FINAL REPORT FOR IMLS GRANT #LG4613026413

Administrative Information

Calcasieu Parish Public Library
CPPL Innovation Studio
Award Amount $24,892 / Total Cost Share $32,083.41 / Total Project Cost $56,778.52
Award Period September 1, 2013 – August 31, 2014
Project Director: Clare Coleman, Central Branch Manager

Project Summary

Two issues facing many libraries today are remaining relevant in a digital age AND meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse population. Because we are continually adding new items and categories of items to our digital collections, it is becoming increasingly possible for regular library users to rarely visit the physical building. While the convenience of having immediate, 24-hour access to resources is a great benefit to the community, it is easy to lose our connection to the people we serve when the physical interaction decreases. The addition of more digital resources and services has also led to an increased demand to provide patrons with instruction and support in using the devices necessary to access digital content. As such, the need for staff to provide instruction is claiming an ever-increasing share of staff time and institutional resources. Trying to balance this instructional need with the community's demand for high quality and unique programming is often a frustrating goal to achieve, especially when the reduced face-to-face patron interaction has made it more difficult to ascertain what their interests are.

By adjusting from a top-down, library led programming model to one that is community-driven, as well as flexible and responsive to changing community wants and needs, organizations should be able to offer more learning opportunities on a broader range of topics, including those that may be beyond the normal scope of the library's services or the library staff's expertise. Look at popular social media and crowdsourcing sites and it quickly becomes obvious how powerful these online tools can be for garnering rabid support and ideas from a diverse group of people. These observations were the driving force behind Calcasieu Parish Public Library's project proposal.

The goal of the Innovation Studio project was to provide residents of Calcasieu Parish and the greater Southwest Louisiana region with a space and program model in which diverse groups could come together to plan, discuss, innovate, and learn. The project itself had two components: (1) designing and outfitting the Innovation Studio, a room with flexible furnishings and trending technology and (2) creating a programming model and Innovation Studio App

which allows members of the community to propose ideas for use of the space, vote on submitted ideas, and reserve the use of the Innovation Studio.

It was our hope that this app and programming concept would benefit communities by giving them a more responsive community-driven method to ensure programming more reflective of the diversity of the community.

Process

In 2012, a room became available at Calcasieu Parish Public Library's Central branch and the initial thought was to create a digital media lab in this new space. Digital media labs have been around awhile and technology is usually an easy sell, so it was not difficult to obtain library administration's support. They said "give us a budget and we'll see what we can do." By late 2012, staff had caught the makerspace bug and realized this space could be so much more. Staff also looked around and realized that community leaders were recognizing the same thing – the key to a strong Southwest Louisiana lies in collaborative, innovative thinking. Thus, the Innovation Studio was born.

A project like this is easy to get excited about but hard to maintain focus. Having the right staff is vital, and CPPL just happened to have five eager and talented librarians on staff who were perfect for getting the Innovation Studio started. Fiona Griswold, Michael Staton, Samantha Smith, Susan Gerhart and Clare Coleman came up with the name and divided the project into three phases. In Phase 1, the studio would serve as a computer lab focusing on basic computer skills (which were already being offered, just not in this space). Phase 2 would see it transform into a digital media lab with advanced video/photo editing software and equipment. Phase 3 would transition into a true makerspace, providing equipment and expert programs for more advanced creators.

Funds were allocated to get to Phase 2, but more money would be needed to realize Phase 3 and so we applied for the Sparks Ignition grant and were THRILLED when we received the award notification. With $41,445 allocated to the project ($24,892 grant funds and $16,553 cost share) and a dedicated team of staff, we immediately began implementing the timeline as presented in the grant proposal. The first three months were the most time-intensive. During this time we selected and purchased equipment, submitted a formal proposal for local artists to redesign the studio, prepared the studio with paint and electrical work, and held multiple meetings and conversations with the Vandrio Software Solutions team (who we selected to design the app).

