Library/Student Partnerships Redefine Tomorrow’s Libraries

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Introduction

Are we doing everything we can to adapt to new technological and social environments? Or, are we bound by service and planning models that are designed for an earlier generation of students? Traditionally, libraries built relationships with faculty and academic departments. Students interacted with libraries only when they approached service desks or worked as student assistants. However, significant partnerships between students and libraries are rare. As the Internet continues to transform social behaviors and how students relate to libraries, we need to redesign our services, resources and facilities to meet the needs of today’s students. In fact, students are under-consulted, under-utilized allies who can help us redefine libraries and the educational experience more than any other constituency group. Engaging students can provide partnerships and
directions for libraries that can increase use and establish creative approaches to funding libraries.

In this paper we will describe an active collaboration with students at San Diego State University in order to redefine current library services and staffing and establish a national dialog about innovative ways to meet the research needs of current students. We will also convey student leaders’ perspectives on why students at San Diego State University voted for two fee referendums providing nearly $2 million to change library facilities and resources to meet student needs. Finally, we will share information on how to gather a rich array of feedback from students from the library that received more LibQual responses than any other. Substantial and continuous student feedback support more meaningful strategic planning decisions.

**Literature Review**

Many libraries today are developing important partnerships with a variety of groups on college and university campuses.¹ For example, librarians often collaborate with faculty on different types of issues, such as information literacy initiatives,² collection building,³ and other research or instructional kinds of projects. But libraries also work closely with other groups besides faculty, including student services,⁴ student affairs,⁵ and athletics.⁶ Carol Germain has advocated librarian-student partnerships that involve a range of responsibilities related to library instruction, web page design, library committees, and
other similar activities.\textsuperscript{7} These are all important types of collaborations. However, it is rare that libraries and students truly engage in collaboration, and rarer still when libraries and student government leaders partner together to reach a mutually desired outcome that has far reaching fiscal ramifications.

Most discussions of student fees in the literature are framed in a negative light and emphasize the fact that students generally dislike the higher fees and tuition increases that inevitably are imposed upon them in difficult economic times. Students, especially those who attend state-funded universities, are on the whole reluctant to pay these higher fees because of their own limited financial resources. There are rare occasions when students will agree to “tax” themselves through new or increased student fees,\textsuperscript{8} but these are clearly the exception and not the rule.

This paper will examine the intersection of two very rare occurrences on college campuses today: library-student collaboration, and student-initiated fee increases. Our presentation will explain the scenario that led to this unique event, and will offer reasons for why it took place and how it can be replicated elsewhere.

\textbf{Background}

About the SDSU Library and Information Access:
• 2.5 million visits last year
• 4.4 million hits to our Web site last year
• Total library hours are 19,242 per year, a 46% increase since 2002.
• 7 million items in collection (including microforms)
• 1.7 million volumes
• 700+ public computer work stations
• 77,857 electronic journals (including access through aggregator databases)
• Items circulated 450,402
• Orientations/lectures held: 122
• Attendance at orientations/lectures: 3,553
• Average weekly reference questions: 1,978
• Faculty and staff: 92
• Student assistants: 170
• General fund budget (2006/07): $ 9,568,603
• Current student use fee revenue: $ 678,500

The Need for a Fee Initiative

The California State University (CSU) system requires all CSU undergraduate students (who are California residents) to pay state fees of $1524 per semester, as of the 2008-2009 academic year. In addition, students must pay special campus-based fees that are approved by a majority of students who vote in special referenda; these special fees must
also be approved by the president of the university and the chancellor of the CSU system. The fees vary from campus to campus, but they include charges for health facilities, athletic programs, instructional programs, and other kinds of fees.

At SDSU, one of the special fees approved in the past is a “library use fee.” All students at SDSU currently pay $10 per semester and $8 in summer in library use fees. The current fee, voted into effect by the students in 2002, supports operation of the library’s 24/7 area, as well as extended hours throughout the library. Library hours have increased from 13,163 in 2002 to 19,242 per year in 2007 due to the library use fee.

In 2005, a LibQual survey of over 4,000 SDSU students found that students wanted improved facilities and furnishings, more technology enhanced spaces for collaboration and research, and more space in the 24/7 area. The use of the 24/7 space, which is funded by the library student use fee approved in 2002, exceeded all of our expectations. Students frequently encountered lines waiting for computers, and a shortage of study space at busy times.

