

Engaging the campus community in conversations on diversity

Ohio University Libraries' Culture Showcase Series

The population of the United States is becoming increasingly diverse; communicating effectively across cultures is becoming crucial, especially in academic environments where co-workers, roommates, and classmates may see the world differently from one another. Also crucial is the global nature of the academic community where learners and scholars from all over the world converge to share ideas.

At Ohio University, for example, recent data show that international students and other minority enrollment keeps growing when compared with previous years. The 2012 student population of 21,724 included 8% international, 4.8% African American, 2.6% Hispanic, and 2.3% were two or more races; 2006 data was 5.2% international, 4% African American and 1.6% Hispanic.¹

Academic library settings, being neutral spaces serving all students, provide unique opportunities to interact with members of a diverse community and to experience the challenges involved. To effectively serve the needs and demands of this community, specific skills, knowledge, and training are required to engage that community and cultivate an environment where differences are valued and respected. The Culture Showcase speaker series² is the major activity of Ohio University Libraries Diversity Committee, serving to promote diversity awareness among the university community and the

library staff, and supporting outreach to the university and larger Athens community. The committee, recognizing the pluralistic nature of the campus, uses the series as a vehicle for the acquisition of knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, and artistic expressions of the campus community. The culture showcase speaker series consists of culturally stimulating events held at the library using local experts as speakers, as well as performances, music, dance, and film aimed at creating an inclusive environment and enhancing the academic experience of the university community.

This article, previously presented as a poster at ACRL 2013, explains and shares aspects of the series that has made it sustainable and successful: theme development, outreach and engagement, and lessons learned.

Themes

The Diversity Committee selects themes and plans, and then promotes and organizes the presentations. The themes selected are

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designed to bring a better understanding of cultures, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and disability. As well as promoting awareness of the diverse cultures of our community, the series draws connections between cultures represented on campus and the libraries' collections. Publicity for the Culture Showcase series is disseminated to the entire region by e-mail, press release, web presence, and posters distributed throughout the community. Since the inception of the Culture Showcase Series in 2008, the Ohio University Libraries Diversity Committee has explored over 15 cultural themes and hosted 34 presenters.

The Diversity Committee uses a variety of methods in developing interesting themes that will encourage attendance at Culture Showcase presentations. Themes selected are often on a topic that people can relate to or find relevant. As such, themes are often linked to campus events and local or national issues. The fall 2008 theme focused on the presidential elections, a faculty member was invited to talk about his book, *The Rise of Barack Obama*, which documents the meteoric rise of Obama from his first day in the U.S. Senate up to the Pennsylvania presidential primary. The second presentation of

the theme was "Race, Gender, and Politics," based on research conducted by a political communications faculty member.

In the fall semester of 2012, the University Libraries' Center for International Collections sponsored the Thai Studies Conference at Ohio University. The Diversity Committee saw this as an opportunity to highlight Southeast Asian culture and the libraries' Southeast Asia collections. The committee selected the theme "Performing Objects: South East Asian Puppetry" and invited a professor in the Interdisciplinary Arts to present. The presentation highlighted Balinese puppetry as a performance tradition and an art

form that is central to Balinese culture and followed up with a lively Balinese puppet show.

The Bridging Cultures grant opportunity from National Endowment for the Humanities and ALA came to our attention in 2013. While we chose not to pursue the grant, we identified this as a theme for the series "Muslim Journeys." Faculty members from Classics & World Religions and the African Studies Program were invited to speak. The first presentation was titled "Hearing the Qur'an: Sound and Meaning in Islam's Holy Book," and the second presentation was "Islam in

Theme	
African American Heritage	Winter 2008
Appalachian Women	Spring 2008
The Surprising Diversity of Presidential Politics	Fall 2008
Rites of Passage	Winter 2009
Celebrating Firsts	Spring 2009
African American Studies and Alden Library	Fall 2009
American Regionalisms	Winter 2010
The International Student Experience at Ohio University	Spring 2010
Guess who is coming Dinner: Famous Visitors to Ohio	Fall 2010
Musical Notes for Various Folks: World Music and Dance	Winter 2011
Hooray for Holly/Bolly/Nollywood: Celebrating Film around the World	Spring 2011
There is Power in a Union	Fall 2011
Athens Alternatives	Spring 2012
Diversity Through Music	Spring 2012
Performing Objects: South East Asian Puppetry	Fall 2012
Muslim Journeys	Spring 2013

Table 1. Culture Showcase Speaker Series Themes 2008-2012.

Africa.” Both presentations were very engaging and well attended by staff, students, and other members of the community.

