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14 Days to Have Your Say

by **Andrea Peterson and Frank Haulgren**

During spring quarter 2008, the Western Washington University (WWU) Libraries established an interactive bloglike environment called “14 Days to Have Your Say” with the intention of gathering new ideas and feedback about the libraries from the university community. The environment was developed as a fairly simple Drupal site. The project was open for direct posting from anyone on the WWU campus for 14 days, from May 7 to May 21, 2008. During this time, more than 600 posts were made from 300-plus unique users.

Background

This initiative was inspired by a similar approach used by the coffee chain Starbucks to gather user input regarding its retail outlets. Frank Haulgren, collection services manager

and assessment coordinator for WWU Libraries, had read about this project and was struck by the idea that the blog environment allowed users to comment on each others’ ideas and in some cases further develop and fine-tune previously posted ideas and suggestions. He got approval for the idea from the library’s administration and then approached Andrea Peterson, WWU Libraries’ head of library IT, about creating a similar environment.

The project was designed to have a sense of urgency about it and to identify with the student population. Frank engaged some students to help create a video, which served as an introduction to the project (www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvTzGRVcSIM). The video explained the intent of the project, which was to give library users a chance to influence policies with the coming of a new dean of libraries (who would arrive soon after the 14 Days project).





A YouTube video helped explain—and bring attention to—our 14 Days project.

Developing the Environment

14 Days to Have Your Say (<http://lib206.lib.wvu.edu/14days>) is a simple Drupal site built using version 5.x and the antique modern theme. The only changes to the theme were a few minor CSS changes and the use of the logo for the project. As you will see, the primary modules used were the Central Authentication Service (CAS), Views, and Tagadelic.

One of the keys to success was the ability to quickly set up an environment to support this project. Andrea had been working with Drupal to create an intranet for WWU Libraries and thus had both the environment available and the expertise to create the site in a short time frame. Drupal (<http://drupal.org>) is an open source content management platform that has gained popularity in libraries over the last few years. While many libraries use Drupal as a content management system for their websites, Drupal has more than 3,500 modules available for the current 6.x release, which provides functionality for everything from blogging to electronic commerce. Its flexibility makes it a great tool for a variety of projects, but this also makes it a bit more complex than a tool geared primarily toward blogging. However, since we were already using Drupal for other purposes and Drupal has many community building modules, it was the perfect tool for this project.

This project could have been created using almost any type of blog software. The sticking point, however, was authentication. We wanted to create a compelling environment that would encourage a conversation about ideas. Given the nature of the social web and the expectations of our patrons, we needed to allow direct, real-time participation. However, we wanted to limit participation to the WWU community and we did not want to allow anonymity, for these steps would limit inappropriate posts or trolling. The key to this in our environment was the use of the CAS module. CAS is the single login authentication software used on WWU's

campus, and Drupal has a module that easily ties in with the CAS server on our campus. Utilizing this module, we required patrons to log in to the system to participate. The CAS module redirects the participant to the universal campus login. After the participant is authenticated at the university level, her credentials are sent to Drupal and an account is generated for her within Drupal using her universal login as her username. This provided easy access to everyone at WWU and prevented anonymity. Drupal also has lightweight directory access protocol (LDAP) and Shibboleth modules, which could be used to provide authentication in other environments.

Drupal Views became a useful module during the project as well. The Views module provides the ability to change the way your content is displayed and to offer different ways of viewing the content on the site. Early in the 14 days, we noticed that many people were simply posting the same ideas as had been expressed in older posts, instead of supporting or commenting on the ideas that already existed. In order to promote commenting, we used the Views module to generate a dynamic list of the ideas that had been commented on the most. This appeared prominently on the site, and we did see a decrease in duplicate posts. Tagadelic is another module that creates a tag cloud of your content, and this was used as another way to view and navigate the content (as well as providing a fun visual clue to the hot topics).

Publicity and Launch

We publicized the 14 Days to Have Your Say project in a number of ways. We sent press releases to the WWU student newspaper (*The Western Front*) and the university communications office and placed a brief article in the faculty and staff newsletter (*FAST*). The project was launched on the day of Western Libraries' quarterly "Study Break"—an event that offers information, fun, and free food to students in the library. This provided a good venue for advertisement of the event, which we did with a large-screen TV running the 14 Days video as a continuous loop and with staff passing out bookmarks and talking to students about the project.

Additionally, we posted around the campus a large number of both 11" x 17" and 8.5" x 11" color posters, which used the image of an edgy college-age woman with a bullhorn. This image was used throughout the advertising campaign, on buttons, on the website, and on the student portal. The image and color posters were highly visible. Two hundred buttons were worn by many of the library staff, as well as some students, for the duration of the project. The buttons generated a lot of questions from library users and from others in the university community as library staff wearing these moved about the campus. Departmental liaisons were

encouraged to talk up the project with faculty and students they came in contact with. The introductory video was also posted to YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvTzGRVcSIM). In addition, throughout the project there was a branded banner ad running constantly on the library homepage.

The marketing design was intended to be edgy enough to attract attention but still vague enough to pique interest and compel students to investigate. Frank was thrilled the morning of the first day when he overheard a student passing one of the posters comment to the group she was with, “There’s that 14 Days thing again. I gotta find out what that is!”

The most effective publicity, however, was a block on the student portal. Most students sign in to the portal numerous times a day to get their email or log in to go to Blackboard for coursework, and during the 14 days of the project, we had the advertising image with a link to the project prominently featured on the portal. Since we were also using the same authentication mechanism, students would be logged in automatically to the 14 Days site if they came from the student portal. Statistics showed that the majority of the hits on the site came from the portal. While the campaign never really went viral, it did create considerable buzz on the campus, and students eagerly participated in the project, with many writing long passionate posts about the issues that concerned them.

