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From the Field

LinkedIn at the Library: A Continuing Collaboration

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Abstract

The University of Houston Libraries collaborated with University Career Services to host LinkedIn at the Library, an event where students were offered reviews of their LinkedIn profiles and free professional headshots. Although LinkedIn at the Library was initially funded as a one-time event, the two units worked together to turn it into a recurring event. This article presents our methods for collaboratively planning and hosting the events, attendance and assessment results, and lessons learned for future collaborative efforts. LinkedIn at the Library is a unique example of an academic library's partnership with a career services unit.

Keywords: LinkedIn, career services, social networking, campus partners, academic libraries, collaboration

Introduction

LinkedIn is a powerful career-building and networking tool, yet many students who are seeking internships or full-time job opportunities do not use it properly or at all. The site reports that over 40 million students and recent college graduates use the networking platform, and they are LinkedIn's fastest-growing demographic.¹

LinkedIn at the Library was an event created by the University of Houston Libraries in collaboration with University Career Services (UCS), in

order to address this concern. LinkedIn at the Library was first piloted in September 2015 thanks to a competitive microgrant awarded by the Libraries, and repeated in February 2017 and September 2017. The primary goal focused on helping students create or improve their LinkedIn profiles to increase the likelihood of finding the right job or internship. The secondary goal focused on empowering students to avail themselves of the Libraries' services and resources.



The event took place in the MD Anderson Library (the University's main library) where students from all disciplines and majors met with staff volunteers from both the Libraries and UCS. Volunteers offered reviews and tips to help students improve their LinkedIn profiles and resumes, and suggested effective ways to build professional connections in the online space. In addition to benefiting students, the event also held a mutual advantage for the Libraries and UCS by raising student awareness of services and by strengthening the relationship between the two units. LinkedIn at the Library might have been a one-time event; however, this partnership was successfully sustained for recurring events through collaborative planning, marketing, and assessment.

Toward Student Success

The University of Houston (UH) is a Carnegie-designated, tier-one research institution with more than 45,000 students. Located in the heart of Houston, Texas, UH is the city's largest university and the third largest in the state of Texas. The MD Anderson Library is the main library of the institution, serving the students enrolled at the university both on and off campus, along with faculty and staff. With a gate count of 13,000 visitors on an average day, the MD Anderson Library is a busy hub of student activity on campus. The University's student success initiative was the primary factor in the creation of LinkedIn at the Library. Rising enrollment and increased expectations for both instructional and co-curricular programming have presented opportunities for the Libraries to expand their range of services and demonstrate higher value for students.

The foundation for the event was an informal conversation between the Libraries' staff on the proper use of students' headshots in the online space and how best to present themselves professionally; general recognition that UH students need assistance in preparing for life after

college, including using online tools like LinkedIn for internship and career searches; and an environmental scan of campus departments that were also in a position to address this concern. UH Libraries was in a prime position for hosting a low-risk event that addressed the use of LinkedIn. The objectives of the event were primarily to help students be well-prepared for their job search, and secondarily to raise awareness of UH Libraries services and programs. The project team was led by the Libraries' communications director and included the history, political science, and government information librarian, the electronic acquisitions coordinator, and the multimedia specialist, in collaboration with the members of UCS.

UH Libraries boasts a Microgrant Program, which allows library employees to try new programming for students or staff by granting funds to eligible activities for a discrete period. The majority of programs are one-time events, with the possibility of continuation if supported by Libraries administration. The first LinkedIn at the Library was made possible through a microgrant of \$850, with supplemental funding provided by the Libraries Office of Communications budget.

Following the success of the initial event, the Libraries' Campus Engagement Committee (CEC) then took on the management of LinkedIn at the Library. CEC comprises librarians and staff who work to engage students with the Libraries through various events and outreach activities. These activities are generally geared toward the promotion of Libraries services to the campus and include representing the Libraries at new student orientations and back-to-school events. CEC activities also include many in-library events, such as Finals Mania, where students are served pancakes in the library to kick off finals week, and Paws and Relax, which brings therapy dogs into the MD Anderson Library for stress relief. CEC also endeavors to collaborate



with various UH units to provide additional services to students. While LinkedIn at the Library's primary function of providing resume/profile advice rather than promoting library services was a slight departure from the committee's typical endeavors, it was agreed that the focus on student success was aligned with the committee's charge.

