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Let the Sun Shine In: Promoting Civic Engagement with Sunshine Week

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Innovative Solutions for Building Community in Academic Libraries

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Chapter 9

Let the Sun Shine In: Promoting Civic Engagement with Sunshine Week

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ABSTRACT

Sunshine Week is a national effort to promote the importance of open government and freedom of information. Although originally begun as a news media initiative, it has grown to include community groups, libraries, schools, governments, and others who are committed to civic engagement and access to information. For academic libraries, Sunshine Week offers opportunities to forge collaborations with campus and community partners, and to connect programming with broader student learning goals. This chapter makes the case for Sunshine Week as a mechanism for bringing together campus and community groups around issues of common concern, either as a standalone effort or part of a broader program focusing on civic engagement. It features a partnership between the library, journalism program, and donors at New Mexico State University but includes ideas and resources that are transferable to other settings.

INTRODUCTION

A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce, or a Tragedy; or perhaps both. –James Madison

The foundation of a strong democracy is an informed citizenry. This can only occur when citizens have access to information about their government, including information about the actions of public officials and bodies. Sunshine Week, one of several civic initiatives emerging since 2000, promotes democracy and an engaged citizenry by championing public access to government records.

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The roughly three decades prior to 2000 revealed disturbing patterns in American civic life. The Index of National Civic Health documented steady and negative trends in Americans' political involvement, social engagement, and trust in government in the period between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s (National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998). Disengagement was particularly pronounced among younger people with annual surveys of college freshmen showing declines in measures including participation in political discussions, political awareness, and involvement in the political process (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995).

Perhaps no work captured the concern about civic disengagement more than Robert Putnam's 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Building upon other studies, Putnam documented a decline in Americans' involvement with their communities and their government over several decades. Whether examining trends in club participation, voting behavior, civic knowledge, or simply socializing with neighbors, Putnam found evidence that Americans were increasingly detached individuals who were "bowling alone" instead of connecting with each other. Putnam looked back at the bond shared by previous generations who had experienced the Second World War and wondered if community engagement would only again be sparked "by a palpable national crisis like war or depression or natural disaster..." (p. 242). One year after the book's publication, the 9/11 attacks occurred.

Researchers seeking to understand the impact of September 11 on American attitudes and behaviors have undertaken studies examining changes in beliefs and actions before and after the events. Young people have been a population of particular interest. Nancy Lange's (2002) survey of Michigan State University students found notable increases in student awareness of the connections between their personal lives and broader political and world affairs in the immediate period following the events. Another study begun by University of Texas professor Patricia Somers found young adults reporting greater interest in world affairs and a desire to connect with others in a community (reported in Randall, 2005). Putnam (2002) reported positive shifts in civic attitudes and behaviors based on survey data from 2000 and 2001, with particularly strong upward trends for younger Americans. Sander and Putnam (2010) found indicators of resurgence in civic activity, particularly among young adults, as revealed through volunteerism, expressions of political interest, involvement with political discussions, voting behavior, and participation in political campaigns. There are caveats and disagreements about the role of September 11 in influencing changes in civic behavior (Sax, 2004). Individual markers of civic engagement have also not all shown the same patterns of increase or decline (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). Nevertheless, the beginning of the 2000s is seen as a time when civic interest and participation appeared to rebound from a state of decline with at least some lasting effects.

Sunshine Week is one of several national initiatives that began around 2000 with the aim of fostering increased civic awareness and engagement. Though Sunshine Week is the focus of this chapter, related efforts such as Constitution Day and the September Project will also be reviewed to illustrate approaches to strengthening library involvement with civic engagement efforts.

BACKGROUND

Sunshine Week began in 2002 as "Sunshine Sunday" when the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors raised alarms about state legislation seeking multiple exemptions to Florida's public records laws. Florida's journalists began reporting on the legislation's potential impact on citizen access to government information and many of the proposed exemptions were subsequently defeated (Florida Society of Newspaper

Editors, 2014). Journalists in other states took note and began their own initiatives to draw attention to the importance of access to government information. In 2005, three years after the actions in Florida, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) established Sunshine Week as a national initiative with a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Sunshine Week is celebrated in the spring and is scheduled to occur close to the birthday of President James Madison on March 16. Madison was instrumental in developing the Bill of Rights and was an ardent proponent of governmental transparency, writing that “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives” (quoted in Padover, 1953, p. 346).

Since 2012, The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and ASNE have co-sponsored Sunshine Week, partnering to provide a website that features resources and inspiration for those seeking to promote open government (Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, 2014). Participants have celebrated Sunshine Week in various ways, such as

- Conducting audits of government agency compliance with open records laws (Missouri Sunshine Coalition, Ohio Auditor of State),
- Exhibiting public records and explaining how the records shed light on government activities (State Library of North Carolina),
- Profiling individuals and organizations that have championed access to public records (Freedom of Information Oklahoma Inc., Missouri Sunshine Coalition),
- Sponsoring open government conferences (Freedom of Information Oklahoma Inc.).

Organizations such as the State of Florida, South Dakotans for Open Government, and Freedom of Information Oklahoma Inc. have also held contests inviting essay entries on the importance of access to government information. The overwhelming majority of participants listed on the national Sunshine Week website are journalistic organizations, though civic groups, government agencies, and officials are also represented. Surprisingly few educational institutions and libraries have been listed as participants in recent years, though these entities are well-positioned to take on roles suggested by the national site, including hosting events on open government topics that are of concern at the local or state level.

