



## ARTICLE

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# Characteristics of Effective Outreach as Perceived by Library Student Assistants

## ABSTRACT

This paper offers specific recommendations for effective academic library outreach that practitioners may consider as they develop and implement outreach initiatives at their institutions. It describes a methodology that can be replicated for similar case studies at other universities. It also contributes new knowledge to the subject of academic library outreach by reporting on the perceptions of library student assistants at a small liberal arts university in Southern California to gain insight into the kinds of outreach programming and communications students prefer and perceive as effective. This study used in-depth interviews to identify characteristics of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants. Library student assistants are trained in access to and use of library resources and services and therefore make ideal informants for outreach librarians seeking to understand what students think about their outreach efforts, including programming and communications.

## KEYWORDS

Library Outreach, Library Marketing, Library Student Assistants, Perceptions, Library Communications

In 2018, I began developing an outreach plan for an academic library at a small private liberal arts university in Southern California. It occurred to me that input from students could be valuable to my planning efforts, and I began to consider ways to gather practical information from students regarding how the library could best reach them. My initial questions included: What kinds of outreach would students be interested in? Did they prefer campus events that were academic or social? What kinds of events did they already attend on campus, and why? How could I effectively promote library outreach efforts to them? I had a goal: to gather information on what university students think characterizes effective library outreach. I also had two problems. First, I could not find any information on what students thought about library outreach. Our library had no data on what our students thought, and the literature on library outreach does not speak to the question of what students think about outreach. My second problem was that many students I was hoping to reach through outreach initiatives likely knew very little about the library and certainly had no significant experience with library outreach. How could I survey a representative sample of students about something they knew nothing about and expect to get meaningful results? To address both problems, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews with our library student assistants and report my findings on the question, "What are the characteristics of effective outreach as identified by library student assistants?" Library student

assistants are a particularly well-informed subset of any university's student population regarding questions related to the library, because they are trained in the use of and access to library resources and services and therefore make ideal informants when seeking to understand what students think about library outreach. Their answers to my questions would be more informed than the general student population because, as library student assistants, they have knowledge of the library that most students do not have. I concluded that I would get more meaningful data from a census of this informed subset of our student population than I would from a random or representative sample of the student body. I conducted a census of all student assistants who had worked in the library for at least two years. Thirteen student assistants met these criteria, and I interviewed all thirteen as "student experts" to identify characteristics of effective library outreach.

The research presented here offers specific recommendations for successful academic library outreach that practitioners may consider as they develop and implement outreach initiatives at their own institutions. It also describes a methodology that can be replicated for similar case studies at other universities. While this study seeks to better understand what students at one institution think characterizes effective library outreach, future studies may consider the impact of implementing the ideas that students shared to confirm or disconfirm the effectiveness of the ideas identified by study participants.

For the purpose of this study, "outreach" is defined as library activities—including displays, events, and communications—which encourage non-library users to make use of library resources and services. "Effective outreach" is defined as any deliberate activities that successfully bring people to the library and ultimately increase the use of library resources and services. For the purposes of this study, participants were asked to distinguish between library instruction activities (such as information literacy instruction) and outreach activities.

This paper is divided into five parts. Part One, the introduction, outlines the problems the study addresses, describes the significance of the research, and lays out definitions. Part Two reviews the literature to date about library student assistants and library outreach and contextualizes this study's place in the literature. Part Three describes my research methodology, including the tools required, and limitations of the study. Part Four discusses my findings on the question "What are the characteristics of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants?" The characteristics discussed are: promotion, incentives, timing, student involvement, and intangibles (such as "unique" and "modern"). Part Five summarizes my findings and offers concrete recommendations for practitioners on the basis of the findings of this study.

## Literature Review

My review of the literature on library outreach services and library student assistants, including their perceptions of library resources and services, finds no studies that identify characteristics of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants or any other student populations. Moreover, it finds no studies reporting on general perceptions of library outreach in any student populations. This study addresses this gap in the literature by reporting on the perceptions of students at a small liberal arts university in Southern California

“What kinds of outreach would students be interested in? Did they prefer campus events that were academic or social? What kinds of events did they already attend on campus, and why? How could I effectively promote library outreach efforts to them?”

with the goal of providing insights into the kinds of outreach programming and communications students prefer and perceive as successful.

