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Imagine: A Student-Centered Library

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Imagine
A student-centered library

I n 2004, the Raymond H. Fogler Library at the University of Maine formed its Marketing Team in response to the changing perceptions of academic libraries. Our charge is to explore new and innovative ways to promote the library and to define its place within the larger university community. One of the primary goals of the group is to reconnect users with the library as place at a time of 24/7 electronic resources.

Under the leadership of Fogler's public relations and outreach coordinator, team members representing different departments in the library perform their marketing duties in addition to their regular jobs. Diverse skills and different points of view have quickly become one of the group's strengths.

During our first meetings, we found there was still something missing in our dynamic. As a group we were being asked to find new ways to connect with our users, the largest group of which was students. Yet, we had no student voice in the group. We decided to open up our process to make room for a student member. Student members of the Marketing Team function as full participants. They are encouraged to share their own ideas as well as to serve as a sounding board for suggestions.

START HERE.

inquiry. integrity. insight.

Raymond H. Fogler Library
http://library.umaine.edu/

Graphic of the i3 brand campaign.

We also set ourselves apart from other academic committees by our commitment to design thinking, which allows us to be quite fearless in exploring creative solutions. We begin by striving to understand the user's point of view, being careful to define the correct problem, and by avoiding linear thinking that may allow our own point of view to cloud our conclusions. We encourage all group members to share ideas freely and rely on the diversity of experience within the group; we experiment with multiple iterations of proposed solutions and develop multiple prototypes if needed. Once implemented, we remain ready to modify our solution as the situation requires.

Marketing the art of information

Our first task was to brand Fogler Library. Brainstorming sessions centered on the

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questions: What is a library? Why is a library special? What do libraries provide that other information outlets do not? The answer: "Inquiry — Integrity — Insight" became our i3 Campaign. The i3 logo and brand combined to form our first marketing campaign. The i3 Campaign helped to define the new marketing group and served as a showcase for the creative potential of its members.

Next we looked at our largest group of users—students. How could we engage them directly in a conversation about the library? We began with our "We Found it at Fogler" poster series, which has remained an enduring aspect of our student outreach.

Originally created by a student member of the Marketing Team, this collaboration between students and the library was a quiet success from the start and continues to grow in popularity. Messages are posted via e-mail inviting student groups to participate. It is interesting to note that many groups hear about the project from their peers. The posters feature a student group posing in a recognizable area of the library. Each group supplies its own quotation in answer to the question: "What did we find at Fogler?"

The responses to this query reveal the many ways in which the library is of vital importance to the students' lives and work. Participants include sports teams ("Because we study just as hard as we skate, you will find us at Fogler!"), sororities ("We found a place where scholarship and sisterhood come together"), and academic pursuits ("In the works of past leaders we found the knowledge, the ambition, and the vitality to create a better future").

"We found it at Fogler!"

Women's Ice Hockey   Fall 2009

"What did we find at Fogler?
Because we study just as hard
as we skate, you'll find us at Fogler."

Inquiry integrity insight FOGLER www.library.umaine.edu
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"We found it at Fogler" poster.

The students are not only thrilled by their celebrity, they are comforted by a deep sense of belonging. "We appreciated the opportunity to reach out, . . . to be part of the larger UMaine community," explained the President of the English Graduate Student Association. Small groups can feel isolated, and it is significant that they turn to the library to feel a vital and inseparable part of the university. "All of the members love [the poster]," wrote the Delta Nu Chapter of Alpha Phi, "and are so pleased that we had the opportunity to really integrate our group into a huge part of campus life that is in the library."

This effect can be a lasting one. Students realize they are helping to create and sustain a tradition. "We would definitely participate again," said the English Graduate Student Association. Team Maine's slogan reads: "We found a place to learn and share UMaine's history and traditions." The Equestrian Team was even more specific, explaining "in the Guy Kendall Collection in Special Collections, we found photos of the harness racing ancestors of our wonderful UMares." The Sophomore Eagles consciously chose to see their poster as part of history: "Who can resist a lasting piece that will serve as a great memory for us later on…Future Eagles can look at the photograph and get a better sense of not only what we do, but who we are." It is encouraging to see students finding a sense of identity and history at our library.

One group highlighted the transformative power of this campaign, seeing their participation not only as a fun experience or a savvy marketing ploy, but as a way to
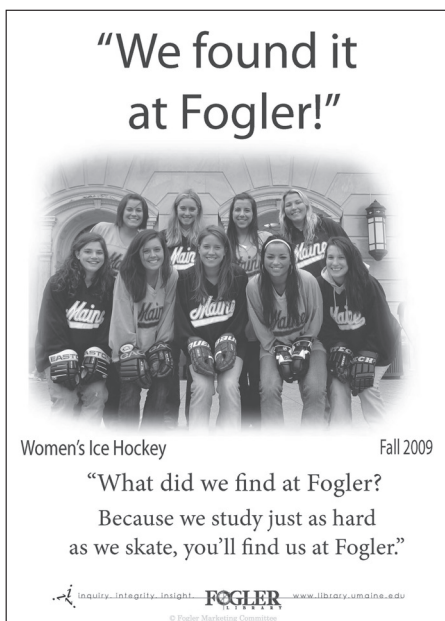
bring about change. The Student Women's Association "found empowerment, courage, and determination in the works of generations of feminists who inspire us to work for equality, justice, and social change." They specifically stated their intent at the very beginning, explaining "we think it will be a great way to [add] our message of collaboration and equality to the atmosphere of Fogler Library." We continue to see the success of the "We Found it at Fogler" reflected in the way it helps students to articulate their relationship with the library and to connect to the larger university community.