Event Management

Following the acceptance of the initial LinkedIn at the Library team's microgrant proposal, UCS was contacted and enthusiastically agreed to collaborate. UCS staff played an integral role by delivering a personal branding presentation at the event and providing the registration mechanism before the event. The University's social media manager also participated by advising students on LinkedIn's networking aspects, as well as live-promoting the event through the University's social media channels.

Promotion of the September 2015 event began over the summer and was primarily digital, consisting of social media posts, a news release and follow-up announcement, and listings on both the Libraries' calendar and the University's calendar. The UH Libraries' graphic designer created a custom logo (Figure 1) and digital signage (Figure 2) to advertise the event. This branding has been used consistently for all iterations of the event.

The event planners utilized the robust "LinkedIn for Students"² resources available from the Higher Education section of LinkedIn's website. This included ready-made information sheets, including a "Profile Checklist,"³ and guides geared toward profile development and tailoring,⁴ networking tips,⁵ and advice on effective communication on LinkedIn developed specifically for students.

Volunteer profile reviewers were solicited from the Libraries and were provided with these information sheets, as well as lists of action verbs

for resumes and other resources, in advance of the event. All handouts were also made available to students at the event.

LinkedIn at the Library was held in the Elizabeth D. Rockwell Pavilion at the MD Anderson Library (Figure 3). This large, open space was ideal to accommodate the event. A welcome table was posted at the entrance, with eight individual profile review stations complete with laptops set up on both sides of the room. At the back of the room, ample space allowed for a pop-up professional headshot studio. Seating was available for those attending the personal branding presentation or waiting for an available profile consultant. Box lunches were provided for registrants.

The inaugural LinkedIn at the Library event was quite successful. In advance of the event, 91 students registered for the event through the UCS "Cougar Pathways" scheduling system. Not all pre-registrants attended the event, however, 39 additional walk-ins attended, resulting in approximately 100 total attendees. A survey was emailed to all attendees following the event, though only four attendees responded. All survey respondents identified themselves as graduate students in technology, engineering, or computer science. Survey feedback was positive; all respondents "strongly" or "moderately" agreed that "by attending this event, I learned a new skill or strategy that will aid in my job search."

The second iteration of the event occurred in February 2017 and was coordinated by the CEC. UCS was contacted early in the fall of 2016 to re-initiate the partnership and begin planning for the event. Many aspects remained the same as the September 2015 event, including the LinkedIn profile reviews, a presentation provided by UCS, and professional headshots provided by the Libraries' multimedia specialist. Ready-made LinkedIn information sheets were once again made available to volunteers before the event and to students during. A similar



room structure was employed in the same venue.

The event was again promoted via social media posts, news releases, and listings on both the Libraries' and University's calendar. UCS again provided the registration mechanism for the event, however, because boxed lunches were not provided for this event, pre-registration was not required. The 2017 event was planned to coincide with the UCS Professional Development Week - a series of career-related professional development events for students - so LinkedIn at the Library was also included in the Professional Development Week promotional materials, such as signage and on the UCS website events calendar. Information about other Professional Development Week events was available during LinkedIn at the Library.

Because the event was no longer funded by a microgrant, it was decided that box lunches would not be provided. Other changes for the 2017 event, made in collaboration with UCS, included reducing the length of the event from three hours to two, soliciting more volunteers to provide LinkedIn profile reviews, and hosting a raffle for attendees with Libraries-branded giveaway items as prizes.

Initially, UCS staff had planned to use the final half-hour to present on personal branding, as they had during the 2015 event. However, once the event was underway, they determined that, rather than disrupt consultations underway to present to only a couple of assembled audience members, they would continue providing profile reviews for waiting attendees.

A total of 31 students attended LinkedIn at the Library in February 2017, with most attendees identifying themselves as seniors or graduate students. Once again, students were primarily from technology or engineering, with a portion from the College of Natural Sciences and Math.

