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The library's role in building campus conversations

Extending academic discourse

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Higher education lives on the academic community established by and for its faculty. [The Campus Conversations in Standish speaker] series drives that community by sharing our expertise, building intellectual networks, and reminding us all of the very interesting work being done every day by individual faculty. This series reminds us of the integral role the Libraries' play in the development and advancement of scholarship. In many ways, the Libraries serve as a cross-campus hub.—*James Stellar*

What library would not like to receive a comment such as this from the previous campus provost? He was commenting on a faculty speaker series, Campus Conversations in Standish, begun by the University at Albany Libraries several years ago. The series has gained the interest and respect of the campus community. A recent speaker from the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures noted:

For me the Conversations in Standish are a rare and precious venue of scholarly exchange; and it seems quite apropos that the idea of such a series has been developed and that the event is being hosted by our UAlbany library. You as our librarians are the ones in touch with all our disciplines and scholarly needs and questions. I see our library as a point of contact and . . . exchange of ideas and resources.—*Ilka Kressner*

Each conversation is sparked by a short presentation by a faculty member about her or his research in progress or professional interests more generally. We encourage speakers not to exceed 35 minutes for the formal presentation, which allows ample time not only for questions, but also for a conversation. We are particularly interested in providing students with an opportunity to engage with faculty members from a wide range of disciplines. Many of the questions that have been asked are thought-provoking, based on the way that speakers work through the issues as they respond. We have had several speakers—particularly those still engaged in the work of the project they are describing—say that the give-and-take portion of the event has been particularly helpful to them in how they plan to move forward.

The series developed from a suggestion by the librarian coauthor of this piece, who felt that there might be an opportunity to extend the libraries' role in the academic discourse on campus. She brought the suggestion to the then director of public services, who felt that the idea had merit. The dean and other members of the policy-making group in the library agreed. The dean asked the librarian to oversee it, and she happily agreed. The name of the series, Campus Conversations in Standish, states both the intent for the events and the event location—a particularly attractive meeting room in the Science Library. It has not been particularly time consuming or costly to institute.

We have had 22 talks since 2015, spanning 15 diverse disciplines. We have found historians to be eager and engaging participants who often encourage their students to attend. Some of the other speakers represent the sciences (chemistry, environmental engineering, atmospheric science), social sciences (psychology, anthropology, political science, information science), and the humanities (art, art history, languages, literatures, and cultures). We have learned things during the course of the series that might be useful for other libraries.



Associate Professor of History Carl Bon Tempo presented his Campus Conversations in Standish talk in the Fall 2016 semester.

Logistics

A small committee was formed to plan and oversee the events. It currently includes four librarians and the communications coordinator from the office of the de of libraries. The committee generally meets just twice a year to determine which speakers we would like to invite and which committee liaison will coordinate communication with each speaker. Initially, we drew upon faculty members whom we knew to be engaging presenters with interesting research topics. We also solicited suggestions from other librarians and former speakers, and have since branched out to adding ideas suggested by the campus daily newsletter and ne announcements on the websites of the university's various schools and colleges. It has quickly become such an established entity on campus that we sometimes get requests from faculty members who would like to be considered as speakers. We strive to include presenters from a range of disciplines that span the humanities, arts, social sciences, and sciences, selecting three per semester. We ask that talks be appropriate for an interdisciplinary, nonspecialist audience.

In order to facilitate the committee's work, names of past and potential speakers are all kept in a shared Google sheet. The sheet is also used to collect information on their departments, research interests, and, for those selected, their scheduled dates and presentation titles.

From the start of the series in spring 2015, the events have been held at midday on Wednesdays, coinciding exactly with a class period. This alignment makes easier for people to attend, rather than a noon to 1:00 p.m. slot, for example, that spans two class periods. We understood that there was no one good time per to select, and made a choice that avoided time slots we knew to be problematic. Some institutions have a "free period" in which classes are not scheduled, which might be ideal for a speaker series.

The communications coordinator provides essential support prior to and at events:

- reserve the room for all viable Wednesday dates a semester prior to the event, which allows us to offer potential speakers a choice of dates;
- determine that the dean will provide funding for refreshments at each event, and then orders those refreshments;
- write a short biography of the speaker to be read when he or she is introduced; and
- prepare sign-in sheets so that attendance can be gauged and refreshment costs justified.

