

The Campus Information Office: A Valuable Service to Academic Libraries

Nancy Shires

The alliance between the college library and the campus information office is a natural one but "seldom seems to be made," says one public relations writer.¹ "People on campus just don't seem to know what all we do," says the director of one news bureau.² Academic librarians who are trying with less time and money to get more information to patrons and funders need to consider these two statements seriously. Whether a college or university is small or large, public or private, it has an information office. This office provides what is probably the most convenient and economical means for a library to distribute all that information which can be called "publicity." Most academic librarians probably are not taking full advantage of their campus information offices.

What the Information Office Is

The information office has different names on different campuses. In North Carolina, for example, academic librarians will encounter the Office of Information Services at Meredith College, the News Bureau at East Carolina University, Communications at Davidson College, News Service at Duke University, Public Affairs at Louisburg College, Information and Publications at UNC-Charlotte, and Public Relations at Richmond Technical College. Whatever the name, the basic purpose of the office is to distribute news about the institution and all its parts and people to the campus community and to the public. The office is usually part of the administrative structure of the institution and is usually obligated to serve campus constituents, like the library, at no cost.

Information offices vary widely in size, organization, and authority. A one-man office may have complete authority over all campus publications, including the sole power to purchase paper and select printers (Meredith College). A larger organization may have several information offices, serving different parts of the university (North Carolina State University).

In general, librarians can expect that the information office receives news information every day and prepares this as news releases for distribution to campus and off-campus media. The office maintains lists, updated regularly, of the people who would be interested in a particular release—trustees, business editors in a tri-state area, the local dailies, people who ask to be on a list, and so

on. A photographer takes pictures to accompany some of the releases and to illustrate some campus publications. For important news or for specialized news the office director calls or writes an editor, producer, or reporter personally. It is the director's job to know these people and their interests. This personal contact may become even more important now that news offices are becoming computerized on systems that are not compatible. Newspaper correspondents and television reporters may visit the information office frequently, seeking information or ideas for stories. Finally, the information office may publish a newsletter for faculty, staff, and administration, stressing what is happening on campus.

Many offices maintain files: faculty biographies and areas of expertise, alumni biographies and addresses, statistics about the campus, story ideas, public speakers, freelance writers, or others. Some subscribe to a clipping service and forward copies of articles which have appeared in newspapers to the people concerned. And usually the director can advise anyone who needs help in conducting a publicity campaign: how and when to make announcements, how to interest an editor, what to do if an editor does not respond, or what to wear before a television camera.

In general, information offices can offer very limited assistance with graphics. Although most offices do provide photographic services, even these services may be hired from another part of campus (North Carolina State University) or from the community (Nash Technical Institute). Other units on campus can assist with graphics better than the information office can: the print shop (North Carolina State University), a club of commercial art students (East Carolina University), or even the library itself (at Richmond Technical College the library's audio-visual technician helps).

Very few information offices do the actual printing of materials. Occasionally an office, such as the one at Richmond Technical College, has an offset press and will print brochures developed with the library's help. In such cases, the director may be familiar with clip-art books and other inexpensive ways to illustrate publicity materials.

The staff members of the information office are professionals in their fields, newspaper journalism, broadcast journalism, or public relations. They are trained to "think of requests which the media can't refuse"³ at a time when news technology is changing and news space, in print or on the air, is growing tighter. For instance, the fact that the library acquired a Kurzweil machine might attract little interest, but the story of how this machine helped a blind student finish a college degree might be read widely.

The staff can make connections between people who otherwise would not know of each other. The director might suggest to a television crew which has come to cover a seminar on computers, "By the way, you ought to see how you can look up things in the library now." And the director may be able to obtain better choices of brochure designers and printers and better rates from both because the office does a large quantity of regular business with them.

Special Services

Information offices sometimes offer unique services which their counterparts on other campuses cannot afford or are not interested in. The personnel and situation do make a difference. Librarians will find it worthwhile to investigate these special services. At UNC-Chapel Hill, for example, the News Bureau publishes "Dateline Chapel Hill," a column of news items which goes regularly to certain newspapers. At North Carolina State University, the Information Service gives the library bound volumes of each year's news releases and faculty journals (campus newsletter). At East Carolina University, the News Bureau operates a telephone information line giving the day's campus activities, including library hours, to callers. Recently a staff member videotaped a segment on the library for a series of campus information spots which the football coach used on his television show. At Wilkes Community College, the Director of Public Information produces a weekly radio show carried by six local stations. And at Nash Technical Institute, the Public Relations Office writes the library handbook with information furnished by the library.

