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## At the Center of Things: How an Academic Library Built a Bridge between Art and Science on Campus

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*From the Field*

At the Center of Things: How an Academic Library  
Built a Bridge between Art and Science on Campus

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**Abstract**

The University of Houston Libraries sponsored an interdisciplinary event for students, faculty, and the public, titled the Artists' Health and Wellness Colloquium and Resource Fair. The event was held in order to facilitate learning in two key research areas and to demonstrate the library's ability to bridge disparate disciplines and forge new partnerships with multiple academic units simultaneously. Aspiring and working artists were taught how to maintain good health and to avoid overstressing their bodies as they practice their art. Scholars presented both historical and trending perspectives on the intersection of art and health science. This article presents planning strategies for librarians who seek to partner with dissimilar campus entities as part of event planning.

Keywords: colloquium, community, arts, health, science

**Introduction**

The Artists' Health and Wellness (AHW) Colloquium and Resource Fair was a collaborative project conceived by the directors of three University of Houston branch libraries (Architecture and Art, Music, and Optometry) to disseminate health and wellness information to campus and community artists by leveraging the cooperative nature of UH Libraries. The event was born out of a desire to link two disciplines that are great strengths of both the City of Houston and the University of Houston: fine arts and health sciences.

The City of Houston is home to the largest medical center in the world, the Texas Medical Center, which is also the eighth largest business district in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Houston also boasts an arts community so large it employs even more people than the Texas Medical Center – 146,625 people in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Despite being such large segments of the city's economy, these two communities rarely partner with each other. One notable exception to this trend is the Center for Performing Arts Medicine at The Methodist Hospital (CPAM), which is the only large-scale



medical center dedicated to performing artists' health in the country.

Arts and health are also acknowledged strengths of the University of Houston. The university's arts programs are internationally recognized. The Moores Opera Center has won first place awards in the National Opera Association's production competition and is the first university to produce Ricky Ian Gordon's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Robert Aldridge's *Elmer Gantry*, and Daron Hagen's *Amelia*. The creative writing program is among the top ranked in the country. Edward Albee, Jose Quintero, Julian Schnabel and MacArthur Fellow Rick Lowe have worked and studied in UH's art and theater programs. UH is a destination university for aspiring artists from around the world. Likewise, it is home to respected programs in optometry, pharmacy, and health and human performance. In recent years, the university has particularly focused on growing its health research programs, and health-related research accounts for more than 50% of the university's total research expenditures.<sup>3</sup> As with the city's arts and health institutions, the related departments on campus rarely found opportunities to partner with one another. However, they all have one thing in common: the library system.

Given the importance of these academic departments, most are supported by their own library branch. The Architecture and Art Library supports all design and visual arts programs. The Moores School of Music houses its own branch, as does the College of Optometry. Upon completion, a new health sciences building will also house its own branch library. Branch librarians often collaborate on management and service matters; however, they recognized an opportunity for them to collaborate on artists' health research. Given that the health and arts programs exist in silos, research on and support for artists' health was given little attention. The music librarian's personal experience as a profes-

sional musician and private lesson teacher informed her awareness of this key, though often ignored, area at the center of wellness and fine arts. Her deep knowledge of health risks to performing artists led her to suggest that the library system (UH Libraries) bring together the health and arts communities of UH and the City of Houston at an event dedicated to research, resources, and instruction in artists' health and wellness.

Artists are particularly susceptible to health problems caused by years of repetitive motion, working with paints and chemicals, mental and emotional exertion, and overstress during rehearsals and performances. Making artists aware of risk factors, as well as preventative services and resources, can help them to avoid or minimize damage. An educational project on health information and resources for artists could clearly be beneficial. The event could also help to satisfy a new accreditation requirement in the National Association of Music Schools' Commission Questionnaire on Certain Health and Safety Standards, which requires that music schools provide information to students on health and wellness in music.<sup>4</sup>

Once the topic of artist health and wellness was chosen, the planning team determined that performing and visual arts students would be the primary audience, but programming should also benefit off-campus arts professionals. After analyzing existing programs and needs, planners proposed a one-day colloquium and resource fair, as a concentrated approach was likely the best method for communicating and networking.

At this point, the planning team invited two additional health sciences librarians to join the group and assist with preparation. The Director of Library Services for the Health Sciences and the Biology, Biochemistry & Nursing Librarian provided additional expertise and helped facilitate access to their allied academic departments.



## Event Details

The planning for the event took approximately one year. Finding speakers, deciding on breakout sessions, timing the day's events, finding rooms for the sessions within the library, soliciting funding, recruiting partners & exhibitors for the resource fair, and planning the luncheon menu were divided among the planning team. The team evaluated potential health risk topics by performing an environmental scan of similar events at academic institutions, visiting CPAM, and informally assessing interest level through conversations with faculty and students in the arts.

The AHW colloquium consisted of a keynote presentation and breakout groups, which took place during the morning session. Each breakout session focused on a unique aspect of health and wellness for artists, such as repetitive motion, voice, mental health, and/or body wellness for dancers. Preregistration for the colloquium was required and capped at 100. A healthy lunch was provided for colloquium attendees, as well as speakers and volunteers.

