Title

Sharing the Value and Impact of Outreach: Taking a Multifaceted Approach to Outreach Assessment

Abstract

Although outreach is a common activity in academic libraries, little has been written about strategies for assessing library outreach efforts. Assessing outreach efforts is important in order to measure the success of the outreach activity, identify areas for iterative improvement, and demonstrate the value of the outreach activity to stakeholders. This article is a case study describing the multifaceted strategies employed to assess a major outreach event, [institution's name]'s annual Open House event. It details demonstrating value and programmatic improvement as the articulated goals for outreach assessment as well as the specific strategies used and the insights gleaned from each assessment strategy.

Keywords

Assessment; Outreach; Orientation; Outcomes

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Introduction

Outreach is a common activity in academic libraries. The library literature abounds with articles and case studies detailing library participation in outreach activities ranging from resource fairs to library luaus to orientation presentations. Although most, if not all, libraries engage in assessment related to their collections, instruction programs, and reference activities, the literature is scarce in providing robust examples regarding how libraries are using assessment to connect their outreach activities to programmatic goals and objectives. While assessment is a long-standing valued practice for libraries, from the literature it appears that connecting assessment to outreach in an intentional and goal-oriented manner has yet to emerge as a common practice.

Some of the difficulty in finding examples of robust and programmatic approaches to outreach assessment may be related to the murkiness surrounding how librarians identify and define outreach. Although most librarians are familiar with the concept, there is a variety of definitions for what counts as library outreach. For example, what one library may term “public engagement” or “marketing,” another library may term “outreach.” Courtney (2008) observes that “Outreach is in the eyes of the beholder. Librarians seem to have difficulty agreeing on a definition of outreach, but, like good art, they know it when they see (or create) it” (p.1). Some libraries include traditional subject liaison responsibilities such as information literacy instruction within their library’s definition of outreach. Others include more passive outreach strategies, including marketing and public relation efforts such as websites, newsletters, and blogs (Carter and Seaman, 2011).

For the purposes of this article, library outreach includes student or faculty oriented events and programming that are aimed at general library resource awareness, library service awareness, and reduction of library anxiety. Examples of library outreach activities that are included in this definition are resource fairs, orientation presentations, events, and exhibits. This definition does not include other student-oriented activities such as instruction or reference services, which are more directly connected to information literacy, or passive outreach such as flyers, brochures, or LibGuides.

Although little has been written about assessing outreach, it is an important aspect to any outreach program. In a recent article calling for an increased focus on outreach assessment, Farrell and Mastel ask, “Without goal-driven activities and assessment, how is the time, money, and energy justified?” (2016, Introduction, para. 3). Library budgets may have little room for spending on unproven initiatives. A survey of outreach initiatives in academic libraries reveals few outreach projects that cost more than a few hundred dollars, and many had no cost other than librarian time and existing resources (Dennis, 2012). To demonstrate the impact of library outreach activities and, as Farrell and Mastel suggest, “demonstrate a return on investment for our constituents,” library outreach event and activity organizers must implement thoughtful and robust assessment activities aimed at measuring the achievement of specific programmatic outreach goals (2016, Conclusion, para. 1).

This article is a case study describing the multifaceted strategies employed to assess a major outreach event, Texas A&M University Libraries annual Open House. The article begins with a literature review of outreach assessment. Following, the context of Open House is described as well as a discussion on the differences between the outreach goals of Open House and the assessment goals for the 2016 Open House. Next, the multifaceted approach to assessment is detailed with the descriptions, rationale, and logistics of the various assessment methodologies used in the 2016 Open House. Next, the results of the assessment are reviewed both in terms the findings of Open House and the importance of assessment reports. Lastly, the article concludes with suggestions on how libraries can adapt these assessment methodologies to their own outreach.

Literature Review

Outreach has long been a popular topic in the library literature. However, what librarians mean by outreach has changed significantly over the years. Earlier mentions of outreach in the literature frequently refer to engagement with off-campus populations, now commonly referred to as extension and public engagement. For example, academic librarians frequently used the term outreach to describe engaging middle and high school students, professional continuing education programs, and members of the local community (Boulanger, 1990; Glogoff & Glogoff, 1998; Gresham & Van Tassel, 2000; Jesudason, 1993; Kudlay, 2000; Rankin & Sayre, 1993). While many librarians still use the term outreach to describe this type of activity, the literature increasingly reflects the term outreach being used to describe efforts to promote library awareness and library services to on-campus populations.

This shift in definition of outreach has been accompanied by an increased interest in outreach in academic libraries. A search in databases such as *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, Library & Information Science Source* and *Education Sources* reveals over 250 articles published on this topic in the last ten years. While many of these articles share creative and innovative outreach success stories, a number of them fail to discuss substantive strategies for assessing the impact and efficacy of the outreach. This may be because, as Carter and Seaman uncovered in their research, “many libraries perform the task of outreach informally or on an *ad hoc* basis, with little or no guidance from their institutions” (2011, p. 169).

There are several common strategies for assessing outreach referenced in the literature. Meyers-Martin and Borchard (2015) found that the most common strategies reported for assessing the impact of finals programming were gathering feedback from users in person and counting the number of attendees. These findings are borne out in case studies throughout the literature. Counting the number of attendees is a popular strategy, likely due to its ease of implementation even at hectic outreach events, and is the gauge used by several librarians to demonstrate the success of an outreach activity (Brinkman & Weinstein Yates, 2008; Cahoy & Bichel, 2004; Dodsworth, 1998; Fabian et. al, 2003; Martin & Martin, 2015; McCullough, 2015). Similarly, librarians report observing participants and collecting anecdotal feedback as a means of outreach assessment (Angell & Boss, 2016; Vanden Elzen & Roush, 2013).