The existing literature on library student assistants and outreach can be divided into four categories. The first is literature on how library student assistants are used to develop and deploy library outreach. This includes using students to develop and deploy library programs, communications, and marketing materials which promote library resources and services. Literature in this category also reports on library programs that train students to engage with other students in various ways, including through instruction in and promotion of library resources and services, and evaluates these peer-to-peer interactions. In 2007, Millet and Chamberlain (95–105) reported on the use of campus peer tutors to market library resources, including the benefits of word-of-mouth marketing to students. In 2009, Betz, Brown Barberi, and Langendorfer (250) reported on the use of student ambassadors to promote and offer instruction on the use of specific library databases. A 2011 study by Miller reported on the student liaison program at Eastern Washington University (EWU). The program was designed to enhance the library's engagement with students at EWU with goals to improve communications with the study body, articulate student perspectives on library services, and increase student participation in library programs (Miller 2011, 1). In 2017, Meyer and Torreano reported on Grand Valley State University's use of library student assistants to provide peer research consultations and serve as user experience assistants tasked with engaging students at front line service points and gathering data on how students are using the library (Meyer and Torreano 2017, 54).

Also in 2017, Barnes reported on peer marketing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries (UNL), reporting increased student engagement with the library when student assistants, called "peer guides," staffed booths and noted that input and assistance from peer guides increased engagement with the library's social media platforms (Barnes 2017, 136–137). In 2019, Hines, Elrod, Huet, Ewing, and Freund (64) described their collaboration with students in a public relations class at the University of Florida to create strategies to better market library services to students. The authors concluded that the partnership "did yield multiple strategies and insights not previously considered by library staff and successfully reenergized marketing and public relations efforts for both branches." (Hines et al. 2019, 75). While this study, in examining student ideas for improving library marketing came closest to the questions addressed in my research, my study contributes an alternative perspective in terms of focus, population, and methodology. I used in-depth interviews (IDIs) rather than focus groups, spoke with students informed on library outreach rather than public relations, and focused on outreach rather than marketing. Working with library student assistants (who are well-informed regarding library resources and services but enrolled in a variety of degree programs) thus contributes a unique perspective on the question of student perceptions of effective outreach, including marketing.

The second subset of relevant literature assesses the kinds of communications and services students prefer. In 2017, Stvilia and Gibradze (257) surveyed 104 undergraduates at a large research university and reported that study support services, as well as access to information and computer resources, were the most important services the library offered. Participating students also reported that social media postings related to library operations, study support services, and library events were the most useful (Stvilia and Gibradze 2017, 257). In 2018, Howard, Huber, Carter, and Moore (11) shared findings on the kinds of social media platforms that students at Purdue University use, the platforms students want the library to use, and the kinds of library social media content students

wanted to see; they found that students used Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat more than other platforms.

The third category is studies on student perceptions of academic libraries generally, including their perceptions of library spaces, of services other than outreach—including interlibrary loan and research help—and of library instruction resources (such as online tutorials, one-shots, and library guides). Butler and Byrd's 2015 study asked students to complete a survey sharing their perspectives on the face-to-face consultations they received (Butler and Byrd 2016, 83). Similarly, the 2017 study by McCartin, Innacchione, and Evans (242) examined students' perceptions of how successfully a course that integrated information literacy instruction improved their research and writing. The 2017 ethnographic study by Tomlin, Tewell, Mullins, and Dent (631) used observations, surveys, and IDIs to gain insights into how students use the library for academic research. Such studies have also focused on specific groups, such as students from specific ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Long 2011, 504–511) and non-student populations such as faculty and staff (Faulk 2018, 193–196). A recent study published in 2019 shares findings on how library professionals perceive outreach and instruction for transfer students in the state of Colorado (Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek 2019, 94).

Finally, there is a related body of literature on how student assistants perceive their work in libraries. Benjamin and McDevitt's study examines students' perceptions of the challenges and benefits of working as library student assistants (2018, 262). The 2016 study by Melilli, Mitola, and Hunsacker (430) demonstrated that students perceive value in the opportunities that working in the library provides for developing life skills and professional and academic competencies.

