

From Programming to Impact: Using Arts-Based Initiatives to Advance Community Engagement and Institutional Development

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Abstract

Arts and cultural programming can provide academic libraries and higher education institutions with meaningful opportunities to strengthen community relationships, institutional visibility, and advancement efforts. This article examines how arts-based initiatives can move beyond individual events to become part of a broader engagement strategy. Drawing on scholarship related to academic library outreach and institutional effectiveness, it identifies four areas of practice: creating participatory experiences, using culture to strengthen community relationships, connecting programming to institutional identity, and documenting impact. The Jazz Art Writers South Festival (JAWSFest) at the University of South Alabama Libraries serves as a practical example of how these approaches can work together through partnerships among libraries, artists, musicians, schools, nonprofit organizations, educators, and community groups. The article argues that the value of arts-based engagement should be measured not only through attendance but also through relationship development, repeat engagement, community partnerships, institutional storytelling, and other qualitative and quantitative outcomes. By shifting attention from producing events to creating lasting connections, arts-based initiatives can support advancement, communication, fundraising, alumni relations, and community engagement while demonstrating an institution's commitment to the community it serves.

Higher education institutions are looking for meaningful ways to connect with students, alumni, donors, and the communities they serve. Arts and cultural programming can provide this opportunity. An exhibition, literary event, or community arts initiative may begin as a program, but when connected to institutional goals, it becomes something larger: a vehicle for relationship building, visibility, engagement, and advancement.

Academic libraries offer a useful setting for this kind of work. Libraries occupy a distinctive position on college campuses. They serve students and faculty but can also provide an accessible point of entry for people who may have few other reasons to visit a university. Increasingly, academic libraries are using creative activities and other public programs to expand that role.

Research on academic library engagement reflects this shift. Outreach has traditionally included marketing and promotion of library services, but campus events, partnerships, and other forms of programming have also become important ways for libraries to connect with their communities. Carter and Seaman (2011) found events and exhibits were among the forms of outreach used by academic libraries. More recently, Dudash and Hill (2025) demonstrated how a music-centered initiative at Penn State University Libraries created opportunities for interdisciplinary partnerships and community participation.

For advancement and engagement professionals, the important question is not simply whether an institution can offer arts programming. It is what happens because of it.

A review of the literature on library outreach, experiential learning, cultural programming, and institutional effectiveness identified four recurring patterns that can help answer that question: creating participatory experiences, using culture to strengthen community relationships, connecting programming to institutional identity, and documenting impact. These patterns can be seen in practice through the development of the Jazz Art Writers South Festival (JAWSFest) at the University of South Alabama Libraries.

Creating Experiences Rather than Events

One of the strongest opportunities provided by arts-based programming is participation. People can do more than attend an institutional event; they can become part of it.

JAWSFest illustrates this principle. Founded in 2022 through a partnership between the University of South Alabama Libraries, Art Galleries, and the Black Ink Coalition, the festival was created around jazz, art, writing, regional culture, and community storytelling. Over time, it expanded to include concerts, visual art, creative writing, exhibitions, youth activities, public programming, and partnerships with community organizations. The goal is not only to bring an audience into a room for a performance. Participants encounter the university through something they can experience, such as music, visual art, history, storytelling, or creative activity.

This distinction can be valuable for advancement work. A participant may not remember an institutional message delivered during a traditional presentation, but they may remember performing in a university space, seeing their artwork exhibited there, hearing music connected to their community's history, or watching their child participate in a university-sponsored program. The result is an experience that becomes an institutional connection.

Using Culture to Build Relationships

Arts programming also provides institutions with opportunities to develop partnerships that might not emerge through conventional advancement activities.

JAWSFest depends upon collaboration among the library, artists, musicians, schools, nonprofit organizations, educators, university departments, and community partners. Rather than asking every organization to support an existing university initiative, the festival provides a framework in which different partners can contribute expertise, audiences, resources, and ideas.

