

Science Cafe: Conversation and Coffee at the Library

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Introduction: Reinventing the Library as an Active, Multi-use Campus Center

In 2007 a task force was convened by Cal Poly's Provost to envision The Future of the Library. One of the top recommendations of this report was that the Kennedy Library should foster the concept of "the library as place." The report stated that "the library needs to be an active space that meets a multitude of academic and social needs," and recommended that Cal Poly "renovate and expand the library as a multiuse, social and academic center of campus". This poster will explore the ways that the Kennedy Library has accomplished this, focusing in particular on its Science Café initiative, intended to encourage social and intellectual engagement on campus.

Environmental and Organizational Context

The Robert E. Kennedy Library is the sole library serving California Polytechnic State University, a four year comprehensive public university in San Luis Obispo, California. Cal Poly's emphasis is on providing a "learn-by-doing" educational experience for its more than 18,000 students.

Cal Poly's "learn-by-doing" focus has a distinct effect on the types of library services required by the campus community. The Future of the Library report noted that, "the Task Group...explored the idea of the library's role in supporting a learning environment based on Cal Poly's "learn-by-doing" philosophy. Faculty were clear that a modern library needed to be an active place that would support student discovery by adding spaces that could engage students outside of the classroom in meaningful ways".

The library is consistently challenged to provide such spaces and services to students.

Changes within the library provided the momentum needed to confront these challenges. In the last three years a new Dean of Library Services, a new Associate Dean for Public Services, three new faculty Librarians, and several new staff members have joined the library. All library personnel have been enthusiastic about trying new projects in response to changing user needs. Recent initiatives, including expanding late night hours and opening a 24-hour study space, have had a major impact on the library's traffic – in 2007-08 the library had over a million student visits for the first time since FY2003. In addition, the library was voted best place to study on campus by the student body in 2007 and 2008. The library is currently well-placed to become a central collaborative space on campus.

Approaches to Revitalization

The library had long identified the second floor as a space that could be better utilized. This is where the library's existing Learning Commons desk was located, in close proximity to a number of the library's open computing labs. Adjacent to the desk there is a large, bright area with many windows. Prior to Summer 2008, this floor was filled with book stacks. It was decided that with some changes to the layout of this floor, and the addition of some important new facilities and services (described below), the second floor could evolve to become a Learning Commons in fact rather than simply in name. Strategies used included:



Julian's Cafe at the Robert E. Kennedy Library. Photo by Marya Figueroa.

Campus Partnerships. The library partnered with Campus Dining in order to install a coffee kiosk on the second floor of the library.

Outcomes: A relationship has been developed with a non-academic campus entity that we had not worked with in the past. In addition, coffee = enhanced foot traffic and happy studiers!

Creative Library Renovations. A combination of factors meant the library had a modest reserve of funds available to apply to renovations on the second floor. Salary savings from past staff vacancies allowed the Library to install new movable seating as well as a number of modular group study rooms. The partnership

with Campus Dining yielded additional funds to replace aging carpeting. The project included shifting all collections from the second floor to the upper floors of the library, removing all the empty shelving, and rearranging existing furniture to best take advantage of library spaces. Since this endeavor was undertaken in-house, staff contributions were crucial.

Outcomes: The newly reconfigured second floor makes much better use of space and sunlight, and was immediately a huge success with students.

Programming for Community: Science Café.

While the new study space and coffee brought in additional traffic, the library strongly felt that larger numbers alone do not necessarily represent community or foster collaboration. Our Science Café program is the next phase in our attempt to foster communication and connections on campus. A Science Café is an informal speaker series on scientific topics (defined here very broadly to encompass topics in the arts and social sciences as well), led by an expert but with a relaxed style, intended to encourage open, easy-to-understand conversations and interdisciplinary interactions. Science Café is an international phenomenon, taking place in coffee houses around the world (<http://www.sciencecafes.org> maintains a list of active science cafés in the US).

Our initial goals, as outlined in the project proposal created by Catherine Trujillo (who organizes events and exhibitions in the library), are: 1) to spark conversations across and beyond the Cal Poly community; 2) to create an ambiance that is relaxing and stimulating; 3) to foster a spirit that is open, friendly, and inclusive; and 4) to create opportunities for student participation. The Café supports university-wide learning objectives such as critical and creative thinking, communication, and the understanding of one's discipline in relation to the larger world of the arts, sciences, and technology. Within the global Science Cafe trend, our project is unique in its location within the university library, and in its broad, interdisciplinary interpretation of the word "science".