Our local funding has very strict purchasing regulations and we met several challenges when trying to order equipment, especially the 3D printer. We had to convince purchasing staff that a 3D printer was NOT a normal printer when they wanted to know why it wasn't available on

state contract (true story). An unusually high rate of staff turnover was another challenge that occurred almost immediately upon receiving the grant and one that continued throughout the entire project. Within the first month, one of the key project staff and the original Authorizing Official left our employment. Seven months later they were followed by another key project staff member. A third staff member who was indirectly involved with the project relocated to another city during this time, and the supervisor for all of these employees retired. It was the perfect storm and we adapted as best we could, but it undoubtedly affected the project as staff time had to be redirected towards training new employees.

Despite these challenges, we managed to implement one month ahead of schedule. By the end of 2013, all equipment had been purchased, the art installation was complete, the app was accepted by Apple and Android, marketing plans were in place, and staff training had begun. We held a grand opening on January 11, 2014 in which the public was able to tour the newly re-designed Innovation Studio and see live demos of the 3D printer and 3D scanner. Prior to this event we executed a full media blitz. One of the more creative ways we did this was projecting the Innovation Studio logo into the library's large entry windows so anyone driving past at night could see the image. We also demoed the 3D printer at our second largest library branch for a week, which helped to spread the excitement with staff and the larger community.

From the outset of this project, our team agreed to begin with as few policies and procedures as possible. We consulted with other libraries with similar projects at the time and noted questions and issues that we anticipated, but we never instituted any rules or procedures until a need arose. We kept things as flexible as possible so that we could adapt quickly and ensure our decisions were based on actual patron demand. For example, we didn't charge for 3D prints the first six months and did not decide on a cost until the end of this time period, which allowed us time to see how this new service would be used and to better determine our actual costs. During the planning phase, we assumed we would charge by the weight of the object (as many libraries were doing). At the end of the six months, however, we found that our community had not fully grasped key concepts of this technology (such as metric units and how to pre-determine an object's weight) and we realized that the supply costs were not as high as we anticipated. Since we felt that some cost was necessary to educate the public that it does generate a cost, we decided to keep it simple and charge only $1 per file. This worked well for beginners and gave us the edge with more advanced patrons who were thrilled to have such an affordable way to print.

This loose approach worked well for the reasons we chose this tactic, but it sometimes left staff feeling confused and made it challenging for others outside of the project team to market the concept. It was challenging for project staff to keep everyone informed in a timely manner while constant change surrounded them. Waiting for patron responses to fill the program

calendar was also challenging, for both patrons and staff. Everyone was used to staff planning programs and then informing patrons what, when and where. Remaining patient and giving the new approach a chance to work was difficult, especially since we had this fabulous new space and we wanted to see it constantly full of programs. To find this balance, we offered weekly "Maker Hours" which were open times in the studio in which a staff member was present to assist patrons in tinkering with the technology and equipment. We maintained this throughout the project and this reoccurring program allowed us the structure we needed but gave the patrons flexibility. It also gave us a chance to see what our patrons were interested in and it became quickly apparent that most were solely interested in 3D technology.

Project Results

We would not have seen nearly as much interest in this project without the 3D printer and scanner. It did not matter how pretty the room was or that we had expensive software and computers – people came to experience a technology that they had never seen. The fervor surrounding the 3D printer was not much of a surprise to us, but the audience was. We learned not to assume who the primary users would be. When we thought we were targeting young professionals for an evening web design series, many of our attendees were middle-age female caregivers and late-in-life entrepreneurs. The most prolific 3D designers were teen girls and crafty moms, not the engineering students from a nearby university as we anticipated. The engineering students, architects, and science/tech professionals did visit, however, and many brought their families with them. Librarians from across the state and local teachers were a large part of our audience. Requests for tours doubled during the grant period and we became a "go-to" library for others in the state who were planning their own makerspaces and 3D print services. We presented our project at the Louisiana Library Association Annual Conference, submitted an article in the state association's journal, and served on a panel with other "library makers" at a state library administrator's conference.

