

Amplify Your Impact

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Promoting Libraries Through Inclusive and Impactful Environments

Johanna Bjork, Ellie Dworak, and Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

In the movie *Field of Dreams* (1989), Kevin Costner's character hears the phrase "If you build it, he will come" whispered to him in a cornfield in Iowa. The phrase refers to the character Shoeless Joe Jackson and other baseball greats from the early 20th century coming back from the dead to play ball. In much the same way, if libraries "build it," the people will come. The academic library of today is not the academic library of the past. These differences hinge on population, staffing, community, and shifts in vision. As a result, many academic libraries have expanded their focus beyond just research to include holistic programming to support the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. These initiatives foster community, reduce stress, increase research opportunities, and boost campus community morale. However, limited staffing, budgets, and resources continue to pose challenges to their implementation. Two academic libraries in Idaho—Lewis-Clark State College and Boise State University—are transforming how they serve the needs of their users.

Jung Mi Scoulas discusses aspects of determining student population and catering to students in the article "College students' perceptions on sense of belonging and inclusion at the academic library during COVID-19." Scoulas recommends three strategies that their library adopted "to promote and strengthen the University Library's role as 'the hub of intellectual activity'" on their campus:

1. Build seamless, comprehensive, and consistent access to global collections, instruction, and services, whether digital or physical.
2. Create and sustain an inclusive culture and a welcoming environment for all.
3. Expand integration of the Library into faculty and students' research life cycles.

While Scoulas wrote their article for the *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* during a time of unprecedented change in academic libraries, many aspects still hold true.

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Lewis-Clark State College Library Approach

Lewis-Clark State College, located in Idaho's Panhandle, serves a smaller college community and prioritizes undergraduate student support. They embrace "Small college, big results," and the library leverages creative strategies to support library program development and the success of the student population due to staffing and funding limitations.

Since 2017, the library has been hosting events designed to align with the institution's mission and address student needs. Funding, advertising, and staffing, however, remain challenges. To navigate these obstacles, the library utilizes several effective strategies:

1. Understand Your Population

The Lewis-Clark State College Library tailors programming to meet the needs of their campus community, with students being the primary focus. Students have a voice in providing input via the Library Advisory Committee and through programming feedback forms. Library student workers drive events based on recommendations and facilitate the success of library events and services. One key aspect is to determine who your library is serving: is it first-generation students, incoming freshmen, graduating seniors, or graduate-level researchers completing their PhDs? Identifying your audience ensures that programs are relevant and impactful. No matter who your student population turns out to be, one constant remains—they are all college students pursuing higher education. "Attending college places unique demands and pressures that may make students more susceptible to psychological distress; students' lifestyles and relationships can change dramatically, as can their eating and sleeping habits, to say nothing about the academic and financial challenges many encounter" (Bladek, citing Conley, Travers, & Bryant, 2013; Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams, & Glazebrook, 2013). To better understand your campus population, consider reaching out to your Institutional Research Department for relevant data. Additionally, student workers in the library can offer valuable insights into student demographics and their evolving needs.

Communication avenues:

Library Advisory Committee: This committee is critical for streamlining communication amongst divisions, departments, and the student population. A Library Advisory Committee can be any size, including any part of the college's population. Just make sure it has ample representation. Having a clearly defined mission is key, and changing attendees every few years brings in new diverse thoughts and insights into the community structure.

Student Feedback/Input: When collecting student input, if it is from surveys or a student representative on your Library Advisory Committee, always credit the student or group that offered the input. Let your students know they are heard and valued.

Libraries Student Advisory Board: While the Lewis-Clark State College Library does not have a committee, other institutions have Student Advisory Boards that support the growth of the library.

Library Director or Library Liaisons: The Library Director has multiple opportunities to communicate through formal channels such as the Chairs Council and Division and Cabinet meetings. Librarians also serve as liaisons, providing relevant information to their respective divisions.

Campus Signage: Digital signage is a valuable tool, but traditional tabletop signage remains an effective option for communication, particularly at Lewis-Clark State College.

Campus Calendars: All campuses have some form of calendar system to inform the campus community concerning event scheduling. Also, double check that your events do not conflict with other significant events on campus.