The Library Role in Fostering Civic Engagement

Libraries have historically been associated with efforts to encourage public participation in their government, not only by facilitating access to information but also by providing a forum where discussion of important issues can take place: “Libraries — long committed to enabling information literacy — can extend their offerings to civic literacy so that their constituents can gain critical thinking skills along with a sense of civic agency” (Kranich, 2012, p. 80).

Similar to what Putnam and Sander (2010) found with a post-9/11 increase in civic engagement, the literature documents a revitalization in library involvement with civic efforts in the 2000s as well as in the period leading up to it, including activities undertaken by school, public, and academic libraries.

A variety of public library contributions to civic engagement were captured in a special issue of the journal, *National Civic Review*, in 2012. An example from the public library in Aurora, Colorado, shared that library’s effort to help its community heal after a violent event by partnering with mental health professionals to offer resources and support. A case study from Hartford, Connecticut, featured a library

project to foster civic engagement among recent immigrants by offering English language and civics classes, as well as helping users maintain connections with distant family and friends through social media. Kathleen de la Peña McCook's 2000 book, *A Place at the Table*, provides additional examples of public libraries and library staff members who played significant roles in enhancing civic engagement within their communities in the 1990s.

Examples of school library efforts may be found in the 2009 American Association of School Librarians report, *School Library Media Programs in Action* (Bush, 2009), which documented a variety of civic activities including programs designed to engage students with challenging topics such as combating homophobia or grappling with racial tension and racism.

Although far from abundant, there is also a body of literature describing academic library involvement with civic engagement, with case studies documenting efforts to provide health information to underserved communities (Raimondo, Tatro, & Mayo, 2009) and offer legal and civic education services in partnership with community leaders (Seeger, 2009).

Much of the literature concerns academic libraries and service learning, a teaching method that combines classroom instruction with some form of community service. Several articles have described positive experiences with librarian integration into service learning courses (Herther, 2008; Hernandez & Knight, 2010). Other pieces have described service learning projects that have emerged from information literacy courses or from courses within the library and information science curriculum. A service learning component of a library and information science course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison resulted in the development of a student-led program to provide books and journals to jail residents (de la Peña McCook, 2004). A service learning component of an undergraduate information literacy course taught at Wright State University provided students with an opportunity to carry out in-depth "real world" research projects for a community client (Barry, 2011). Other articles feature libraries as clients receiving services or resources developed through service learning courses (Chestnut, 2011; Brown-Sica, 2013).

The Academic [and Academic Library] Role in Fostering Civic Engagement on Campus

Academic libraries and the educational institutions of which they are a part have a particular stake in fostering civic engagement. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) original standards for information literacy competency directly relate to civic engagement and open government in the Fifth Criterion: "The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally" (ACRL, 2000). Higher education can serve to help students develop into an informed citizenry as they learn to be information literate adults. Although the standards are under revision as of this writing, the new framework retains this theme with a different structure: "Information literacy is a repertoire of understandings, practices, and dispositions focused on flexible engagement with the information ecosystem, underpinned by critical self-reflection" (ACRL, 2014, p. 22) and one that recognizes the value of a "holistic" understanding of the world,

Focusing upon intersections... [like those] between academic pursuits and community engagement...all of these intersections are underpinned by the need to engage with information and the communication of information. To do so effectively, students must understand the intricate connections between knowledge, abilities, and critical dispositions that will allow them to thrive. (ACRL, 2014, p. 22)

Similarly, civic responsibilities are articulated as one of the Essential Learning Outcomes identified by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) in the report *College Learning for a New Global Century* (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). With regards to *Personal and Social Responsibility*, students are called upon to demonstrate

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global,
- Intercultural knowledge and competence,
- Ethical reasoning and action, and
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007, p. 3).

The goal for higher education is to provide students with information and experiences that will equip them for lives of active citizenship and civic engagement. Colleges and universities are urged to “build new understanding that civic development—in all the forms described here—is an essential rather than an elective outcome of college” (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007, p. 38).

Effective methods of fostering civic education can be found among the “high impact” educational practices championed by the AACU. Service learning experiences, when intentionally crafted to provide reflection and to ensure linkages between the classroom and the service experience, have been found to improve student gains in the areas of moral reasoning, sense of social and civic responsibility, and ability to draw connections between the classroom and the real world (Brownell & Swaner, 2009, p. 27). Learning communities are another practice with demonstrated beneficial effects on student civic engagement and appreciation for diversity and different points of view.

The AACU report *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (2012) shares evidence of beneficial effects of civic engagement programming undertaken by a variety of universities. Universities—such as Tulane University, Portland State University, and several campuses of the University of California system—that incorporated civic engagement emphases into general education requirements, major requirements, or campus initiatives have achieved positive outcomes including improvements in academic persistence and academic engagement. The report also discusses the benefit of a broader stake in the form of a consortium such as the Campus Compact, a national coalition of over 1,100 college and university presidents who promote the role of academics in helping students develop citizenship skills and identity. By sharing examples of effective practice, the entire community is able to benefit. Unfortunately, while there are a few cases of academic libraries joining this community, their presence is not significant at this point.

Academic libraries are well-positioned to support these institutional efforts through their on and off campus activities. Increased community awareness is especially valuable to public and land grant institutions, which rely to varying degrees on community support and buy-in. In the book *Academic Library Outreach: Beyond the Campus Walls*, Nancy Courtney (2009) notes that academic libraries have at times restricted the view of outreach as “meant for...campus communities, specifically faculty and students” (p. 1) but that greater possibilities exist. Courtney and the contributors to the book illustrate this concept by showcasing a variety of collaborative projects undertaken by academic librarians to strengthen ties between their libraries and universities and local school, community, and government groups.