Another common method of assessing the impact of outreach events is by surveying outreach event participants, which can be helpful for programmatic improvement, as it provides participants with the opportunity to comment directly on the outreach event (Jalongo & Devitt, 2015; Lannon & Harrison, 2015; Nicholas et al., 2015; Oravet, 2014). Other librarians have implemented regular Plus/Delta meetings where those who staffed the event have an opportunity to reflect on the event and share their ideas for future changes (Otto, Meade, Stafford, & Wahler, 2016). Still others have collected reference or circulation statistics as a measure of impact of outreach programming (Aguilar & Keating, 2009; Maloney, 2012; Torrence, 2015).

Many librarians have used two or three assessment methods in order to create mixed-methods approach to outreach assessment. For example, Flynn (2017) tracked attendance and collected feedback forms to evaluate the success of finals week outreach activities, and Vanden Elzen and Roush (2013) supplemented their observational assessment with a survey. Langer & Kubo (2015) used a combination of attendance tracking, a survey, and anecdotal feedback to assess their library's international student outreach program. Sclippa (2017) tracked attendance numbers, social media views, and survey results in order to gauge both event reach and potential areas for improvement. And librarians at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities counted attendees at pilot library gaming events, solicited whiteboard and anecdotal feedback, and followed up with a survey of first-year students to gauge their interest in future gaming events (Bishoff, Farrell, and Nisser, 2015).

This article takes assessment of outreach a step further, encouraging librarians to consider a multifaceted approach to outreach assessment. It demonstrates how to use both formal and informal assessment methods in concert with one another in order to achieve predetermined assessment goals.

Library Open House

Texas A&M University is one of the largest public universities in the United States, with attendance in the fall 2016 semester exceeding 60,000 students at the College Station campus (Texas A&M, 2017). Each August, before the beginning of the fall semester, Texas A&M holds an orientation week dedicated to events and programming aimed at welcoming new students to campus. Since 2009, one of this week's "signature events" is the Libraries' Open House, an event held annually by the five libraries that make up the University Libraries. During this event, the Sterling C. Evans Library, the main library on campus, opens its main floor to welcome thousands of students and familiarize them with the Libraries. Students are invited to play library-themed carnival games, eat free pizza, and receive a free library-branded T-shirt. Open House is the largest event put on by the University Libraries; attendance over the past few years has averaged around 4,000 students per year. The Libraries markets Open House heavily at the various new student orientation events held prior to the fall semester at which the Libraries sees thousands of incoming and transfer students.

For the past three years, Open House has been styled as a carnival. The 2016 Open House included thirteen separate booths including game booths such as the Preservation department's "Save the Book" beanbag throw and programmatic booths such as for pizza and T-shirt giveaways. As participants enter Open House, they are given a "passport" that includes three empty checkboxes and a tear off ticket for a T-shirt. Each participant is required to visit three booths and have their passport checked off at each booth to receive a T-shirt. The University Libraries' branded T-shirts are the signature giveaway of Open House and are incredibly popular with students, staff, and faculty across campus; it is not unusual for the Libraries to receive requests for T-shirts from patrons who were unable to attend Open House or to receive requests to begin selling the T-shirts at the Libraries' service points. Additionally, participants must turn in their passport for free pizza and they are invited to eat and socialize outside on the Evans concourse.

Open House is an enormous investment by the University Libraries, not just financially, but in terms of human resources. Due to the scale of the event, Open House is an "all hands on deck" situation for the Libraries. Well over one hundred librarians, staff, and student workers from across the University Libraries, as well as the University Writing Center, come together to help organize the event, design the carnival games, manage and staff the game booths, hand out pizza and T-shirts, and manage the crowd. The event volunteer structure has taken several forms over the course of the years. In 2016, the First Year Experience Librarian, the Director of Learning and Outreach, and the Marketing Manager served as the event organizers with the First Year Experience Librarian serving as the event manager. In addition to the event organizers, sub-teams were created for the planning and staffing of each of the booths as well as for an assessment team. For each of the booths, there was an assigned booth leader as well as several volunteers. The assessment team was led by the Libraries' Service Design Librarian and included four additional volunteers.

Assessing Outreach

As Farrell and Mastel note, "To measure success we must begin with a goal in mind, as this can help staff prioritize activities, budgets, and time" (2016, para 2). To assess Open House, it was first important to revisit the event's outreach outcomes as defined by event organizers and the Libraries' overall outreach program. By consciously considering an outreach event's purpose, goals, and outcomes, libraries can be sure that they are being intentional in their selection of assessment strategies. First, it is important to distinguish the difference between outreach outcomes and assessment goals. An outreach outcome is similar to a learning outcome; it measures what the Libraries' would like event participants to know or be able to do after completing the outreach activity. For example, an articulated outreach outcome for Open House is that students will be able to identify at least one library service after attending the event. Identifying specific and measurable outreach outcomes is ideal, but fully assessing those outcomes is not always feasible depending on the structure and scale of the outreach event. An assessment goal, however, frames the larger research questions that will inform and shape the overall methodologies selected. Although it is good practice to ensure that the outreach outcomes and the assessment goals are in alignment, in the context of a large, complicated outreach event, organizers may have limited ability to formally evaluate all outreach outcomes. The context of the event will play a large role in determining which outreach strategies are appropriate. For the 2016 Open House, the scale of the event and efficient resource utilization were of primary concern for assessment.