Faculty/Divisions: The academic library is here to provide resources to all campus groups, but most specifically students. Communication with faculty and divisions regarding prospective events is critical. Many Lewis-Clark State College Library displays are driven by faculty and class-related work. The Moby-Dick Reading Marathon originated with a humanities class. In addition, provide a clear, definitive platform for classes to design and develop programming and displays as part of course work. This is a win for the students. They receive a grade, learn how to efficiently organize an event, and take the stress off the Library staff regarding event planning.

Administration: Always keep administration in the loop regarding events and follow institutional policies and guidelines.

Whatever communication method that works best with your institution, always keep the communication two-way and provide feedback and credit to those that developed the idea. Ownership of “an idea” adds value. When students, faculty, and staff know they have been “heard,” this will increase collaboration, event growth, and student support.

2. Leverage Your Team’s Skills

Your employees have skills! Maybe someone likes to make origami, knit, paint, or do yoga. Give them time and space to develop programming that can be incorporated into the campus community. This also includes your student workers, interns, and work scholars. Your team or event planner should take ownership of event(s). As a supervisor, it is important to provide the tools and support they need while allowing them to develop initiatives, while remembering to follow institutional policies.

Language: Be mindful of “stop words” such as “no.” An employee may present a brilliant idea that might not fit the current time or place, but it’s important not to shut it down completely. The idea may need refinement, but fostering an environment of encouragement and growth is crucial. Remember, the idea “belongs” to the person who shared it. Support its development rather than dismiss it.

Skills Adaptation: When employees change, it’s important to recognize that past practices, no matter how successful, should not dictate a new employee’s approach. They may bring fresh perspectives or different ideas on how to support the library community, and embracing this flexibility can lead to innovation and growth.

Give “Space” for Creative Growth: It is important to discuss the event planning with the employee or group of organizers, and you can offer guidance, but when an event idea is presented to you, do not completely rewrite the event to meet “your” expectations. The concept may be foreign to you, but if they are following institutional policies, remember this is “their” event.

Time: If an employee facilitates an event beyond their normally scheduled hours, make sure they have appropriate time off during the week. Just because they are doing something that is “fun,” they are still working. For example, if your employee facilitates the success of the Library Book reading event on a weekend (beyond their normal scheduled hours), make sure they have time away from the office during that week, making sure to follow campus policies. Being cautious of an employee’s work hours lets them know they are valuable and that you support their work-life balance.

Student-Driven Events

Student-driven events are essential in creating an engaging library environment. Students are often the best resource for identifying trends and interests among their peers, and developing student-led initiatives can be highly effective and increase event attendance and participation.

Unlike top-down programming, student-led events generate excitement, encourage word-of-mouth promotion, and foster a sense of ownership. Some successful student-led events at Lewis-Clark State College Library have included origami making, pumpkin painting, game nights, puzzles, button making, Lego building contests, mini painting pop-up art events, movie nights, and de-stress coloring events. These have included creative activities like cupcake decorating, the Lewis-Clark State College Library Moby-Dick Reading Marathon, Murder Mysteries, and "Ghosts in the Library," where students search for hidden ghosts to win prizes. Adaptability, collaboration, and innovation remain central to shaping the Lewis-Clark State College Library environment that actively supports student success.

Some Lewis-Clark State College Library events are purely for "fun" and to "de-stress," while others have been developed specifically for academic and scholarly support. These events have included Academic support events, including Rock the Finals and Rock the Midterms; the Midterm Motivation Waffle Event (attended by over 150 students); and the Dead Week Snack Cart, a collaboration with the Lewis-Clark State College Administration that provides snacks during finals. Both Rock the Finals/Rock the Midterms and the Midterm Motivation Waffle events were developed through campus collaboration amongst departments that included tutors, Student Success, Accessibility, Associated Students of Lewis-Clark State College (ASLCSC), administration, faculty, and Academic Advising.

The Lewis-Clark State College Library has progressively grown to participate in many campus events. 2022 marked a significant shift toward holistic student support. In addition to housing the Writing Center, the Library became home to the Food Pantry, Student Success, and tutoring services. This required shared spaces, relocating resources, and repurposing study spaces. As a result, library usage surged, transforming it into a dynamic hub of student engagement, academic resources, and essential support services for the Lewis-Clark State College community.