The influential report *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution* (Kellogg Commission on the Future of the State and Land-grant Universities, 1999) also has emphasized the critical importance of

connecting public institutions to the communities they serve. The report was compiled by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, a partnership between the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the Kellogg Commission. The APLU, North America's oldest higher education association, is a research, policy, and advocacy organization representing 234 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations (APLU, 2013).

Most of the report focuses on student engagement with the community, but academic libraries are another university body for which an emphasis on developing programs that are responsive to community concerns and respectful of academic-community partnerships is relevant. The report distinguishes between the concepts of engagement and outreach, with the former acting as a "two-way street" characterized by "commitment to sharing and reciprocity" (Kellogg Commission on the Future of the State and Land-grant Universities, 1999, p. 9). This model of engagement is one that can form the backdrop for more focused civic efforts such as celebration of Sunshine Week.

Sunshine at the Library - Literature and Programming Review

Sunshine Week is but one example of a national initiative seeking to foster civic awareness and engagement. Because there is relatively little literature documenting library involvement with Sunshine Week, this section also includes discussion of library involvement with related projects that seek similar outcomes of civic engagement: Constitution Day and the September Project.

Constitution Day

Constitution Day came into being following a campaign by Senator Robert Byrd to celebrate the date of the signing of the United States Constitution, September 17, by establishing it as a legal public holiday. Instead, Public Law 108-447, Consolidated Appropriations Act 2005, took a more educational approach, amending the U.S. Code to add the designation of Constitution Day to the existing designation of Citizenship Day and requiring that federal agencies and educational institutions receiving federal funds commemorate the day by providing training and resources on the Constitution (Stanton, 2007).

School, public, and academic libraries—many of which are either direct recipients of federal funding or part of larger institutions receiving such funding—have provided written accounts of successful experiences supporting Constitution Day. Library staff at Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) joined an existing faculty initiative and expanded it through their efforts, which included educational lectures and exhibits on the issues of privacy rights, voting rights, and the Fifth and Eighteenth Amendments. The library also took the lead in organizing a campus voter registration drive (Carpenter, 2008). Southern Illinois University Carbondale library staff collaborated on a set of exhibits on the First Amendment, which highlighted strengths from the library's government documents collection and Special Collections Research Center, and hosted a Lincoln-Douglas style debate featuring members of their university's award-winning debate team. The library also developed a complementary LibGuide on constitutional resources and purchased and distributed Pocket Constitutions (Xiong, Hubbard, & Ray, 2012).

The September Project

In contrast with the legislative mandate of Constitution Day, the September Project emerged as a grass-roots effort to encourage discussion about core American ideas such as democracy and freedom in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Professor David Silver conceived of the idea in 2004, and identified libraries as ideal venues to build community engagement with these issues. In partnership with Sarah Washburn, a program manager for the nonprofit Tech Soup for Libraries, Silver promoted the September Project online, using the project's website as a hub for libraries to share their experiences with developing programming and to provide ideas and inspiration for others (Janes, 2005). The concept spread quickly, with nearly 200 sites throughout the United States participating in projects during the first year (Burek Pierce, 2004). While many early programs began—and some remained—as remembrances of the events of September 11, 2001, other programs were developed that linked concepts of freedom to issues of local importance. The O'Grady Library at St. Martin's University in Lacey, Washington, collaborated with a journalism class to explore a nearby food cooperative's controversial decision to boycott products from Israel through digital and physical exhibits (Lamp, 2010). Portland State University Library celebrated its institutional legacy in documentary filmmaking and First Amendment rights by preparing an exhibit on the student film *The Seventh Day*, which captured chaos and violence in the wake of a student protest (Portland State University Library, 2010). A great many other public, academic, and school libraries participated in the September Project by sponsoring discussions, preparing exhibits, and using their collections to spark discussion about broader themes of freedom and democracy.

Sunshine Week

As was the case with Constitution Day and the September Project, libraries have supported the goals of Sunshine Week, though its reach does not appear to have been as broad as that of the other two initiatives. At the national level, the American Library Association (ALA) has promoted Sunshine Week by sponsoring or co-sponsoring programs on access to government information and by recognizing champions of access to information through its James Madison Award. In a 2007 press release from ALA's Washington Office, then-president Leslie Berger noted the organization's "long-standing commitment to open public access to information created by our government in order to ensure accountability and informed public participation" (ALA, 2007). The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) has joined these efforts and has been an active co-sponsor of ALA programming, along with other partners that advocate open government, namely OpenTheGovernment.org. Sunshine Week programming sponsored by ALA and AALL has been webcast in an effort to encourage participation from individual libraries who are invited to host the event and link it to local efforts: "Hosts are encouraged to show the national program and plan local programs tailored to open government issues in their communities" (Roberts, 2008).

Beyond the national level, the most active and coordinated efforts to promote Sunshine Week have been undertaken by the Northern California Association of Law Libraries (NOCALL), often in conjunction with other partners such as the League of Women Voters and the California Library Association. Events have included a fee-based conference, which incorporates a webcast of a national program, followed by a local speaker panel (Finnerty, 2013).

Individual academic libraries have featured their experiences participating in Sunshine Week activities on websites and through library newsletters. Pfau Library staff at the University of California, Santa Barbara, worked with their local chapter of the League of Women Voters to co-sponsor programming, including hosting broadcasts of national lectures and panels, as well as offering local programming (Vassilakos-Long, 2009). Library staff at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), followed a similar course, co-hosting webcasts of national programming with UCLA's Department of Information Studies and Center for Information as Evidence.

