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Creating a Positive Learning Environment with a Guest Speaker

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Introduction

Routine library orientation and instruction sessions are no longer sufficient to meet faculty and student expectations. Reference librarians must reach beyond the library to find out what interests students and faculty and organize events that will appeal to them. Subject librarians must expand their role beyond selecting materials and basic information literacy instruction. How can librarians become an integral part of the teaching process? How can librarians work with faculty to achieve this goal when faculty who used to teaching alone?

Team teaching, a form of teaching in which two or more instructors collaborate in the design and implementation of a course, has been frequently used as an alternative approach. Wadkins, Wozniak, and Miller (2004) discuss three effective approaches: collaborative teaching, tag team teaching, and the coordination of multiple speakers. They emphasize the first two for the role of the teacher-librarian, especially school librarians. Academic librarians can also use these methods. This article presents a method for planning an event, based on an example from 2008, in which a guest speaker was invited to the University of Florida (UF).

Rationale

As the subject liaison for Japanese at UF, the author was expected to host an event to increase the visibility and academic profile of the Asian Studies program. The program began in 1986 with seven core faculty members, and has been sustained with a series of gifts from anonymous donors and grants from the Japan Foundation and the Freeman Foundation. UF has built its program over the last ten years into one of real substance and has played an important role as the flagship university of the State of Florida University System, which consists of 11 universities. Although Asian Studies is not historically strong in the Southeast, many students have become interested in East Asia because of the region's economic, political, and cultural significance. The increasing popularity of elements of Japanese popular culture such as anime and manga have also drawn many students to Asian Studies.

UF offers history, language, and literature courses on Japan and Japanese, and, therefore, a guest speaker who could cover these fields and others was sought. Beate Sirota Gordon, who had, at the age of 22, drafted the portion of the Japanese constitution that dealt with women's rights, was invited to speak. She spoke at several different venues, at both UF and Florida International University (FIU). At UF, she addressed a large public audience, a smaller seminar devoted to Japanese history and gender, and an informal luncheon with the Japanese community.

Invitation

Gordon's progressive provisions for women's rights in Japan—the drafting of article 24—gave women equal constitutional rights, rights that still do not exist in much of the world today, much less at the time the constitution was written. Article 14 guaranteed equality and forbade discrimination, and article 24 guaranteed mutual consent in marriage. Gordon, who was the only female member of the Allied occupation authority committee working on the Constitution, insisted that the democratization process must involve women's liberation. After receiving positive feedback from several faculty members, the author invited Gordon to UF. The idea was that Japan Studies majors, history majors, and others would be inspired by Gordon's story. Below, the role of the Principal Investigator (PI) in successfully leading a project like this is discussed.

Role and Responsibilities of PI

Ensuring advance funding is the best way to make such an event possible. Because academic departments at UF have limited funds for inviting speakers, grant opportunities were sought. Although there were many options, the AAS NEAC (Association for Asian Studies North East Asia Council) Distinguished Lecture Series on Japan grant dovetailed with the goal of providing students and faculty with a more in-depth look at women's experience in Japanese history.

A grant is a legal instrument that provides financial assistance, and therefore can require the support of administration. UF's Office of Research Division of Sponsored Research (DSR) is responsible for reviewing, negotiating, and legally executing agreements from external funding sources. This particular project required cooperation with the Grant Coordinator, library accountants, faculty, the representative of the guest speaker, DSR, FIU, and the NEAC to negotiate and resolve contractual issues. Each of these plays their own role: the PI accomplishes the project goal, the grant coordinator is the liaison with the University, and accountants are responsible for the budget. Grant writing involves many people, and more time than one would expect—more time is spent in meetings than in writing a grant.

It is important to make sure that the grant is aligned with the granting organization's goals. Communication with the funding organization is very important. Before organizing the project, it was important to know whether the NEAC was likely to fund it. Advance planning is crucial. A PI must identify tasks, the time and resources they require, and the sequence for achieving them. From the initial idea through the final report to NEAC, the project took 10 months to complete.

PI as Coordinator

Hosting a program that involves campus and community presents challenges, especially in publicity and organization. The PI must work with internal and external parties to organize the components needed to initiate, run, and conclude a project. Since AAS NEAC require two or more institutions to jointly invite a guest speaker, UF worked with the Asian Studies department at FIU, which doubled the coordinating work of the PI. The guest speaker's needs are the highest priority. Those might include things related to age and health. In such a case, a work-rest schedule should be considered. For librarians whose focus is in the university, it is easy to overlook the community. There are, however, many benefits to approaching the community, and community outreach was one of the most unique and successful phases of this project. There are approximately 100 Japanese families in Gainesville. Most are associated with the university, but spouses often feel isolated. Exposing this community to Gordon's experience gave them an opportunity to feel closer to the university and to enhance their awareness of the importance of human rights in Japanese history. Thus, in addition to the formal lecture, there was a

luncheon hosted by Japanese spouses. This outreach enabled us to make connections with the local Japanese community with the potential for a broad and long-lasting relationship.

