

In the Public Interest

JOSIE BARNES PARKER, Column Editor
Director, Ann Arbor District Library, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Column Editor's Note. *It is a privilege to be asked to edit and write a column addressing issues of concern to the general public and the public library community. I will attempt to bring issues forward from the point of view of public libraries, large and small, wealthy and struggling, used and neglected, and those facing the future, as well as those struggling to preserve practices that deserve respect, if not preservation. Although the Journal of Library Administration has peer-reviewed articles, this "In the Public Interest" column is intended to represent all of the perspectives of the public concerning public libraries, and those of persons who are delivering service to the public through public libraries. This column will appear on a rotation, in several issues each year. Submissions are not peer-reviewed, but are reviewed and selected by the column editor. Public library administrators, managers, anyone on the staff of a public library, and those serving in elected and appointed positions in local governments are invited to contribute to the column by contacting Josie Parker at josie@aadl.org email address. Manuscript guidelines and submission timelines will be sent with further instruction for authors.*

BETTER TOGETHER: RESPONSIVE COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING AT THE U-M LIBRARY

JAMIE LAUSCH VANDER BROEK

*Learning Librarian, Exhibits and Programming Librarian, University of Michigan,
Ann Arbor, MI, USA*

EMILY PUCKETT RODGERS

*Entrepreneurship Program Manager, School of Information, University of Michigan,
Ann Arbor, MI, USA*

© Jamie Lausch Vander Broek and Emily Puckett Rodgers
Address correspondence to Emily Puckett Rodgers. E-mail: epuckett@umich.edu

ABSTRACT. *In the past seven years, the University of Michigan Library's programming model has evolved to be responsive and reflective of staffing areas of interest and expertise. Our team-based, iterative model enables us to develop responsive exhibits, workshops, experiences, and events in our community. This article explores our experiences in developing this model through the lens of some of our collaborations with the Ann Arbor District Library (AADL). Our approach to programming opportunities builds on learning by doing, building deeper, mutually beneficial relationships with other organizations, and continually making sure we are truly developing programming with our audience (our community) in mind. While public and academic libraries often develop distinct sets of services, collections, and expertise to serve their respective communities, successful collaborations can yield interesting opportunities for more effective engagement and programming. Our relationship with AADL has helped us to identify and better understand how we can connect our teaching and research missions with the interests and needs of the broader community in which we are situated.*

KEYWORDS *outreach, programming, academic-public library partnerships, community engagement*

The very first item that the University of Michigan Library bought, in 1839, was John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*. The university paid \$970 (in 1839) for the collection, demonstrating our commitment to education as a leading public university. This summer, the folio was used in a set of clues in the Summer Game, a multidimensional set of experiences designed by the Ann Arbor District Library (AADL) to engage our community in events, learning, expression, and engagement throughout the city. The U-M Library's involvement in the Summer Game was the season's culmination of several collaborations with AADL and it brought hundreds of individuals and families into the library's undergraduate and graduate libraries during the month of August.

As we seek to "contribute to the common good" we are driven to "communicate, and share the record of human knowledge" (University of Michigan Library, n.d.). A library system with over fifteen physical locations and hundreds of employees, our approach to community engagement through exhibits and programming has developed iteratively over time. It is based on celebrating ideas, engaging our librarian and staff strengths and interests, and in taking advantage of emergent, tangible opportunities to partner with community organizations. Especially emblematic of this engagement is our library's deepening relationship with our local public library, the Ann Arbor District Library.

In this article, we discuss the ways in which librarians and staff at U-M Library have developed responsive programming and exhibits that focus on engaging the larger community of Ann Arbor and how the library has developed relationships that take advantage of strengths of shared collections across AADL and U-M Library and community interest/activities. This approach has enabled U-M Library to serve both our academic community and the region in which we are based. As a public university, we believe it is important that any staff associated with this programming is “at the table” at relevant events and conversations within our community. This helps us to identify and better understand how we can connect our teaching and research missions with the interests and needs of the broader community in which we are situated and for whom we serve. Indeed, similar efforts of “turning outward” (Kranich, Lotts, & Springs, 2014) have been supported by ALA across both academic and public libraries as we develop more proactive strategies to critically and meaningfully engage with our communities.