The disappointing result was the Innovation Studio app. In terms of cost to usage ratio, it was a complete failure. We spent $12,145 on designing and hosting the app and of the eight project proposals generated through it, only two were from a non-staff member. As of November 2014, the app had 32 downloads in Google Play and 93 cumulative downloads in iTunes. We marketed the app heavily during the beginning publicity blitz and included it with all marketing materials throughout the grant period. We quickly discerned that the app needed additional functions to make it more interactive, but that was an added cost and at the time we had spent our allotted funds. So we stuck with what we had and focused on soliciting feedback from anyone we made contact with (library visitors, phone or email, outreach at community events, etc).

A pattern emerged with two distinct types of users: (1) people who wanted to use the space independently and were not interested in suggesting or attending programs and (2) people who were interested in what we had to offer but had no specific suggestions in terms of actual programs. The people who self-generate programs never emerged. Our fear that an overflow of "off-the-wall" suggestions would lead us astray from our organizational mission never materialized. Patrons would select general options such as "crafts" or "computer classes" but no one would suggest specific topics or new categories. When given examples of possible programs such as "3D Printing Cookie Cutters" they would give feedback, but only once did someone from the community provide us with a new program idea. What they DID do was come up with creative ways for individual use, such as one young man who used our equipment to make a portable WiFi hub for his phone and a father/son duo who designed an automated feeder for their fish tank. One group that did give feedback when prompted were our Tech Teens, a group that met bi-monthly to explore different technology topics. At the beginning of the school year, teens were given a survey of suggested topics and asked to rank them according to interest. Topics were selected for the year based on these results. Popular topics included Arduino, Beginner CAD, Trip Wires, Animation, and App/Game Design.

Moving forward, we will continue to offer open "Maker Hours" but will add more structured activities and more equipment. Many in our community lack the knowledge and skills to use newer technologies, which we believe is a contributing factor in the lack of suggestions – people need to see how it works before they can begin to envision the possibilities. Offering quick instructional programs that promote digital literacy and cutting edge technology will be a focus in the upcoming year, as will improving our connection with digital patrons. Instead of trying to build a new base of users (like we did with the app), we will focus on the platforms we already have in place and incorporate more interactive features. Building from our own failures and what we have learned from successful crowdsourcing techniques, we will seek more focused feedback and offer incentives when possible. For example: ask the community to suggest activities for a superhero summer reading program and reward or acknowledge those that result in actual programs.

While we feel that the app was not the best platform for our community at this time, it could be useful to anyone who has a strong base of users who rely on smart applications for communicating with the organization. The API files are linked on our website and are completely open source. Anyone with coding skills should be able to customize and reconfigure these files. For an improved app, we suggest adding the following features: push alerts and notifications, ability to login with Facebook and other social media accounts, and a home screen that states the project goal.

We hope that our experience will encourage others to continue to strive for more experimentation and flexibility. Forcing ourselves from our comfort zones is a great way to see things from a new perspective and to generate new ideas. Much like a strategic plan or organizational restructure, it also forces us to question our purpose and revisit the things that make us uniquely useful to our communities.

Resources

Coleman, C. (2013) Sparking Innovation @ Your Library. *Louisiana Libraries,* 76*(*2), 6-8.
Briefly describes the Innovation Studio's early stages and issues a challenge to other Louisiana libraries to implement makerspaces in their own communities.

Be innovative in the Innovation Studio! http://calcasieulibrary.org/innovatelibrary
Calcasieu Parish Public Library's landing page for everything involving the Innovation Studio project, including FAQs, equipment list, 3D print request form, app store links, and more.

Librarian of 30 years shares importance of National Library Week. (2014)
www.kplctv.com/story/25256793/30-year-library-veteran-explains-importance-ofnational-library-week?autoStart=true&topVideoCatNo=default&clipId=10058064.
Susan Gerhart talks about what Calcasieu Parish Public Library has to offer, including 3D printing and innovative programs.

We are creating an "Innovation Studio." (2013). http://calcasieulibrary.org/innovatestudio.
Article previewing what was to come during this project. Posted on the library website's news feed.