

Far Out

Pushing the Boundaries of Academic Library Outreach

Since the return of students to campuses after the COVID-19 pandemic, outreach has been an integral part of most academic library efforts to engage with students, faculty, staff, and even the communities beyond their campuses. Although library outreach programs are not new, the wide array of programs offered has expanded—wellness, cultural awareness, creative activities, and perennials like open houses and information literacy workshops. But why do academic libraries spend time, money, and energy on outreach?

Jamie White-Farnham and Carolyn Caffrey's examination of the roots and evolution of the term looks at this historical idea to answer the question of why we do it. They propose the original intent of outreach had a goal of inclusivity while also identifying thirteen milestones in the library field since 1958 that led to an increase in outreach programs.¹

Stephanie Diaz's thorough work provides both a concept analysis and extensive definition of outreach to understand what we are doing and to get a better idea of the effectiveness of our efforts. According to Diaz, a better definition should result in more intentional and impactful outreach programs.²

Take our Political Song-a-Palooza concert at Penn State University Libraries, an event born out of the desire to showcase political music while offering the campus community a creative outlet. What would happen if a large academic library offered the campus community a stage to perform political and protest music? Would anyone submit auditions? Would anyone attend? How would the library and the greater community respond? Would it be cost effective and sustainable? And how would we measure success?

Political Song-a-Palooza was an outreach experiment, somewhat rooted in our mission and strategic priorities but perhaps less intentional than what Diaz envisioned. We thought it would be fun but wondered if it was too “far out” of scope for an academic library outreach offering. When we advertised for a student intern position for the event, another campus unit reached out to us about partnering to offer political song events in conjunction with their concert series. This led to five other experiences: an open conversation with the Soweto Gospel Choir, an ancestral listening session with Michael Mwenso using vinyl records from the libraries' collections, an academic panel with scholars writing about the intersection of music and politics, and two songwriting workshops with indigenous artists Las Cafeteras and Supaman. Now we had a Political Song Series that sounds more “intentional” in concept but was also a happy accident. But let's get back to our experiment. Was Political Song-a-Palooza a successful outreach event?

Andrew Dudash is associate librarian for political science, policy studies, and government information at the Penn State University Libraries, email: dudash@psu.edu. Rebekah Hill is assistant librarian for music and performing arts at the Penn State University Libraries, email: rqh5509@psu.edu.

Would Anyone Submit Auditions?

There were two phases of marketing associated with our event: the call for performers and the marketing of the live concert. For phase one, we created a dedicated email account and two associated social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram). We worked with our libraries' public relations and marketing office to produce a logo, several press releases, and both print and digital signage. We postered extensively on campus and in the State College business district. We also staffed information tables at



2024 Political Song-a-Palooza performers Olivia Park and Jacob Elliott, image courtesy of Andrew Dudash.

the campus HUB on several dates leading up to the audition submission deadline. We wondered if the political song idea would resonate with our students and found that opening submissions to students, faculty, and staff created a strong pool of potential performers and, in the end, an atmosphere of shared music among generations. For our 2023 concert, we had fifteen submissions, and of those, eleven acts performed nearly two hours of music. In 2024, we had twenty submissions, and seventeen acts performed. The submissions for both years consisted of original songs as well as covers of familiar and unfamiliar music that offered an eclectic mix across countries and cultures. Over the two years, we decided to open auditions to Penn State alumni in addition to current students, faculty, and staff. We also were able to offer a travel stipend to performers from campuses beyond University Park in 2024, but the final roster did not have performers from other campuses.

Would Anyone Attend?

At first, we thought of having the event outside the library and looked at tent rentals and all the associated equipment to host a concert. It became apparent that this might be harder than first imagined in the space we had available. We then started to look at possible community venues and connected with a local theater who was actively seeking university partnerships. The downtown State Theatre sits just off campus and hosts a variety of both local and national events. They were excited about the event, and we felt that working with an established venue and a professional staff familiar with production elements



State Theatre marquee advertising 2023 Political Song-a-Palooza, image courtesy of Andrew Dudash.

like sound, lighting, and stage setup would provide a great experience for new and seasoned performers.

Now we could begin the second phase of marketing: attracting an audience for the concert. We used social media and digital signage as our main form of marketing. Other tools included an official press release from the libraries, a promotional video on social media, a featured spot on the State Theatre's website for almost one month before the concert, and a listing on the theater's marquee. Both years, the student newspaper reached out to us for an interview, a great way to reach the campus population. This free evening event drew 120 people in 2023 on a Thursday night. In 2024, it was 150 on a Saturday night.

How Would the Library and the Greater Community Respond?

We had enthusiastic support throughout the library for help with marketing and financing Political Song-a-Palooza, but we had a much smaller percentage of library colleagues attend each year than we anticipated. In fact, the percentage was the same in 2023 and 2024. We have wondered if this is tied to divergent views on outreach in the library. It is certainly something worth investigating. We were able to build successful campus partnerships over the two years and continue to work with these partners on political song programming. Support from the greater community was impressive as they made up more than half of the concert audience each year.