Ongoing Benefits of Holistic Programming

Academic libraries that prioritize student wellbeing contribute significantly to their overall development by fostering a sense of community. These initiatives offer several benefits:

- **Improved Academic Performance:** Students who receive mental and emotional support are better equipped to manage stress, focus, and achieve stronger academic outcomes.
- **Higher Graduation Rates:** A supportive environment enhances student retention, increasing the likelihood of degree completion.
- **Enhanced Sense of Belonging:** Libraries play a crucial role in creating a welcoming atmosphere where students feel valued and connected to their campus community.

Funding Strategies

Smaller institutions like the Lewis-Clark State College Library often face financial constraints when organizing holistic student events, but several strategies can help navigate these challenges:

- **Collaboration:** Partnering with departments, campus organizations, clubs, student government, divisions, and approved community groups enables collaboration on resources and event staffing. For example, the Lewis-Clark State College Library collaborates with humanities instructors to host game nights.
- **Foundation Funding:** Institutional foundations may offer funding opportunities to support event initiatives.
- **Grants:** Exploring national and local grants can provide additional funding. The Idaho Commission for Libraries, for instance, offers smaller grants tailored to Idaho-based libraries.

When applying for grants, it is essential to work with the Institutional Research Department and adhere to institutional policies.

Marketing and Outreach

Effective marketing ensures strong attendance and engagement. Student-driven events provide word-of-mouth promotion and are a key marketing tool. Lewis-Clark State College Library utilizes several social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook. Always be cautious how these social media platforms are utilized. Usage should always align with institutional policies. Additionally, the College maintains two event calendars: “Do More,” which is student-focused, and a general campus calendar for broader visibility.

Adapting to Change and Evaluating Success

Continuous evaluation is essential for long-term success. Events should be assessed annually to determine their effectiveness. Key questions include:

- Are attendance numbers declining?
- Is the event still meeting student needs?
- Has marketing been clear and effective, avoiding jargon and ensuring accessibility?
- Administration loves data. Are you sending out surveys, or determining how to collect usage data?

Some events may fail, but failure is not the absence of success—it is an opportunity for re-evaluation. If an event does not meet expectations, it is essential to evaluate whether it serves the community’s needs, review marketing strategy, and refine future approaches. By embracing change and learning from setbacks, the Lewis-Clark State College Library continues to provide meaningful, student-centered programming that enhances engagement and academic success now and into the future.

The Boise State Approach

Large institutions have their own challenges for students who may feel like small fish in a big, overwhelming pond. Boise State Library approached this challenge in a number of ways, including initiatives to co-create library services and spaces with students, partnering with other campus student services units, and targeted support for parenting students.

Co-creating With Students

In 2014, Boise State’s Albertsons Library opened a makerspace dedicated to 3D printing and other maker technologies such as Arduinos (simple electronics platforms), Raspberry Pi (barebones computers used to learn programming), sewing machines, soldering equipment, and vinyl cutters. From the start, founder Amy Vecchione’s vision was to create a space that empowered students who might not otherwise have access to these tools. Amy developed a unique staffing strategy where students who had been trained to use the equipment would serve as volunteer coaches in exchange for access to the equipment during hours when the space was not available to other students. Amy said that “when we allowed students to write on a white board wall, or make vinyl cut stickers and objects that reflected their identities (like Pokémon), it allowed them to feel belonging.”

More recently, the Library made changes to the first floor to provide students other opportunities for co-creation. In addition to making, students group around gaming stations and puzzles to unwind, record podcasts in our sound studio, and print posters on our plotter printer. In response to

student feedback that the Library study rooms were “sterile,” Access Services staff inexpensively decorated some upper floor study rooms with creative lighting and ceiling and wall hangings. Students overwhelmingly responded that they loved the decorated rooms, and many said they especially appreciated the lower lighting option added in some of the individual study rooms.

