

Chapter 14

Library as Campus Main Street: Building Community via Engaging Programming and Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates ways that academic libraries can engage with students to build and support campus communities. At the University of Tennessee Libraries, librarians seek opportunities for cultural enhancement of the campus community through creative outlets and activities that meet students in the spaces they frequent, both inside and outside the library. Librarians interact with students informally through contests and games, residence life programming, open houses, and street fairs that showcase the library as the campus main street.

INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries can be places for active student engagement that help build a sense of community on campus, diminish library anxiety, and support the educational goals of the university. Like many others, the University of Tennessee Libraries (UT Libraries) is faced with the challenge of creating a warm, welcoming and less intimidating place where students can feel comfortable using services, attending programs, and working with librarians. Two of the critical concerns for UT Libraries in assisting students are overcoming library anxiety and interjecting literacy skill development in the designing of programs and spaces. Engaging students in library spaces and with the programming produced by librarians not only allows for student support in their goals of academic achievement, but also supports library goals of creating lifelong learners who are information literate.

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To that end, the UT Libraries strives to build a dynamic, user-centered community by engaging students in library spaces and through library-initiated programming. In order to enhance and improve the ever-fluctuating needs of library patrons, library faculty and staff have established a multitude of initiatives to provide opportunities for the community to interact with the library. Librarians use a wide variety of programming and engagement tools, including contests, residence life engagement, open houses, street fairs, and other means of featuring campus community creative work.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore UT Libraries' efforts toward and observations made while building community for a diverse user population thus, establishing the academic library as the campus main street for the university and local community. This chapter will focus on four specific aspects of the UT Libraries' approach to building community: renovation of spaces, contests, student comfort and well-being, and residence life engagement.

The UT Mission states, "The primary mission of UT is to move forward the frontiers of human knowledge and enrich and elevate the citizens of the State of Tennessee, the nation, and the world. As the preeminent research-based, land-grant University in the state, UT embodies the spirit of excellence in teaching, research, scholarship, creative activity, outreach, and engagement attained by the nation's finest public research institutions" (University of Tennessee, 2014). Due to this explicit statement, engagement is treated as a robust and meaningful part of most relevant campus initiatives. The UT Libraries play an important role in ensuring that the university's mission is accomplished.

The UT Libraries' vision states, "We are the campus main street and the crossroads for innovation, scholarship, learning, and civility" (University of Tennessee Libraries, 2013). The UT Libraries work to keep engagement efforts from being limited by walls, extending beyond the physical boundaries of the library building and into spaces unfamiliar to librarians, but familiar to our patrons i.e. residence halls. Engagement is always about people, and UT Libraries proactively endeavors to meet library patrons where they are instead of waiting for users to discover services in a void. For the UT Libraries, that means finding out what users need and meeting them before they even arrive at their point of need. If individuals are not coming to you then you must go to them, bringing your organization into their presence. In order for that to happen there must also be a purpose framing all engagement endeavors. Information literacy provides a frame by which all programming and instruction are supported. Integrating literacies into not only instruction, but programming and space allocation as well is critical to supporting the development of life-long, information literate learners.

After a brief literature review, the remainder of this chapter will explore how UT Libraries' engagement efforts yield positive community building outcomes. By presenting a space renovation, contests, and programming initiatives that were created with a focus on finding the place where the goals of student engagement and teaching literacy skills meet, this chapter will show how other libraries can achieve the same in their campus community, strategically taking action toward strengthening their position as their own campus main street.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Library as Community Building Agent

In the chapter, "Place Planning for Libraries: The Space Near the Heart of the College", the author highlights the role of the library as being more far reaching than the walls in which bound volumes are

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