Marketing and distribution

While not a member of the committee, the student success and communications associate oversees the marketing of the series. Print materials, namely flyers, bookmarks, blog posts, social media messages, and LCD monitor slides are all used to advertise the events. Each talk also gets posted to the university's shared calendar.



The University at Albany community gathers for a Campus Conversations in Standish presentation in October 2016.

In addition to sweeping, university-wide advertisements, the student success and communications associate also coordinates with targeted groups on campus. This includes academic departments related to the topic, student groups, and administrative offices that work closely with the libraries.

Involvement from the speakers plays a key role in effectively marketing the series. When an invited guest provides a headshot, biography, and description of the topic, the quality of the marketing materials rises. In some instances, speakers have indicated that they are open to doing short video advertisements ahead of time. These could range from a preview of the topic to rapid-fire questions shared on Facebook Live.

In addition to advertisement videos, the committee finds recording the events beneficial for post-talk distributions. Beginning in the fall 2016 semester, the committee made an effort to record each session. Recordings are then shared on the libraries' YouTube channel,¹ as well as hosted in an institutional repository Scholars Archive.² The videos have a similar brand layout, so that once packaged, a student employee or intern interested in multimedia production can edit them.

Reception to the series

The reception on campus has been quite positive. Highlights have included two standing room-only events, one a presentation entitled “Unconscious Brain, Decision-Making and Learning” by the university’s provost, the other, “What Can 1916 Tell Us About 2016? Europe, Islam and the Middle East,” given by a historian.

As the series has become better known, the small group dynamic that we had at a few of the early events, where everyone engaged in conversation as they sat around a large table configuration, is no longer possible. Depending on the topic of the talk, attendance has ranged from 15 to 75 people. But we still ask speakers to save time for a robust question-and-answer period. Some instructors ask their students to attend talks that are relevant to their courses, sometimes offering extra-credit.

One subject librarian emphasizes how the series extends the libraries’ reach on campus:

I appreciate that this series is a great way for the libraries to support and promote research on campus not just via our regular venues (building collections, creating library services, developing workshops and other information literacy sessions) but by inviting faculty to share their research projects [with] the larger UAlbany community. Libraries [are] a place to share knowledge, to invite discussions, to promote the research voices on campus.—*Jesús Alonso-Regalado*

Faculty, staff, and students find the mission of the university reflected in the conversations. A staff member highlights this connection:

I thoroughly enjoy the Campus Conversations in the library. I try to go whenever I can because I am always rewarded by learning something new, gaining insights about academic research, and getting to know our faculty. It also makes one more aware of belonging to a greater university community.—*Christina Evola*

These responses affirm the value of the series across a range of constituencies. All too often, individuals from across campus only connect through committee work or at administrative meetings. Libraries have a unique opportunity to facilitate scholarly engagement that creates bridges between departments and disciplines.

Conclusion

The organizing committee has had requests to consider other categories of speakers or types of events, such as a conversation among doctoral students about the challenges they have had researching and writing their dissertations or the presentation of research by graduate students. We have also been asked to consider speakers who would require a move to a much larger space, such as the university president when he had published a new work. While some of these suggestions would clearly lead to interesting events, we plan to continue to adhere to our original mission of highlighting the scholarship of faculty members in a manner that enhances the campus community and conversational goals of the series.

We would be happy to work with others who might like to run a parallel series or host occasional events featuring graduate students. One of our goals is to have a librarian present his or her research—as faculty members, we certainly qualify. We plan to continue as long as the library dean supports the program and faculty members continue to say yes when we ask them to participate.

Notes

1. University at Albany, Campus Conversations in Standish Playlist, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLG8BUcfxGoeuq8lcZ8S5prKG9iQ7PWVa> (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLG8BUcfxGoeuq8lcZ8S5prKG9iQ7PWVa>) (accessed April 30, 2019).
2. University at Albany, Scholars Archive: Campus Conversations in Standish, https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/campus_conversations/ (https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/campus_conversations/) (accessed April 30, 2019).