to celebrate and learn about the resources and services available to them. While there was a large amount of time, effort, and preparation that went into this event, we found it all to be more than worthwhile, and the initial investment in time spent planning will make it easier to build off of previous experience. We will definitely be taking what we learned to do this again and encourage you to try one, too.

## Note

1. Roger Schonfeld and Matthew Long, "Supporting the Changing Needs of Art Historians," *Ithaka S+R*, last modified April 30, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.22833:28>. 