## Methodology

I chose IDIs as my data-gathering methodology because the current literature indicates that this is the best methodology for gaining insight into what a specific group of people thinks about some aspect of the human experience, including their perceptions, beliefs, interpretations, and motivations (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013). To ensure that my data came from well-informed students, I conducted a census of all our library student assistants with at least two years of experience working in Access and Outreach Services (a total of thirteen students). Current research demonstrates that six to eight participants is an adequate sample to ensure meaningful results when analyzing IDIs (Guest, Namey, and McKenna 2017, 3–22). I successfully recruited all thirteen students to participate and offered Amazon gift cards as an incentive. I developed, piloted, and revised an interview guide, and used it to conduct IDIs to gather information on what participating students thought characterized effective outreach. To facilitate conversation about these characteristics and help corroborate findings, I required interviewees to participate in three listing exercises to identify and rank: outreach events they believed would be successful, communication channels they believed would be most effective in reaching university students, and characteristics of effective outreach. I used an audio recorder to create digital audio files of all the interviews and the audio transcription service TranscribeMe to transcribe the audio recordings. The data I gathered was stripped of personal identifiers, coded, and then analyzed for themes. To ensure intercoder reliability, I worked with a colleague to code the interviews independently. We then came together to agree on a final code based on our independent work. I used the qualitative data analysis program Delv to analyze the transcripts and identify the characteristics discussed in my results. I also used Delv to analyze the list created by interviewees. I used Microsoft

Excel to conduct statistical analysis of each list. I also gathered demographic data from participants (age, ethnicities, and majors) to determine the degree to which my census of student assistants was representative of the general student population and used Microsoft Excel to analyze that data.

This study has three noteworthy limitations. First, the students interviewed were not representative of my university's demographics. However, the need to ensure that the data came from informed library users was critical and had to be balanced with the goal of studying a group that constituted a representative sample of the entire student population. For example, my study was twenty-three percent male while the university's undergraduate population at the time was forty-five percent male (University of San Diego, 2019). Likewise, twenty-three percent of participants identified as Asian with only about seven percent of the university's undergraduate population identifying as such. Also, twenty-three percent of participants identified as White compared to forty-nine percent of the university's undergraduates, and no study participants identified as American Indian or Alaska Native or as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, though the university's undergraduate population of each group is 0.4 percent. Our university's undergraduate student body is fifteen percent Hispanic, and twenty-two percent of participants identified as Hispanic (University of San Diego, 2019). That said, the results of this study suggest that I got more meaningful data from a census of an informed subset of students than I would have from a random or representative sample of our general student population.

“Findings reveal that the two most important characteristics for effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants are “well-promoted” and “incentivized.””

While the students interviewed had different experiences working in the library, my findings show that they all played some role in our outreach efforts during their time as library student assistants and that all had more knowledge of library resources and services than they would have had they not worked for the library. A second limitation was the potential for conflicts of interest concerning participation in the study. Since interviewees were employees of the library, concerns about conflicts needed to be addressed, and two things were done to mitigate the potential for conflicts of interest.

First, I worked cooperatively with the library's Federal Work-Study Program coordinator to ensure that I was not assigned to supervise any of the students eligible to participate in the study during the semester in which the data was gathered (Spring 2019). This ensured that I was not responsible for evaluating the work performance of any potential participants. Second, I created a concise but thorough consent form explaining that participation was voluntary and that the decision whether or not to participate would not affect a participant's employment status. The consent form included clear instructions on how to withdraw from the study at any time. A third limitation is that this data was gathered in the spring of 2019 so it is unclear how the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 may have changed students' perceptions of library outreach since that outbreak. That said, this paper's findings and conclusions reveal general characteristics of effective outreach as identified by student assistants that should have long term applicability.

## **Findings**

Findings reveal the extent of participants' knowledge and experience with library outreach and demonstrate that they are ideal informants when seeking to understand what students think about library outreach. Findings

reveal that the two most important characteristics for effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants are “well-promoted” and “incentivized.” Findings suggest that outreach events should combine multiple modes of communication to be considered well-promoted and should combine various types of incentives to ensure that students receive something they value. These could include material incentives—such as extra credit and food—or non-material incentives—such as the opportunity to socialize with friends and network with professionals. By well-promoted, students mean that they see and hear communications about the outreach in multiple ways, many times, over many weeks. Other characteristics of effective outreach identified by student assistants included timing, student involvement, and a loose collection of intangible characteristics such as “fun,” “unique,” and “modern.”

**Students as Experts.** Three characteristics of library student assistants show that they are ideal informants when seeking to understand what students think about effective library outreach: the amount of experience each participant has working for the library, the experience they have participating in library outreach specifically, and positive changes in their perceptions of the library after being trained in use of and access to library resources.

