

CREATING A LIBRARY FAIR

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CREATING A WELCOME TO THE LIBRARY EVENT

Almost two years ago, I was a new librarian at Indiana State University. Naively, I asked the head of reference what kind of event the library planned to welcome students when the fall semester started. "None," she replied, "but it sounds like a good idea. Why don't you work on something?" "Be glad to," I answered (having no idea what I was getting into). Following is our adventure in creating an event to welcome students to the Cunningham Memorial Library.

PLANNING TEAM

Two librarians and one staff person made up the core team that was responsible for creating the event. Since this was the first event of this type, we wanted to keep the core team small, partially for ease in arranging meetings, but mainly because it would be easier for a small group to stay focused on planning the event.

Our first task was to decide what type of an event to have and to outline all that needed to be done in order to have a successful event. The team decided to call the library welcome event a "fair." We thought that most students would be familiar with this term and would associate a fair with having fun in a non-stressful situation.

There were many other decisions to be made including the selection of a day and time for the event, a theme, events and displays, games for the students, food and drink, donations from merchants, gift bags for students, work schedule for staff, and, of course, publicity.

We decided to schedule the fair for two days in late August from 9:00 a.m. to 12 noon. We wanted to hold the event very early in the semester, hoping to introduce the students to the library and staff in a fun and friendly atmosphere on a day that did not interfere with any other events at the library.

THEME

The next item on the agenda was to create a theme for the fair. The theme had to satisfy our criteria: to

make the library non-threatening for students, to showcase the facility and resources, to make the event available to all students from those considered "returning" to international, and to have fun. We decided to find an international theme that would give us many choices in decorations and library resources to highlight during the fair. We felt that it was important to choose a theme that encompassed all students and we finally settled on "Passport to the World" as our theme.

EVENTS AND DISPLAYS

We knew that we did not want the students to walk into the lobby, pick up free food, and then leave. We wanted them to at least look at the library and the resources available. We needed something to get the students into the building and past the lobby and in which all students would want to participate. Our solution was simple. On each floor of the library are ceiling to floor window displays cases. We decided to use the window displays to highlight international materials from the library. We would have students answer one question about the display on each floor. Ok — why would the students want to look at displays of international materials and answer questions? Prizes!

The three questions were on one slip of paper. Queries were formed in simple sentences so students new to the English language would be able to understand the questions asked about each display. Students added their name, phone or email address to the slips of paper. Entry forms stated all three questions had to be answered correctly to win a prize. Drawings were held every hour.

On the first floor, the display consisted of various Fodor Travel Guides from the reference section, representing the countries of international students attending Indiana State University. A large world map was pinned to the wall as background along with a list of web site addresses for the national libraries around the world. Copies of the web site addresses were available for interested students to pickup. Students had to list one of the Fodor tour guides displayed in the window.

The window on the second floor contained a display of fiction and non-fiction by American and

WIN A PRIZE! ANSWER EACH QUESTION ABOUT A WINDOW DISPLAY. THE DISPLAYS ARE OPPOSITE THE ELEVATORS ON THE BASEMENT, FIRST AND SECOND FLOORS OF THE LIBRARY. YOU MUST ANSWER ALL THREE QUESTIONS CORRECTLY TO WIN.

FIRST FLOOR: NAME ONE OF THE FODOR TRAVEL GUIDES.

SECOND FLOOR: IS EMILY BRONTE ONE OF THE AUTHORS SHOWN?

BASEMENT FLOOR:

THERE ARE THREE MAPS SHOWN. NAME THE MAP ON THE LEFT SIDE OF THE WINDOW.

NAME: _____

E-MAIL ADDRESS _____

TELEPHONE _____

YOU WILL BE CONTACTED IF YOU WIN!!!

international authors along with posters depicting several of the authors. Students were asked if a work by a particular author was shown in the display.

The government documents librarian created the display for the basement window. The display included three maps of the world and international materials printed by the United States government. Students were asked the title of a particular map on display.

We also included another simple game that turned out to be an unbelievable hit with the students. Four paperbacks (bought at a garage sale for 25 cents each) were taped (using clear tape) onto a cardboard base in a square shape. The center of the square was filled with candy; clear plastic wrap was placed over the entire package. Students had to guess how much candy was in the square. The winner received the candy and the books.

Additionally, we scheduled live demonstrations of wireless technology, a display of information about the Rare Books and Inter-Library Loan departments and tours of the library every half hour. Students chose how much they wanted to participate. If they wanted to pick up food and leave, there was no pressure to participate any further. We felt that it was important to greet the students and to give them the choice of how much they wanted to participate in the fair.

FOOD AND DRINK

When we started planning this event, I sent e-mails to several library list-servs asking if other libraries had attempted this type of event and what advice they would offer. Every answer included food. Food needed to be served for the event to be a success. We decided to offer a plastic bag with 2 cookies or a bag of chips along with a small bottle of water. Staff seated at tables in the lobby

encouraged students to pick up the food (little encouragement was needed after students realized that the items were free) and water and continue through the fair. We had no problems with refuse in the library from water bottles, chips or cookie bags.

DONATIONS

We contacted city merchants to ask for a donation to be used as a prize for the students. The merchants were very generous in their donations. Coca-Cola donated 250 bottles of water. They even brought in a cooler to keep the water cold. Other stores donated gifts, free haircuts, food coupons, and gift certificates. We tried to ask merchants not usually involved with donations (beauty salons, flower shops, and an alterations store). We had enough gifts to hold drawings every half hour for prizes. As a grand prize, to be drawn when the fair closed at noon, a parking pass for a semester of free parking on campus was awarded to a student.