As Open House requires large amounts of human resources, demonstrating the event's value is not only important to the Libraries' administration but also to all of the stakeholders who contribute to make Open House successful each year. Accordingly, one of the primary strategic goals of the assessment plan for the 2016 Open House was to demonstrate value. Event organizers wanted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data that would help tell the story of Open House to the Libraries' administrators and ensure the event's future. It was also important to collect data that would help event organizers demonstrate the event's impact to all of the volunteers that help staff the event. This event could not happen without the support of everyone in the Libraries, from public services to IT. Additionally, external stakeholders such as the University Writing Center participate in Open House, and it was important to gather data that would demonstrate the value of their involvement in the event.

The second, but equally important, assessment goal was to identify areas for programmatic improvement for better event design and experience. As an annual event, Open House is subject to tweaks and revisions each year, and the event organizers are always seeking ways to identify problem areas and improve the experience for attendees and volunteers. The programmatic improvement goal included evaluating aspects such as the event traffic pattern and traffic flow management as well as the popularity of booths, refreshments, and giveaways. Additionally, this goal would investigate the efficacy of the carnival model for the event, which, while engaging, is also labor intensive and time-consuming. The assessment team needed to explore whether there were ways to improve the event to ease these burdens on event volunteers.

Additionally, Open House was ideally positioned as a pilot for the University Libraries' efforts to develop more robust strategies to assess outreach activities. Assessment can take many forms and utilize a variety of methodologies. Methodologies can include counting, surveys, feedback walls, and observation, among many other methods. Although assessment is an element that the University Libraries strives to incorporate into all instruction and outreach activities, due to the scale, visibility, financial commitment, and potential impact of Open House, there was a need to expand the assessment methodologies in order to assess the goals of Open House. As an annual event that incorporates a large number of volunteers and participants, there is an inherent capacity to test out a variety of different strategies that can be employed to assess other aspects of the Libraries' outreach program in the future.

Methodology

Rationale and Strategy

Libraries have been increasingly adopting “design thinking” to innovate services, make spaces and spaces more user friendly, and create a culture of experimentation. The Open House assessment team used this framework to develop the assessment strategy for Open House. Assessment and design thinking go hand in hand. Design thinking is a framework that can formalize the assessment, analysis, and design process that is intuitive to many librarians. Design thinking is both a mindset and a process focused on hands-on and user-centered approaches to problem solving that can lead to innovation (Gibbons, 2016). The Design Thinking for Libraries Toolkit describes the mindset as, “deeply empathic and intuitive” and notes the rationale behind this mindset as, “Adopting a designer’s mindset enables you to see problems as opportunities and gives you confidence to start creating transformative solutions” (IDEO, 2015 p.6). The Toolkit goes on to describe the process “as a system of overlapping phases rather than a sequence of orderly steps. There are three phases to keep in mind: inspiration, ideation, and iteration” (IDEO, 2015 p.8). The Open House assessment team used design thinking to create the assessment plan, as described below, which is a snapshot into the inspiration phase. In the inspiration phase, designers engage users to provide insights and feedback and other data is collected to help designers empathize with users. The inspiration phase also includes using this data to define problems, needs, and successes that are used in later phases in the design process. The assessment plan supported the defined assessment goals of demonstrating value and programmatic improvement through activities designed towards the empathetic understanding of participants and volunteers needs and how they might feel during the event. Additionally, the assessment team designed the assessment report to describe the findings in a way that would allow event organizers to communicate the value of Open House as well as to carry on the design process as they use the information to explore new ideas and iterate for future events.

During the planning stages for the 2016 Open House assessment plan, the assessment team lead worked with the event organizers to determine the constraints that informed selected methodologies. As mentioned, Open House itself is a labor-intensive event, thus any assessment activities needed to not overwhelm a busy volunteer staff. Additionally, because the event immediately preceded the busy beginning of the fall semester, it was not practical to conduct follow-up studies. Therefore all methodologies needed to take place within the confines of Open House and would have to be relatively fast and simple to analyze. Lastly, the methodologies could not interfere with the enjoyment of the event. In order to meet the assessment goals of demonstrating value and programmatic improvement, the event organizers selected a combination of behavioral, attitudinal, qualitative, and quantitative methodologies. All methodologies have their limitations and using mixed methods can expose different information regarding the object of study. Particularly there was an interest in understanding the affective aspect of how a participant enjoyed the event that led to attitudinal and qualitative strategies such surveying and user feedback. However, these strategies can lend themselves into self-selection and self-reporting bias. To aid in mitigating these biases, there was also the desire to look at more behavioral and quantitative metrics of what actually happened at the event that would include strategies such as counting a variety of aspects of the event. These strategies, however, leave out the important question of “why?” participants were choosing their actions. Therefore, in order to meet the assessment goals, while also taking into consideration the constraints on time and resources as well as to mitigate potential bias, four specific methodologies were chosen for the 2016 Open House: (1) counting; (2) voting; (3) feedback wall; and (4) participant survey.

Methods and Logistics

Counting is a good methodology for demonstrating value as it helps stakeholders understand the scope of the event. Additionally, counting is good for programmatic improvement as it gathers data about resource use and helps event organizers understand the capacity needs of the event. Counting is a reliable quantitative method that demonstrates actual user behavior even though it does not measure specific outcomes such as user satisfaction or knowledge gained. During Open House, the assessment team took a multifaceted approach to counting, meaning that the team counted different items to measure different aspects of the event.