All study participants reported having worked for the library for at least twenty-four months, with the longest-serving student reporting forty-eight months of service. One hundred percent of participating students reported experience assisting with library outreach. The outreach events most frequently supported by the student participants were the library’s Annual Banned Books Week events, including an interactive display and our “Blind Date with a Banned Book” event (which invites students to select a book wrapped as a present and open it to reveal the title), and our participation in a campus orientation event each semester. Eight of the thirteen reported that they had no perceptions of the library before they became student assistants; all thirteen indicated that their current perception of the library was positive, with eleven of thirteen stating that it had changed in a positive way since becoming student assistants. The number one cause students gave for their change in perception, noted by seven of thirteen, was that they knew more about library resources and services since becoming a student assistant. One participant explained how their perception of the library had changed since becoming a library student assistant thus: “When I first arrived, I just assumed that this was a place people just went to study for tests . . . But now, it just has become a part of my life. [I have] been able to learn on my own and improve my grades here. Utilize the resources efficiently. Not knowing about the resources, someone just goes to Amazon and orders the book . . . ” (interviewee 13, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another participant explained why their perception had changed since becoming an assistant, saying: “I guess I’ve gotten to see the other sides of it. Like, there’s so much more than just coming to study here. . . . the [Associated Student Government] reserves books, and even their online reserves. But that’s something that, maybe if I didn’t work here, I wouldn’t really know about it or use as often” (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student shared how being an assistant had enhanced their knowledge of library services: “There’s a lot of resources that people don’t know about that I think is very useful, but I try to promote that when I’m not at work. I try to tell people like, ‘Hey, you can go to the library and find stuff. You don’t have to stress about this’” (interviewee 8, in discussion with the author, 2019).

**Well-Promoted.** Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that “well-promoted” is the most important characteristic of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants. As one student explained: “If no one hears about it, no is going to go” (interviewee 10, in discussion with the author,

2019). By “well-promoted,” students meant that they saw or heard information about the outreach initiative in multiple places, multiple times, and over a few weeks. In describing the top characteristic on their list, one interviewee stated, “I said successful marketing and under that, something that’s well-posted or

Copley Outreach Events Participation	Years of Experience in Library (Months)	Change in Perception
Campus Orientation, Banned Books events	36	no
Movie Nights, Banned Book	30	yes
Movie night, Banned Book, APA - MLA workshop	48	yes
Banned Book	42	yes
Movie night, Banned Book	42	yes
Finals Week	48	yes
Finals week, Banned Book	48	yes
Campus Orientation, Banned Book	30	yes
Banned Book	36	yes
Campus Orientation, Finals week	24	yes
Campus Orientation, Finals week	24	no
Campus Orientation, Finals week	36	yes
Campus Orientation, Movie night	36	yes

Table 1. Library outreach events interviewees participated in as library student assistants, years of experience as library student assistants, and whether interviewees' perceptions of the library changed because of working in the library.



Figure 1. Word cloud with characteristics of effective outreach identified in the coded listing exercise.



well-advertised across different areas, so social media and posters. And then the second point I said is that it's spoken about, so something that people have heard either from their friends or tabling in a different way they're hearing about something and not just reading about it" (interviewee 11, in discussion with the author, 2019). This interviewee makes clear that to be well-promoted, outreach needs to reach students via multiple communications channels, especially word of mouth. When asked if outreach that was relevant to their coursework was an important factor, one participant instead highlighted the importance of outreach being well-promoted: "No. Not even relevant to my coursework. It's just that I'd be interested in [it], but also it's well-marketed. That continuously seeing it around campus in my emails, that would make you think like, 'Oh, what's this thing that I keep seeing? Maybe it's worth checking it out'" (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019).

As part of our discussions on what students think characterizes effective outreach, participants were asked to create lists of preferred characteristics and communication channels. When asked to prioritize their characteristics lists, several participants noted marketing or something similar, which I coded as "well-promoted." Analysis of the students' priority lists of characteristics found that ten of thirteen participants included some version of "well-promoted" as a characteristic of effective outreach. Interviewee 3 explained: "I think the advertisement or the marketing of the events is the most important" (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). Analysis of the lists revealed that well-promoted had an average (mode) priority rank of one.

Analysis of students' priority lists of communication channels showed that students believe the best way to make sure they hear about an event is to communicate it via email, word of mouth from friends and professors, social media, and well-designed and well-placed signage.