To promote campus participation and acceptance the Library involved the campus community from the inception of the program, beginning with an Advisory Committee consisting of faculty from the sciences, social sciences and humanities and various campus administrators.

Their most important feedback was the necessity for the program to be interdisciplinary in order to foster inclusiveness for the entire campus. In preparation for the first program, a logo contest was held, and a Kennedy Library Science Café logo was selected from among student submissions. In addition, the library has created an open (non-Cal Poly hosted) blog where constituents can discuss potential future topics (<http://sciencecafe-calpoly.blogspot.com>) and read about upcoming events.

Science Cafe Logo. Designed by student contest winner Quyen Trieu

Our inaugural program, on January 28th, 2009, was entitled "Improbable Vehicles" and introduced work produced at and around Cal Poly on unusual vehicles of all kinds. The event was held in Kennedy Library's 2nd floor café lounge (adjacent to the coffee kiosk pictured above), and featured four 10-minute talks by Cal Poly faculty, staff, and students, alternating with audience conversation and questions. John Dunning, a Cal Poly Research Scholar and former General Motors engineer, moderated the program. The "improbability" of each vehicle was the thematic framework of the talks: without the oil crisis (resource substitution) the methanol motorcycle is improbable; without fiber composite materials (technical push), the human powered vehicle is improbable; and without the Tournament of Roses Parade (social demand), the rose float is improbable.

Our second event will be "Darwin's 200th Birthday Tea" and will take place on February 12th, 2009. Birthday cake will be served and a campus faculty member will be sharing their research on lizards in the Galapagos, "The Galapagos: not as Darwin saw them." The March event is titled, "The Science of Type," and an Adobe executive will begin the discussion.



Inaugural Science Cafe Poster, designed by Kennedy Library staff.



Moderator John Dunning leads a discussion at the first Kennedy Library Science Cafe. Photo by Tyson Tate.

Lessons Learned

To have an effective Science Café it is important to have a good moderator in order to keep the conversation flowing smoothly. Our moderator did

a phenomenal job of framing the topics, posing questions to group, asking them to comment, etc.

Atmosphere is everything! There are numerous techniques that can be used to provide an atmosphere conducive to conversation: light music in the background, free food, and visuals projected onto a screen before the formal program, can all help people feel comfortable and give them reason to start talking to one another. Scheduling a break and having a space for presenters, as well as related student groups, to display research posters and fliers allows attendees to browse and engage in additional conversation.

By being creative in developing campus collaborative relationships, and by using current technologies for promotion and outreach, it has been possible to organize these events without major expenditure.

Advertising is accomplished via blog, e-vites, library website, posters and fliers, campus website, campus newspaper, listserv, and word of mouth. Connections with faculty, students, and the community have led us to excellent moderators and speakers at no cost. Another good technique is to approach campus departments about co-sponsoring an event at which a member of their faculty is speaking; this may be used to cover the cost of food. The College of Engineering and the College of Science and Mathematics have already provided financial support, and the Theater & Dance department will be providing a costume for our "Darwin" to wear on February 12th while blowing out the cake candles.

The comment cards we had available for the first audience were invaluable sources of information. The next two programs will be very different from the first. We look forward to learning further lessons from the comments of more participants and making changes to our programming accordingly.

Conclusions & Future Plans

Science Café is an opportunity for our constituents to get together over a cup of coffee, and come to recognize the connections that exist between the numerous and seemingly unrelated areas of study on campus. Launching a Science Café program has been a fun and inexpensive way to encourage a sense of community on campus, and to foster the recognition of the library as an important campus meeting place. While some funds were spent on renovating the library's second floor, the Science Café concept can be utilized in many libraries without major expenditures. The Science Café is one of many community programming opportunities in our second floor Learning Commons; we are also exploring the possibility of organizing exhibitions, hosting live music and more. We see our second floor Learning Commons as a dynamic, campus-centered program, bringing together technology, information, and people to create connections of all kinds.

References

Task Group on the Future of the Library. (2007). *Report to the Provost*. Cal Poly.[1] [↗](#)

Trujillo, C. (2008). *Science Café: freshly brewed science*. Project Proposal. Cal Poly Internal Report. [2] [↗](#)

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