The reason for this significant drop in attendance wasn't clear, though team members speculated that an event held on Monday was not conducive to participation. Further, UCS noted that there was lower-than-average attendance at all Professional Development Week activities.

Due to the low online survey response in 2015, UCS suggested utilizing their paper feedback forms for the February 2017 event, which could later be entered in a database. While response rates were much better with paper surveys, the data made available to the Libraries represented all UCS events for Professional Development Week, rather than solely LinkedIn at the Library. Overall, however, feedback was very positive. Seventy-eight percent of respondents replied that they "definitely would" use the information learned at the event after graduation.

Based on these two experiences, the CEC and UCS made some minor adjustments to the third iteration of LinkedIn at the Library, which took place in September 2017. To address the low attendance of the February event, the September event was scheduled mid-week, and drinks and snacks were provided from the CEC budget. Furthermore, in response to survey information, marketing efforts were focused on students in engineering and technology, in addition to the all-campus outreach. Based on the February 2017 event, the presentation was eschewed in favor of more time for profile reviews. All preparations for the September 2017 event were thrown into question, however, due to the devastating impact of Hurricane Harvey on the Houston area. Harvey made initial landfall on August 25, 2017, and over the next several days poured an unprecedented 50 inches of rain on the Houston area. The resulting damage to the city and UH campus forced the University's closure from August 25 through September 5. LinkedIn at the Library was planned for just one week later, on September 13. The CEC and UCS ultimately decided to move forward with the event as planned. Fortunately, the majority of



volunteer reviewers were able to attend. Despite the unexpected impact of Harvey, 60 students attended LinkedIn at the Library. Notably, virtually all attendees took advantage of the free professional headshots, with many students arriving dressed in professional attire specifically for this service.

Figure 1: LinkedIn at the Library custom logo



Figure 2: LinkedIn at the Library digital signage.



Figure 3: LinkedIn at the Library event image



Outcomes

Positive Outcomes

The collaboration between UCS and the Libraries raised the awareness of services provided by both units to students. By holding a co-curricular, career-focused event within the library, students were introduced to new aspects of the Libraries and what they can achieve and learn while occupying the space. Librarians and library staff communicated the value of using the Libraries not only for academics, but also in preparation for life after graduation. Consultations for LinkedIn profile reviews became part of a face-to-face conversation about access to services and resources that would be useful in college and beyond. Librarians and staff served as first-line connections for students who otherwise may not have been privy to the Libraries' resources.

LinkedIn at the Library not only had a direct benefit for students, but it also strengthened the relationship between the Libraries and UCS. Collaborating to plan LinkedIn at the Library has expanded on previously established relationships between the two units, opening up communication among other contacts within the Libraries (initially the microgrant project team, then the CEC) and the UCS associate director and career counselors. Repeating the event and continuing communication with UCS has allowed for greater relationship building and resource sharing, which is a significant part of the Libraries' values. After the February 2017 LinkedIn event, UCS offered to give a presentation for liaison librarians and provided several copies of a career workbook, including a digital copy which the Libraries has included in its Career Resources Guide.

LinkedIn at the Library presented a unique opportunity to engage students in important conversations about social media literacy, a topic

not typically addressed in the Libraries' undergraduate instruction sessions. Although students are familiar with a variety of social media tools, individual consultations about LinkedIn profiles allowed for discussion of the differences between one's personal and professional online presence, communicating with potential employers through social media, and the use of privacy settings across multiple social media platforms.

Lessons Learned

Each iteration of LinkedIn at the Library coincided with another career-related campus event, however, the impact on attendance was not consistent. The 2015 event was held at the same time as the Technology Career Fair in a nearby location on campus. This was unintentional, yet appeared to yield positive results on attendance for LinkedIn at the Library - many students arrived after the career fair in business attire and ready for their professional portrait. The February 2017 LinkedIn event was intentionally planned to coincide with the UCS Professional Development Week, yet we did not see a similar bump in attendance as a result, perhaps because the event took place on a Monday. The September 2017 iteration was also planned to coincide with the UCS Professional Development Week, and saw a rise in attendance from the previous iteration. From these experiences, we gathered that coordinating the Libraries' outreach events with other related campus events may have a positive impact on awareness and attendance.