The Government Documents Unit at Bloomsburg University's Andruss Library sought to engage students with Sunshine Week by sponsoring an essay contest with prompts on open government themes such as "WikiLeaks: Responsible Journalism or Dangerous Leaks?" A partnership with the local chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists made it possible for the library to offer cash prizes to winning essayists. The winning essay was also published in the local newspaper (K. Yelinek, personal communication, November 7, 2012).

The University of Rhode Island (URI) Libraries undertook Sunshine Week programming as part of a more ambitious effort to strengthen students' information literacy skills, specifically focusing on Standard Five of the ACRL Information Literacy (IL) Competency Standards for Higher Education, which concerns the "economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information" (ACRL, 2000). Librarians at URI teach a three-credit information literacy course—LIB 120: Introduction to Information Literacy—into which they hoped to incorporate greater emphasis on Standard Five. They modified their existing course, inviting guest speakers to addressing "information age issues" such as legal controversies with information, consumer information and privacy questions, media ethics, and related themes (MacDonald, Izenstark, Gallagher, Kinnie, & Larsen, 2006). Students were also encouraged to take advantage of campus forums concerning these topics. Sunshine Week was a natural fit for one of the forums, which considered "secrets or 'privileged information' as part of the spectrum of information types and the pervasive role of secrecy in government, science, business, and personal life" (MacDonald et al., 2006, p. 478). Although initially conceived of as a specific course project, some programs were expanded and promoted to the entire campus.

Sunshine Comes to New Mexico State University

In 2012, library donor Tim Parker expressed an interest in supporting projects that would bring together the New Mexico State University (NMSU) Library and Department of Journalism and Mass Communications to foster a spirit of inquiry and ensure preservation of information. Parker had been an editor of the student newspaper while a student at NMSU and had both interest and experience in seeking access to public records and meetings of public bodies. Library staff, in partnership with the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, proposed the idea of using a new endowment that would support activities celebrating Sunshine Week. Mr. Parker approved the proposal, and since fall of 2012 a committee consisting of library faculty and staff, journalism department faculty, and Mr. Parker have worked together to plan and carry out Sunshine Week programming. Beginning in the fall semester, the committee met weekly to share information and develop a structure for the spring program. Committee members were chosen based on their interest in the event as well as their work expertise. Starting work far in advance of the event itself allowed the committee time to discuss different concepts and themes and pace event planning so as to not overwhelm any one individual. Assignments played to the strengths of committee members: the library development officer reached out to local businesses for promotional

items to distribute, the journalism faculty and Mr. Parker knew local journalists, and a library staff member with experience in graphics designed the program and contest posters.

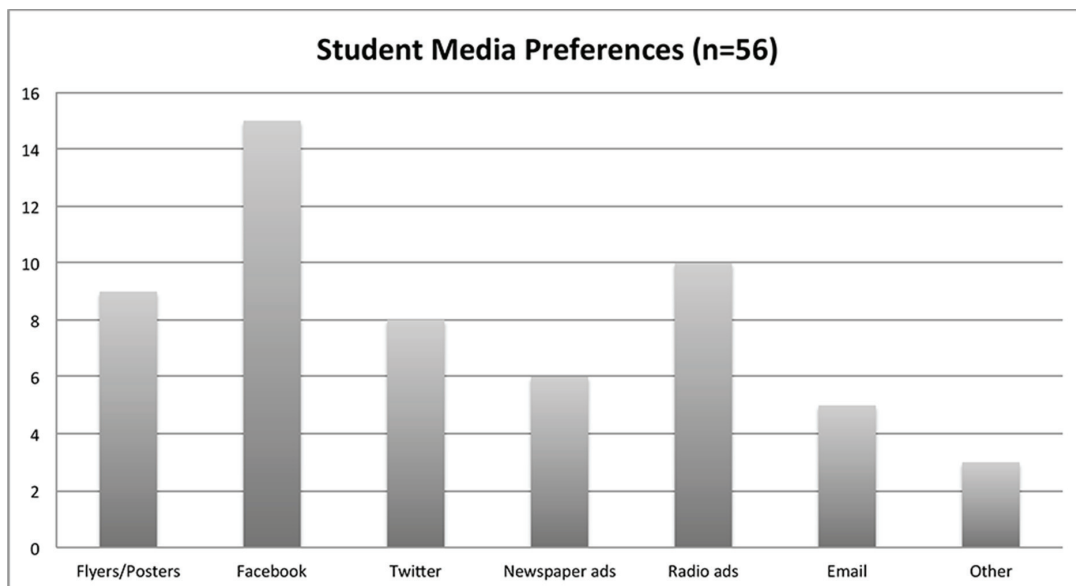
Students and Civic Engagement

One of the goals of the Sunshine Week committee was to familiarize students and the campus community at large with public records and open meeting laws and to encourage dialog about the importance of information access to civic engagement. For the 2013 Sunshine Week events, the committee organized an essay contest prompting students to write 600-800 words explaining how New Mexico's state public records laws encourage citizen participation in state government. The committee publicized the contest on campus through posters and flyers, and faculty members of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications encouraged their students to participate. The endowment allowed for the presentation of a \$200 campus bookstore gift certificate to the first place entry and a \$100 bookstore gift certificate to the second place entry. Winners were honored at a reception following a program on public records access in New Mexico. Their essays were also shared via a LibGuide, along with other information and resources on open records and government (Smith, 2014).