*Email.* Participants' priority lists show that they believe email is the most effective way to communicate with students about library outreach. All thirteen participants listed email, and it was ranked number one for effectiveness more than any other channel: eight participants ranked it number one, four participants ranked it two, and one ranked it three. Email also topped communication channels in my analysis of the transcripts. One interviewee summed up the value of email: "Because I always check my emails. If there's something important, I know that it's going to show up in my email" (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another articulated why they felt email was an effective way to reach students saying: "we're constantly checking it for any notifications from Blackboard or teachers" (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). A third participant discussed email as their top choice for university communications stating: "I think the main one is in emails, especially newsletters. Different kinds of centers send a newsletter that has all of the events, and that's where I find most of my information" (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019).

*Word of Mouth.* Participant lists reveal that word of mouth and social media are tied for the second most effective way to communicate with students. What sets these channels apart in the listing exercise is that the average (mode) ranking for social media among the thirteen lists was two, and word of mouth had an average of four. Twelve of thirteen participants listed word of mouth, with eleven specifying word of mouth from their peers and five listing word of mouth from professors. Of the five participants who listed professors, four also included peers. Only one did not list word of mouth as a priority communication channel.

The transcripts reveal that word of mouth was firmly ahead of social media in terms of effectiveness and suggest why. Students most often specified that



word of mouth from their fellow students was the most powerful way to reach them. One student explained: "If like a friend reaches out to me and invites me or says, 'Hey, I heard about this event,' I think that would definitely convince me more than flyers, posters, or emails" (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked how they had heard about an event they described as successful, another student explained, "It was through my friend. Because her professor was speaking at one of the events for the [Communications] Department and I found out through her" (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student summed up the value of word of mouth from friends this way: "But, word-of-mouth, I feel like is usually the most effective . . . just because, when you hear people who say it through word-of-mouth, it's usually friends. So you kind of [look?]. I don't know. You have more of a personal connection with it, with the certain event that they're telling you [about]" (interviewee 7, in discussion with the author, 2019). Word of mouth through professors was also noted as an effective way to reach students. When asked what made an event a success, the student stated: "I think there was a lot of professors there at the event. And I'm pretty sure those same professors told their classrooms about it" (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student explained that they put professors as a top way to learn about library outreach initiatives because "they have a very good influence on the students" (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked if they were more likely to attend an event that they heard about through word of mouth, interviewee 11 said: "absolutely" (interviewee 11, in discussion with the author, 2019).

*Social Media.* Analysis of the interview transcripts show that social media is an important tool for communicating with students but it is firmly behind word of mouth and email. One student explained: "I feel Facebook is dying, especially with the younger generation. I notice people don't really use Facebook that often. They kind of just use it for its messaging capabilities" (interviewee 5, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student said of Instagram: "I think it's a good way to reach students if you were to post stories on the [library's Instagram] because those are on a day-to-day basis. And you could post one month ahead of time, advertising like: 'Save the date. This is the event'" (interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019). The same student noted that Instagram offers opportunities to make sure outreach is seen multiple times by students stating, "And if Instagram is posting it several times and they see it a few different times—I personally need that reminder" (Interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019). Like word of mouth, twelve of thirteen participants listed social media, with some distinguishing between specific platforms: ten participants specified Instagram for social media, four participants specified Facebook, and one specified Twitter, suggesting that Instagram is the best platform to reach students.

*Signage.* Students' priority lists reveal that signage, including posters and flyers, is the fourth best way to communicate with them about library outreach, with eleven of thirteen participants listing it. Likewise, analysis of interview transcripts regarding communications suggests that signage which is both well-designed and well-placed is one of the top ways to communicate effectively with students about outreach. One interviewee explained: "So they're super easy to just read and then if they're interesting, or if the poster itself is nice, and they just caught your attention" (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019). Students consistently mentioned that ubiquity of posters and flyers is important to successful marketing. As one student put it: "And definitely posters. In the bathrooms, if I'm using the restroom and I see them, I stop and look at them, take pictures of them if I'm interested. And they're all over

campus. So it's like you really can't miss them" (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). Several students noted that placing posters and flyers in high-traffic and high-visibility areas was important. One participant explained: "And fliers would be—a huge factor would be the tactical way you place it, where you're going to post it or how big, how small" (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). The same student elaborated on the importance of location, explaining: "But also where students are frequently in. I guess . . . somewhere in the [University Center] where students pass by and would see those standing fliers" (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). Rounding out the top five on the list was the university's website, with four participants noting it as a place they get information about events.

