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History Day: Another Outreach Opportunity for Academic Libraries

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Thomas Steman and Susan Motin

History Day

Another outreach opportunity for academic libraries

Participation in History Day by students, teachers, parents, and the community is a unique opportunity to have fun learning about many different aspects of history and to visit local libraries, historical societies, and archives.¹ It can be especially rewarding for academic libraries to assist History Day students in their quest for knowledge of the past. History Day provides an excellent outreach opportunity by bringing together many people for a day-long event to learn from each other. In one day, this event encapsulates outreach in action, provides an opportunity to expose students to information literacy and critical thinking, service learning for university students, recruitment of future college students, and collaboration across campus.

Background

In 1974, History Day was established by David Van Tassel, professor of history at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. The event quickly spread in Ohio and, by 1980, History Day grew into a national organization. Today, History Day is a very popular event, with more than 700,000 students, grades 6–12, along with 40,000 teachers across the United States participating. Based on a different theme each year, students find and use primary and secondary sources to create documentaries, plays, papers, Web sites, and exhibits. The process requires students to research, collect, evaluate, and present information in a way that makes sense. Students enter their projects into local and state History Day competitions, with a select few competing at the national contest, usually held at the University of Maryland each June.

In Minnesota, History Day is a well-developed program.¹ Led by the Minnesota Historical Society, thousands of students from every

corner of the state create projects for History Day every year. Since the late 1980s, St. Cloud State University (SCSU) has served History Day as a regional contest site.³ However, the library was marginally involved in the past.

Vision for outreach and History Day

SCSU, established in 1869 as a teachers college by the State of Minnesota, is fortunate to be led by a president committed to and supportive of community outreach. The president has been very vocal about the responsibility that a place of higher education has to both the surrounding communities and the community in which it is located. The James W. Miller Learning Resource Center, the SCSU library, obviously shares that vision—a librarian has been charged with outreach responsibilities. With the president's and library's commitment, outreach programming and activities within SCSU are encouraged. When the librarians were approached to be part of History Day in a formal manner, there was no question about whether to participate.

Players

To plan a successful event, collaboration from many areas of the university was needed. Coincidentally, each group sought each other out and a partnership came together very quickly. Included were:

- SCSU History Day team, which included the History Day coordinator and three students who served as interns.

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- Central Minnesota Libraries Exchange (CMLE). CMLE is based in SCSU's library, the James W. Miller Resources Center. CMLE links K-12, public, and special libraries to academic libraries in the Central Minnesota region.

- Outreach coordinator for the Minnesota Digital Library (MDL) project. MDL, based in the Miller Center, is a project that encourages digitization of historical images and documents from across the state, which encapsulates Minnesota history.

- Librarian in charge of outreach at Miller Center. The librarian publicizes services and resources, as well as creates programming for the campus and community.

- SCSU Archivist. Living with history every day, the archivist was excited to get students interested in history.

How we got started

In the fall of 2008, the CMLE director pondered aloud about History Day to the associate dean for library services. The CMLE director believed that students in Central Minnesota needed to have a level playing field with the schools in the Twin Cities for History Day, hoping the rich resources of Miller Center would provide that spark. Realizing this effort must be a collaboration between the library, the rest of SCSU, and the local community, several people got on board.

In late October, the players formed the History Day committee. The committee brainstormed ways to make History Day a success for students in Central Minnesota. At that meeting, everyone got to know each other a little better, which services they could provide, and how they could best help each other. The partnership was tested early with a visit of 150 junior high students to the Miller Center who were beginning their projects. After that day, the History Day committee was committed to working together. But how could they reach a broader audience?

In November, the CMLE director and university archivist attended a workshop entitled "History Day @ Your Library." Sponsored by Metronet, a state-funded multitype library serving all types of libraries in the Twin Cities,

the event was held at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). MHS staff organized sessions for attendees to understand and participate in History Day. A session discussed the Minneapolis Public Library's 2008 History Day event. For three Saturdays, library staff were available to help students with History Day projects. Running with that idea, and with support from the outreach librarian and administration at Miller Center, the university archivist and CMLE director offered the idea of the event to the History Day committee. All committee members felt that it was an excellent outreach project to pursue.

Efforts were made to collaborate with other libraries, notably public, in the St. Cloud area. At the start, the committee was unsure if this type of event would be suitable for SCSU and it wanted to make sure other libraries could participate if they wanted. Those libraries believed it was a great idea but choose not to or were otherwise unable to participate.

