

Miriam Rigby

Social networking 0.0

Cultivating casual collaboration

There is nothing more refreshing for university faculty than yet another meeting in which information about teaching and research resources are crammed down their throats, right? Right! It is just a matter of context.

Picture this: it's a sunny weekend afternoon, and you're coasting on your bicycle beside the local river, enjoying the breeze through the trees. Add a half-dozen faculty members, a picnic stop, and a Frisbee game into the mix. Everyone is relaxing and having a good time, and the conversation naturally turns to their research, their students—especially good-natured complaining about problem students and creative teaching methods to bring to the classroom. As a librarian, you have special insight into these areas and the resources to help. So you casually drop information into the conversation, explaining how struggling students will benefit by meeting with you for one-on-one research consultations. You also mention library instruction, bringing up new technology, online tools, and resources that you can integrate into courses to engage students and encourage deeper exploration and research as they tackle assignments.

Biking trips, hanging out in coffee shops while working, and going out for happy hour drinks are just a few of the types of activities that I have successfully employed to reach out to teaching and research faculty. When I share these strategies with other librarians, I have heard reactions like, "Oh that would never work for me. I'm not outgoing enough," and, "No one will show up – they don't come to library events about research services and classroom support." I offer two observations

to counter these types of worries: 1) university professors are people, and have all of the same worries about meeting new people that librarians do, and 2) these are social events, not library workshops. These more casual get-togethers do not come with the stigma often attached to work-related events and are not competing for time with other lectures and professional events in the way a typical library workshop might.

It was surprisingly easy to start my social outings group. When I attended new faculty orientation as a new hire, I enjoyed the social activities and was concerned that I might never run into these people again. I met a woman, who happens to be in one of the departments I serve, and I brought up the idea of coordinating more social events. She agreed that this was a good idea, so we collected the e-mail addresses of new faculty from the university administration and sent out an invitation to a happy hour. New faculty were motivated to attend by the chance to meet their new colleagues, and have continued to attend monthly events of this sort.

Through these ongoing events, and as people meet other people, spread the word, and continue to invite additional faculty to these events, we have built strong social networks across the university. These events are useful, not just for the access I have to the teaching and research faculty, but also for other interdepartmental collaboration. Their value and the fun atmosphere encourage

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people to continue attending—even senior faculty have joined us.

These events should not be seen as library outreach in any formal sense, but rather the outreach is a positive side-effect that emerges from the social interactions. In these casual environments, where you are communicating as friends and colleagues, faculty members are receptive to these tidbits of information. If nothing else, they will remember later that you know about these things when they find themselves having an information need. As a new librarian on campus, it has quickly emerged as one of the best marketing tactics in my librarian toolkit.

Additionally, as many of the participants are from the departments I serve, I have gained great insight into their research areas, which helps me best serve their information needs and helps inform the manner in which I develop the library's collections. I have successfully cultivated work relationships out of social interactions that have resulted in dozens of requests to teach library information

literacy sessions in classes, have one-on-one research consultations with students as well as faculty, and follow-up questions about additional library resources.

Well-established librarians are just as capable of starting such a group, too. While I had the easy position of being new with the other new faculty, there is no reason that any librarian could not take it upon him or herself to coordinate similar events. My most ambitious outing so far was a day trip to Portland, Oregon, for a biking tour of good restaurants and, of course, Powell's Books. It went so well, a second trip has been requested.

I fully plan to continue my efforts next school year to bring the new faculty into the fold. Other ideas for the future include creating modified versions for new graduate students: casual social events based around a theme designed to attract a diverse crowd to encourage interdisciplinary relationships as well as interactions with librarians. Be warned, pursuing these activities will increase your workload (but it is entirely worth it). *zz*



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