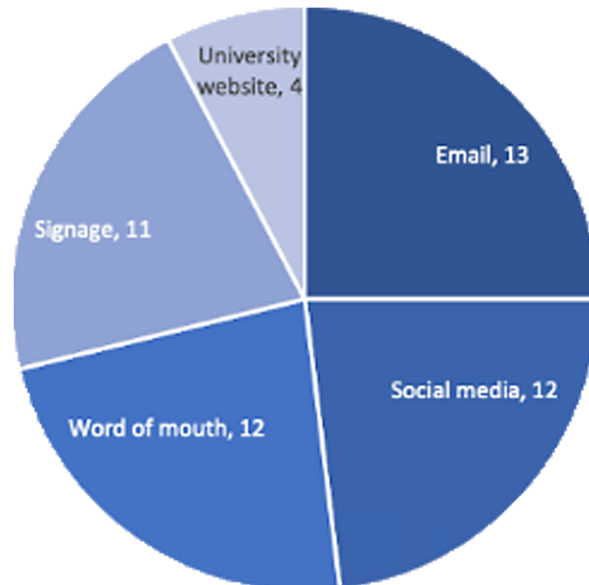


Figure 2. Modes of communication important to effective outreach, from coded list.

**Incentivized.** Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that providing material and non-material incentives is a crucial characteristic of effective outreach, second only to making sure people know about outreach activities. Likewise, participants' priority list of outreach characteristics and events corroborated that incentives ranked well ahead of lower rated characteristics, including timing and student involvement. Incentives are anything that the student values.

The term "non-material incentives" describes a category in which students come away from an outreach activity with something valuable but difficult to quantify, such as opportunities to network with professionals in their chosen field or engage with members of a shared community. The most commonly mentioned non-material incentives needed to make outreach successful were opportunities to socialize with friends and peers and to learn something outside of the classroom, especially if it is relevant to their career interest, and includes less tangible characteristics such as being interactive or fun. One interviewee explained why their favorite event on campus was so successful: "I think community . . . Being able to go somewhere and meet other people with your same interests" (interviewee 10, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another participant explained, "I think especially here, on a college campus, people want that social aspect where they get away from that but they also want to come away learning something" (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). The same student explained why they thought the most successful event they had attended on campus was so effective saying, "It's, yeah, a very social event. It's basically a party and you're just hanging out with people that look like you. It's welcome to everyone, but you see a lot of people from the Latin community go and have fun. They have tacos, non-alcoholic beverages. They have a piñata and music . . . It's just a chance to just relax and hang out with all

your friends” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). Interviewee nine summed up the value of an event combining material incentives with less tangible characteristics such as “useful” saying: “useful in terms of useful for my college experience or maybe after graduation, or looking for jobs or researching for classes or anything like that. And then, also beneficial, so free food, raffles, future benefits, anything like that” (interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019).

Another student asked to comment on what they thought was the most successful event they had attended on campus explained: “They have food and they have someone who’s informed about the topic. And they have student leaders or two of the student workers, one of the grad assistants, and then one regular undergrad student, just facilitate the conversation, ask people to speak to one another about it” (interviewee 4, in discussion with the author, 2019). In this instance, the student notes a combination of incentives and characteristics: opportunities to learn something and to socialize and network with friends and peers are important, but the characteristic of timing in terms of frequency and the characteristic of student involvement in facilitating the event are also noteworthy. When asked about their favorite educational events on campus, one student explained that the networking opportunities provided by the accounting club were the most successful, saying: “What makes them good and attractive for students, and interesting, is that the professionals are the ones presenting. And they have incentives to be there just to have facial recognition [with] the people that I’ll eventually interview with or meet in my career” (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student, describing an educational event on campus they thought was particularly effective, highlighted networking opportunities as a key reason. They explained, “So the Career Development Center, they find companies in a city and then they bring their students up there to talk to professionals in the company and have networking opportunities and they can just learn more about their company and ask them all sorts of questions. And it really applied to me because I’m graduating soon, so it really helped” (interviewee 7, in discussion with the author, 2019).

The most common material incentives students noted were free food and the opportunity to earn extra credit or points toward completing career readiness programs required by their program. The word “food” appeared 155 times across nine of the thirteen interviews, and some reference to extra credit or career program points appeared sixteen times across seven of thirteen interviews. Explaining why a recent event they attended was successful, one student mentioned that in addition to the event featuring a well-known celebrity, “It was also extra credit for some people, so a lot of people went just for that reason” (interviewee 8, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another highlighted a combination of material incentives: “A couple months ago, I attended this international speaker series. . . . And we got provided lunch and dessert, and I got a [career readiness] point” (interviewee 13, in discussion with the author, 2019). Although food was mentioned more than any other material incentive, students usually paired it with another incentive when talking about successful events they had attended. Students stressed that food was an important motivator for attending events but usually not the sole reason. Interviewee nine explained: “If the event has food, I’m more likely to go if it’s something that I’m on the fence about, or if it’s something that offers like a [career readiness] point . . . I’m more likely to go than an event that doesn’t” (interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked why they attend events on campus, another student said, “If there’s free food. If I think

it could help me. I think that's probably it" (interviewee 13, in discussion with the author, 2019).

