

# Wine with Friends: Creating a Signature Fundraising Event for Your Library

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## **Author Note**

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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## **Abstract**

The Friends of Sims Library created a signature recurring fundraising event that over the past seventeen years has raised thousands of dollars to support Sims Memorial Library. This article will explore how the Wine with Friends event evolved over the years and outline the work of the Friends board and the faculty and staff of Sims to make it a success.

## **Introduction**

The Friends of Sims Library, the support organization for Sims Memorial Library, located at Southeastern Louisiana University (SLU), sponsors two annual signature events to raise funds for the library. Each spring, the group hosts an author tea featuring a traditional tea service with a mimosa add-on option where the featured author shares some of their works through readings and discusses their writing and creative process. The tea also serves as an annual membership meeting and recruiting event.

In the fall, the Friends organize their largest fundraiser of the year, a wine tasting event held in the library. For the past seventeen years, the Wine with Friends event has evolved from an experimental fundraising idea to an established staple on the fall university and wider Hammond social calendar. In this article, the history of the event and the impact it has had on the library will be examined, along with ways the Friends of Sims Library have changed the event over the years to make improvements.

## **Background**

Southeastern Louisiana University is a regional, public institution located in Hammond, Louisiana. It is classified as a Research Colleges and Universities institution with a Fall 2025 enrollment of 15,570. The university offers a wide range of undergraduate programs, as well as a number of graduate programs and two doctoral degrees. Founded as a public junior college in 1925, today the institution is the third largest university in the state and serves as a regional hub in the growing southeastern corner of the state.

Sims Memorial Library, named in honor of Linus A. Sims, the first president of what would become Southeastern, is located in the core of the campus. The four-story building houses not only the library but also the Center for Southeast Louisiana Studies, the Mathematics Technology Learning Center, Innovation Hub, Northshore STEM Center, and the administrative offices for the university Honors Program. Open to the public as well as

the campus community, the library building sees approximately 350,000 visitors annually. In addition to offering traditional library services, faculty members of the Reference and Instruction Department teach a one-hour course in library research required by approximately one-third of the undergraduate degree programs on campus. Most sections of the course are taught online but several continue to be offered in-person and approximately 570 students enroll each semester.

The library employs fifteen professional librarians holding faculty rank and thirteen staff members, along with approximately thirty student assistants and graduate assistants. The collection includes almost a half million physical volumes and almost three-quarters of a million electronic titles, along with bound serials, government documents, and other items.

### **Friends of Sims Library**

The Friends of Sims Library began operations in 2006. Previously, an earlier organization supported the library but became dormant after several years of inactivity. The Friends of Sims is not a standalone 501(c)3 organization but rather operates as part of the wider Southeastern Louisiana University Foundation. Funds raised by the groups are deposited with the foundation and used at the discretion of the Friends board to support various worthwhile endeavors. The mission of the Friends group is to support the activities and collections of Sims Library by generating funds to purchase needed equipment and resources; to provide programs; to sponsor lectures; and to host other special events. Most recently, the organization has funded the purchase of electronic equipment including iPads, Chromebooks, cameras, and other items for students to borrow; the bestseller collection; and the creation of a new graphic novel collection.

While the Wine Tasting event has been the most successful fundraiser over the years, the board has hosted several other events. These included musical events and author lectures. The Friends also work with other local groups to support arts and humanities events tied to reading. The group sponsored a recent author talk at the

Hammond Regional Arts Center, a local non-profit organization that supports visual, performing, and literary arts in the parish.

### **From Humble Beginnings to Annual Success**

In its infancy, Wine with Friends was a truly homegrown event, with members of the board cooking dishes and serving guests while others poured wine. The event grew slowly over the years, with attendance stabilizing at between sixty and seventy-five. After several years of dedicated hands-on labor, the board began to utilize a local caterer to prepare the dinner. This made a big impact on the overall presentation of the food and wine, which helped the event grow and increase the amount of funds raised. It was only through trial and error that the current format of the event came into being.

The event now brings together wine, top-quality food, and a silent auction, all within the library building. For the past several years, the board has partnered with one of several fine-dining establishments in and around Hammond. The restaurant's chefs expertly curate a beautiful multi-course dinner. Once the menu is developed, the owner consults with a local wine store to carefully select wines to complement each dish. The event is led by an emcee who focuses on both wine and libraries, trying to tie the event attendees to the facility and promote the wines. An example of one of the tips shared at a recent event is that the best wine to drink with fried chicken is champagne.