First, the assessment team counted the number of attendees at the event. To count people, the assessment volunteers stood just inside the entrance of the event but before the main room with a hand clicker and counted individuals as they entered. This location was chosen so it would be easy to see participants as they enter and to avoid confusing incoming participants with those leaving the event or with individuals simply entering Evans Library to research. Due to the number of participants, volunteers were unable to ensure that an individual who re-entered Open House would not be counted multiple times. The overall number of attendees at Open House is a crucial number that is of interest to all event stakeholders, as it provides a simple yet effective picture of the event’s size and the number of students reached.

The second item counted was the number of visits to each specific booth at the event. During the event, booth volunteers were busy managing the crowds of students visiting their booth and often had little opportunity to gauge the relative popularity of their booth or even guess at the number of visitors their booth received. In order to demonstrate the value of the event to the volunteers staffing the event and stakeholders, the assessment team determined it was important to measure the amount of traffic received at each Open House booth. The assessment team provided each booth with Sharpies of a different color and asked booth volunteers to mark the passport of each participant who visited the booth. The participants would then exchange their passports for pizza. The passports were set aside to be counted later by the assessment team.

Lastly, T-shirt distribution information was also counted. The T-shirts also constitute a major expense for the University Libraries; to provide 4,000 T-shirts at an event, the Libraries typically must purchase a larger number to ensure sufficient shirts in each size. Therefore, it was critically important for the assessment team to evaluate the number of T-shirts distributed overall as well as the number distributed in each size to inform purchases for future years. The most efficient method of counting T-shirts was also the simplest. Rather than counting the number of shirts distributed in each size, the assessment team simply subtracted the number of the number of T-shirts remaining after the event from the number T-shirts ordered in each size. This method was particularly effective as it also ensured that remaining T-shirts were promptly inventoried and prepared for distribution at subsequent outreach events.

In addition to the quantitative data gathered by counting, the assessment team opted to seek qualitative data to help provide context about the value of the event. The assessment team devised a feedback wall in the form of a moveable whiteboard covered with butcher paper. This whiteboard was placed on the Evans Library concourse in the area where tables and chairs had been set up for event participants to eat their pizza and socialize after finishing the event. The prompt provided for the feedback wall was “Describe Open House in one word.”

In addition to the counting methodology used to measure participant traffic at each booth, the assessment team also wanted to evaluate the participants’ preference for each booth to help determine types of booth to encourage at future events. Accordingly, the assessment team set up containers labeled with each booth name near the Open House exit. After participants received their T-shirts and pizza and as they were leaving the event, the assessment team invited participants to vote for their favorite booth. There was a large punch bowl of small balls called “Orbeez” that students were asked to pick up and drop into the container for their favorite booth. The Orbeez were used to drive down the costs of purchasing approximately 5000 tokens, which would have been costly. Orbeez are super absorbent polymers that are the size of a bead but, when placed in water, grow to the size of a marble. After absorbing sufficient water, the Orbeez were the perfect size for the voting containers, however they did remain slightly slimy. Every 15 minutes the order of the containers was rearranged to ensure that the popularity of booths was not related to the container’s proximity to the punch bowl. The voting methodology was used as an indicator of participant enjoyment that allowed the assessment team to measure the overall most popular booth as well as the number of votes a booth received per visit. Some booths, such as the Media Studio’s green screen image booth, only had the capacity to handle a smaller number of participants, so the assessment team predicted that the number of votes would be smaller. Assessing the number of votes received in comparison to the number of check marks on passports would contextualize this measure of popularity.

Finally, the last methodology used was surveys. The assessment team developed a participant survey and the event organizers developed a volunteer survey that is not described in this article. The participant survey was distributed during the event. This survey gauged both behavioral and attitudinal information as well as quantitative and qualitative data. The assessment team set up a table near the Open House exit from which they distributed eight iPad Minis pre-loaded with a Qualtrics survey. The assessment team opted to provide devices rather than a link to the survey based upon previous experiences conducting assessment at outreach activities; response numbers were significantly higher if participants did not have to pull out their own devices and follow a QR code or link to the survey. The assessment team anticipated that the participant survey would be the least fun and most time-consuming aspect of the event assessment, and therefore decided to include a small extrinsic motivator for participation in the form of Tootsie Pops.

The participant survey was deliberately designed to be brief to maximize the number of potential respondents. It included basic demographic information such as the participant's university status (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate, staff, faculty), which provides event organizers with important insights about the audience for which booths should be designed. The participant survey asked about participant's previous experience with Open House, which would help event organizers determine where to market the event. It asked for feedback about what event organizers should change, as well as about likelihood of returning. Finally, the assessment team determined that the participant survey was the best place to measure one of the key outreach outcomes of Open House: students will be able to identify at least one library service after attending the event. Accordingly, one of the questions implemented in the participant survey was, "What is one thing that you learned during Open House?"

Analysis

Assessment Findings

After the event, the assessment team gathered all data and presented it to the event organizers in the form of an assessment report. Findings from the report are summarized below as well as descriptions of how this information could be used to inform the design of future Open House events and other events within the Libraries' outreach program.