Following the 2013 contest, the committee conducted a review of the year's events in an effort to identify ways of increasing student participation. As part of this process, the committee solicited feedback from one class of journalism students. Students were asked how aware they were of recent Sunshine Week activities, if they were aware of the program and contest, and what sorts of activities would be of interest to them for future years. Overall, the students agreed that there had not been enough publicity surrounding Sunshine Week, and suggested Facebook notifications, radio ads, and campus flyers as the best ways to attract student attention (see figure 1). They were less enthusiastic about the essay contest, and showed more interest in alternative activities such as poster designing competitions, trivia questions,

Figure 1. Student media preferences

Source: New Mexico State University Library, 2014



and small prize giveaways. Students were also asked for feedback on the incentives, and overwhelmingly preferred the existing gift card option. The student feedback was very useful in planning activities for Sunshine Week 2014, but did not necessarily translate into increased participation (see figure 2). Though the committee endeavored to involve students by asking NMSU student newspaper staff and others to participate in planning for 2014 activities, students were not able to consistently attend meetings or provide feedback.

The committee started planning the student activities for 2014 Sunshine Week in September 2013 and chose to engage in both “high” and “low” stakes activities to engage student interest. The most coordinated and work-intensive activity was a student infographic contest, replacing the essay contest of the year before (see figure 3). The committee developed several prompts, and students were instructed to develop a visual representation of New Mexico’s open records or open meetings laws. The designers of the top two entries would be awarded gift cards to the campus bookstore, and the winning infographics would be reproduced as posters for display at the main program during Sunshine Week.

Committee members put a great deal of effort into publicizing the event, both on and off campus. Eye-catching posters—to fit with the “infographic” theme—were posted in academic and residential buildings around campus and at the neighboring branch campuses, as well as to local coffee shops, restaurants, and other businesses frequented by NMSU students. During the month of February and the weeks leading up to Sunshine Week, committee members used chalk to write messages on walkways around campus publicizing the contest and Sunshine Week in general. Both chalk ads and posters directed students to the Sunshine Week LibGuide, where they could find contest rules, design tips, and resources for state open records and meeting laws. The committee also targeted specific academic departments, including journalism and mass communications, art, and government, to encourage them to bring the

Figure 2. Student incentive preferences
Source: New Mexico State University Library, 2014

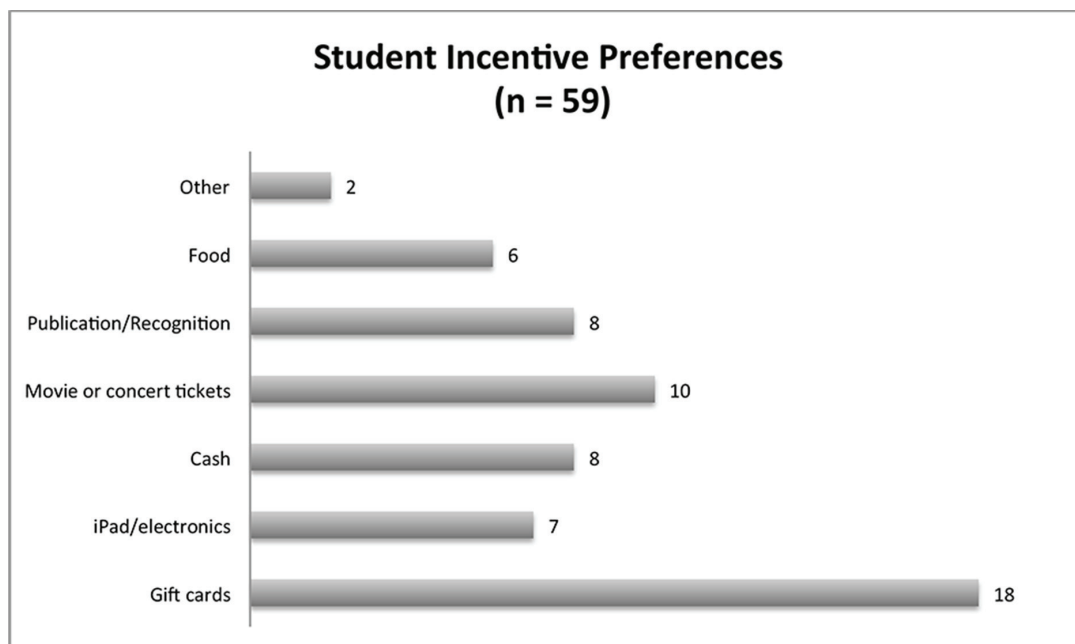


Figure 3. Poster for 2014 Infographic Contest

Source: New Mexico State University Library, 2014



SUNSHINE WEEK 2014
Infographic Contest

Sunshine Week is a national event promoting the importance of open government, transparency and freedom of information. The NMSU Library and the Department of Journalism & Mass Communications have partnered with NMSU donor Tim Parker to raise awareness of sunshine issues in New Mexico.

Help us get the word out by designing an eye-catching infographic to inform citizens about one of New Mexico's Sunshine Laws: the Open Meetings Act or the Inspection of Public Records Act.



Rules

Contest rules, helpful resources & design tips at nmsu.libguides.com/sun

Open to NMSU students enrolled full-time at any NMSU campus. Either individuals or teams of up to four students may enter. Individuals or teams may submit only one entry.

Email infographics to sunshine@lib.nmsu.edu along with name and contact info.