Other methods used to foster interest are the use of different presentation models: cultural performances, music, panel discussions, and single or multiple presenters. The theme “Musical Notes for Various Folks: World Music and Dance” (winter 2011) consisted solely of musical and dance performances. The Ohio University African Ensemble, led by Paschal Younge and Zelma Badu-Younge, were invited to perform in the library. The exciting performance included dances with elaborate costumes and traditional instruments from Ghana, Togo, Benin, and other African countries. This performance had one of the largest attendance records in the history of the series; among the attendees was the wife of the president of the university.

The second event was a performance by a graduate student from the School of Music, who played a variety of European and American musical pieces adapted from piano for marimba and xylophone. To encourage attendance by music students, the venue of the presentation was changed to the music library.

Connecting themes to library collections

A goal of the Diversity Committee is to use the series to draw connections between cultures represented on campus and the libraries’ collections. Efforts are made through the development of bibliographies, book displays, and/or subject guides. Bibliographies of pub-

lications in the libraries collections relevant to each theme and links to relevant subject guides are included on the Culture Showcase website. Books relevant to the quarter theme are displayed in certain areas of the library and also on a plasma screen.

For example, on the Muslim Journeys web page users were referred to the subject guide on Islam as a good starting point for the semester’s theme. A link to the international student subject guide was provided on “The International Student Experience: Celebrating Global Diversity” theme web page.

Outreach and engagement

In addition to promoting diversity awareness, the series provides opportunities for outreach and engagement with the campus community, as well as the larger Athens community. Presentations are open and marketed to the campus and

local community audiences. They are recorded and uploaded on YouTube to increase the accessibility and visibility. Faculty members have often made attendance at a presentation an extra credit activity to encourage their students to attend. Speakers and performers come from all over campus, as well as the community. For example, the presentation “International Student Experience at Ohio University” (spring 2010) featured a panel of four international students and the director of the International Students and Faculty Services.

The “Athens Alternatives” theme, focusing on economic sustainability within the area, highlighted the diverse ways in which people in the Athens community strive to be



Event marketing poster.

economically sustainable and independent. Leaders of three community initiatives were invited to present on each of their initiatives—the Athens Farmers Market; the Athens Time Exchange, a community network that promotes access to resources through the exchange of services at no monetary cost for members; and the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACENet), a local business incubation group that supports local entrepreneurial efforts.

Lessons learned

The Diversity Committee continuously assesses the series and makes changes accordingly. Two years ago we added an audience feed-back survey at the end of each presentation to assess audience reaction. The audience survey asks for input regarding marketing (How did you hear of this event?), satisfaction (Is the event what you expected? Would you attend other events?), and suggestions for future topics. Data from the survey has helped in planning for future events, and has improved our methods of marketing to the community.

A concern of the committee was the occasional presentation that fails to address the theme. We identified that as a failure of communicating to our presenters the goals of the series and the particular theme we wanted them to address. This past year the committee began inviting the presenters to planning meetings to discuss the goals of the series, the theme identified, and the topic of the presentation and the results have been positive.

A goal of the Culture Showcase series is increased awareness of library staff regarding issues of cultural and ethnic differences. The Diversity Committee administered a survey to library staff, to assess their reactions to the Culture Showcase Series, and approximately 50 percent of the staff completed the survey. The respondents indicated they understood the mission and goals of the committee. Most had attended at least one Culture Showcase event each quarter, and found them to be educational and informa-

tive. The events best liked were those that offered performances and those from local speakers. Respondents challenged the committee to provide more opportunities for staff development: to focus on raising awareness of the different cultures and religions of the patrons we serve, and each other. When asked, the majority of library staff said they would like more guest speakers from outside the campus, and would like to see more professional development opportunities on diversity.

As a result of the staff survey, the Diversity Committee has added a staff development component to diversity programing in addition to the Culture Showcase Series. In the spring semester we offered a staff development event that focused on awareness of critical cultural issues in interactions with international students, building on the “ACRL Diversity Standards.”³

Conclusion

The series’ success is evidenced by the increasing number of attendees from the campus and community and several faculty presenters assigning extra credit to encourage student attendance. The Culture Showcase speaker series shows how the library can provide leadership on campus in promoting diversity awareness and outreach to the university and larger community. It demonstrates the importance of using measurement tools like audience feedback, comments, and staff surveys to assess library programs. The factors that had made the series sustainable include interesting themes, outreach and engagement, and continuous assessment.

Notes

1. Ohio University Athens Campus Student enrollment by race/ethnicity, www.ohio.edu/instres/student/HistoricRace.html.
2. Culture Showcase Series, www.library.ohiou.edu/about/administration/culture-showcase/.
3. “Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries,” www.ala.org/acrl/standards/diversity. 