Would It Be Cost Effective and Sustainable?

We started the funding process with a budget request to our administrative team. The associate director for stewardship and events in the Office of Development and Alumni Relations at the libraries had identified donors who would be interested in funding our event through their endowment for the libraries. We included this information in our request and fleshed out other details to support the "why" of a library-supported concert. Our event description was as follows:

"Political Song-a-Palooza (PSAP) aims to: engage students in the discovery of political song, foster community building at Penn State, and strive for excellence related to historical research, student/community engagement, fun, and performance."

We emphasized the uniqueness of this kind of outreach, offering a vehicle of creative expression and civil discourse for the performers and a shared experience between the university and local communities. The budget request was accepted, and we were able to proceed with our concert plans. In addition to the funding received from this endowment, other financial support came from our department's budget for student intern wages and, in 2024, support from two campus partners.

Political Song-a-Palooza had a fairly high cost that included theater rental, marketing, student intern wages, and video production. The cost stayed about the same each year. Organizer time is a major factor in the sustainability piece of the equation. We did spend less time in 2024, but it was still substantial by many measures, including marketing, vetting auditions, processing vendor paperwork, program preparation, and editing the concert footage. The donors who supported Political Song-a-Palooza with their endowment each year were quite impressed with the concerts and are supportive of efforts to continue funding it

in the future. We have found that our time is what is least sustainable entering year three of this endeavor. We are currently planning the next Political Song-a-Palooza, scheduled for the fall of 2025.

How Do We Measure Success?

It is important to look at the many outcomes generated by these costs, which include intern experiential learning, audience reception, performer experience, and the creation of a tangible resource that is freely available for anyone to view. The student interns who worked on this project gained skills in event planning, social media marketing, research to support writing program notes, and concert production, all in an experiential learning environment outside the classroom. One intern was recognized for their work, winning an honorable mention for the University Libraries Outstanding Student Employee Award in the outreach category.

We gathered audience feedback after both events through a survey, and the reaction to the concerts was overwhelmingly positive. One person said, “State College needs something like this. If this is what university events are like, I’m going to start going to more. So much diversity in performers and performances.” A survey of performers echoed similar feelings: “This event was a fun and creative way in which to speak out, and we hope the event returns and grows in the future.”

One student performer from the 2024 concert introduced their second song of the night in a very personal manner: “So this song we have for you now is called ‘Split’ by NIKI, and it’s really special for me this year specifically because this year kind of marks the halfway point where I’ve lived half of my life in Korea and half of my life here in the U.S. ... I’m very thankful for this event because I get to share voices of minorities and people that I really resonate with.” In the few days after the 2024 show, two colleagues shared with us how they connected with this performer through their own immigrant experiences. Another colleague called Political Song-a-Palooza an example of “inclusion in action” as opposed to what they suggested were too many performative events. This library-sponsored concert provided not only a platform for political expression but also a vehicle for sharing the many unique and personal stories of our community.

The videos of the 2023 and 2024 concerts are fully cataloged in the libraries’ collections, serving as documentation of the events and resources for future use and interpretation.^{3,4} The 2023 video was among the Penn State University Libraries’ Top 10 Kaltura title playbacks for 2024, with 276 views and counting.

The energy that both shows created was incredible, but we still question our efforts, as do others. In fact, in the theater lobby before the 2024 show, a gentleman who was an usher for the play that was happening upstairs questioned why a library would be hosting a concert, clearly thinking of more traditional library roles. After meeting one of our interns, witnessing the buzz in the lobby as the performers arrived for soundcheck, and looking at our program with piqued curiosity, you could see his idea of what a library could or should do had shifted in that short time interacting with us. Although he could not attend our concert, he left with a changed view of the library and its role in the community it serves.

Maybe that is what makes academic library outreach worth the effort. As we try out new programming ideas and work to refine the intention behind our efforts, the result could be changing the idea of what libraries can and should be offering for our communities. And wow, that is far out. *~*

Notes

1. Jamie White-Farnham and Carolyn Caffrey, “Examining Our Roots: The Origins and Evolution of Outreach in Academic Libraries, 1958–2020,” *Journal of Library Outreach & Engagement* 3 (2023): 106–18, <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.jloe.v3.1105>.
2. Stephanie Diaz, “Outreach in Academic Librarianship: A Concept Analysis and Definition,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 45, no. 3 (2019): 184–94, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.02.012>.
3. “Political Song-a-Palooza” (All Business Videography LLC), from a concert produced by Andrew Dudash, Ben Rhine, Margaret Matous, and Rebekah Hill on April 20, 2023, The Pennsylvania State University, 1:50:18, <https://catalog.libraries.psu.edu/catalog/42253764>.
4. “Political Song-a-Palooza” (All Business Videography LLC), from a concert produced by Andrew Dudash, Margaret Matous, and Rebekah Hill on April 20, 2024, The Pennsylvania State University, 2:15:04, <https://catalog.libraries.psu.edu/catalog/44804029>.