Aligning the Programming of the Gillis Branch Library to

Meet the Needs and Interests of the Inner City Patrons of Fresno

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**Introduction**

**Overview**

The Gillis Branch Library is a medium-sized inner-city branch of the Fresno County Public Library. In the 2016-2017 fiscal year, the Gillis Library recorded 165,500 checkouts. It was originally opened in 1940 and moved to its current 6,262 ft2 location on the corner of Fruit and Dakota avenues in 1975. Despite a robust circulation, the Gillis Library has historically had trouble attracting teens and children to their programs.

This action study proposes to investigate the information needs and interests of Gillis Library clientele by examining different programming and marketing strategies through a literature review, feedback collected primarily through surveys on current programming as well as surveying a sample of patrons who are not participating in Gillis Branch programming through a questionnaire. In addition, this study will acquire some basic demographic information on Gillis patrons and on the service area’s geographic boundaries through surveys and data mining the libraries internal networks. This will help guide librarians when formulating future programming for the Gillis Branch Library.

This study is critical to the success of the Gillis Library as past resources have been wasted on lightly attended programs and such waste will no longer be tolerated in light of the current fiscal situation of the Fresno County Public Library. In the most recent fiscal year, the Fresno County Public Library has relied on its reserves to maintain operations; and with the additional need to fund the construction of the Clovis Regional Library and Reedley Branch Library, instructions have gone out to branch managers to justify funding outlays. This research is a necessary component of that justification. Aligning with the interests and needs of Gillis patrons will increase the community support of the Gillis Branch Library.

**Literature Review**

Marketing and programming are topics that concern every librarian and there is an abundance of literature that is devoted to either topic. Most of the literature published in peer-reviewed journals draw from the personal experiences of library professionals and are presented in the form of case studies (Faricy-Beredo, 2013; Reihle and Witt 2009). In Faricy-Beredo (2013), the University of Toledo showcased the National Library of Medicine’s traveling exhibition Harry Potter’s World: Renaissance Science, Magic & Medicine. In the case of Reihle and Witt (2009), both librarians expounded on the results of their outreach to undergraduate dormitories in the program titled Research Project Survival. Most of these case studies concern academic libraries with a fraction of the articles drawing from the experiences of librarians in special libraries—particularly medical libraries—such as in the case of Allen and Allen (2007) which described how outreach programming when guided by a marketing plan resulted in a 11% increase in users of the Munson Community Health Library (MCHL). Much less common are case studies that focus on public librarianship.

Some topics are less common in the information services profession such as discussions on the impact of traveling exhibits. Faricy-Beredo (2013) illustrated how the William S. Carlson Library of the University of Toledo leveraged a traveling exhibition as a vehicle to create relationships with community stakeholders. Similarly, MacAlpine (2005), discussed how another traveling exhibit (Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature) was used to increase library uses and provided warnings on some of the pitfalls libraries should avoid when marketing such exhibits. MacAlpine (2005) cited how hosting guest lecturers on various topics such as cloning and exhibiting relevant student projects at the library helped increase student traffic from different departments and raised awareness of the resources that the Coates Library of Trinity University had to offer. In particular, MacAlpine (2005) emphasized the importance of persistent communications including emails and face-to-face meetings that were required in setting up these programs. One of the pitfalls MacAlpine (2005) identified was relying on faulty assumptions about the nature of the student community. In particular, low attendance to the Frankenstein film festival was attributed to faulty assumptions on the student community’s interest and the amount free time that they had. MacApline (2005) asserted that the misstep could have been avoided through an exploratory survey during the planning process. The article “Marketing Your Library with The Big Read” continued the overarching theme of forging community partnerships for larger programs and insisted that a successful Big Read (provided by the National Endowment for the Arts) required the collaboration of libraries, community parks, and school districts (Laster, Stitz, & Bove, 2011). In the article, the DeKalb Public Library partnered with the Egyptian theater—a local art cinema—to showcase movie screenings of the selected stories. The DeKalb Public Library also organized lectures on topics pertinent to the selected novel. In addition, this was supplemented with activities that were related to the selected story. For instance, for the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the DeKalb Public Library sponsored tours of local cemeteries. For Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*, the DeKalb Public Library hosted a sled dog demonstration.