LEARNING BY DOING

Over the past seven years, the U-M Library has dedicated staff and space to exhibits, workshops, author discussions and more, aiming to physically and programmatically provide an intersection between academic and cultural activities in our area. While originally very academically focused in its delivery and model, in 2012 we took a more distributed approach to these services to address more learning-centric activities and to begin building relationships across the university *and* the surrounding community in southeast Michigan.

Established in 2007, the University of Michigan Library’s primary programming space occupies an expansive first floor area in the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, which is located at the heart of the University’s central campus. Formerly a staff area, the nearly floor to ceiling panoramic windows overlooking the campus thoroughfare, the Diag, make it an attractive location for bringing the campus together with the broader community. Initially, events in the space were modeled after the programming at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, aiming to be a center for the intersection between academic and cultural activities. It was never meant to be a rental hall for social events or a location for closed-off, private retreats. Its location at the entrance to the library, which is free and open to the public, led to a programming mission that supported the same objectives. Originally, the program had a full time director as well as a support staff position.

In 2012 the program’s director moved onto a new position in the library, and a three-person team was established: managing the Library Gallery would constitute 25% of each person’s job. The team members are a mix

of librarians and staff and were selected for their programming, technology and managerial experience.

The original director established many connections across the University, and the established reputation of the space made finding new partners easy. Up to this point, however, the focus of programming was on traditional academic events such as lectures and panel discussions limited the possibilities of the space, particularly in terms of engaging undergraduate audiences. The transition to a new staffing model allowed for a reevaluation of programming efforts, and we began saying “yes” to requests we never had before. The new team retained the original mandate that most events be free and open to the public, but expanded acceptable activities to include hands-on workshops, student performances, and class sessions. This coincided with an organizational shift, from organizing staffing by building to organizing staffing by function, within the library. Along with this shift, the Library Gallery began to be seen within the staff of the library as shared by all of the library rather than a programming location for just those located in the Graduate Library.

In 2012 we also established a library-wide Exhibits and Programming Group. The Exhibits and Programming Group, which meets monthly, brings together staff engaged in programming activities from across the library system. Over time, our team grew to see ourselves as more connected to each other, rather than isolated in our own buildings. We both increased internal awareness and communication among exhibits and programming staff and also collaborated more, increasing the number of exhibits taking place across multiple spaces in the library system on our two major campuses. This team, which falls outside of the formal organizational structure of the library and has no decision-making authority, provides us with a lot of utility for very little formalized effort.

After a year of regular meetings, our team decided to broaden awareness of exhibits among our colleagues within the library. During Winter Semester 2014 we organized two daylong intensive workshops in wood engraving for staff that coincided with an exhibit of wood engravings in our Special Collections Library. We followed these workshops with a lunchtime open house at an in-house letterpress studio, Wolverine Press, which recently opened in our storage facility. One of the participants in the daylong workshop reported that it was his best-ever day at work, and all of the participants left with a deepened knowledge of the physical processes at play in our library’s collections.

As a culture of useful experimentation began to grow at the library within the realm of exhibits and programs, we were emboldened to take things beyond the physical limits of the libraries, into the community. In January 2014 we approached the Ann Arbor District Library with an idea to collaborate on a pop up library located somewhere within the city of Ann Arbor.

PARTNERSHIPS LEAD TO RELATIONSHIPS

As our staffing model has become more organized around staff strengths and responsiveness to community interest, our growing relationship with AADL also reflects these values. What began as a single partnership centered on a collection is now a strong relationship where ideas and opportunities can be shared and acted upon in ways that best respond to community interest and activities. However, we have learned that partnering with a public library challenges our library's notion of "access" in concrete ways.

Our library has had a long history of collaborating with AADL by coordinating an annual exhibit of materials drawn from our Special Collections Library's Children's Literature Collection. Over the past two years, however, we've expanded our collaboration greatly to include joint programming, additional exhibits, library advocacy, and outreach activities. We've also increased our collaboration in traditional programming, cross-promoting author talks and lectures when they have a broad appeal.

We don't just partner with AADL on family friendly outreach opportunities, we have also partnered with AADL on shared advocacy initiatives. When our Foundations and Grants and Education librarian was inspired by past ALA president Barbara Stripling's Declaration for the Right to Libraries, we contacted staff at AADL to coordinate a public signing event. AADL helped us brainstorm to come up with an ideal setting for the signing. We targeted the community fair associated with the annual Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti Reads program, in which people from all over the area would be streaming past information booths on their way into an author talk and book signing held at a local community college. Though our library held seats on the planning board for the Reads program, we had not traditionally participated in the public events. Instead, we had opted to offer book discussion programs for our students and faculty on campus. These programs achieved modest success. Attending the fair to collect signatures for the Declaration, nearly every person our U-M librarians encountered had no idea he or she could make use of our library and its collections and resources. Lumped into their understanding of the University as "not for them," we realized that, despite our successes with programming in the Library Gallery, we had a long way to go to effectively reach the greater Ann Arbor community.

