

# Planning and Executing an Annual Library Lecture

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One of the joys and challenges of being a library director is bringing speakers to campus. However, nothing in library school or working as a front-line academic librarian provided preparation for event planning. There are the considerations of budget, audience, location, timing and weather, multimedia needs, campus politics, and publicity among other factors. Having now coordinated several successful lectures myself, here are some considerations to help you with the planning and execution of these events.

The Mason Library Annual Lecture of Keene State College in New Hampshire is now in its seventeenth year. It has gone from being called an honors lecture, which had strict guidelines about inviting speakers with connections to New Hampshire, to a more relaxed event that is now open to individuals from the New England regional area. The invited speakers must have demonstrated excellence in scholarship in their field, which eliminates most popular authors. The lecture is given once a year and is free and open to the public.

When I started my position as library director at Keene State College in January 2002, I learned that a funded honors lecture would be among my new duties to administer. This meant I was to select and invite speakers, invite them, arrange the venue and publicity for the event, connect the speakers to a campus class if possible, and host a dinner. The first lecture I was responsible for was scheduled for March. All I had to do was introduce the speaker, something relatively easy for me to do, since I had been to a public lecture he gave two years prior and was familiar with his work. The behind-the-scenes work had already been done, and I did not appreciate the hard work my administrative assistant and the interim library director had accomplished until the next year. These are the lessons I have learned since.

## Budget

First, your budget is never enough. Coming from small private institutions that could barely make it through a year without a budget reduction, it was a new concept to me that I actually had a fund set aside just for lectures. Two thousand five hundred dollars seemed an enormous amount to pay someone for a couple of hours of his time. There was also a three-hundred-dollar budget for public-

ity, travel, and hospitality. My very first invited speaker, a Pulitzer Prize award recipient, accepted the amount we offered. This led me to the conclusion that this was the generous honorarium that I had thought it was. I was wrong. During the next year, a half dozen potential lecturers turned me down, because their usual starting fee for speaking engagements was ten thousand dollars. If they had an agent it could be more.

I learned to be very creative in identifying and approaching speakers. I looked for speakers that had previously worked in higher education in my state. I played on the fact that they understood the funding situation, which is how I landed the second year's speaker, also a Pulitzer Prize award recipient, whose work had been made into a highly successful PBS documentary. The next year's award-winning author charged us only half of his usual fee because one of his former pupils, who is currently a faculty member on our campus, made "the ask." It was still twice the amount in my budget, but by teaming up with another lecture series on campus and combining events the funding was found. Another budget-enhancing strategy that worked for this year's lecturer, an Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker, was that I explained that while the budget for the honorarium was fixed, my acquisitions budget could accommodate purchasing materials for our collection. We contracted to purchase a certain amount of his films over two years, directly from his distribution company, to supplement his agreement to speak on campus.

## Audience

If you find something interesting, so will others. The first lecture I arranged in 2002 fooled me. The topic directly tied into September 11 and was about building community. The room was fairly full with more than two hundred attendees. I assumed that the Mason Library Lecture drew them in, and did not consider the audience and topic carefully enough the following year. When only ninety campus and community members attended the lecture, I learned an important lesson: just giving the lecture is not enough. I needed to consider integrating the lecture into campus and community interests. I had thought that because the campus had hosted a symposium on World War II two years previously that there would be built-in interest on a lecturer on this topic. Instead I encountered burnout on the topic. There was interest in the Holocaust, but not in

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Japan, which was the focus of the lecture. I could not even interest the history faculty. Only five students attended that night. Clearly I needed to rethink my strategy.

The next year's lecturer, as previously mentioned, was well known due to the documentary film that had been made of one of her works. All of the speaker's work was centered on the New England region. Also the focus of her work was women's history, and the lecture was scheduled for March to take advantage of Women's History Month. Publicity outreach efforts targeted community women's groups, such as the local branch of the American Association of University Women, and there was coordination on campus with the multicultural and diversity commission, as well as the commission on the status of women. The speaker also responded favorably to meeting with students prior to the lecture. An afternoon seminar was set up and attended by forty students. Attendance at the evening's lecture was well over two hundred and included a broad cross-section of students, faculty, staff, and community members.