Another topic that several articles discussed was how to service the needs or reach out to specific communities or groups of patrons (Miller, Accamando, & Wagner, 2017; Wright and Holt, 2012). Miller, Accamando, and Wagner (2017) discussed several methods in which to tailor their collection to meet the needs of veterans and help them acclimate to student life. They first asked for recommendations on what to add to fulfill the information needs of veteran students. This was accomplished by appealing to professors through email and soliciting suggestions from the campus community through the Gumberg Library of the Duquesne University’s website. In total, this process amassed 87 suggestions on what to add to the library’s collection. Miller, Accamando, and Wagner (2017) also recounted how the Gumberg Library used the Doody’s Review Service, the Yankee Book Peddler’s Global Online Bibliographic Information (GOBI) and library journal *Choice* to identify potential additional to meet the information needs of the Duquesne University veteran student community. Wright and Holt (2012) described how Odum Library and the Dewar College of Education illustrated how an academic library could reach pre-K children in their article “Read Fest: Academic Library Programming for Pre-Kindergarten Students”.

Allen and Allen (2004) discussed a framework for programming emphasizing an outreach marketing strategy to drive increased usage of library resources and drew examples from the Munson Community Health Library (MCHL) who applied the techniques and achieved an 11% increase in the number of people utilizing MCHL resources (Allen & Allen, 2004). In this outreach marketing strategy, the librarian paid close attention to selecting target audiences with each program and then refining the Marketing Mix—product, place, price, and promotion—to more efficiently utilize resources and generating improved outcomes. Two programs that benefited were the Camp Healthy Me!—a children’s health single day summer camp—and the MCHL Speaker Series.

Outreach was a common theme in many of the articles. According to Riehle and Witt (2009), academic libraries in particular face a particularly daunting task of reaching out to undergraduates in an attempt to educate them on the necessary information literacy skills that they will need in their academic career. The article recommends hosting sessions that address selecting manageable topics, research through the World Wide Web, tips on determining quality and currency, and avoiding the pitfalls of plagiarism inside residence halls. Reihle and Witt (2009) further identify working closely with resident advisors (RAs) to motivate them to promote the presentations, selecting the timing of these sessions, and having food-based incentives as crucial to the success of such a program.

Marketing is insufficient by itself in driving increased library use. Another aspect that the literature discussed was usability Laster, Stitz, and Bove, (2011). This articles chronicles the disastrous rollout of a Web 2.0 version of their previous HTML library website for the University of Akron in Ohio and how iterative usability testing—where users described their thoughts out loud in a task-based protocol analysis to develop a prototype and then performed a second iteration of the task-based protocol analysis to further refine the prototype—resulted in a user-friendly webpage that enabled the University of Akron community to quickly locate library resources.

The issues of programming and marketing that face information scientists in the United States are relevant to libraries around the world. Nyobvu, Hamooya, and Mwila (2012) identified economics as being one of the primary reasons for the underutilization of the National Archives of Zambia. Simply, the majority of citizens were too preoccupied with finding food, clothing, and shelter to be concerned with visiting the National Archives of Zambia. The article also identified a lack of funding as exacerbating these circumstances. Nyobvu, Hamooya, and Mwila (2012) recommended increased funding for marketing and training programs as the most effective solution to increase utilization of the National Archives of Zambia.

Academic libraries and specials libraries have contributed a large body of work on the entwined topics of programming and marketing. Unfortunately, public librarianship has been far less prolific in producing peer-reviewed articles on these topics.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The participants ofthe first phase of the study will be a purposive sample of a minimum of 50 literate patrons who either participate in current library programming at the Gillis Branch Library or are physically present inside the library’s premises during predetermined time periods. Participants in the second phase of the Gillis Branch Library will be a sample of a minimum of 50 households—unique residential addresses—who check out and return physical items to the Gillis Branch Library.