The partnership between AADL and the U-M Library comes naturally. Our collections complement each other, and we share a desire to effectively utilize technology for preservation, access and innovation. As the library serving a public research institution, the U-M Library strives to serve our community beyond the bounds of academic scholarship and research. Beyond these characteristics, the iterative model described in the previous section makes us ideal collaborators from a functional perspective. In contrast to coordinating programming with slower-moving organizations, the staff and librarians at AADL and the U-M Library appreciate purposeful risk taking

and experimentation as a method for learning and growth when developing community-responsive programming. We find AADL easy to partner with because we know their team will jump into the deep end with us, learning together as we go along. AADL staff provides U-M Library staff with a window into their expertise in hands-on engagement that is timely and reflective of larger community activities, such as city festivals.

Our pop up library, Library on the Lawn, evolved in this way. Inspired by the Strandbibliotek in Copenhagen, a beach-based pop up library run out of a shipping container at the seashore, we contacted AADL to see if they might be interested in creating a pop up library in an unexpected place somewhere in the city. They enthusiastically jumped in, helping us take the idea from a winter brainstorming meeting to a summer reality in six months. Together we explored the idea and its possibilities, from the football stadium on game days to empty storefronts in town, and arrived at the annual Ann Arbor Summer Festival (AASF) as an ideal fit. AADL had a track record of supporting children's programming at the AASF, a several-week-long outdoor film and concert series held each year in June and July. The AASF brings a large group of people to downtown Ann Arbor and the U-M campus, but unlike the football games, most of the attendees are from the city and its surrounding area. Programming at AASF is family friendly and includes a variety of performances, movies, and events. AADL's strong relationship with AASF helped us receive a green light on this experimental project.

Over the next few months, we met with a combined team of library staff from AADL and the U-M Library, creating a logistical and programmatic plan for the pop up library. In contrast to AADL, which has long been comfortable with public outreach, our library had a lot of thinking to do in this area. Questions about outreach that were easy for AADL were much harder for us. Initially, AADL focused on the logistics, rather than the programmatic aspects of the pop up, while we were the opposite. The AASF is hosted by the University, which gave us a comfort level and insider status from a logistical perspective. However, though we are a public institution, we have traditionally primarily focused on serving the students, faculty and staff at the University. We had to consider carefully what we as an academic library brought to the table at the pop up library. While our exhibits and building are open to the public, off campus many of our resources are accessed via variety of content-specific policies or limitations. Our subscription database policies ended up creating conversation centered on a "yes this, but no, not that" message that was awkward from an outreach perspective aimed at the general public. How to access our content is not easily explained in a pop up library setting.

However, our library expresses a culture of public service that runs deep within the staff. Our collections have long included patent and government document repositories, legally mandated to be open to the public. In contrast

to many other departments on campus, we view our mission as broader than serving the day-to-day research needs of the University community. For example, we are the only buildings on campus that remain open during the annual Ann Arbor Art Fairs in the summer, which bring thousands of visitors into the center of the city. As a public research university, serving the public is important to us, but we don't often actively engage with what it means from a programmatic or practical standpoint. In the digital age, much of our energy and staffing has focused on providing seamless academic access to a complicated network of subscription materials even as we pioneer open access initiatives like HathiTrust. So, through the pop up library project, thinking carefully about what we actually could offer the public was difficult but important work for us.

To begin the conversation about targeted services each library could promote, we created a set of personas representing individuals who could benefit from using our collections. Ranging from entrepreneurs seeking patent information to writers engaged in research, these descriptions helped us make concrete the user needs we were trying to address. We then enumerated the collections and services that would address the needs of these populations. Armed with our list to promote, we worked with AADL to flesh out the logistics and staffing for the "Library on the Lawn," including furnishing our "outdoor living room" space, based on the idea that one function of a library is to act as a communal living space. This concept has roots in higher education's established practice of creating embedded libraries in campus common areas packed with services and information, so the frame was appropriate to both of our organizations.