When approached by the dean of arts and humanities about combining our lectures for spring 2005, I was at first reluctant, not wanting to set a precedent that would subsume the Mason Library Lecture and its funding. Many other lecture series on campus were not funded, but rather the organizers had to apply for small campus grants for monies. I had often been approached about "giving" my funds to someone else's lecture. Only one other time in the then sixteen-year history of the lecture had it been combined with another lecture. The proposed speaker, while an outstanding scholar in his field, was not really located within the New England region. The lure of having someone else share responsibilities for the lecture and the popularity and exceptional scholarship of the speaker convinced me that it was in our best interests to be associated with this event. It proved to be the right call. The speaker's connection to a popular film on which he consulted, the playing of the movie on campus prior to his arrival, the fact that the speaker met with English classes, and the publicity sent directly to area high schools, all generated buzz. It did not hurt that the lecturer's most recent work on Shakespeare, in addition to being prize-winning, was also on best-seller lists at the time of the lecture. We enlisted drama students in Elizabethan costumes to hand out programs and seat guests. The lecture had a capacity crowd of over five hundred in attendance, and culminated with a birthday bash reception celebrating Shakespeare's birthday and a book signing.

## Timing

When I arrived on campus the lecture traditionally had been given at 8 P.M. Due to the first lecturer's request, the time was moved forward to 7:30 P.M. That time was kept for the next year. It wasn't until the spring 2005 lecture,

when due to the speaker's request the time was moved to 4:30 P.M., that a truism about campus life became clear. Students did not want to attend a night lecture, which they perceived as their social time, and faculty could not bring their class if the lecture was held at night. Having the lecture right before the dinner hour, and after most classes for the day were concluded, provided a significant boost in student attendance. It also turned out that community members who wished to attend came whether it was a night lecture or a late afternoon lecture. In fact due to the time of year and potential weather conditions in a New England winter, more senior citizens attended at the earlier time. Since senior citizens had been a significant portion of our community attendees at night, being sensitive to their needs turned out to be an important consideration for the lecture's success.

Check your campus calendar. There are many factors that can influence whether or not a lecture is well attended. How close it is to the end of the semester can mean students and faculty will not attend. Right before or after a vacation, such as spring break, can mean attendance will be low. Multiple competing campus events can also affect attendance. One year the lecture was the same night as a popular annual student dance recital and attendance at the lecture was noticeably lower. Try to find a week in a particular month and day of the week that works well and stick with it. Holding the lecture approximately at the same time each year will not only help you build your audience as people will look for information about the lecture around the same time annually, but it will also help you stake out your "claim" to that slot with other campus events. People will start to plan around you rather than the other way around.

## Location and Multimedia Needs

I was fortunate that the lecture location had been moved from a recital hall on the edge of campus to the student center in the heart of the campus several years prior to my arrival. The student center has adjacent and adequate parking for community members, a hall with a balcony, seating capacity of five hundred, and is handicap accessible. It also has been outfitted with audiovisual equipment and has a staffed help desk for immediate assistance as needed. Since the acoustics in large rooms are not always adequate, making sure there are speakers to project sound and appropriate microphones is essential for a lecturer's success. It is also convenient being in the same building as the campus store. When I forgot to provide bottled water for a speaker, it was just a quick dash downstairs to procure one.

It never occurred to me that speakers would have particular requirements as to what kind of microphone they would prefer. I soon learned that some lecturers are very precise in their requests. One year, only a headset microphone was acceptable. The next year a podium with

microphone was requested. The next year the speaker asked for a lapel microphone. Luckily we have been able to accommodate these requests, but it pays to ask early in contacting speakers so you can make sure the set up they desire is available. This year our documentary filmmaker has requested an audiovisual technician be present to run the illustrative snippets of his films that he will provide, leaving him free to focus on delivery of the lecture.

## Publicity

While our campus has a college relations office, the bulk of publicizing and organizing the lecture has fallen upon my administrative assistant and myself. In fact, my administrative assistant is essential to the success of our lectures. The first step in organizing publicity is to secure a speaker. Once someone accepts, I request the title of the speech, a short abstract of the lecture, a biography, and a photograph of the speaker for college relations. With these items the graphic design and editorial departments within college relations can begin work on a press release, poster, and program. Also at this point the date of the lecture can be posted on the Web site calendar, and I can send information to faculty about this future event, so they can incorporate it into their curriculum for the spring semester. The earlier I can secure the lecturer for the following year, the more the lecture can be integrated into courses.

Once I have found someone to accept, my administrative assistant, with a little help from me, arranges his or

her travel and overnight accommodations, makes sure we process contracts and other forms so he or she can get paid, schedules the lecture room and audiovisual set up, handles the details of the meal (either making a reservation or bringing me menu selections if the event is on campus), and arranges for people to hand out programs. In fact, my administrative assistant has even chauffeured the speaker in her car. Her attention to detail guarantees the successful administration of the lecture, and she sees to the comfort of the speakers while they are on campus.

