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Try, Try, Try Again: Better Faculty Outreach Through Trial and Error

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Abstract

Reaching out to faculty about library resources and services is an ongoing and sometimes mysterious process for vendors and librarians alike—one that, when effective, can contribute a higher ROI and improved collaboration between libraries and publishers. However, it can be a challenge to reach that sweet spot between “effective” and “annoying,” especially in the face of seemingly nonresponsive faculty. A physical and life sciences librarian and former head of collection development and acquisitions from the University of Central Florida (UCF), and a Springer account development specialist, who works closely with academic librarians, weigh in on four different issues about improving outreach and identifying opportunities for outreach and collaboration.

Outreach Goals

The key goal for acquisitions librarians and subject librarians is to create awareness among faculty of library resources and increase the use of those resources. At the University of Central Florida (UCF), subject librarians actively work with their faculty to solicit feedback about the current collection and ways it can be improved, and, whenever possible, identify collaboration opportunities that often lead to successful grant proposals. Simple ways of measuring success include increases in constructive discussions with faculty, collaborations, instruction requests, research consultations, and use of library resources. While at UCF, Michael Arthur worked closely with subject librarians to facilitate successful relationships with teaching faculty. From the publisher perspective, Springer’s outreach goals include helping customers attain a high return on investment, while also helping to market the library itself on campus.

Outreach Initiatives

There are a number of simple, but often overlooked, means of conducting outreach. In his new (and current) role at the University of Alabama, Arthur has participated in many new faculty events, introducing himself and learning about issues in their disciplines. Wasting no time,

he is already in the early stages of working with faculty to evaluate the effectiveness of streaming video on classroom instruction. Patti McCall is also proactive and routinely takes steps to develop and enhance relationships with faculty, including:

- Attending on-campus events such as department seminars, dissertation defenses, and discipline-specific discussion groups
- Attending discipline-specific conferences (she is an active member of the Chemical Information Division of the American Chemical Society), and being present for faculty and student presentations and poster sessions at those conferences
- Making occasional presentations to student groups (such as the student chapter of the American Chemical Society)
- Personally welcoming all new faculty in her departments
- Regularly attending meetings with publisher representatives

She believes that being a presence in her departments and making personal connections helps build trust and establishes a reputation as being a go-to resource for her faculty and

students. In her four years at UCF, she has slowly but steadily increased the number of instruction requests and research consultations but is careful to point out that building these relationships takes a great deal of time, effort, patience, and sometimes pure luck.

Examples of successful outreach include working with UCF's Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL) to include a write up in FCTL's weekly e-mails, which are distributed to faculty campus wide and highlight a variety of library resources. Librarians are also frequent presenters at the FCTL's annual on campus conference.

Librarians and publishers also worked closely to hold a publisher forum at UCF, geared specifically to address the interests and needs of faculty. Key topics included how faculty can get published, open access opportunities and initiatives, and issues relating to digital rights management. The forum was well received and generated productive discussion with faculty in a variety of disciplines. There have also been collaborations with faculty that resulted in \$2 million in grant funds for new collection-focused purchases between 2009 and 2014.

Of course, not all outreach efforts prove successful. Some departments have been simply unresponsive to repeated attempts by subject librarians to get input on collection development and in those cases; some of the collection development funds have been shifted to departments who show interest in working with their librarian. Other departments on campus have been unwilling to share in the costs of access to resources when they realize that those resources need to be available for all students and not just a select group in their department, a view that runs contrary to the library's collection development policy.

Outreach Challenges

Nevertheless, faculty outreach is not easy given the typical challenges: time (or complete lack thereof), limited budgets, and ever rising costs. There are other issues as well, such as departmental politics, heavy course loads, and a large number of adjunct faculty. These issues tend

to make successful outreach difficult at best. In a school of 60,000-plus students, it is also difficult for a librarian to truly address each department equally. Unfortunately, faculty do not always understand the high costs and delivery models involved with the resources they desire, making collaboration difficult and sometimes even creating the misperception that the library is not responsive to their needs. They complain to the library but fail to make the administration, which is in charge of the purse strings, aware of their needs. Faculty may also be reluctant to collaborate because they view the work involved as part of their domain and not that of the librarian. Or, they may view the work involved as work to be addressed by the librarian and not their job. On the flip side, when these collaborations do work they almost always result in establishing solid long-term relationships.

Publishers: How Can They Help

With flat or soon to be cut budgets, librarians can be leery of publishers looking to yet again attempt to sell them (or bypassing them and going directly to faculty) something that the library simply cannot afford. Sarah Schulman noted that her role is not to sell more products, but to work with librarians to find ways to make the most of resources they currently own. Helping librarians discover who among their faculty have published in specific journals or identifying faculty who might be interested in resources the library currently owns can be very helpful in fostering relationships. McCall pointed out that publishers should not simply focus on dealing with acquisitions staff. They should work with subject librarians who know their faculty best and are responsible for promoting the use of resources and soliciting valuable feedback. Leaving the subject librarian out of the loop generally results in that librarian not having the latest and most useful information that would benefit the faculty. At UCF, publishers such as Springer, Sage, Gale, and Taylor & Francis have helped to facilitate outreach by participating in and providing funding for outreach events and providing promotional materials.

Conclusions

Outreach is often difficult yet necessary and frequently proves beneficial for faculty and students by creating an awareness of library

resources, promoting their use, and even finding the funds to purchase new resources. There are no easy formulas and sometimes the best of efforts fail, but patience and communication are essential.