The AASF gave our pop up library a shared tent space for its pilot year. We operated every Sunday evening of the festival, aligned with the children's and family day. For AADL this was a natural fit, and children and parents flocked to our tent, comfortable with AADL's presence at the event and expecting opportunities to connect with their incredibly popular Summer Game. For us, though we were comfortably within our campus environment, the outdoor summer family population was totally new to us, and we initially struggled to understand the needs of the audience. We brought collections of discarded popular material, which proved attractive, but for the most part our efforts to evangelize attendees about the benefits of engaging with our library generally fell flat. In some instances our marketing materials about our Espresso Book Machine (open to the public to use) or our services led to a genuine reference question. But, encumbered by their small children, who raced around the festival grounds, most of the adults visiting our booth didn't have time to consider their own research or entertainment needs. While we heard feedback that our presence at AASF was appreciated, our message wasn't well aligned with our audience and context. Watching the families, parents as much as children, devour the Summer Game, however, gave us an idea.

In its 4th year, AADL's Summer Game had recently expanded beyond offering incentives to players to visit AADL locations and programs to partnering with local parks and community organizations. As our experience with Library on the Lawn was ending, we asked AADL if we could develop a series of badges for Summer Game players to earn from engaging with our library in some way. We selected two of our exhibits and one of our digital research guides for inclusion in the Game and sat down with staff from AADL to come up with questions that could only be answered by visiting the exhibits in person or engaging directly with the research guide online. The exhibits and guide we selected, the permanent display of our Audubon *The Birds of America*, a pair of displays on the history of Ann Arbor, and a research guide about finding historical maps for the city of Detroit, were ideal for community engagement. The Ann Arbor displays, *Place: Ann Arbor* and *A Community for Victory: Ann Arbor During World War II* were created in collaboration with AADL's staff and featured material from the U-M Clark Library and the AADL Ann Arbor News Archive and Local History Collection. Our research guide contained links and information about a topic of regional history, most of which are available for use by the public without subscription. This partnership proved to be an ideal combination: the U-M Library provided content and a novel location for Summer Game participants, while AADL gave us an enthusiastic stream of visitors and the infrastructure to attract and quantify them. This allowed us to actively communicate our position in the shared history of our community. The Audubon *The Birds of America* collection is displayed in our Special Collections room, which showcases materials from the variety of historic collections we own in the library, including papyri, and Islamic, Medieval, and Renaissance manuscripts. The three badges in our displays were earned 524 times by the end of the Summer Game, introducing many to our services and in-house collections access and strengthening this connection for others.

We realized, through the learning process of developing the Library on the Lawn and then in participating in the Summer Game, that our intended audience really is our community. This may seem obvious, and in fact it is, but it is often easy to conflate these two concepts and lose sight of why librarians develop programs in the first place. Audience doesn't just mean numbers in attendance, bodies in a seat, audience means the people we serve, connect with, and support. Our audience must relate to us because it is our community. Communities, and the individuals in them, are why libraries exist.

AUDIENCE IS COMMUNITY

Through our collaboration for the Library on the Lawn, we learned a lot from AADL. We especially learned how an academic library can perform

outreach to a broader public audience. Our library can also offer resources or infrastructure that enables AADL to connect with young adults, ages 20–30, in a way they wouldn't otherwise be able to do. We explore one example of this, the Oculus Rift hackathon, in this section. Partnering with AADL to reach a common audience, young adults, is also a way for our academic library to be increasingly relevant in an age of change in higher education: these types of experiences we can offer our students align with our university's mission to support engaged learning. It's been a challenge, however, for our library to re-imagine how to market our services to the general community.

Over the past two years, we have worked more closely with AADL to offer programs that effectively engage to our overlapping audiences. Last fall, for example, AADL approached us with an opportunity to host an overnight hackathon for the Oculus Rift video game headset. AADL's success in gaming programs dovetails nicely with our Undergraduate Library's 24-hour downtown building and our population of young adults. The program brought engineering students down from U-M's North Campus for the weekend, and many of them remarked it was their first time in the Undergraduate Library. It also brought community members into the library from a local hackerspace, All Hands Active, one of the hackathon's collaborators.