The first major highlight from the Open House assessment report was the number of attendees at the event. This number is of critical importance when demonstrating the value of the event to the Libraries' administrators, who are responsible for funding the event, as well as to many other stakeholders. Booth leaders use this number when deciding whether to develop a booth for the next year's event. Individual library staff and faculty members base their decision on whether to volunteer their time in part on the number of participants they expect to see. And the Libraries uses this number to demonstrate the value of the event to the Texas A&M University campus, which highlights specific events, including Open House, as "signature events" during orientation week activities.

Since Open House first began in 2009, the number of attendees had increased every year, sometimes dramatically, as illustrated in Figure 1. Event organizers plan every year for increased attendance, but have been anticipating that attendance numbers might plateau. The assessment team counted 3,998 attendees at the 2016 Open House, which is slightly below the 2015 attendance numbers. This information demonstrates to event organizers and to stakeholders that attendance might have plateaued in recent years, but that the event continues to draw a substantial crowd, especially for an event that lasts only two to three hours.

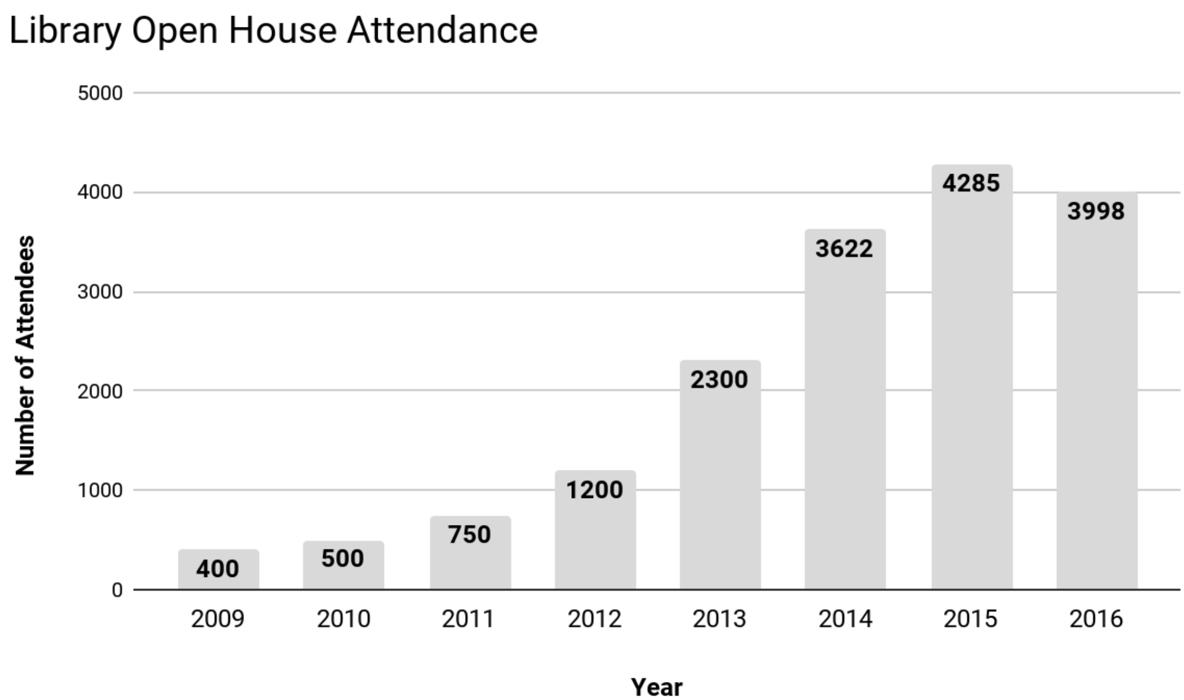
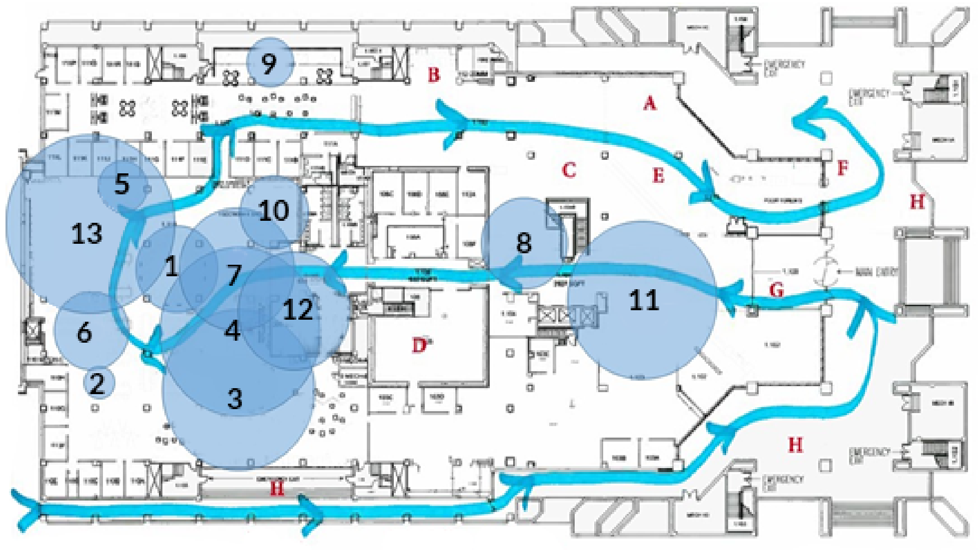