The stores we contacted did request a written confirmation about the fair on university letterhead stationary for tax purposes. During the fair, a poster board listed the donations and the merchants responsible. This was an especially good idea since at least one merchant did appear during the event. We were able to point out the poster and show him where his donation was displayed. After the event, hand written thank you notes were sent to each of the merchants.

PUBLICITY

The event was heavily advertised. Colorful posters in the library lobby announced the event. Flyers announcing the free event were placed in dormitories, classroom buildings, and the union building. An ad was

placed in the student newspaper. Invitations were sent to the President and Provost of the university. On the days of the event, a banner was placed outside the library to draw students inside.

WORKERS FOR THE FAIR

Staff were informed of the event at a library meeting. E-mails throughout the planning stage kept everyone informed of the progress. Sign-up sheets for the event were available for staff to sign up to work one-hour shifts. People could choose which area they wanted to work (set-up, food giveaway, prize-sign up, gift bags or clean up). Several of the staff who signed up for an hour worked much longer — because they were having fun.

THE DAY OF THE FAIR: GREETING THE STUDENTS

Faculty and staff were stationed outside the library to welcome students and encourage them to venture inside for food and prizes. Some of the volunteers outside wore costumes of their own choosing, greeting students with kazoos as they walked along the sidewalk outside the library. The costumes and props were a great way to attract the attention of the students. One librarian donned a native Bavarian costume she purchased during a trip to Europe which was very appropriate for the theme of the event. Other faculty and staff dressed in Hawaiian print shirts or large hats. A few volunteers blew bubbles to attract the attention of students. Gift bags were handed out to students from this location. The gift bags consisted of brown lunch bags containing a bookmark, pencil, sticky note pad and a few pieces of candy. Key chains and other free small items (highlighters, pens) donated by another department on campus completed the gift bags. On the outside of the bag was a sticker welcoming the students to the library.

The library lobby was the main stage for the event. Here students were able to pick up free food and drink, pick up answer slips for the window displays to win prizes, and play a game. A large display window held a "Passport to the World" welcome. At a local teacher supply store, we found large paper squares with a border of international flags. Librarians and staff with foreign language ability printed international greetings of "Welcome" and "Hello" on the various squares for the window. Also displayed were CD covers of international music. A librarian who collects flags from all over the world volunteered his flags for display in the window. The welcome window set a great tone for the fair. Staff sat at the tables in the lobby, handing out food and drink and encouraging the students to participate in the different activities of the fair.

The first fair was a great success according to staff,

library administration, and most importantly, the students of the university. Between 750 and 900 students participated in the two-day event. Although the number may seem low, compared to the total enrollment (about 11,000), we realized there were additional factors to consider. Not every student is on campus every day, some students go directly to their classroom (which may be on the other side of campus) and do not venture any further than they have to, and some students choose not to participate in campus events. But the students who did participate felt that this was a success and told us that they thought it was great we were doing this. It broke the ice for the students and the staff, allowing them to interact in a situation which was fun and non-threatening.

WHAT WE ARE CHANGING FOR THIS YEAR

We are planning the event for 2002. We have learned from last year, and will be changing some things. This year, the event is scheduled for only one day and will be from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., giving students the opportunity to stop by during their lunch hours.

Since the books filled with candy were so successful, we may make this a tradition at every fair. But, we have learned to put the books and candy together several days before the fair in order to let the candy settle and then add more candy before sealing the project with plastic wrap. Last year, we offered cookies and chips. We learned that the chips were much more popular than the cookies, so this year, we will offer a variety of chips and no cookies.

We also decided that we should not contact the same merchants every year for prizes and we will look for different ones to solicit this year. Some of the best prizes (according to students) last year were the baskets or small boxes filled with candy or chips and soft drinks. We have decided to create some of our own gifts this year and are thinking about putting together small baskets filled with food or academic items students always need. One idea is a small basket filled with microwave popcorn, cola and a voucher for a movie rental. Another might be a small container filled with highlighters, pens, a notebook and some candy.

It is difficult to estimate the number of students who will attend this type of an event. Last year, we started off with 750 gift bags, but ran out on the second day. Although the students were good-natured about missing gift bags, we plan on creating 1,000 gift bags this year.

This coming fall, we also want to highlight the library and resources more heavily. We plan to emphasize tours (a good way for students to learn what resources the library has and where they are located). We want to spice up the tours by hinting of past ghost

sightings or the location of the tarantula found by a staff member earlier this year. Plans are also in the works to create a continuously looping videotape of the library showcasing databases and reference materials available in the library.

Finally, we can offer two big tips to help you succeed in planning a library fair. The first (and the one we plan to follow this year) is to start planning early. We had about three months to plan the event last year. While it was successful, we rushed to complete everything in time for the fair. The second tip is to organize. We started with a three ring binder, labeling and dividing into the following areas: Possible Games, Food and Drink, Merchants Contacted, Merchant Letters, Thank you notes, Gifts Received and Window Displays. The binder enabled us to keep track of our progress and serves as an excellent record of the event.

The Library Fair is an event we plan to continue. It is an excellent opportunity to showcase the library and library materials. Most important, it is a chance to introduce the library and staff to students in a friendly, stress-free environment.

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