The wine shop owner introduces the wines with each course, and the chef offers a commentary describing each dish. During breaks in the service, attendees may browse the silent auction area while student musicians play jazz music. Many members of the local community have attended the event for more than a decade, while each year it continues to entice first-time attendees.

The menu includes a wide range of dishes, including many related to the culture of south Louisiana. Previous dishes include Tomato Muffuletta Sausage Bisque, Smoked Pork Noodle Bowl, and Shrimp and Crab Gumbello, a surprising dish that saw traditional seafood gumbo transformed by using gelatin.

### **Lessons Learned/How to Improve**

Over the decades, the Sims Team and the Friends of Sims Library Board have tweaked the Wine Tasting. The largest change occurred in 2020 when the event could not be held in person due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than cancel the event, the board created a modified version. After purchasing a ticket, participants picked up a to-go plate of food, along with a selection of wines. The event turned out to be a success and was critical in ensuring that the unbroken streak of events continued. Continuity is important to the ongoing success of annual fundraising events. It gives donors something to look forward to at the same time each year. The continuity of an annual event is important as it can attract many of the same attendees each year while also serving as an important part of the social calendar and attracting new patrons.

The following year, the Board held the event off campus for the first time. As all previous events were held on the second floor of Sims Library, this was a major change. The Board partnered with a local country club to host the event, utilizing the food service portion of the club to provide the food. The event proved to be a success but raised less money than expected, leading to a return to the library in 2022.

Additional tweaks made over the past three years include an increase in ticket prices and the relocation of the event within the library. For more than the first decade, the library hosted the event on the second floor of the building. Located on a mezzanine near the Department of E-Resources and Serials, the location allowed the workers to utilize a small kitchen area in the Faculty/Staff Lounge. The use of the location led to several issues, including a lack of space to grow the event and the need to move numerous pieces of furniture before set-up for the event could begin, leading to disruptions for students using the space.

In 2024, the board moved the event to the first-floor lobby. Due to a lack of kitchen facilities on the first floor and a misunderstanding of the square footage of the space, the

board overlooked it for years. The board members realized that, as the event relied on food cooked at another location, the requirement for kitchen facilities no longer existed. The move also decreased the pieces of furniture that needed to be moved, allowing for an easier setup and a reduced impact on students.

Another major change made over the years includes multiple increases in ticket prices. A significant increase in the ticket price in 2025 led to an all-time high collected, while not having an overly detrimental impact on the number of attendees. An overall increase in food prices led the board to reduce the number of courses provided by the caterer from five to four. To replace this missing course, members of the board create and donate a charcuterie board that is available to attendees as they first arrive at the library. As the event each year always sees wine remaining following the conclusion of the evening, the charcuterie is paired with the wines from the previous year. This has proven to be a hit with attendees and saves the Friends a substantial amount on both food and wine.

Always held on a Friday night, the majority of the physical work to set up the event begins on Monday of that week. As the last reservations come in, members of the Friends board and employees of the library pull supplies from storage and wash hundreds of wine glasses. Tablecloths are steamed, and any missing items are purchased, such as tableware. SLU operates on a non-traditional schedule with extended hours Monday through Thursday and limited hours on Friday, with the entire campus closing at 12:30 pm. Few classes are offered on Friday, leading to a drop in overall library usage that day.

The University Moving Crew set up tables and chairs throughout the library lobby in the morning. The Friends purchased the tables over the years to support events in the library, and the chairs are owned by the library. With the event now located on the first floor, fewer pieces of furniture are required to be moved out of the way, making the process much quicker. As the tables are set, other work is completed to set up a sound system and prepare for the arrival of the caterers.

The silent auction items are placed on tables in a corner of the lobby shortly before the doors open at 6:30 pm, and the event is typically concluded by 8:30 pm. The library is

closed on Saturday, and much of the cleanup happens on that day, with only the bare minimum occurring on Friday after the event. The movers return on Monday to move the tables and chairs, and the board meets to discuss how to improve the next event.

### **Publicity and Promotion**

Advertising the Wine Tasting event proves to be an important part of the success of the fundraiser. The board relies on several outlets to reach the membership, including Facebook and emails. Postcards are mailed to each paid member, and the organization has placed posters across Hammond for several years. Ultimately, the board decided to discontinue the use of posters, as a few people anecdotally provided information that they saw them, and the printing cost was prohibitive.