## Bridging Art & Health on Campus

One of the planning team's goals was to partner with as many campus departments as possible. Partnerships with other campus units would lend credibility to the event and departmental personnel could provide knowledge, skills, and community connections, which would guide the colloquium's planning. These campus partners could also broaden the marketing reach by promoting the event directly to department staff and students. Finally, these departments could potentially provide partial funding for the event, alleviating some of the burden on UH Libraries.

Like the arts, health sciences are a key part of the University of Houston's ambitious strategic plan adopted in 2009, which led to its achieving Carnegie Tier One status. While the university does

not have a medical school, it does have programs in nursing, optometry, pharmacy, and clinical psychology and social work. It also has student service units dedicated to the health and wellness of its students, including a student health and fitness center, a counseling and psychological services department, a campus health clinic, and a campus optometry clinic, which is also open to the public. All health-focused academic and student services departments were invited to participate in the Artists' Health and Wellness Event.

Keeping in mind that a personal connection is the best marketing tool, subject librarians approached their campus departments. The planners allowed the other departments to dictate the parameters of their involvement. Any level of involvement was encouraged and considered a foundation for future developments.

Several academic departments agreed to a minimal partnership, in which they provided marketing assistance only. Faculty members in the Theatre and Dance Program were more enthusiastic and offered programming guidance and workshop participation. Some academic departments seemed perplexed about why the library (rather than an academic department) was hosting the event. This unease with the library's leadership role may have lessened their willingness to become involved and support the colloquium, as there was no precedent for a library-led project of this type.

The two academic departments that were active partners with UH Libraries were the Honors College and the College of Optometry, which offered space and financial support and participated in the Resource Fair. The Honors College, like the library system, functions at the intersection of all campus disciplines and is accustomed to forging connections between disparate programs on campus. It has also already united medicine and the arts within its Medicine & So-



ciety Program. The college, therefore, immediately understood the function and value of the event and offered meeting space, marketing, and programming support.

The greatest challenge to recruiting academic partners, however, was timing. The event was scheduled to take place in late October, which is a very popular time for campus programming. Departments where planners expected the greatest involvement, like the School of Music and the Mitchell Center for the Arts, were deeply engaged in planning their own late October events and could not offer more than basic promotional support.

Timing affected the Division of Student Services' ability to participate, as well. Most of those employees are non-exempt and, therefore, unable to work on a Saturday. Several departments committed to partnering on future Artists' Health and Wellness events, but only if the events take place on weekdays. Planners had scheduled the event on a Saturday because they believed it would enable more community partners to participate. Ironically, that decision cost meaningful partnerships on campus.

### Community Collaboration

Not only can the library build campus partnerships but it can also serve as a bridge between campus and community. Community collaborations provide additional resources and expertise, as well as an opportunity for students to network with potential employers and collaborators. After graduation, student artists may also be cut off from health and arts organizations, which could otherwise offer health and wellness information, so planners felt it important to provide access to those organizations at the event.

Two off-campus organizations, The Center for Performance Arts Medicine (CPAM) and the Houston Arts Alliance, agreed to co-sponsor the event. Forty-five other organizations, including

community health alliances, mental health agencies, arts advocacy groups, and health clubs, were also invited to participate in the resource fair, where they would be able to share information about their organization. All of the organizations were dedicated to supporting artists or health.

The planning team used multiple communication methods to contact potential community partners, including in-person telephone calls, which were expected to improve the rate of positive response. The planner responsible for community partnerships made herself available for questions and followed up with businesses and organizations. She also tracked reasons for negative responses, which include the following:

- Concerns that attendance would be low (as an inaugural event, there was no track record to which they could refer),
- Concerns about not being a part of planning process,
- Insufficient weekend staffing, and
- Insufficient notification to participate.

Although off campus community organization participation was lower than anticipated, community partners were generally satisfied with the experience. Students also reported success in networking with community partners at the Resource Fair, including a student who was able to gain an internship at CPAM and another who was invited to give a presentation at a Methodist Hospital event. The interactions afforded by the AHW event helped the students develop a network beyond the classroom and may result in future collaborations and innovation.

Based on feedback, planners determined that the number of community partnerships might be increased for a future event by inviting potential partners to join the planning process, so that they have sufficient notice to meet staffing needs and will become invested in the outcome. A weekday event should also improve attendance.





Given the high attendance of the inaugural event, it should be easier to market future AHW events to potential partners, as well.

## Results

The event proved very successful in meeting the benchmarks planners established in their initial proposal:

1. Register 30 or more colloquium participants for the morning session.
2. Partner with five or more community and campus organizations.
3. Receive positive feedback from attendees and the university community on quality programming and arrangements.