A simple strategy for signaling to students that they belong in the Library is to place whiteboards in heavily trafficked locations asking for questions or feedback. For example, during Bronco Welcome Week, students were asked what they were curious about. The whiteboards are quite popular, and usually fill up with responses on both sides of the board. The Library has also hosted a fan art exhibit, where students, staff, and faculty at Boise State were invited to submit their renditions of artwork related to a particular work of fiction, such as a book, movie, television show, video game, or comic. The Library displayed the pieces on the first floor and hosted a lively opening reception. While most of the artwork submitted was created by students, many staff and faculty members also submitted artwork.

Coupled with efforts to create a more welcoming environment for students, Library staff prioritized better integration of student employees into the shared mission of the Library. New student employees now receive a nametag in the same style as other Library staff. They are also allotted three seats on the Library’s new advisory council, giving them an opportunity to hear what is happening and share their perspectives. In order to support them beyond the Library, the Library purchased a meal plan from the campus food service for spring 2025. It allows each library student employee to eat one meal per week on campus free of charge. While one meal a week will not ensure their food security, they are taking advantage of this opportunity and have expressed gratitude, saying that it allows them to fit in a meal on busy days when they otherwise would not have been able to do that.

Partnerships

The Library recognizes that partnerships with university support service units are crucial to efforts to welcome and support students. Instead of a traditional reference desk, Instruction and Research Services librarians collaborated with our university’s Advising and Academic Support Services (AASS) to develop a Bronco Learning Commons (BLC) on the Library’s first floor. Throughout the week, students come to the BLC to work with librarians on research questions, and academic consultants on course assignments and exam preparation. In conjunction with AASS, First Year Writing, and the Writing Center, librarians hosted several Writers’ Block Workshops. These events provided students opportunities to work one-on-one with a librarian or writing specialist to improve their research and writing projects.

The Library regularly collaborates with other campus units to host special events. Once a year in October after the Library closes at 10:00 p.m., students from campus residence halls take over the building for a few hours for the popular Nightmare on Cesar Chavez (the street where the Library is located) event. Students make Halloween crafts and play games that range from standard board games to hide-and-seek in the dark on the top floor. The Games, Interactive Media, and Mobile Technology Department, housed in the Library, hosts an overnight event for their students toward the end of each semester. During this time, they work on team-based projects, eat a lot, and generally have a good time making sure everything for the semester is wrapped up. University health services and BroncoFit encourage student mental and physical health by providing vaccine clinics throughout the year, and healthy snacks and activities at stressful times of the semester.

Recognizing that one of the primary reasons that students leave college is a lack of funds, the Library has partnered with the Office of Student Financial Services to promote financial wellness workshops for students. At the start of the 2024-2025 academic year, a rollout to changes to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) system was delayed, and once made available was plagued by technical glitches. This presented challenges for students seeking financial assistance for college. In order to support students in getting their FAFSA applications completed, the Library partnered with the Financial Aid office to host drop-in sessions where students could get help completing the application. Seeking to support students undergoing stress due to the situation, Library staff worked with a local organization to have visiting emotional support dogs available at the events. Needless to say, these have been very popular with students and staff alike.

Supporting Student Parents

The Library at Boise State has made efforts to support parenting students in a couple of ways. First, backpacks with age-appropriate toys and learning materials are available for parents to check out at the front desk to use while they are in the Library. Several age ranges were targeted, from six months to twelve years. Materials in the backpacks are selected to be self-explanatory and allow for independent play so that parents can tend to their research and study needs. These backpacks are quite popular. A second initiative is a family study room that parents can book in advance or use on a walk-in basis. The space utilizes an existing group study room and contains toys, books, and children's furniture, along with an adult-sized rocking chair and computer workstation for parents to utilize as their children play. While the amount of use is not as high as we would like, the students who comment on the impact of the space make clear that it is a necessary and appreciated offering.

Final Thoughts

Boise State University and Lewis-Clark State College have both developed hospitable environments to support their students' needs. By implementing a "therapeutic landscape" approach in education, these institutions have created welcoming and collaborative library spaces that foster student engagement and growth. Additionally, they provide a platform for students and library users to voice their perspectives and lead the library into the future. This overview highlights how two Idaho academic libraries of different sizes have adapted to enhance student research experiences and contribute to their overall growth. What works for us, might work for you. Please "borrow" our ideas. We are still growing and moving forward and through collaboration we will create the academic Library of the future.

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