Chapter 39

Incrementally Building Community and User Engagement in the UC San Diego Library

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ABSTRACT

The University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Library's inaugural Learning Spaces (LSP) Program was formally established on July 1, 2013 through a library-wide reorganization process spanning 2012-2014. As a new program whose offerings remained in development, 2013-2014 presented the opportunity organizationally to initiate new library services and amenities and to adopt a new path based on the program's initial strategic objectives. This chapter details several of the ways in which the program began during its first year to accomplish its goals of engaging library users, building a sense of community and patron ownership within the library's learning spaces, establishing a culture of assessment among program staff, and developing library spaces where students feel welcomed and supported in their academic life. Activities detailed in the chapter are provided as examples for other libraries working toward similar outcomes. Additionally, a limited literature review of library engagement and community building in libraries is presented, along with research support for many of the Learning Spaces Program's new initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

The University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Library's inaugural Learning Spaces (LSP) Program was established on July 1, 2013 through a library-wide reorganization process spanning 2012-2014. The program's development both stems from and illustrates the Library's conviction that the physical facility remains an essential part of the campus and plays an important role in the lives of UCSD students, faculty, and staff. Gate counts for the two facilities averaged 1,700,000 visits per year for calendar years

2011-2013, with weekly gate counts reaching 56,000. To ensure the physical library's continued value, LSP's foundation emphasizes building community within the library and engaging users in developing program services.

Following extensive strategic and reorganizational planning, the UC San Diego Library transformed its internal structure entirely, moving from a collection of discipline-based ("branch") libraries to a programmatic structure consisting of approximately 20 programs within what is now considered a single entity resident primarily in two buildings on UCSD's main campus, rather than a series of unique, relatively independent libraries. Activities continued into the reorganized library were consolidated into the new programs to enable greater consistency across the activity and to yield economies of scale.

The Learning Spaces Program manages a wide array of learning spaces across the Library's two main buildings. The program's 4.45 FTE (full-time equivalency) in staffing was responsible for providing functional user spaces, ensuring adequate user technology/multimedia, offering general user assistance, staffing the library's two Learning Commons desks, managing locational signage, performing programming and outreach, and providing technology-focused educational services. The program's mission explains its role in supporting a robust learning experience by offering a wide array of learning environments, user support, technology, and educational tools to meet diverse learning, teaching, and research needs.

Among others, one primary Learning Spaces Program objective is to encourage physical library users to interact with the reorganized library, rather than passively occupy it. The program hopes to build a sense of community and belonging among library users, encouraging shared ownership of the facilities, and user investment in whether and how well the library serves their academic needs. Prior to recent restructuring, branch library staff worked to provide interesting and appropriate amenities within their spaces and establish a sense of community among discipline-specific user groups, while LSP now leads this effort library-wide.

This chapter details several ways LSP began to accomplish its goals of engaging library users, building community, and developing welcoming library spaces and presents a brief review of research supporting program activities. Initiatives detailed in the chapter may offer ideas for libraries working toward similar outcomes. In the UCSD example, limited funding for new initiatives, and limited program staffing to achieve them, meant progress began at a slow, steady pace. Nonetheless, circumstances at other libraries may support a similarly thoughtful, incremental, and deliberate path, which also allows for continually evaluating initiatives, making appropriate modifications, and iteratively enhancing services.

BACKGROUND

Following earlier thinking that questioned the continued need for physical library spaces, several changes in libraries revitalized the importance of library buildings in the past 10-15 years, strengthened the need to engage users in designing libraries to serve them, and supported the value of building community among physical library users. Meunier and Eigenbrodt (2014) report increased publications about library space, its qualities, social aspects, and design in the first decade of the 21st century (p. 218), which led to construction of numerous, spectacular library buildings. After years focusing on constructing virtual library environments, this re-emergence of the importance of 'library as place' returned both user engagement and community building in libraries to the foreground. Popularized by Ray Oldenberg, the term "Third Place" refers to alternatives to home and work (the first two places) (Elmborg, 2011, p. 348). A visible trend among users shows them to prefer more welcoming, engaging, and exciting places

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