The University has recently emphasized its focus on community-based engaged learning for all enrolled students. This is part of a commitment to broadening the impact of the University through initiatives such as Coursera, increasing international learning experiences, and regional community engagement for our students. During the Oculus Rift event, attendees formed groups to design a game for the virtual reality headset system. Though the groups self-segregated along their community and U-M division, all of the programming and game testing occurred in the same space in the Undergraduate Library. Students worked side-by-side with game enthusiasts and developers in the Ann Arbor community over the course of the 40-hour program.

While our library seeks to attract a broader community audience, our collaborators at AADL are expanding their reach to young adult audiences. These members of our community traditionally gravitate away from public libraries after their teen years, often failing to return until after they have children of their own. As a part of our community, college-age students provide an opportunity for both U-M Library and AADL to provide programmatic continuity and to establish habits of visiting and using library services and collections that can continue after graduation.

In addition to our partnership on the Oculus Rift hackathon, we have worked with AADL to offer an iron-on printing workshop featuring images from our contributions to the HathiTrust Digital Library. AADL staff contributed experience with hands-on programs (and a staffer with an invaluable ability to remove the stubborn backing from iron-on decals). Our staff provided space within a glassed-in technology hub called the Tech Deck on

the first floor of Undergraduate Library. We also provided software assistance to meet any student's interest in creating custom content. Attendance at the event was typical of our undergraduate programming. Unless championed by a student organization, students tend to attend our events at the spur of the moment rather than planning to attend and making room in their schedules. In fact, the only student who had planned to attend the program in advance was a graduate student studying library science. The other attendees wandered into the Tech Deck, curious about the ironing board and stack of blank canvas tote bags. Other students followed, drawn in by their peers' creations. Applying what we learned from this program should aid in outreach practices to college students for our partners at AADL. Meeting them where they already are with an enticing hook to draw them in is an excellent way to deliver a message.

In fact, this mirrors our experiences at the Library on the Lawn with the adult community population. While we were halfway to meeting our community where they already were, our academic library's message offering help with research expected too much of them in the context of a summer festival. By adjusting our tactic and bringing our message to an activity our community was already doing (playing the Summer Game), we had much more success.

We have begun to co-market events with a broad community appeal. Ann Arbor's population is highly educated, with an over 70% college graduation rate (United States Census Bureau, 2013). The U-M Library Gallery hosts a wide variety of academic programming, from author talks to films and panel discussions, many of which are sponsored in partnership with departments across campus. By cross-promoting these more traditionally academic events, we offer lifelong learning opportunities to our community. We also connect the scholarly products of the University to the lives and experiences of its community. We believe this kind of engagement is especially valuable as higher education redefines relevance in the age of great change in the ways in which humanities and STEM fields are being researched and taught.

CONCLUSION

As U-M Library's culture and mission toward broad public engagement has evolved over the years, we have found a true partner in the staff at AADL. Together, we strengthen relationships and learning opportunities across the academic and regional communities and serve to support each other with our shared infrastructure, skills, and resources. Within our academic library, the approach the Gallery Team has developed to cross departmental lines, staffing based on interest, expertise, and domain knowledge, serves as a model to other units seeking to serve a broad community both nimbly and effectively.

We have also learned so much from our collaborations with AADL, from learning to be more approachable to an audience that is seasonally receptive to our services to designing young adult oriented experiences and workshops that celebrate their own learning agency and the resources both libraries bring to the community to utilize. In developing responsive programming, we are also able to respond to trends, interests, and needs as they appear in our community. This adds to our reputation as being a library that serves relevant needs and interests but we also learn from these experiences each time we respond to opportunity, honing our engagement model.

Finally, our partnerships and our approach to iterative programming has enabled our team and our library to re-imagine and continually challenge our view of what an academic library can offer our own community and the broader regional community in which we are situated. It challenges us to critically examine what “access” means to both our faculty, staff, and students and to our general public. It enables us to be prepared to address the uncertainties and changes in our field and in our academic community. As we continue to build the next century’s collections we will do so with our community and our collaborators in mind.

REFERENCES

- Kranich, N., Lotts, M., & Springs, G. (2014). The promise of academic libraries: Turning outward to transform campus communities. *College and Research Libraries News*, 75(4), 182–186. Available at <http://crln.acrl.org/content/75/4/182.full>
- United States Census Bureau. (2013, December 17). *American Community Survey (2008–2012). 5 Year Estimate*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/2012_release/
- University of Michigan Library. (n.d.). About the library. Retrieved from <http://www.lib.umich.edu/about-library>

Copyright of Journal of Library Administration is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.