Figure 1: University Libraries Open House Attendance

The second important data point was the number of attendees per booth. This data was important for event organizers to demonstrate the value of the event to each specific booth leader and to the volunteers who staffed that booth. Although the assessment team was able to capture the number of check marks per booth by collecting the passports as authentic artifacts from the event, this methodology did have some limitations that had to be clearly communicated when sharing this data with booth leaders and volunteers. First, over the course of the event, some booth leaders found they needed more markers to better manage the traffic flow. However, booth leaders supplemented their colored Sharpies, which were coded to identify that specific booth, with plain black Sharpies. Although this supplementation was important to reduce bottlenecks in the traffic flow, it did affect the integrity of the data and black check marks were not counted. Further, this methodology had limitations in its ability to capture the full number of attendees who visited a specific booth. Although attendees are required to visit only three booths to receive checkmarks in order to be eligible for a T-shirt, it is common for attendees to voluntarily visit additional booths. Those booth visits would not be accounted for on the passports and therefore not included in this data, causing some booths to have underreported numbers of attendees.

While the methodology selected to capture the number of visits per booth was not sufficiently rigorous to give a complete picture of the traffic pattern, it did demonstrate an important point to booth leaders and booth volunteers. Due to the chaos of the event and the Evans Library floor plan, booth leaders and volunteers have a limited ability to gauge whether their booth is receiving as many participants as others, or whether booths near the end of the traffic pattern receive a smaller number of participants than those located at the beginning of the event. The assessment team used the number of visits to each booth to create circles that were in proportion to the number of visits (the larger the circle the more visits the booth had). They then superimposed these circles on a floor map and designed traffic flow of Open House (Figure 2). Based upon this picture of the event traffic, the assessment team concluded that the traffic pattern is neither creating an uncomfortable environment for participants nor is it overwhelming the volunteers at certain booths. This data was able to reassure all booth leaders that even those located near the end of the event were receiving substantial numbers of students. Indeed, the Shelving booth, which is number 13 on the heat map in Figure 2, recorded the largest number of booth visits overall despite its location as one of the final booths encountered at the event. Event organizers can use this data to demonstrate the value of each and every booth hosted at the event, as well as to ease discussions about booth placement within the traffic pattern at future events.



Game Booths
1 = Get It For Me
2 = Media & Reserves
3 = [specific named library] Special Collections
4 = Medical Sciences Library
5 = West Campus Library
6 = Political Science and Economics Library
7 = [specific named library] Library
8 = Maps and GIS
9 = Writing Center
10 = Subject Librarians
11 = AskUs
12 = Preservation
13 = Shelving

Programmatic Booths
A = Pizza Tables
B = T-Shirts
C = DJ
D = Volunteers & Green Room
E = Assessment
F = Selfies with Library Revielle
G = Line Management and Greeters
H = Water Stations

Figure 2: Open House Heat Map. Size of bubble number of visits counted via checkmarks on the passport with larger bubbles indicating more visitors.

The assessment team hoped to supplement the quantitative data above with qualitative data that could help frame the story told by the attendance and passport numbers. However, the feedback wall methodology proved unsuccessful. Despite moving the whiteboard to multiple locations in hopes of improving usage rates, there were fewer than 40 entries on the feedback wall and most of them were not useful. For example, Harambe, the name of the gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo killed earlier in 2016, was one of the most common responses. The assessment team attributes the lack of success to a variety of factors. Open House participants had already participated in a similar activity at a game booth. Additionally the feedback wall was not actively staffed. Lastly, the feedback wall was after the participants had received their pizza and T-shirt and thus might have felt that the activities were over and simply did not want to participate.

Data points such as overall attendance numbers and number of visits per booth are useful for programmatic improvement as is the data regarding T-shirts. The University Libraries orders T-shirts in bulk for Open House each year to have sufficient T-shirts in each size for participants, reduce the cost per T-shirt, and have shirts left over after the event for other outreach activities. However, the Open House organizers strive to ensure that they are not purchasing more T-shirts than can be distributed at outreach events each year, and that they are purchasing an appropriate distribution of T-shirt sizes. The assessment team calculated the number of T-shirts distributed overall at the event, which helps event organizers better understand how many participants want a T-shirt and gauge the relative popularity of the University Libraries' current marketing campaign. Approximately 88% of attendees took a T-shirt, which suggests that students were not yet tired of the Libraries' "Happy" campaign, which was in its third and final year in 2016.

Given the large cost of nearly 6000 T-shirts, understanding the size distribution is extremely important in order the needed sizes. For example, at previous Open Houses, the Libraries ran out of small size T-shirts, and in 2016, the most in-demand size was medium, followed by large. Event organizers had also purchased larger numbers of 4XL and 5XL T-shirts in 2016 in response to feedback that those sizes had run out early at previous events. Data showed that a substantial number of 4XL T-shirts had been used, but that 5XL T-shirts could be ordered in smaller quantities for future events (Table 1).

2016 Open House T-Shirt Count			
Size	Ordered	Distributed	Percent Distributed
Small	1380	791	57%
Medium	2200	1476	67%
Large	1680	930	55%
Extra Large	480	247	51%
2XL	132	50	38%
3XL	24	9	38%
4XL	42	20	48%
5XL	42	2	5%
Total Count	5980	3525	59%

Table 1: 2016 Open House T-Shirt Count

The second data point that was collected for programmatic improvement was votes on most popular booths. Event organizers and booth leaders alike have difficulty gauging the relative popularity of Open House booths. It can be challenging to determine during an event if a booth has a waiting line due to its popularity or just its capacity to handle large numbers of students. A data-informed understanding of booth popularity, however, can be critical to event planning in future years. Event organizers can use this information to spread out popular booths to improve traffic flow and reduce bottlenecks, and can also use popularity data to help booth leaders identify strategies for making their booths more successful. The voting booth was popular with students; they seemed to enjoy the Orbeez despite their slight sliminess, and over 4000 votes were cast in this activity.