The power of language

In 2008, building on the success of the i3 and We Found it at Fogler campaigns, we introduced a new campaign focused on the word *imagine.* We

Easel with student comments.

quickly realized that this single word had the flexibility to allow us to highlight a wide variety of resources. It served as a call to action, encouraging those who use our materials to imagine all of the possibilities available to them through the library's tangible and electronic resources. Not long into our efforts, a team member noticed that in his book *Words That Work,* Frank Luntz identified *imagine* as "one of the most powerful words in the English language," ranking it number one on his list of "Words and Phrases for the Twenty-First Century."[1]

Imagine a new approach for gathering feedback

After creating a series of posters inviting students to *imagine* the diversity and usefulness of various library resources, we recognized an opportunity within the imagine theme to incorporate methods similar to those described by Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons in their 2007 book, *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester.*[2] We placed easels holding oversize paper along 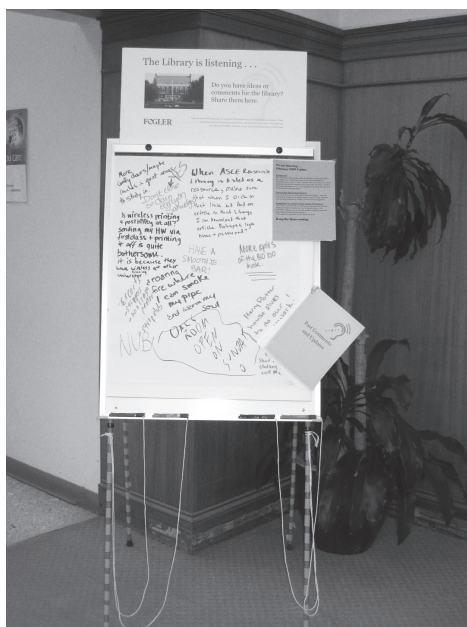with colored markers in prominent places, encouraging patrons to offer a response to the phrase: "Imagine making a difference in the library. Tell us… what's your favorite place in the library? What should we do to make all areas as appealing as your favorite?"

This invitation began a dialogue that resulted in more than 1,000 comments in an academic year. In addition to comments noting favorite locations, suggestions touched on topics as diverse as the library's hours, Web site, and ideas for future displays. The vast majority of comments were constructive and reflected a willingness on the part of students to participate in library decision-making as members of the community that we had been trying to foster in previous campaigns.

One contributor wrote, "Create an area to showcase books that are staff favorites. Also have an area for student favorites so students who love books can submit a list of their favorites and set up a showcase too." Another responded to this idea, saying, "Build community." A third added, "This would be so fun!"

Unlike traditional forms for gathering suggestions, including surveys or comment cards, the easels allowed students to react to each other's comments, resulting in a form of dialogue. The open and public nature of the board, and the sheer number of notes

we received, contributed to our ability to contextualize each suggestion. Many comments reflected users' familiarity with the conventions of online discussion boards and made the connection that this tangible board is a similar "conversation" space within the library. One student spent a fair bit of time using a marker to adapt a page and add the heading of "Status Newsfeed" along with "Like" and "Logout" buttons found on a Facebook page.

We are now able to draw from a running transcription of all of the comments and watch for themes to emerge. In addition, we prepare a summary each semester to allow for quantitative analysis of comments that have been tallied and ranked by total. As we develop campaigns, we always consider ways to make our efforts measurable. While surveys and interviews have provided valuable information regarding reaction to our poster series, the addition of the easels in this particular campaign—which allowed us to watch the number and type of comments as they were contributed each day—added a certain level of built-in measurability.

Reconfiguring spaces

Library staff members responded to as many of the students' ideas as possible, providing additional seating, making repairs to equipment, adding power strips, and making adjustments to hours of operation during finals week. When we received suggestions for new signage, or different placement of signage, we made every effort to incorporate the ideas contributed by these fresh eyes. Students began responding with thank you messages on the board.

Spurred by student suggestions, multiple departments coordinated procedures, shifting and consolidating materials to create a more comfortable reading space in the area that houses our collection of contemporary leased titles. Additional clusters of soft furniture and rocking chairs were added. New shelf labels were designed to make the collection easy to browse, and clipboards encouraged students to contribute suggestions for new titles. As

of April 2011, more than 150 new student-suggested titles had been ordered.

Another recurring comment from students was a request for more student art in the building. We responded by creating two new exhibit spaces for student art. Coordinated with the Art Department, these venues allow students to see themselves reflected in their surroundings.

Benefits of the student-centered library

The benefits of the student-centered library are many. Learning to trust students has allowed us to create a community centered on the library as place. In addition to our reading area and new art spaces, our outreach to students has given voice, literally, to The Renewals, Fogler Library's band. A collaboration between student and staff singers and musicians, the group writes, performs, and produces music videos about the library.[3]

One unintended result of these efforts was that the university's student government organization drafted an official resolution to thank the Dean of Libraries for attentiveness to student needs. Once passed, the resolution was framed and presented in a formal ceremony.

As we move into the next academic year, we do so with the knowledge that our students are making the journey with us. The students themselves said this best in their comments from the last week of classes in spring 2010: "Thanks for a good year," "So long, Fogler," "I (heart) Librarians."

Notes

1. Frank I. Luntz, *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2007), 241.

2. Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons, eds., *Studying Students: the Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007), 21.

3. The Renewals videos are available at www.library.umaine.edu/podcasts/renewals2.htm and www.library.umaine.edu/podcasts/renewals.htm. ✷