The local newspaper includes the event announcement, but few residents continue to subscribe. The most successful advertising avenue has consistently been appearances on local radio stations to promote the event. Typically, two board members and the library director visit the local radio station studios and, in under an hour, appear on three different morning shows detailing the event. The coverage from the radio stations allows the Friends to reach a wide range of local members of the community, including many who are not associated with the university and are unfamiliar with the Friends group. The stations play a variety of music, allowing the Friends to reach a wider audience.

With many of the attendees associated with the university, internal communications and publications play an important role in publicizing the event. The event appears in university-wide emails and various social media outlets, reaching both current employees and alumni, as well as members of the greater Hammond community. The event does not target students as potential attendees because alcohol is served. While students of age would not be prevented from purchasing a ticket, they are not the preferred audience.

The members of the Friends board and staff members work together closely before, during, and after the event. The board completes the planning of the event and much of the

publicity, members of the library staff print and mail the postcards, and library staff share the information for the event with university outlets and library social media while members of the board reach out to off-campus outlets.

On the day of the event, board members join with library staff, student workers, and other university employees to set up and decorate. During the event, board members and library staff split duties. One board member oversees the plating of the food and opening of the bottles of wine, while others help serve drinks. Library staff oversee the silent auction, collecting the funds at the end of the evening. Everyone works together following the event to help clean. It is key to have a good working relationship between the board and the library staff, and Sims is lucky to have dedicated members of both groups to ensure the event runs smoothly.

### **Fundraising Impact**

Since the first event, the Friends of Sims Library have raised more than \$100,000 over the seventeen-year period. The vast majority of the funds raised come from the silent auction. All profits from the event are deposited with the SLU Foundation, and the board of the Friends group decides how best to support the library.

Generating a majority of the funds raised at the event, the silent auction is a key part of the wine tasting. The silent auction dates to the earliest event, and as every item is donated, the cost to the Friends of Sims is negligible. Board members reach out to local businesses and request donations of items either as standalone offerings or as part of a larger basket. The board president shares a letter to distribute to businesses detailing the event, along with contact information in case questions arise. A wide variety of items have been included in the auction over the years. Experiences, including tickets to theater performances and a shooting outing at a local hunting lodge, proved to be popular auction items in 2025. Services, including car detailing and a gift certificate to a hair salon, a basket including a bottle of each of the wines served at the event, and box tickets to an SLU football game, were also included in the most recent auction. The most unique item

proved to be a sculpture created and donated by a member of the Department of Visual Arts.

Members of the board collect each item for the auction and deliver them to the library in the weeks and days before the event. Members of the staff create bid sheets and store the items before the event. Following the wine tasting, each auction donor receives a gift-in-kind letter thanking them for their donation. Many of the businesses donate each year to the event, and by using connections on the board, the Friends of Sims are able to reach across the wider Hammond community to obtain items.

The number of items in the silent auction has varied over the years, but in 2025, the board agreed to limit the total to twenty. In previous years, some items did not sell, and the board decided that too many items were being collected. The change proved to be successful, and all the items were sold in 2025, bringing in the majority of the funds collected at the event.

### **Wine...in the Library?**

When discussing the event with other librarians across the country, many initially ask how the Friends of Sims can hold an event with alcohol in a university-owned building. Two major points come into play. First, the event is restricted to ticket holders, and only adults over the age of twenty-one are allowed to purchase tickets. Servers belonging to fraternities and sororities work at the event, as well as some library student assistants and graduate assistants, but only those at least of legal drinking age are allowed to serve wine, while those who are younger may only serve food. The library director and the library liaison to the Friends Board both sign off with the Office of the Dean of Students, and the campus police department also approves the event. The second reason that the Friends of Sims can hold this event is simply the culture of the area where SLU is located. Louisiana, especially the southeastern corner of the state, is known for parties and celebrations.

## **Conclusion**

The Wine with Friends event has proven to be an immense success. But it has only been through trial and error that the Friends of Sims Library made the event into the success it is today. The authors of this article highly encourage you to create a signature event for your library. Some important points to remember are:

- Always have the event in your facility. It is important that donors can see how the funds raised are spent.
- Be willing to make changes. Learn from mistakes.
- Be consistent and ensure that the event, if it is an annual one, happens every year to keep in touch with the attendees.
- Raise prices to accurately reflect both actual costs and the type of experience you are creating for attendees.
- The quality of the food and drink is paramount.

If you keep these points in mind, you can create an unforgettable experience at your library and raise some funds while having fun!