Based upon participant voting, event organizers realized that their perceptions of the most popular booths did not always align with student voting. For example, while the Preservation booth, a “Save the Book” beanbag toss, appeared to be extremely popular due to the long lines associated with it, it was the sixth most popular booth according to voting. The Medical Sciences Library booth, a disease-to-transmission matching game, did not have long lines, but it received the largest number of votes. Event organizers will use this data to consider the impact that lines have on students’ perceptions of each booth for future events and try to identify new ways to mitigate traffic flow issues that cause bottlenecks around some popular booths.

While the voting data was primarily collected to inform event organizers about the popularity of specific booths and spur programmatic improvements to booth design and traffic flow, there were also unexpected findings related to demonstrating value. The voting data, when considered in comparison to the passport data (Table 2), revealed that some booths were very popular with those who were able to visit it, but that those booths could not handle a large number of attendees. For example, at the Media and Reserves booth participants could take a picture in front of a green screen. The Media and Reserves staff would then superimpose the participants’ image on a photo of Texas A&M’s football field and send the image to the participant to keep. This activity proved to be extremely popular, as it was the only booth to receive more votes than the number of attendee visits according to the passports. But because this activity took more time per participant than many others, it did not receive as many votes overall. By contextualizing the votes with the visit data, event organizers were able to demonstrate the value of that type of booth to attendees, and consider how to balance the popularity of that type of booth with the demand for a quick traffic flow and short lines.

Booth	Votes (Orbeez Count)	% of Overall Votes (n=4122)	Number of Votes per Booth Visit
Medical Sciences Library	529	12.83%	0.4035
Evans Library	421	10.21%	0.4450
Subject Librarians	389	9.44%	0.6873
Get It For Me	377	9.15%	0.5644
Shelving	362	8.78%	0.2614
Preservation	355	8.61%	0.3888
Media and Reserves	332	8.05%	1.3123
Cushing Library	298	7.23%	0.2392
University Writing Center	279	6.77%	0.7266
Maps and GIS	209	5.07%	0.2960
West Campus Library	194	4.71%	0.4802
Policy Sciences and Economics Library	194	4.71%	0.3170
AskUs Services	183	4.44%	0.1499

Table 2: Votes per Booth

Lastly, over 450 students took the survey at the 2016 Open House, and this data provided insights that will inform future event marketing efforts as well as the design of the actual event. The first insights provided by the survey data were insights into the demographic makeup of the event. Therefore, event organizers anticipated that a substantial number of attendees would be first-year students, although they were unclear on how many returning and upper-division or graduate students to expect at the event. Survey data revealed that over 60% of respondents were freshmen. Sophomores (15%) and graduate students (11%) were the next highest percentages. Fewer respondents were upper-division students, and very few were faculty, staff, or community users. This data is contextualized by the percentage of respondents who were first-time participants; nearly 85% of respondents were attending the event for the first time, with only 4% of respondents attending more than twice. This information reveals that the University Libraries’ marketing efforts aimed at incoming students, especially first-year students, seem to be effective at drawing those students to the event, but different strategies should be considered if the Libraries would like to expand the scope to effectively reach other student and campus populations.

Respondent Status	**Count**	**Percentage (n=452)**
Freshman	280	61.95%
Sophomore	66	14.60%
Junior	26	5.75%
Senior	20	4.42%
Graduate Student	50	11.06%
Faculty or Staff	4	0.88%
Other	6	1.33%
Total	452	100%

Table 3: Respondents’ campus status breakdown

Next, the assessment team attempted to measure one important outreach outcome for the event; namely, that students will be able to identify at least one library service after attending Open House. Survey respondents were asked to name one thing that they learned during the event, and the assessment team extracted the response data in the form of a word cloud (Figure 3). This format provided both event organizers and stakeholders with a visual representation of response frequency, with font sizes increasing to represent frequency of responses. The most common words other than library or libraries were terms such as books, media, check, and find, which suggests that booths such as the Shelving department’s “Find a Book” booth and Media and Reserves’ “Green Screen” booth were perceived as impactful by students. This data was useful to event organizers as they identify which booths are important to include, highlight, and promote for future events, but it was also useful for demonstrating the value of the booths to booth leaders, volunteers, and other stakeholders.