In addition to organizing the practical details of the lecture and the lecturer's needs, my administrative assistant also does all the distribution of the posters and postcards that we purchase to publicize the event. The postcards, which are miniatures of the poster on one side and have the printed details of the lecture on the other, have proven to be a key element in targeting community groups who might be interested in the lecture. In addition to sending publicity to all of the colleges and universities in our statewide consortia, public libraries, and historical societies, we also send postcards to appropriate groups and individuals. For example, a recent lecturer's topic of medicine and social justice resulted in postcards going not only to the local medical center, but also to other public health organizations and health-related nonprofits in the region. Library staff are often encouraged to address postcards to community members as appropriate. One year the lecturer spoke on animal rights and everyone's veterinarian received a personalized invitation and was encouraged to publicize the event with clientele.

### Generating and Securing Speakers

Generate potential speakers from:

- Lists of prize winners
- Who is teaching at regional higher education institutions
- Faculty on your campus by finding out who they know
- Other librarians
- Newspaper and local public radio reviews (the latter is a particularly good way to determine if the potential speaker is dynamic or not)
- What you've enjoyed reading

Secure the speakers you want by:

- Contacting them as early as possible, usually a year in advance, so you can get on their schedule
- Informing them up front about the funding situation at your campus, which can play to their sympathies and understanding about the financial state of higher education
- Even if they have an agent, try to approach them directly. If they are regional, they might still be willing

to be a lecturer, but first you have to reach them and an agent usually looks at the bottom line first

- Finding other ways to entice them to your campus, perhaps by lining up several events for them in the region (tap into your regional institutes of higher education and see what can be arranged)
- Give them an opportunity to sign their books, which increases their sales. If this cannot be done on your campus, coordinate with local bookstores and have them sponsor a book signing there (this strategy doesn't help you attract people to attend the lecture, so if at all possible have the book signing at the lecture site)
- Make sure the "correct" person extends the first invitation to speak. If someone on campus knows the speaker personally, it is harder to turn them down than a library director they've never met
- Offer alternatives to an honorarium, such as purchasing "x" number of their titles, providing overnight accommodations, meals, make sure you extend the invitation to their partner, etc.
- Tell them how their area of expertise is valued on your campus and why having them be your next lecturer is an honor

The importance of the poster design cannot be stressed enough. It needs to be a strong graphical image and symbolic of the lecture topic. Several times our posters have become a sought after commodity and decorate multiple offices around campus. This helps keep the lecture present in the community consciousness and serves as continuing publicity long after the particular event. If the speakers are well known, then having their images on the poster is advised. Most of the time, despite the excellence of their scholarship, speakers do not have the name recognition with the community that warrants taking up valuable publicity space with their image. The appropriate place for their photo usually is the inside of the program with their biography. The poster needs to catch the public's eye and convey an image to engage instant interest in the topic. For the Shakespeare lecture an outline image suggesting the Bard's head was used. For the Japanese history lecture the poster had a large red dot, symbolic of the Japanese flag. For the women's history lecture a woman in turn-of-the-twentieth-century clothing looking at a book of blank pages was the evocative image presented. This year's poster for the filmmaker has a sprocket of unreeled film across the top, drawing the eye strongly to the text and image below.

## Unexpected Pleasures

With every speaker there have been unforeseen moments. One year, unannounced, the lecturer brought his partner with him. We were serving a catered sit-down meal. Quickly

one of the library staff found himself uninvited, and I handed him cash to get a meal at the dining commons so there would be a place setting for the additional guest. His delightful partner turned out to have been an alumnus of our institution and was a booster of our campus. The woman historian, who was so generous of her time while on campus meeting with students, encouraged me to send her the abstract of my thesis for a soon-to-be completed history degree. She e-mailed back very encouraging comments on the abstract. These are just two examples of unforgettable and unanticipated results from sponsoring the lectures.

## Conclusion

While there are many details and considerations in planning a lecture event, the benefits are worthwhile to the library. The more integrated the lecture's theme to campus interests, the better attended the lecture will be. The lecture on medicine and social justice was a theme from the summer reading program and resulted in an overflow crowd. Providing a scholarly lecture series enhances the library's reputation as a partner in support of the classroom curriculum. Our experience with the Mason Library Annual Lecture is that the library is now placed squarely in the heart of the learning environment and perceived as an active contributor to the intellectual life of the campus, which is a wonderful place to be.

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Inspired Hiring *continued from page 130*

## Reference and Note

1. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005). This book is a recent contribution to the popular literature on the psychology behind what seem to be our rational decisions. *Blink's* third chapter, "The Warren Harding Error: Why We

Fall for Tall, Dark and Handsome Men," probes in engaging detail the favoritism enjoyed by tall persons, and especially tall males. Gladwell shows that this favoritism extends to hiring decisions. His bibliography for that chapter references recent scholarly and popular literature.