**Data Collection Instruments**

The data collection instruments will be a paper and pencil survey in the form of a questionnaire written in both English and Spanish and data mining the integrated library system Horizon for a sample of library accounts who return items to the Gillis Branch Library. The questionnaire will ask participants to specify basic demographic information such as their age, address, and the mode of travel used to reach the Gillis Library. The questionnaire will ask patrons for the purpose of their current visit to the Gillis Branch Library and probe their satisfaction with their overall experience. In addition, the survey should ask patrons to identify shortcomings of the library’s customer service, collection of materials, and library programming as well as elicit suggestions for future additions to the collection and future library programming. After the collection of the questionnaire, the study’s data will be supplemented by data mining a sample of the records of patrons who returned items to the Gillis Branch Library. From these records, demographic information will be extracted including each patron’s birth date and the listed address of each patron. In addition, a snapshot of the check out record—both physical and electronic materials—will be taken from each patron that is included in the sample.

**Procedure**

Permission for this exploratory action research plan concerning the Gillis Library—a branch of the Fresno County Public Library, requires the approval of the Board of Supervisors, and the County Librarian or her designated subordinate. In addition, the Cluster Supervisor and the Branch Manager must also sign off on the action study. To obtain permission, initial contact of all of the relevant persons will be through email with the intention to schedule a face-to-face meeting whereupon permission will be obtained after explaining the proposal and the benefits the proposal will provide to the Gillis Branch Library.

The first collection instrument will be a survey in the form of questionnaire written in both English and Spanish. After permission is granted a two week period will be spent developing survey questions for the paper and pencil questionnaire. This preparatory period will also be used to specify the scope of the data that the study will capture through data mining—the second phase of the study—a sample of patrons who return items to the Gillis Branch Library.

The survey will be administered to patrons who participate in library programming for a period of one designated week. The survey will also be offered at predetermined times during select days from morning to evening across the span of the designated week of survey collection. The Gillis Branch Library is open from Monday through Thursday from 10:00 am to 8:00 pm and on Friday and Saturday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm. Consequently, time periods that should be sampled will include the time periods from 10:00 am to 11:00 am, from 4:00 pm to 5:00 pm, and from 7:00 pm to 8:00 pm. In addition, the survey will also sample patrons during the period from 3:00 pm to 4:00 pm to capture students who use the library as an afterschool hangout. All survey responses will be elicited on a volunteer basis. Surveys will be collected in a marked manila envelope for later analysis.

After the week of survey collection, the study will commence its second phase by mining data from the integrated library system Horizon of patrons who return items to the Gillis Branch Library. The sample will include all check-in activity from the main check-out station during the designated times on select days—paralleling the first phase.

This study will collect a minimum of 50 records or responses in each phase. Should the minimum number of responses not be reached in either phase, an additional week of data collection by both methods must be instituted until the minimum sample size is achieved. For purposes of data mining, the captures of multiple returns by the same person over the whole data collection period will be treated as a single result. In regards to acquiring the minimum sample of 50 results through data mining, persons who share the same address will be treated as a single result.

The strength of the questionnaire is its ability to ask for specific information on a person’s intent and to allow participants to articulate that intent, but this qualitative data collection instrument does have its drawbacks. One of the weaknesses for the data collection instrument of the paper and pen questionnaire is the bias introduced by the author of the questions. Assumptions that the author holds could influence the questions and the feedback that such questions elicit. Another weakness of the study’s questionnaire is the probable exclusion of segments of the population of all Gillis patrons either because they decline to respond, were never offered the opportunity to respond, or in the case of young children or autistic persons incapable of responding. Another weakness is in the limitations of the types of conclusions that an investigation can draw from a survey; namely that surveys as a whole do not allow investigators to manipulate an independent variable; and therefore, make it inappropriate for an investigator to confirm a causal relationship.

One of the strengths of data mining is the relative efficiencies in acquiring data. By its very nature, initial data capture is done by the system in question. When a study employs data mining, the investigation must outline the method of selecting a sample and the scope of data that will be included in that sample. Another strength of data mining is how easily the quantitative nature of the data generated allows investigators to identify associative relationships. One of the weaknesses of data mining is its blindness to the thought processes of a sample’s participants. Data mining lacks the ability to provide insight on the intent and desires of a sample’s participants. In addition, limiting the sample to patrons who return materials to the Gillis Branch Library excludes capturing data on a segment of patrons who come to the Gillis Branch Library solely for access to technology, e.g., word processing, web browsing, printing, and copying.

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