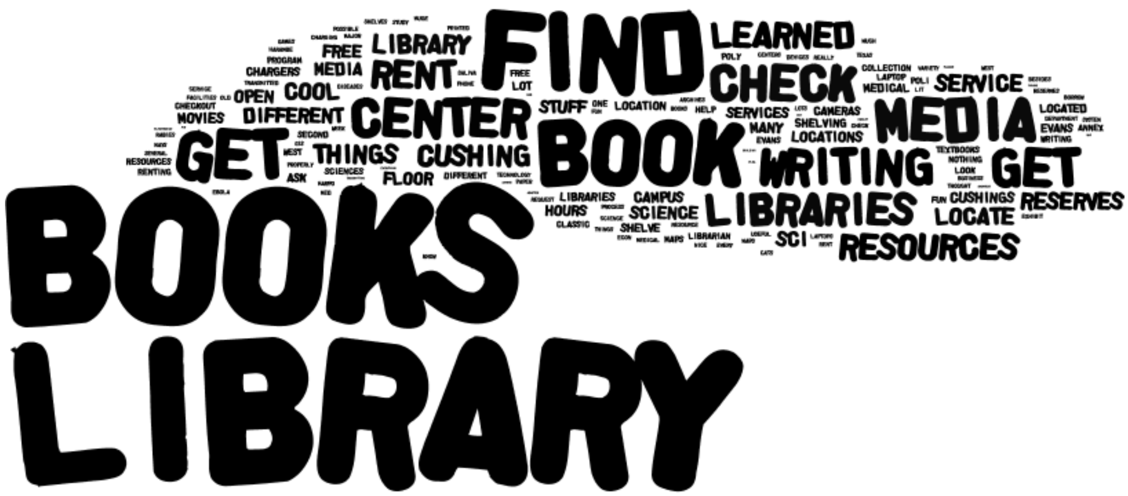


Figure 3: What Did You Learn at Open House Word Cloud (created with wordle.com)

Finally, in terms of demonstrating value, the survey question “Will you come back to Open House next year?” helps to expose how the participants value the event. If participant answered that they definitely or probably will attend next year, it indicates that they find the event worthwhile. 442 survey responses were recorded for this question, and 90% of respondents indicated that they definitely or probably would attending next year; 5% indicated that they might or might not; .4% said they probably or definitely would not attend; and 3% said that they were graduating next year. This high rate of students indicating that they would attend Open House again is a clear indicator to stakeholders that the participants find the event valuable.

Assessment Report

Although implementing a multifaceted assessment project at a large event like Open House was a challenge, the effort proved worthwhile as considerable progress was made towards achieving the articulated assessment goals. The result of the project was that event data was collected, analyzed, and aggregated into a report that is available for the next year’s Open House organizers. The first official Open House assessment report provides detailed information that is invaluable for future planning and design. Not only does it provide the head counts that are critical for ordering food and giveaways at the next year's events, but it also provided more detailed information about specific aspects of the event that can be used for programmatic improvement. For example, the survey data illuminated which student populations are most likely to attend Open House; informed whether the current event marketing efforts were working; and spurred brainstorming of new ideas for how to reach student populations that seem to be underrepresented. Similarly, students were able to inform future booth design and traffic patterns by voting for their favorite, which identified booths that were unexpectedly popular and booths that had a lower response from students. Each method provided unique points of insight into the event or into the assessment methodology itself that can be used in future years to fulfill the goal of iterative improvement to this event.

The assessment report also helped advance the goal of demonstrating library value. Event and assessment booth organizers took the data shared in the assessment report and developed it into a presentation format. The event manager and assessment team lead (the article authors) presented this data at the Texas A&M University Libraries monthly library meeting ("Dean's Corner") in November 2016. In this presentation, the authors shared the results of the assessment project with many stakeholders, including the Libraries' administration, and presentation slides were subsequently made available to the entire Libraries' personnel via the Libraries' intranet. This format afforded the authors the opportunity to contextualize the data and answer any questions about the way the data was interpreted and the way the data will be used to inform the design and implementation of future events. For example, the authors felt it was important to stress to all stakeholders that the results would not be used to eliminate any booths that did not receive many Orbeez votes. Instead, those results would be shared with booth leaders as a resource to help them reflect on their own observations of the event and consider whether they would like to try a new booth design. This presentation also afforded the opportunity to share and contextualize attendance and survey data with library administrators, which then provides those administrators with a more robust story to tell on campus about the success of the Libraries' Open House.

Finally, the 2016 Open House assessment report has been heavily consulted as organizers move forward in planning future events. Subsequent Open House events will be directly informed by the data collected, analyzed, and contextualized within the assessment report, but these findings will also have far-reaching impacts on the Libraries' outreach program. Librarians organizing orientation outreach activities for first-year students as well as underrepresented populations at Open House will be able to use this assessment data to inform their outreach approaches and encourage their students and faculty to visit Open House for fun, freebies, and library learning.

Conclusion

By implementing a robust and multifaceted approach to assessment at a major event like Open House, event organizers and the assessment team were able to pilot an approach to assessment that could be implemented in a variety of contexts. Although Open House is by far the largest and most complex outreach event held by the University Libraries, the Libraries lead or participate in many other outreach events. After a successful pilot with Open House, the Libraries now have established a set of strategies that can be adapted to other library outreach events, including much smaller events. The Libraries' Learning and Outreach department strives to incorporate assessment into outreach and instruction activities whenever possible, and this project has provided the Libraries' with a more robust assessment toolkit from which they can draw.

Librarians at any college or university library can take a similar approach to assessing library outreach. Although the size and scale of Open House afforded event organizers and the assessment team the space to pilot a variety of approaches, librarians can consider implementing a multifaceted and goal-oriented assessment approach even at smaller events. By thoughtfully considering the goals for assessment of the event, and of the overall outreach program, librarians can select methodologies to help them achieve their goals and measure the outreach outcomes for the event. Librarians can also consider the following important factors when developing their assessment reports: mitigating bias; maximizing resources by only assessing to the extent they can analyze; considering the audience for the assessment report; and documenting for transparency and to facilitate planning of future events. Additionally, by not only gathering data, but also analyzing, reporting, and further sharing that data, librarians can help demonstrate the value of their outreach efforts to stakeholders both inside and outside the library as well as make iterative design improvements to their outreach activities to position themselves to make further impact at future events.

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