The event was marketed through multiple avenues, including an event website, press releases, social media posts, community calendar submissions, and invitation letters and email messages to University faculty and students. University faculty and colleagues were encouraged to promote the word about the event to students and other interested groups. This comprehensive marketing plan was integral to exceeding the registration goal of 30 participants. Total registration was 95 people and attendance was approximately 80 people. This high attendance rate (94% of all registrants) is rare for library events, particularly those that take place on a weekend, when there is a higher likelihood of “no-shows.” Word of mouth was by far the most successful form of advertising for the event. In the post-event survey, more than half of the participants indicated it was the primary method through which they had learned about the event.

Overall, planners were successful in cultivating campus partners. The event benefitted from the knowledge and help of nine UH units, including the campus art museum, recreation center, the counseling and psychological clinic, and six academic departments: the Center for Creative Work, the College of Optometry, The Honors

College, the Moores School of Music, the School of Art, and the School of Theatre and Dance. Best of all, planners established the first direct partnerships between the UH Libraries, the Department of Campus Recreation and the Center for Creative Work, a multidisciplinary program focusing on creative work in Houston. In addition to the university partners, two community organizations: Houston Arts Alliance, the city’s largest non-profit arts and culture organization, and the Center for Performance Arts Medicine at Methodist Hospital (CPAM) partnered to provide event programming.

The cooperation of CPAM, a prestigious partner, proved to be the most valuable. The only center of its kind in the United States, CPAM employs more than 100 specialists that collaborate on health issues specific to the performing arts. CPAM’s participation legitimized an untried event to campus administrators and students by providing an esteemed keynote speaker, as well as ongoing guidance throughout the planning process. It also created a tighter focus on performing arts, which ultimately helped deliver a large audience from the Moores School of Music.

In order to determine attendees’ satisfaction with the event and measure the success of the third goal (positive feedback), attendees were asked to complete an eight-question survey rating the quality of the programming. Respondents were also able to submit comments with additional event feedback. The speakers were well received, particularly the keynote speaker, who was given a mean rating of 3.39 on a four point scale. Furthermore, 100% of respondents stated that the event should be held regularly.

## Lessons Learned

There is a lingering question as to whether the library should be the chief sponsor, as that role seemed to impact involvement for some potential partners. However, the library did partner



successfully with several colleges, departments, and community organizations, which it might not have, had it not sponsored the colloquium. Having one or two faculty members from Music, Theatre, or Dance on the planning committee could alleviate this confusion and provide more buy-in from those departments. This would require much more advance planning to ensure availability.

The format of the program with a keynote and breakout sessions proved to be a good use of resources and time management. In the arts, the body is so often the main instrument or tool and potential issues can be unique to each person. The break-out sessions were particularly useful as they provided a hands-on, personal experience for attendees. In fact, feedback showed that many attendees wished they could have attended more than one session and found it difficult to choose which one to attend. Having two sections of break-out sessions, perhaps before and after lunch, would alleviate this issue.

While the attendee survey indicated that the colloquium was well received, it also indicated flaws in resource fair planning. While well intentioned and helpful for those attending, it did not provide sufficient value, i.e. the number of attendee contacts, to the institutions who participated. The fair was separated from the colloquium by a 90-minute lunch designed to give attendees time to network, but most did not remain long enough for the resource fair, which was poorly attended. Based on observation and feedback, the planners determined that the re-

source fair should begin as soon as the colloquium ended and last longer than the lunch to improve attendance and maximize the value of the event.

Although the planning team had hoped to foster a more resourceful interaction between UH and the local artist community by opening the event to the public, they did not see the turn out they had expected. This may have been due to limited off-campus marketing, as well as the lack of community organizations participating in the Resource Fair. In addition to having faculty on a future planning team, it may be beneficial to have a community representative to assist with advertising and engaging with the public. In order to raise community awareness and attendance, the project team agrees that additional time in project planning should have been dedicated to more diverse marketing strategies and community outreach.

## Conclusion

The Artists' Health and Wellness Colloquium and Resource Fair was a success and showed that there is a need in the performing arts community for an event of its kind. The overall importance of this event and how the library recognized information needs and brought the event to fruition, shows that libraries are more than a storehouse for materials. They can be, and many times are, centers where needs are recognized and met, even though those needs are not library centric. The University of Houston Libraries was very proud of the effort to seize an opportunity, organize the colloquium, and, hopefully, plant the seed for future such events.

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<sup>1</sup> Texas Medical Center. "Facts and Figures." Accessed October 1, 2016.

<http://www.tmc.edu/about-tmc/facts-and-figures/>.



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<sup>2</sup> National Association of Schools of Music. "Commission Questionnaire on Certain Health and Safety Standards." Last modified June 6, 2016. <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/05/NASM-Health-and-Safety-Questionnaire-2016.pdf>.

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the Houston Economy." *Houston Arts Alliance*. Accessed October 10, 2016. [http://houstonartsalliance.com/images/uploads/main/Creative\\_Economy\\_-\\_Report\\_\(2012\).pdf](http://houstonartsalliance.com/images/uploads/main/Creative_Economy_-_Report_(2012).pdf).

<sup>4</sup> University of Houston. "UH Health," Accessed October 1, 2016, <http://www.uh.edu/uhealth>.