History Day objectives

To organize the event, the History Day committee met several times to brainstorm for ideas and to decide who would do what when. They recognized that many students would likely be well on their way with their project before assistance could be offered. With that in mind, the committee set six objectives for the Central Minnesota History Day @ SCSU event:

- provide library instruction;
- demonstrate how to construct a History Day project, whether it be a display, Web site, performance, or paper;
- provide one-on-one assistance;
- find materials for the students to check out;
- give a sense of the resources and services available through the Miller Center, CMLE, and MDL; and
- showcase SCSU to prospective students.

An instructor provided students from his upper-level History class to work as volunteers for the event as a service learning opportunity. The goal for the class, filled with students who are to become social studies teachers, was to give basic help to History Day students to find resources, both online and physically in the

library. This freed up the librarians to provide more in-depth one-on-one assistance to as many students as possible.

More importantly, everyone was happy to help, was willing to work together, and was always as accommodating as possible.

Publicizing/promotion

As with any outreach initiative, publicizing and promoting the event was critical. A press release was written and sent to newspaper, radio, and television outlets within a 50-mile radius of SCSU. In addition, two extremely important communication vehicles were the CMLE's newsletter and an e-mail address list for media specialists in the K-12 area schools. The SCSU History Day team also publicized the event to each school they visited during the month prior to the event. The event was also highlighted on the university's Web site.

The event

Due to a lower than expected turnout (about 25 students and parents participated), it was decided to be less formal the day of the event. Those attending used the librarians and volunteers for one-on-one assistance. The event still was beneficial to all involved. Librarians, the History Day committee, and volunteers were able to give students more personalized help through the more relaxed format. The participants were very pleased.

Plans for the future

After the event, both the History Day committee and interested librarians debriefed while the day's events were fresh in everyone's mind. Everyone learned from the experience and felt that there was much room for improvement. These included:

- longer planning time—with the groundwork laid, planning can start much sooner for next time;
- library instruction provided by academic librarians for schools participating in History Day;
- earlier communication with schools and parents, such as exposure at parent-teacher conferences and in school's newsletters;

- CMLE sponsoring a History Day event for area school media specialists;
- providing a certificate for students grades 6-12 who participate;
- supplies, such as scratch paper and sharpened pencils;
- handouts, such as a Library of Congress classification sheet, library map, campus map, and any other material from offices who want to reach out to the students; and
- free lunch to keep participants in the library.

Assessment

Recognizing that even with the short planning time for the first year and low turnout, the History Day committee was extremely pleased with the success of the event and felt it was worth doing again. The six objectives that the History Day committee agreed upon were met. Participant evaluations also gave very positive feedback and stated that they hoped this would become an annual event. Could the event have turned out better? Yes, and the committee knows it must work harder to make the day more successful next year.

Why is History Day an important outreach event for academic libraries?

- **Information literacy and critical thinking skills.** Through History Day, students are exposed to finding resources, asking thoughtful questions, extracting and analyzing needed and reliable information, and presenting it in a way that makes sense. Research shows students will turn to Google as the easy way out to find information. Yet by completing History Day projects, participants learn there is a better way to efficiently find reliable information. By practicing those skills, the students will have an advantage as entering college freshmen.
- **Service learning.** For SCSU undergraduates who will become social studies teachers, History Day helped them learn the skills of transferring knowledge from the classroom to others in ways that are meaningful. Learning at the university should not

be restricted to sitting in class, listening to an instructor, and taking notes. History Day may be on a small scale, but it's another way to engage all students, both at SCSU and in local schools.

- **Community service and outreach.**

This event was "outreach in action" to the community. People who attended had no connection to SCSU, yet discovered resources available to them as community members. The community participants were shown that the academic library has other uses that go beyond the university.

- **Recruitment.** Related to community service and outreach is recruitment. Many of SCSU's students are first-generation college students. What better way to showcase the campus then by inviting History Day participants to the library? A positive experience for a History Day event may lead a student to attend SCSU. That experience is much more effective than a brochure or a visit by an admissions representative to a prospective student's school.

- **Collaboration.** SCSU is a big place. Many people saw the value of History Day to the campus and to the community. No one would have been able to plan this event alone. Instead, those interested got together, planned, and executed the event. This collaboration is especially important in these tough economic times when budgets are slashed and people have to do more with less.

With a few people, motivation, and a desire to help students, the event was a success. Helping History Day participants takes time, but in the end it was worth the effort.

Notes

1. For more information about National History Day, see www.nationalhistoryday.org.

2. Minnesota Historical Society's History Day, see www.mnhs.org/school/historyday/index.htm.

3. St. Cloud State University's History Day, see www.stcloudstate.edu/history/historyday2009.asp. ❧

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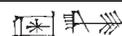
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