PI as Team Instructor

Many authors implore librarians to forge stronger, more effective working relationships with the faculty. Conversely, it is also pointed out that there are pitfalls in poor relationships despite the numerous benefits to be gained from collaborative partnerships. Given and Julien (2005) give many examples of the limitations and complexities of the librarian-faculty relationship. Their study focuses on the experience in the context of a librarian's information literacy instruction, but does not explore other realms of collaboration. Other kinds of collaboration can increase librarians' ability to interest students and gain legitimacy as instructors. Coordinating a guest speaker can serve as a team teaching model.

The model presented by Wadkins, et al. uses coordinating multiple guest speakers as a team teaching model. Guest speakers can provide students with insights not available in textbooks. Inviting a single guest speaker can also be a team teaching model. The "team" in UF's case consists of a single guest speaker with a librarian and a faculty member as tag-team.

The librarian's responsibility is to fit the subject of the public lecture to other course content. The author contacted Sarah Kovner, UF's Japanese historian, who was teaching a senior history seminar on gender in Japan. She was able to tailor course content to Gordon's visit. The seminar, for example, read Gordon's memoir. A roundtable session with a ratio of 1:12 was organized for the seminar. Both the speaker and students benefitted: Gordon appreciated the students' preparation and questions, and students loved meeting a historical figure—and getting their books autographed.

PI as Librarian

Most librarians' daily tasks do not include organizing public lectures, and academic departments do not always contact the library when they are hosting lectures. This can be a source of frustration for librarians who lack the advance notice to order, receive, and process books related to the event. Students obviously benefit from previous knowledge on the topic, as in the case of the senior seminar in history. By reading and researching topical materials, students could gain much more from lectures. Therefore, librarians, especially those who work at a big university, must stay aware of future events by working closely with planners such as academic departments or student organizations.

In Gordon's case, upon confirmation of the grant, books and videocassettes related to Japan's constitution and feminism in Japan, including Gordon's own books, were ordered for the library. By the time of her arrival, these materials were processed, allowing community members to check them out. Some spouses obtained library cards for this specific event, reading as many materials as they could in advance. This experience shows how a cultural event can be positively perceived in the community, especially one like Gainesville where there is not a great deal of cultural enrichment on Japan outside the university. It is crucial to consider people not affiliated directly with the university as potential readers or supporters.

The Guest Speaker's Talks

Gordon was able to arrange three different approaches, based on the audience. At the first roundtable session, she began with a role-playing situation where students were instructed to become constitution writers. She told the students, "So, write a constitution within 7 days." This engaged students, who were first surprised, then intrigued. The room's atmosphere was full of enthusiasm, from both students and the guest speaker. After the session, students lined up to have Gordon autograph copies of

her memoir. By contrast, the large formal lecture had an audience of more than 130 people. Since the history seminar students were also in attendance, Gordon spoke about her experience as a constitutional writer and her life as a cultural ambassador. On the following day, Gordon spoke in fluent Japanese at a luncheon organized by Japanese wives in the community.

Informal feedback indicates that attendees benefitted in several ways. Students, community members, and faculty appreciated the rare opportunity to meet a historical figure. Making this kind of opportunity possible and available to everybody is the responsibility of an academic institution. Students use their experience differently—some may just listen because they are required to, others are inspired by the life of the speaker, and others are inspired to do research. But all students will benefit for years to come.

Conclusion

During the course of organizing the lecture, the author was repeatedly told from the library side that coordinating an event like this is not a librarian's job. The academic departments had no such view. Communication between academic departments made it clear that the teaching faculty expect a librarian to collaborate in educating students by any method available. This raises the question of whether librarians concentrate on information literacy instruction too much—especially since learning cannot be achieved by relying on documents alone. Knowledge and information are sometimes stored in people's memories, and those stories sometimes can be obtained only through verbal communication. Librarians may tend to look at only visibly stored information, but we should also place a value on invisible information. Realizing that faculty and students' research cannot be done only in documents will allow librarians to take an initiative in seeking new types of collaboration.

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