Another student highlighted material incentives as a key characteristic they thought would make their idea for a finals week giveaway effective in bringing students to the library saying: "This can go for either caffeine beverages or food. I want to say that maybe the first x amount of people in the library during the first 24 hours during finals, they can get a free item or something, whether it's like a food meal or if it's like first 100 students get a free year of In N Out" (interviewee 6, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked why they attended a recent event on campus, interviewee five said, "Because they were giving away free stuff" (interviewee 5, in discussion with the author, 2019).

The campus event most frequently cited by students as successful is hosted annually by a campus organization. Many students noted that the fact that it was annual was important, but interviewee eight summed up best the incentives most identified as important for making this effective outreach when they explained: "I liked the music. I liked the food. A lot of my friends go because a lot of my friends are people of color, so they're interested in those kind of events. And it's fun" (interviewee 8, in discussion with the author, 2019). Interviewee four summed up incentives to make a campus event successful as follows: "rewarding can be anything from people feeling as if they learned something that's rewarding to them in terms of, 'I feel like I just expanded my own sense of knowledge.' Or rewarding can literally mean something tangible" (interviewee 4, in discussion with the author, 2019).

The listing exercise for characteristics of effective outreach corroborated students' perception of incentives as very important to effective outreach. Eleven of thirteen participants listed some kind of non-material incentive, nine of thirteen listed some kind of material incentive, and seven of thirteen listed both. Twelve of thirteen participants listed some kind of incentive as a key characteristic of effective outreach. The average (mode) priority rank for non-material incentives was two and for material incentives four.

**Student Involvement.** Analysis of the transcripts revealed that student assistants believe involving students in planning, marketing, and executing outreach events is a key characteristic of effective outreach. Doing so incentivizes other students to participate by increasing opportunities to network and socialize with the students assisting with the outreach and provides opportunities to ensure it is well-promoted through word of mouth generated by the students helping with the initiative. When asked to describe the kinds of events that interest them, one student explained: "Definitely, if I know other people that are my friends are going too. If it's put on or someone I know helped plan this event and then if it's more social than educational" (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked why student involvement was key to their interest in events, the same student explained: "Because I think for events that I've seen on campus, when they're like, 'Those students that are heavily involved--' and you know of these students, or you have a personal relationship with them, you're kind of more invested in . . . showing up for them, and they'll do the same for you" (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). When discussing their experience helping the library with outreach, students were asked to comment on how we might best use student assistants for outreach. Interviewee nine summed up the value of student involvement explaining, "We would probably know what students like to see, what students want or would actually show up to. So I think even setting up the displays within the library, it's more helpful to have a student do that, maybe than somebody who is older because I would be more drawn to something that has maybe like pop culture references or funny things . . . and

then I would be more likely to read it or go to the event or talk to whoever is in charge” (interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another participant cited student involvement as a key reason they thought their favorite campus event (an annual drag show) was so successful. They explained, “So I think that’s also an annual event that the LGBTQ-plus community, they run it, and I really like it . . . having people come together in one space that’s really openly supportive of marginalized communities, it was really cool. And just seeing the performances too. It was fun. Yeah, and seeing student performers perform . . . (interviewee 7, in discussion with the author, 2019).

Student involvement was less frequently noted in the listing exercises, with only three of thirteen participants listing it. Nevertheless, its prevalence in the transcripts, in combination with what students said about incentives (including opportunities to socialize with friends) and word of mouth as critical to well-promoted outreach, this study’s findings firmly situates student involvement among the most important characteristics of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants.