In addition, electronic resources have become an integral part of the library’s 24/7 service. Students have access to databases, journal articles and e-books at their convenience, without needing to physically go to the library. The cost of these resources has gone up approximately 10% every year, and cancellations loomed on the horizon.
One other factor is the recent SDSU faculty emphasis (especially in certain disciplines such as business administration) on student group projects. Given this demand for increased group study space, and given the apparent new trend among students themselves for studying in groups and collaborating on class assignments, the SDSU library began to prepare for ultimately changing the structure of the library from a predominately “single student” study space to a mixed used space that includes a growing number of group study areas.

The SDSU library had a strong track record of working to meet student needs, and wanted to continue to support students beyond its budget capabilities. Recent accomplishments have included creation of a laptop users area in the basement of the dome, increased electrical outlets for laptops on the first floor, and renovation of group study rooms. To fully accomplish the improvements students want, an addition to the current fee was required.

The library did not have the money in its budget to provide the services, furnishings and facilities that students wanted it to provide. State funds were inadequate to pay for the value-added services and surroundings that students told us in surveys they wanted the library to offer. The fee that we proposed would make the library an ideal place for studying and researching. The fee increase would expand and improve 24-hour computing and study space. Additional group studies would be built and furnishings and facilities would be upgraded throughout the building.
The Campus Fee Advisory Committee (CFAC) unanimously approved placing a referendum on increasing the student library use fee by $5/semester for the next three years on the spring 2008 student ballot. CFAC is a University Senate committee, but unlike most other senate committees CFAC has a majority of students, which demonstrates the underlying initial student support that this fee initiative had.

The proposed fee would fund increased 24/7 space and additional group study rooms, as well as enhanced furnishings and facilities. A portion of the fee would be used to offset inflationary increases to electronic resources. The fee would increase by $5 in Fall 2008, by $5 in Fall 2009, and by a final $5 in Fall 2010. Thus, the fee (which was already at $10 per semester) would increase to $15 per semester in 2008, $20 per semester in 2009, and $25 per semester in 2010.

The Referendum Outcome

On March 13, 2008, 71.5% of the students who voted in the referendum approved the library fee initiative, thus eventually providing the SDSU Library and Information Access with almost one million dollars per year in extra funding. Combined with the earlier fee initiative approved in 2002, and projecting future enrollment growth, the library will soon have almost two million dollars per year in added revenues that will be spent on improving group study space, upgrading furnishings and facilities, and paying for more
electronic resources. This was a huge victory for the library, one that will provide revenues for added library services and facilities improvements for many years to come.

(It should be noted that the ballot also contained other fee initiatives, including an important proposal to increase student fees for various programs including scholarships for international study and a more eco-friendly campus. These were also approved).

**Collaborative Strategies**

Some of the collaborative strategies that we used to promote the fee initiative included the following:

For many years the Library has worked hard to develop positive relationships with individual members of student government as well as the Associated Students as a whole. Our Dean, since her arrival on campus in 1999, has always met individually with the president of A.S. at least once per year, usually more often, and has made presentations to the entire A.S. Council at least twice per year. In addition, the Library made a concerted effort to listen to student concerns and to respond positively to them, in many cases giving them what they asked for if it was within their power. One good example of this was relaxing the Food and Drink Policy based on student requests. Another example is the good faith efforts we made to spend money from the current student library fee in a conscientious manner. We believe that the strategy of building relationships with student
leaders and responding to their requests was one of the primary reasons for passage of the fee initiative by such an overwhelming margin.

We worked in tandem with members of CFAC to ensure that this committee understood our deep relationship with student government as well as the reasons why this initiative should be placed on the ballot.

We worked closely with the Associated Students fulltime staff (especially the executive director and the programs director) in developing the content of the initial fee initiative and later in advocating for its passage.

In consultation with Library Council (the primary decision-making body in the Library, made up of faculty, staff, and managers), the Library’s director of administrative operations and communication developed talking points and “Frequently Asked Questions” in support of the fee. Our faculty and staff made these documents available at various public service points in the Library. We also created bookmarks and brochures that advocated on behalf of the fee, and these were placed at public service desks and handed out at meetings attended by library representatives.

We asked library faculty and staff, along with other members of the campus community, to talk with students and student assistants about the importance of these measures, and to encourage them to vote in the election.
We compiled a list of deans, vice presidents, Student Affairs staff, faculty, and other key staff working with students, and we contacted these individuals to ask for appropriate meetings where we would have the opportunity to speak with student groups (such as student clubs, fraternities, etc.) about the fee initiative. Library representatives then attended these meetings and spoke on behalf of the library fee initiative, sometimes using a PowerPoint presentation that had been prepared by the Library.