Submissions must be received by 8 a.m. on **Tues. March 4.**

Questions? Email sunshine@lib.nmsu.edu or call 575-646-2869.

Judging



Infographics will be judged on their connection to one or more of the prompts listed at nmsu.libguides.com/sun and on their presentation of information in a clear, creative and visually appealing manner.

Winners will be notified via phone and email by **Thursday, March 13** and will be recognized at the Sunshine Week Public program on **Thursday, March 20.**

Prizes

1st Prize:
\$200 Barnes & Noble gift card

2nd Prize:
\$100 Barnes & Noble gift card



NM STATE UNIVERSITY Presented by New Mexico State University Library Journalism & Mass Communications

contest to the attention of their students and to tie Sunshine Week and freedom of information to their coursework. Despite extensive publicity both on and off campus, there were no entries in the infographic contest. Though the journalism faculty on the Sunshine Week committee encouraged students to enter and there was a significant prize for the winning entry, this was perhaps not enough to offset the extra work the contest entailed. This also highlighted a challenge in acting upon the feedback gathered from journalism students: though students expressed considerable interest in poster and graphic contests, this did not translate into increased student participation.

Committee members organized several “low stakes” activities on campus during Sunshine Week to generate interest in the formal program and spread awareness of open records issues around campus. These activities found greater success with students than the more work-intensive infographic contest.

Figure 4. Josefina Smith and Caitlin Wells staffing information table during Sunshine Week 2014
Source: New Mexico State University Library, 2014



The three main activities—including tabling (see figure 4), leafleting, and displays in the two campus libraries—involved minimal preparation on the part of the committee (see figure 5). On the NMSU campus, it is common for campus groups to set up a table inside the student center as a way to grab attention as students pass through on their way to lunch or class. The committee reserved a table during Sunshine Week and set up a poster for the program, along with free promotional items obtained from local businesses and leaflets outlining the mission of Sunshine Week. Two committee members staffed the table and engaged with students as they passed through the student center lobby.

Students were receptive to this approach, and many stopped to talk to committee members about the meaning of Sunshine Week and governmental transparency. The distribution of program leaflets provided another opportunity for committee members to explain the connection between Sunshine Week and state open records laws and to put it in the context of the specific program topic: the push to gain access to public records on New Mexico’s mental health service providers. For the third activity, the committee set up message boards with questions—such as “What do you want to know about your government?”—and provided index cards and markers so that students could contribute to the discussion (see figure 6). While there were a few less serious answers, the responses were overwhelmingly thoughtful and on-topic. Overall, the low stakes activities were significantly more successful than the formal contest, possibly because they required less work on the part of the students involved. While few may have had the motivation or time to create a complex graphic representation of state open records laws, almost everyone had a few minutes to chat with a library staff member about governmental transparency and pick up a program leaflet. Some students also knew one or more of the program panelists and were familiar with the program topic and its significance for the community.

Figure 5. Block tower game as part of “low stakes” activities during Sunshine Week 2014

Source: New Mexico State University Library, 2014



Community Engagement and Sunshine Week

The Sunshine Week committee experienced considerable success in developing outreach programming of interest to the local community, by offering program or panel presentations that focus on open government issues currently in the news. As many public records and open meetings issues had the possibility of being controversial or drawing attention to the host institution's history of openness, the committee consulted with the dean of the library before moving forward with planning the program. Members wanted to ensure that the committee and Sunshine Week events would have the support of the library administration in case someone outside or within the university complained about the nature of the program. The dean saw the value in the library participating in discussions of open records and gave the Sunshine Week program her full support.

The first Sunshine Week program, in March 2013, featured Walt Rubel, managing editor of the *Las Cruces Sun-News*, who spoke on his work as a journalist seeking government documents. The program was well received, and about 25 people showed up for Rubel's talk and the reception following it.