Working with the Information Office

Librarians should take the initiative in getting acquainted with the activities and abilities of the information office. One of the most useful things a library can do after making this acquaintance is to assign a contact person on the library staff to work with the information office. Responsibility and routines assure a better flow of information from the library, and the information office knows whom to contact for further information, fillers, a check on facts, or hints of coming events. Next, the library should submit possible news items. Because information offices have small staffs, all must rely heavily on the people involved to send them the facts. A serious problem which information offices face is getting information in time to do it justice. Even routine news faces deadlines (Thursday noon for the Sunday paper, for example), and events like professional workshops may require considerable advance planning. Finally, some offices issue forms for various types of news. Others prefer a telephone call or personal visit. Whatever the case, "come prepared," as one director pleads. The contact person should have all the necessary dates, names, goals, telephone numbers, and other facts.

Types of News to Submit

Information offices generally cannot use internal policies, memos, committee minutes, daily statistics, or highly personal items such as a staff member's participation in a church choir. Librarians should ask themselves "what is really newsworthy" and then give the information office the opportunity to consider the item. Newsworthy items fall into the following categories:

- Professional activities, honors, achievements.
- Staff appointments, internal changes, retirements.
- New programs, facilities, services, or changes in any of these.
- General biographical information on library staff members.
- How does the library help students, the public, or the institutional image?
- Calendar items.
- Special displays or loans.
- Donations or activities of Friends of the Library.
- Grants and results.
- Seminars, lectures, workshops, meetings.
- Anything unique, unusual, or just plain interesting.
- Background information.

Participation in a meeting, election to an office, articles.

Recently an information office was able to emphasize a library service in describing a retiree's contributions.

For instance, the availability of a Kurzweil reading machine in a new room for handicapped students.

A good time to obtain this is upon hiring, but do not forget to update files. Include photos if possible.

For example, a university library, community college library, and a public library in one city cooperated to offer certain services to all school children in the county.

Regular hours, special holiday or exam hours, senior art shows in lobby, receptions to be held in library.

A national traveling display of pages from early books, seashells to be donated to museum, work of artist-in-residence.

For example, a Friends group celebrated acquisition of the millionth volume with a dinner and speaker.

What grants has the library received, where were the results published?

Sponsored by library, attended by staff, or held in library.

For example, a library may have an outstanding collection of materials on genealogy or law.

The library's annual report or newsletter, or names of staff members who are good speakers or experts on various topics, for example.

Conclusion

There are obvious advantages to working with the campus information office. The people reached by the office often are the very people whom the library needs to reach: faculty in far-flung departments, budget-minded state legislators, and members of the immediate community. The news with which the office deals includes items like special library hours, a new bibliographic instruction program, the appointment of a librarian, a booksale, or a professional seminar sponsored by the library. Much or all of the actual work of producing and distributing the library news can be done by the information office. In some cases the library simply needs to inform the office of its activities and interests so that the library can be included in the appropriate files and services. The informal connections the library can make through the information office may be as valuable as any.

Nancy Shires is a reference and cataloging librarian at ECU.

References

1. Robert Breedin, "Welcome to the Library," *College & University Journal* 13 (May 1974): 33.
2. Interview with William Shires, News Bureau, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, 21 May 1980.
3. Emilie Mulholland and Philip Schaeffer, "Making the Metropolitan Media," in *Making Your News Service More Effective*, ed. Joel S. Berger (n.p.: Council for Advancement and Support of Education, 1977), p. 28.

Sources Consulted

- Aiken, Earl. Pitt Community College, Greenville, North Carolina. Telephone conversation, 31 March 1981.
- Coulbourn, Lucy. Office of Information Services, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina. Telephone conversation, 30 March 1981.
- Hayes, David. Office of Public Information, Wilkes Community College, Wilkesboro, North Carolina. Telephone conversation, 26 March 1981.
- Homes, Lynda. Office of Public Relations, Nash Technical Institute, Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Telephone conversation, 30 March 1981.
- Morris, Ann. Public Relations, Richmond Technical College, Hamlet, North Carolina. Telephone conversation, 27 March 1981.
- Norton, W. L. Office of Information Services, Meredith College, Raleigh, North Carolina. Interview, 28 May 1980.
- Shires, William. News Bureau, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina. Interview, 21 May 1980.