**Timing.** Students frequently mentioned timing as an important characteristic of effective outreach and most often referred to finding a time of day that did not conflict with classes and other regular campus activities. Students also mentioned timing in terms of frequency, especially annual events, as well as timing in terms of duration of events, especially their being shorter or asynchronous to accommodate busy schedules. In discussing their rankings, one student said, “So number four I put location and time. I think keeping that in mind, having something that you know people will be able to show up with that doesn’t really conflict with their schedules. So I know here people definitely-- good outreach here is done in the afternoon or during dead hours” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked about their priority list of characteristics, another student explained, “The third big thing is the time of the day that it’s occurring. . . . Dead hours are a great time to do something or later in the night, I guess like maybe 6 o’clock” (interviewee 11, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another said, “So I think the most successful ones are the ones that have food, are quick and maybe don’t interfere with a lot of other stuff” (interviewee 4, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked why they do not attend events on campus, the same student explained: “For me, it’s just time constraint” (interviewee 4, in discussion with the author, 2019).

**Intangible Characteristics.** Finally, intangible characteristics such as “fun,” “exciting,” and “unique,” were cited by students as important characteristics for effective outreach. Although analysis of the transcripts did not

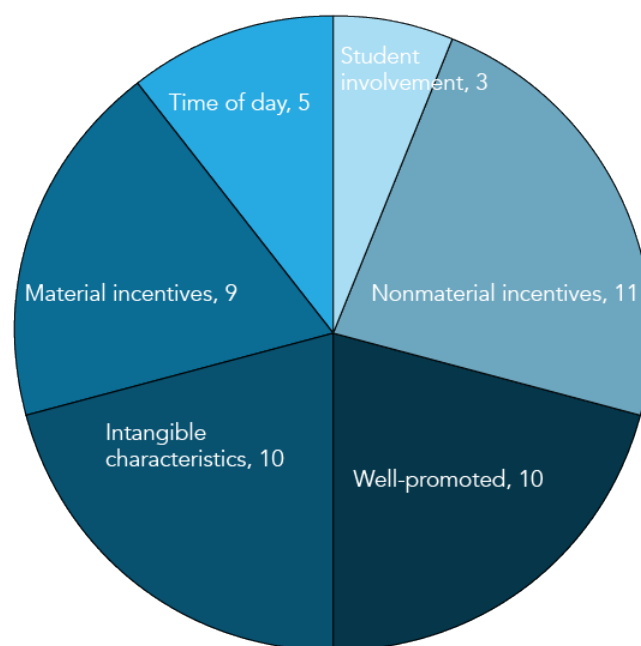


Figure 3.  
Characteristics of effective outreach from coded lists.

reveal insights into exactly what students mean by characteristics like “fun” and “unique,” these less tangible characteristics appear repeatedly throughout the interviews, with “fun” taking the top spot. The word “fun” shows up 120 times across ten of the thirteen interviews and is listed as a characteristic of effective outreach on five of thirteen priority lists of characteristics. “Unique” appears thirty times across eight interviews and “exciting” appears thirty times over seven interviews. Overall, ten of thirteen participants included at least one intangible characteristic.

Characteristic	Average Rank (Mode)
Well-promoted	1
Intangible characteristics	3
Material incentives	4
Non-material incentives	2
Student involvement	5
Time of day	5

Table 2. Average rankings of characteristics of effective outreach from coded lists.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study used IDIs to reveal what a well-informed subset of university students believe characterizes effective library outreach. Findings suggest that effective outreach is well-promoted, provides material and non-material incentives to participate, and is well timed to avoid conflicts with class and extracurricular activities. Findings also show that library student assistants believe effective outreach includes student participation in the planning, marketing, and execution of outreach, and intangible characteristics (such as fun, unique, and exciting) are important. This study also highlights library student assistant opinions on effective modes of communicating with students to ensure outreach is well-promoted: these include email, word of mouth, social media, and well-designed and well-placed signage. Future studies could examine if any of the characteristics identified may be more effective than others and determine what combination of characteristics might be most effective. Future studies may also define and assess the effectiveness of the most common intangible characteristics students identified including fun, exciting, and unique. On the basis of these findings, the author recommends the following:

1. Promote early and often: participants believe that promoting outreach in many ways over many weeks is essential to success. Combining modes of communication including email, word of mouth, social media, and signage is recommended.
2. Provide incentives: a combination of material and non-material incentives is recommended.
3. Develop a team of outreach student assistants: interviewees consistently noted that hearing about library outreach from fellow students was an effective way to reach them. They also made it clear that they attended events when they or a friend played a role in planning or facilitating the event in some way.
4. Consider timing: not just your academic calendar and class schedules, but also frequency and duration. Annual events or biannual events lend

themselves to effective word-of-mouth marketing. Shorter events tend to be more appealing to busy students.

5. Incorporate less tangible characteristics: intangible characteristics that appeal to your target audience are important. Make it unique, fun, engaging, or relevant to a particular community on campus.

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