Figure 6. Message boards promoting Sunshine Week 2014

Source: New Mexico State University Library, 2014

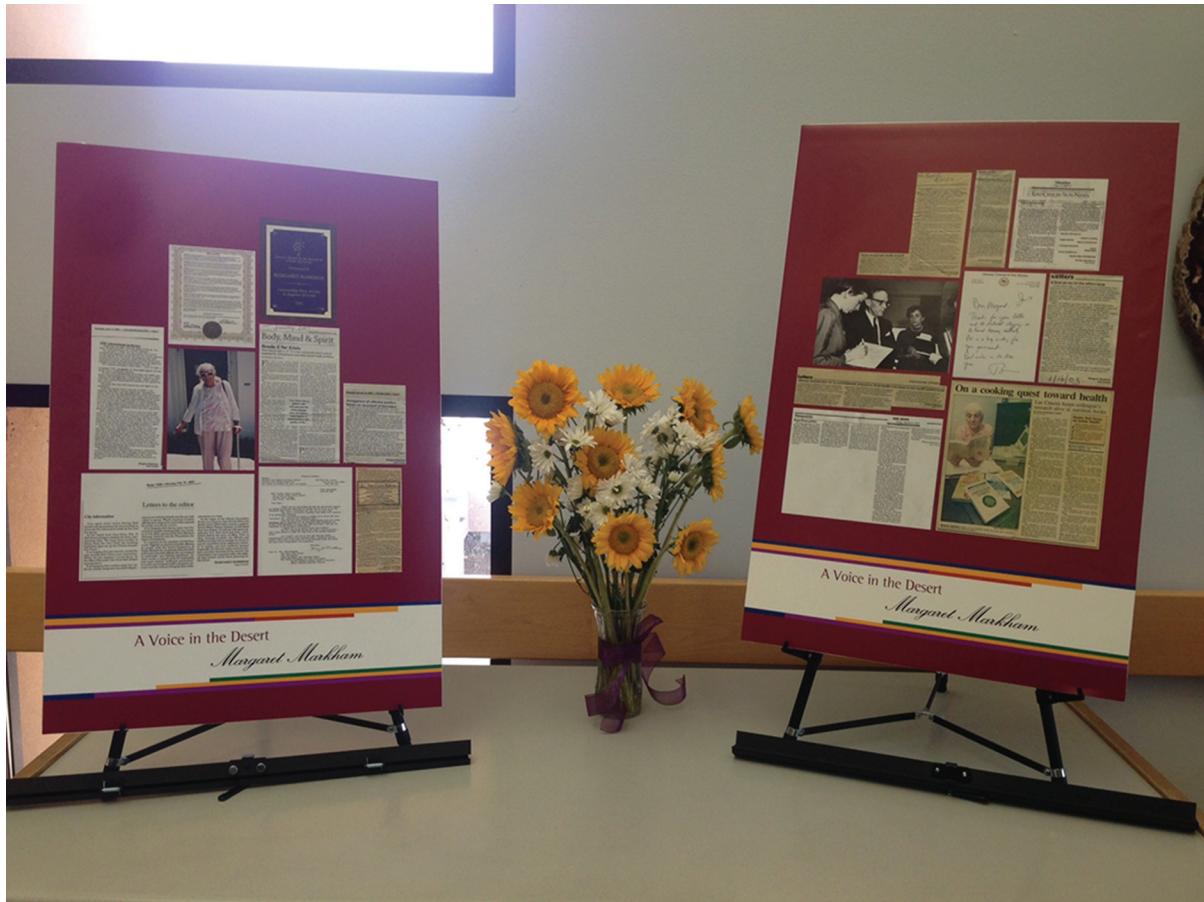


For the 2014 program, the committee decided to address the controversy over the state's refusal to release the results of a 2013 audit of state mental health care providers. The state of New Mexico had commissioned an audit of 15 mental health care providers receiving Medicaid funding, which allegedly uncovered incidents of fraud and led to the state freezing Medicaid payments to those providers, several of which subsequently went out of business (Jennings & Haussamen, 2013). The *Las Cruces Sun-News* and *New Mexico In Depth* filed a lawsuit in August 2013 seeking the release of the full report (*Las Cruces Sun-News* Editorial Board, 2014). This topic had great resonance with the community; not only did it address open records and governmental transparency, but the closing of several mental health providers had had a dramatic impact on individuals and the Las Cruces community at large. Walt Rubel of the *Sun-News* and Heath Haussamen of *New Mexico In Depth* agreed to speak about their lawsuit to force the state to release the mental health care audit and how the shuttering of several mental health clinics had affected local constituencies. Mary Kay Papen, the state senator for the Las Cruces area, is a well-known advocate for mental health care and agreed to speak about the legislative aspects of the case. In addition to the panel discussion, the program also included a tribute to Margaret Markham, a health writer and local advocate for transparent government who had passed away the previous fall (see figure 7).

Let the Sun Shine In

Figure 7. Margaret Markham display at Sunshine Week 2014

Source: New Mexico State University Library, 2014



By beginning work during the fall semester, well in advance of Sunshine Week, the committee left sufficient time to develop the program and related event arrangements, such as seeking speakers and determining a venue. Because the program honoree, Margaret Markham, had left her personal papers to the Rio Grande Historical Collections at NMSU prior to her death, the archives staff were able to put together a display featuring several letters she had written to local news outlets in support of improved mental health care and open government. The extra planning time also allowed the committee to work with panelists to ensure that the program fit into their schedules.

To capitalize on existing media coverage of the mental health care audit, the committee put a great deal of effort into publicizing the program within the community. These efforts proved to be a great success. Publicity included contacting local media, putting event posters in a variety of public places, and targeted leafleting at events where interested people might congregate. The committee put together a press release to distribute to local newspapers, television stations, and the local public radio station. Response from these outlets was very positive; the *Las Cruces Sun-News*, the local daily newspaper, ran an editorial calling for greater governmental transparency, and public radio station KRWG ran spots on the program in the weeks leading up to Sunshine Week as well as a follow-up story after the fact (*Las*

Figure 8. Audience at Sunshine Week 2014 panel discussion

Source: New Mexico State University Library, 2014



Cruces Sun-News Editorial Board, 2014). The committee distributed posters around town, placing them at local coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, and other public areas where people would gather. Leaflets were distributed at the local farmer's market and placed in stacks throughout the NMSU libraries. Fortunately, a local civic group held an open forum to discuss the audit in early March prior to Sunshine Week, and a committee member was able to speak briefly about the object of the panel and distribute more leaflets to attendees. In the end, attendance at the program exceeded expectations, and extra chairs had to be brought in to accommodate an audience of over 100 (see figure 8).

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not only do academic libraries have a stake in advancing the information literacy skills of their students and local community, they have a significant stake in supporting their students and community's civic engagement. Sunshine Week is an underutilized and creative method to promote that engagement. The

recommendations that follow are intended to guide others interested in sponsoring Sunshine Week programming.