The venue is an important consideration when an outreach event includes individual consultations. The Elizabeth D. Rockwell Pavilion, which is the preferred venue for LinkedIn at the Library, is a large room at 100' x 35' with a maximum capacity of 222. This is quite a different environment than the norm for individual consultations of this sort, which typically take place in a smaller office space. The event space was set up to simulate individual consultation spaces as



best as possible, with tables along the perimeters of the room, along with chairs, laptops, and handouts. Still, the open space may not have provided enough privacy for students or they may have been uncomfortable due to the unfamiliar environment. Although there were no known complaints about the venue, we feel the appropriateness of the venue should be evaluated with regard for suitability to the event.

Holding a student-focused outreach event about LinkedIn turned out to be a learning opportunity for the Libraries staff as well. As volunteers were being solicited from the Libraries to provide LinkedIn profile reviews for students, several expressed uncertainty about their ability to offer quality profile reviews, based on perceived lack of awareness of LinkedIn features. LinkedIn's information sheets helped to familiarize these volunteers with the platform and prepared them to give credible advice on profile improvements. We heard from a few volunteers that the LinkedIn at the Library event motivated them to update their own profiles. The volunteers' hesitation about what they could offer to students highlights the crucial component of event volunteer empowerment and training, particularly on knowledge or skills outside of their regular job duties.

The information sheets provided to students were especially useful resources that contributed to the success of the events. The "LinkedIn Profile Checklist," "Building a Great Student Profile," and "How to Network on LinkedIn" sheets were downloaded from LinkedIn for Students and served as a credible and valuable primary source. UCS also provided information sheets of their own, including an extensive list of action words for use in resumes and cover letters. Ready-made resources such as these add value to the event and save a significant amount of preparation time.

Availability and turnover of specific Libraries' staff members had the potential to impact the

success of this event. For example, the Libraries has one photographer who shoots and edits the portraits offered at LinkedIn at the Library. This service is dependent on his availability. Additionally, the chair of the CEC currently serves as the main contact between the Libraries and UCS for planning LinkedIn at the Library. Because a different librarian assumes the chair role each year, there is the potential for issues with continuity in our outreach to UCS for this repeating event. A lack of consistency in the Libraries' communication with UCS can lead to a loss of historical context related to the event, as well as less reliable follow-through with assessment from year to year. Involving the committee vice-chair in the planning process may lessen the continuity issues. However, the committee recognizes that a more consistent contact point would likely benefit the Libraries' outreach to other campus units.

Conclusion

The Libraries and UCS have developed a strong partnership in the planning for LinkedIn at the Library. This innovative event, which began as an experimental one-time project, has led to a long-term collaboration with the fourth iteration planned for February 2018.

Although a successful partnership has emerged, room for improvement remains as we move forward. Assessment, for example, is an important area in need of continued examination and development. So far, we have tried two different assessment methods at LinkedIn at the Library: an electronic survey post-event, which received few responses; and a paper form at the event, which was combined with data from all other Professional Development Week events. It will be important for the Libraries and UCS to continue communication and be open about each of our assessment needs so that appropriate data can be collected using a method that satisfies both units.



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The main takeaway from this experience so far is the benefit of working with a campus partner due to the different perspective they bring to the table. For example, the LinkedIn at the Library held in February 2017 saw a significant drop in attendees from the initial 2015 event. During the event, library staff volunteers noticed this drop in attendance and began to speculate on its causes. Although attendance numbers are only one quantitative factor that contributes to an outreach event's success, it is one that is easy to notice and fixate on. Our UCS partners, however, took the lower attendance in stride. They commented that their other Professional Development

Week events had also seen lower attendance, and that they were not too worried about it overall. This positive outlook put the attendance rate in greater perspective, and led us to move forward with the third LinkedIn event. This is one example of how a campus partner can bring unanticipated ideas and experiences that add value to a collaboration.

Outreach events are not always sustainable over time, however, we have been able to turn LinkedIn at the Library into a repeat event due to collaboration with UCS on planning, marketing, logistics, and assessment.

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