

Beyond teaching: Out of hours at the Grant Museum

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Abstract

To a large extent university museums are dependent on their governing institutions for operational funding and support, space and staffing. At the Grant Museum of Zoology, we identify University College London (UCL) students and staff as our primary audience in order to advocate our work and worth. We strive to attract the UCL community to use the collection informally, in addition to academic teaching. These two formats enhance each other.

UCL students and staff attend the Museum's public events. Not only does this communicate our value to UCL, but as our most local community they can be easier to attract than people further afield. Internal communication systems allow for cheap, efficient marketing. We run free specimen-based activity days for families, which succeed in attracting UCL staff as well as the wider public, and programs of innovative, light-hearted, evaluation-driven events for adults which interest students too. These include exhibitions, hands-on activities, talks, discussions and film nights. Themes addressed are animal-related, but look beyond individual disciplines to attract students and staff with wider interests. Choosing topics that pique our colleagues' interests, but are fun enough to encourage them to visit out of work hours and bring in the public as well are a recipe for success at the Grant Museum, with total visitor figures increasing 1,000% since the Learning Programs began.

Introduction

The Grant Museum was founded as a teaching collection, to resource England's first Zoology degrees, and has been used ever since for teaching and research. In 2004 learning programs were initiated to service non-university audiences – including schools, families and adults - as well as to increase use in traditional university teaching.

I will discuss the informal adult learning program's successes and how and why we have put efforts into attracting members of the academic community to take part in these programs.

University museums as public interfaces

UCL is a Beacon for Public Engagement, with goals to provide formats for the public to engage with academic issues. The museums at UCL function as a key gateway for the public to the university.

University museums are reliant on governing institutions for administration, space, funding and staff. Much of what universities do is geared towards increasing levels of income generation. Therefore museums are under constant pressure to prove their worth and demonstrate that they are more valuable than a potential research group that could occupy the same location and probably generate more income. It is up to the museums to show that the services they provide are more important than alternative allocations of resources.

At the Grant Museum, providing free learning services to the public and schools is a key way of demonstrating this kind of value. Universities are under pressure to be part of their local communities; external learning services fulfill such a role. However, we can go further than providing opportunities for the public, and begin to target our internal community for informal events.

The university community in public events

Our number one strategic aim is to increase the number of students and staff in Higher Education using the museums' collections. While traditional student use of the collection in formal teaching is paramount, another way to improve their engagement with us is through informal evening events.

The Grant Museum's adult learning program runs light-hearted events based around zoological issues. One aim is to go beyond subject-specialism and engage with topics with broader appeal, to include people who would not normally attend science events.

We realized that many of our informal participants were coming from UCL. By slightly modifying the way we programmed and marketed our events, we could dramatically increase the number of Higher Education users engaging with the collection. In this way we could maintain our public audience, increase overall visitor numbers and fulfill our key aim of increasing Higher Educational use.

The key is to program events with cross-disciplinary themes, attracting people from outside the specialty in addition to enthusiasts. In 2008 we tackled cryptozoology: the study of hidden animals, including animals unknown to science like Big Foot and Nessie, and sightings of animals that are presumed extinct. The series was designed to debate the validity of cryptozoology – is it mainstream science or paranormal research?

Such event programming must appeal to the varying types of people in the 'adult' audience group. Some events are largely light-hearted, such as a discussion with professional cryptozoologists reporting on their expeditions searching for Mongolian death worms. This was designed to attract a broad range of people from any field or level of knowledge, and encourage them to come back to future events in the series.

Other events can be considered more academic and attract the university sector more specifically. For *The Cryptozoology Season* we invited a scientist from the Zoological Society of London to discuss his research on the Yangtze River dolphin which became extinct in 2007, in the context of asking what it is like to search for extinct animals.

The two styles – academic and lighthearted – are certainly not mutually exclusive. Combining the two is the best tactic. Our topics have enough of a hint of an academic discipline to attract people with interests in these areas, but are light-hearted enough to bring in an audience from beyond the confines of any one specialism.

Evaluation and marketing

At the heart of the programming is evaluation, and this allows us to monitor how many Higher Education users are hidden within a public audience. Following events we ask standard qualitative questions, but also whether people belong to an academic institution.

There are great advantages to treating the internal audience as leisure users beyond fulfilling the aim of increasing the number of Higher Education users. For one, they are easy and cheap to market to through existing communication channels – such as departmental emails, newsletters and internal mail; as well as the fact that they are physically local enough to see promotional signage. They are easy to attract because they are already on-site; UCL staff and students do not have to travel for an entertaining evening out.

Outcomes

The results of the program so far have been hugely successful. Last year saw a 54% increase in the number of university staff and students on the previous year, against a back-drop of 15% growth

across all of our audiences. This increase above the baseline can solely be attributed to the internal audience coming to public events.

There have been secondary results which have been encouraging – students and staff from our informal adult program have gone on to use the collection in other ways, either by bringing their children to our family events, or by using the collection in formal teaching and research. Over the past year the number of research enquiries received increased by 115%. At least in part this can be attributed to the increased awareness of the collection and the work we do.

To conclude, at the Grant Museum we have found that by encouraging university students and staff to take part in informal adult programs, we meet our strategic objectives of increasing the number of Higher Education users, research users and overall growth, as well as benefiting from the advantages that targeting an on-site audience brings.

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