- **Begin the planning early.** Planning is critical to developing effective programming. It is essential to identify activities well in advance. Starting early allows the committee the optimum amount of time to plan and troubleshoot activities and events. This includes taking the time to brainstorm the focus and venue for events, research outreach practices on the host campus and look for examples of similar programming. Approaching the relevant partners at the right time with the right plan increases chances that successful partnerships will follow. Planning also ensures that all elements of the event are given sufficient attention.
- **Identify the audience (or audiences).** Sunshine Week can appeal to different audiences for entirely different reasons. The Sunshine Week committee at NMSU sought to engage different audiences with diverse programs, ranging from in-depth participation to “low stakes” activities. To increase awareness of Sunshine Week events, seek insight from others on campus as to what has and has not been successful for their outreach. NMSU Library had used message boards successfully during previous outreach projects and decided to incorporate them into Sunshine Week.
- **Be aware of applicable campus rules and regulations, as well as any legal issues.** Each institution may have specific rules and regulations for providing incentives to university students, paying staff or guests an honorarium, etc. Additionally, if sponsoring a contest, be sure to have applicable legal counsel review contest forms and rules.
- **Be prepared for controversy.** Because Sunshine Week by its very definition calls for scrutiny of governmental institutions, participating in Sunshine Week activities may invite unwanted attention to the host library or university. If the institution has had issues with open records laws in the past, a student essay contest may paint the institution in an unflattering light, upsetting donors or trustees. Prior to taking on a Sunshine Week program, make sure to be prepared for any controversy that may arise and take steps to mitigate any conflicts. It is important to have the support of library administrators, and bringing up potential issues with them beforehand can help ensure that Sunshine Week organizers have the support they need should a problem arise.
- **Use Sunshine Week to promote greater transparency on campus.** Though Sunshine Week is a time-defined initiative, academic libraries can promote the themes of openness and transparency year-round by taking a leadership role in addressing the need for openness in higher education, a source of some complaint in recent years (Goldberg, 2013). Librarians and archivists, in their role as curators of information, can take steps toward making their campus records and processes more open and transparent. One first step is to conduct an audit of how the library or the university as a whole addresses open records and meetings laws. It may also be the case that library efforts such as institutional repositories or digitization projects can help to pave the way for greater openness. Again, working with administrators and getting their support can ease the process.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Sunshine Week offers a great opportunity for libraries to promote civic engagement. At the same time, it is one week out of the year and its impact—as with any single event – is limited without additional efforts to build connections between activities and broader learning goals.

One straightforward way to increase the reach of Sunshine Week is to integrate it into a broader year-round program of civic engagement programming, which could also feature programs designed for Constitution Day or relating to the emphases of the September Project. In particular, libraries should consider the connections between Sunshine Week programming and broader institutional efforts to support civic engagement. The AACU (2010) has coordinated the development of VALUE rubrics to help higher education institutions document the effectiveness of their efforts to implement civic engagement efforts. The rubric is applied to one or more pieces of student work—ideally a portfolio—that demonstrate civic awareness. If a campus is using AACU VALUE rubrics to document success with its high impact educational practices, Sunshine Week activities such as essays or infographic contests might be a stronger draw for students who need to provide evidence in these areas. Similarly, the new Carnegie classification for engaged institutions requires participating institutions to document the extent of their civic engagement efforts as well as provide information on the impact of those efforts (Driscoll, 2008). Providing data on Sunshine Week or related civic engagement programs to campus leadership could not only further the broader institutional goal, but may also uncover potential partners who could share strategies for developing and promoting civic activities.

Another means of connecting Sunshine Week or related programming to learning is through integration with one or more academic courses, possibly in related disciplines such as journalism, law, or political science. The partnership with a course could facilitate learning by employing effective educational practices (Brownell and Swaner, 2009), including providing opportunities for structured student reflection [best practice for service learning], or designing curricula that enhance and develop student research skills [best practice for undergraduate research]. With curricular integration, there is also better opportunity to investigate the impact of exposure to civic engagement concepts on students subsequent attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

What both of the preceding recommendations facilitate is the linking of discreet programming efforts to broader educational practices and goals, and providing a means of investigating the effectiveness of such integrated efforts as well as their transferability to other settings. While interest in linking library efforts to high impact educational practices is great, most literature is characterized by “studies of one high-impact practice in one institution” (Riehle & Warner, 2013, p.136). As libraries gather and share experiences with their civic engagement efforts, more may be learned as to how to increase their effectiveness and integration with broader curricular and co-curricular outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Academic libraries and the universities of which they are part have a critical role to play in fostering civic engagement with their students and with their communities. Sunshine Week—whether celebrated as part of a broader series of civic programming or as a stand-alone event—is an excellent mechanism to achieve this goal. It is not the most common vehicle to engage with community or the most obvious. However, if used appropriately, and with a mind to the local community, it can be a creative way to promote engagement with all institutional constituents. At the foundation, that is what is important: “libraries of all types can rekindle civic engagement, promote greater citizen participation, and increase community problem solving and decision making” (Kranich, 2005, p. 89).

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Civic Engagement: Understanding and acting upon one's responsibility to a broader community by identifying and addressing matters of community concern.

Civic Knowledge: Knowledge and understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizens and of the role of the citizen in government and public affairs.

Community Outreach: The donation of time or effort to benefit a community.

Open Government: The concept that citizens must have the ability to review the work of their government through access to records, data, and proceedings in order to exercise public oversight.

Open Meetings: Meetings of public bodies that are required by law to be open to the public, for which advance public notice must be given, and for which records of decisions and deliberations must be made available.

Public Records: Records which public officials or bodies are required by law to maintain and to make available to citizens for purpose of public oversight.

Sunshine Week: National initiative spearheaded by the American Society of News Editors to promote the importance of open government, including access to records and proceedings of government officials and bodies.