At the time, Facebook and MySpace had become active virtual hangouts for most students, but the university offered no comparable social environment. 14 Days was the right thing, in the right place, at the right time, catching the campus by surprise.

How It Worked

One of the ground rules for this project was that library staff would generally not become involved in the discussion. We felt that by answering a question or correcting erroneous information, we would effectively stop that line of dialogue, which would keep us from finding out if an issue represented an isolated concern or a widespread belief. While library student employees did readily participate in the 14 Days project, library staff and faculty were discouraged from doing so unless they could present their concern from the viewpoint of a library user rather than an employee. We also felt that if library staff and faculty were involved, they could—intentionally or unintentionally—direct or manage discussions, which could result in a less representative snapshot of concerns.

Exceptions to this were two “seed posts” from Frank and Library Specialist Heather Dalzell and a comment posted by Frank early on addressing comments that the library seemed to be ignoring posts from students. This post explained that the 14 Days project was not intended to be a



The portal block provided our most effective publicity.

Q&A process but rather a forum for open and frank dialogue about the library. It also summarized how the collected comments would be utilized by the library.

Additionally, there was a post by Chris Cox, the new dean of libraries. While he was still at his post in Wisconsin, he had been monitoring the project with great interest. He expressed his enthusiasm for the process to the community and voiced his intent to address the needs and concerns identified by the project.

Ideas and Actions

We were unable to address every issue that came up on 14 Days—for example, we cannot afford or justify remaining open 24 hours a day or installing a giant fish tank. But we did respond to the most popular suggestions on the site and posted a summary of the actions we’d taken as a result of the project.

We were able to quickly address a number of the issues raised during the 14 Days project—we eliminated the need to use the “www” in www.library.wvu.edu and increased the inspection and cleaning of DVDs when they are returned. Other issues were a little more complex, but we were able to address them as well. For example, we had many complaints about the very old and grubby orange couches throughout the library, and we sent them out to have them reupholstered soon after the 14 Days project. In addition, we were able to install book drops on the south side of campus to address concerns expressed on 14 Days. While we weren’t able to directly address the desire for more group study rooms, we did implement scheduling software that allows students to book group study rooms online, and we worked with the Associated Students to set policies to better manage their use and to address the problem of single users occupying rooms.

The biggest issue raised during the project was noise, with the ever popular “more hours” request not far behind. Using a suggestion from 14 Days, our new dean hosted a discussion in the library’s most popular gathering spot, the skybridge, to find out more about the hours issue. We also formed a task force to look into the issue of library noise, and we have already instigated quiet floors in the library.

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The 14 Days website was full of ideas and issues contributors might want to address.

Commentary and Observations

If we could do it all over again, we would designate library staff to respond to comments in a timely manner when necessary. For example, there were many comments about the closure of the large reading room in our library. If we had responded to this thread, it might have evolved into a broader discussion of the impact of construction and collection relocations on users.

While we were very pleased with the response to the project, we were disappointed by the lack of participation by university faculty and staff. We attempted to promote the idea to them by sending posters to departments, publishing an article in *FAST*, asking liaisons to encourage participation, and including a link to the blog in a two-line blurb included in ILLiad and document delivery email messages sent to all users. None of these appear to have worked.

We believe the primary reason for the lack of faculty and staff participation is that they are less comfortable with the online environment than students. This is supported by a faculty survey done at the same time in which faculty stated a preference for more traditional forms of communication. In addition, the tone of the advertising was clearly geared toward students. Another factor could have been that students began posting heavily from the first day, and any faculty reading posts after the first few days could have easily made the assumption that this was “for students.”

Suggestions for Replicating 14 Days in Your Library

Make sure the library, particularly your administration, is on board with the project.

Create an open but nonanonymous environment limited to your community. Drupal is a great tool if you are familiar with it and it is available to you, but it is probably overkill if you need a tool just for this purpose. Any blogging-type tool will work, provided you are able to address the authentication issues.

Set a time frame (14 days would be good!) for responses in order to create a sense of urgency, and advertise heavily. The best advertising we did was an image on the student portal, which students visit multiple times daily to check email and participate on Blackboard. If the student portal isn't an option, targeted Facebook advertising would be another good bet.

Use the opportunity to join the conversation, without directing the conversation too much. Respond to direct questions and correct misinformation, while trying not to stifle the discussion.

Address as many issues as you can. Many issues can be addressed by new policies or by doing something differently; changes don't always require money. Involve student government or representatives from your community in addressing issues to make sure that your response is appropriate for the community and not just the individuals complaining. For example, we had a number of complaints about the cost of laptop fines (\$10 per hour), but after discussing this with the Associated Students, the board unanimously voted to keep the existing fine structure in place.

Final Words

14 Days to Have Your Say was a very positive experiment in gathering user input for the WWU Libraries. We were able to act on many of the concerns participants brought to us, and the 14 Days archive provided a valuable repository of comments and suggestions that were useful in developing a new strategic plan the following year. It also brought attention and good will from around campus and created a sense of excitement among the library staff, who used the project as a talking point with users and encouraged participation. As budgets continue to decrease, this kind of open and noticeable assessment can be invaluable in improving underfunded services and the estimation of your administration and patrons. 

Andrea Peterson (*andrea.peterson@wwu.edu*) was a cataloger, a director, and an instruction and reference librarian before discovering that the most fun in libraries is in IT. She has been the head of library IT at Western Washington University Libraries for 11 years.

Frank Haulgren (*frank.haulgren@wwu.edu*) is the collection services manager and assessment coordinator at the Western Washington University Libraries. In more than 25 years at the libraries, he's held a number of public service positions in circulation, course reserves, media and microform, and interlibrary loans.