We solicited endorsements from a diverse array of student groups, such as the Business Council, the Honors Program Council, fraternities and sororities, the Student Health Advisory Board, and many others.

We created signs and posters that encouraged students to vote “yes” on the library referendum, and placed these in the Library and around campus.

We purchased a ¼ page ad in the student newspaper to highlight the endorsements that we had received from student groups.

The student newspaper wrote an editorial endorsing the library fee initiative, and op-ed pieces were written by staff writers and others singing the praises of the library. While these were definitely not solicited by the library, they were undoubtedly written based on the many years of positive relationships developed with students by the Dean, library faculty, and library staff.
One of our librarians created a library Facebook account, along with a Myspace account, that encouraged students to vote “yes” in the referendum. In addition, we created a page for the Library website related to the initiative, and we also utilized the computer “wallpaper” on the monitors of all PCs in the Library Student Computer Lab to post referendum information.

Library administrators met with members of the Associated Students Elections Committee to strategize on how to best communicate to students the efficacy of the fee initiative. This was, in effect, an informal training of these members of student government in the rationale for the library initiative.

**Redefining Library Services**

Libraries services on college and university campuses today are in a state of transition. While some pundits have made predictions about the future of the university library, many academic librarians are unsure about which direction to take and what decisions to make in order to further the vitality of the library. SDSU Library and Information Access sees this student fee initiative (and its overwhelmingly positive response) as an indication that we should move forward in several ways in terms of redefining library services:
(1) The academic library must be comfortable, inviting, and attractive. This should include new chairs, furniture, and art work.

(2) The academic library should be redesigned around the idea of facilitating group study.

(3) Along with group study spaces, the academic library should continue to provide quiet study areas for individual study.

(4) Technology continues to play an important role for students today. Academic libraries need to provide bandwidth (both wired and wireless), workstations, and other technologies that will allow students to do research, write papers, and communicate with other students, and collaborate on class assignments.

(5) Electronic databases are more important than ever. The university library must maintain and grow its commitment to electronic journals, databases, and other electronic resources even if it means de-prioritizing its commitment to traditional print formats.

(6) Colleges and universities must maintain open libraries (or at least a portion of the library) 24 hours per day, 7 days per week.

(7) Academic libraries should be flexible with rules related to food and drink. If students are willing to pay for added costs in facility maintenance, libraries should respond with less restrictive food and drink policies.
Assessment

Assessment must play a major role in the way that the library plans and implements any changes related to the student fee initiative. Both library staff and student leaders should be part of this assessment.

One method of assessment that is already being planned is a series of focus groups that will fine tune our ideas for improving library services. Focus groups are increasingly used to improve library services throughout the country. There is a growing realization that focus groups can elicit feedback from patrons that cannot be gained through any other methods.

Another method that will be used to judge the quality of our services is self-assessment by students hired (with fee initiative funding) to serve as high level assistants to librarians while at the same time building their portfolios. Self-assessment is another recognized method of evaluation that brings an added perspective to the assessment process.

A third way for us to evaluate these library services is the LibQual Survey. As mentioned earlier, we conducted this survey in 2005, and we hope to re-introduce it to the
campus community in 2009 or 2010. LibQual combines statistically significant data with qualitative information to provide a full-orbed picture of the library and its services.

How to Succeed at Student Collaborations

- Build goodwill before you need it. Students will rightly reject any requests from us for support if we have not developed positive relationships years in advance of when we really need them.

- Listen to students and try to respond in positive ways to their requests. Again, this goes to the point of building relationships. If we do not give them at least some of what they ask for, they will rightly interpret this as not listening to them in the first place.

- Work with paid, fulltime student government staff along with the student leaders. Fulltime staff have years of continuity in working directly with the students on a variety of initiatives. They will understand much better than us how to communicate with students and work successfully with them to gather support.
• Be honest with students about needs and challenges, and if the relationship has been developed beforehand, the process should take care of itself without manipulation of the system.

• Seek endorsement from student groups on campus. Like many other campuses, SDSU students respect their student leaders and take seriously official endorsements. We were able to acknowledge these endorsements in an ad that we placed in the Daily Aztec (the student newspaper) the day before the election.

Conclusion

In today’s economic climate, it is common to hear protests over rising tuition and other student fees. Thus, it is remarkable to hear about a campus where a substantial majority of the students voted to raise their own library use fees by 150% over three years. The authors of this paper would point to several factors that ensured the success of this fee initiative, including strong relationships with student leaders, responsiveness to student requests, and open communication with full time student government staff. Only in an environment of trust will students vote to raise their own fees in order to improve library facilities and strengthen library resources.
References


