Introduction

Libraries have always depended on quality outreach. State-funded academic libraries, especially those involved in agreements such as the Federal Depository Library Program, expand this outreach to the greater community outside the walls of university affiliates. Universities have vast resources, however, which may not always be shared beyond their immediate locale. After being granted funds to engage more broadly throughout the state, Indiana University Libraries and its Center for Rural Engagement proceeded in a project reaching public library patrons across 11 counties. This article discusses the ways in which university resources, libraries and students connected with the greater rural area in the state to bring desired programming and outreach to rural libraries.

Information Gathering

In the first phase of the project, a listening tour was conducted. Libraries reported a variety of both successes and struggles. Successes included several specific materials and programming themes patrons responded well to. Struggles included funding and areas of the community unreached. One resounding comment came up again and again, however. These libraries valued as much community engagement as they could attain. To discover more closely how various groups could connect with their libraries even further and in the most desirable ways possible, the Center for Rural Engagement funded a vast survey.

The survey was delivered to over 160,000 households, with over a 6.5% response rate. Close to 50% of respondents reported someone in their household visits the library at least once a month (See Figure 1). When asked “If nobody from your household has visited the library in the last year, which of the following reasons describes why?” the prevalent reason selected was “All of this household’s information needs are met through the internet at home” (Figure 2). However, more than 90% stated that the library is at least moderately important as a community service (Figure 3). Of particular interest to look at in regard to this project, was the question “What are the main reasons your household visits the library?” over 20% selected “to borrow fiction books for leisure reading,” while less than 12% marked “to attend events or programs held at the library” and just over 3% marked “to gather socially” (Figure 4). When presented with twelve different programming themes patrons would like to see more of at their library, a genuinely varied response was given (Figure 5). This naturally provided the information necessary for the next phase of the project.

Utilizing the Information

The top five programming themes survey participants had shown interest in seeing more of at their libraries were represented in five virtual programs and promoted to the entire region. During all of these, open access Indiana University, along with government and other quality, free digital resources were introduced.

• Nearly 11% of the survey responses showed importance in arts and culture programs. To provide something hands-on for people to enjoy, 630 maker kits were distributed to the public libraries in the region for patrons to pick up. Each kit contained a plain canvas tote bag, paints and supplies to block print on the bag. The digital engagement librarian at Indiana University created a video tutorial on YouTube for anyone to watch at any time. To accommodate those without reliable internet access, a physical handout with directions was included with each kit (see Figure 6).

• Nutrition, health and fitness was also a leading theme selected by survey participants, with 10.28% stating they would be interested in attending such a program at their library. In turn, graduate students led the instruction for a virtual program called “Open and Healthy! An Introduction to Online Nutrition, Health & Fitness Resources.” Shared here were digital tools and education sites from sources like the National Institutes of Health, the Indiana State Office of Rural Health and outreach to rural libraries.

• Nearly one out of ten responses included an interest in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) programming. Having learned from conversations with library directors and staff throughout this region that pre-teens or “tweens” are an age group often engaged with less than others, it seemed a great fit to create a STEM program specifically for them and simply titled “STEM for Tweens!” This event featured an overview of online materials pre-teens can access at home to enhance their knowledge and skills, as well as introduce some simple project ideas. Parents, educators and of course tweens themselves were encouraged to attend.

• Finally, with a selection rate of almost 9%, music and film was designated as a topic survey participants would enjoy as a library program. In “Media Mania: Open Film and Video Resources for All,” The Head of Media Services at Indiana University Libraries introduced several university open media resources that members of the general public can access right from home.