This reflects a broader change in academic libraries. Dempsey (2017) describes the movement from thinking about the "user in the life of the library" toward considering the "library in the life of the user." This approach encourages libraries to think about how they fit within the research, learning, and creative lives of their users rather than expecting users to enter established library structures. The same idea can apply to institutional engagement. Instead of beginning with the question, *How can we bring the community to us?* Institutions can ask, *Where is our institution already part of the community's cultural life, and where could those relationships grow?*

One example is JAWSYouth, a youth-centered component of JAWSFest. In 2025, the *Ladies of Jazz* program provided more than 350 participating students with educational kits containing canvases, paints, brushes, and lesson plans developed through collaboration among library staff, public and private school educators, and community arts partners. Students created original works inspired by women in jazz, and their artwork was subsequently displayed at the Mary Elizabeth & Charles Bernard Rodning Gallery of Art, located at the University of South Alabama Marx Library.

The value of an initiative like this extends beyond the number of participants. It creates multiple points of connection: students encounter the university through an educational activity; teachers and schools become institutional partners; families have a reason to visit campus; and the institution gains an opportunity to demonstrate its investment in regional culture and education. These relationships are precisely the kind upon which long-term engagement is built.

Connecting Programming to Institutional Identity

Arts programming becomes valuable when it reflects the identity of both the institution and the community it serves.

JAWSFest exemplifies regional heritage activation by centering on Mobile's jazz traditions, including performances by the Excelsior Band, one of the nation's oldest continuously performing brass bands and a cultural touchstone in Mobile, along with jazz-themed exhibitions and community partnerships with local organizations such as the Black Ink Coalition. This local connection, important for institutional communication, gives the program an identity and provides opportunities for storytelling across concerts, exhibitions, social media, educational activities, and community partnerships.

Advancement storytelling is strongest when an institution can demonstrate its values rather than stating them. A university can say it values community engagement, cultural preservation, education, creativity, and partnership. Programs provide visible evidence of those commitments.

The library can be effective in facilitating those connections because its institutional role is already changing. Dempsey's (2017) concept of the "inside-out library" emphasizes the library's growing role in supporting the creation, curation, discoverability, and dissemination of institutional intellectual output. Rather than thinking only about bringing outside resources into the institution, the inside-out model also considers how an institution's locally created resources can be shared outward.

Arts initiatives can extend that concept into public engagement by allowing institutions to create cultural resources with their communities rather than delivering resources to them. The result is programming that simultaneously supports education, engagement, communication, and institutional visibility.

Measuring What the Program Makes Possible

Perhaps the most important shift for advancement professionals is moving from measuring activity to demonstrating impact. Attendance numbers remain useful. They demonstrate reach and can help track growth. But attendance alone cannot tell the entire story of an engagement initiative.

This challenge is well established in academic library research. Santiago et al. (2019) found that attendance counts and informal observations are among the most commonly used approaches to assessing academic library outreach. Their work also demonstrates the need to examine outreach more broadly in relation to institutional priorities and student success.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (2018) makes a similar distinction in the *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*. The standards emphasize an outcomes-based approach in which libraries identify measurable outcomes, gather evidence, assess their success, and use those findings for continuous improvement. The standards define outcomes in terms of how users are changed through their interactions with library resources and programs (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018). For advancement and engagement professionals, this suggests looking beyond the question *How many people came?*

Other questions may tell a more meaningful story: Did the program create a new community partnership? Did the participants return for another university activity? Were new audiences introduced to the institution? Did students gain opportunities to exhibit or perform their work? Did the program create stories that could be shared through institutional communications? Did an initial partnership develop into a longer relationship? Did donors or prospective supporters see tangible evidence of institutional impact?

These outcomes can also make cultural programming more useful to fundraising. Rather than presenting an arts initiative as an expense requiring annual support, advancement professionals can demonstrate the network of relationships and institutional outcomes the investment makes possible.

This approach does not mean abandoning quantitative measures. Attendance, participation, social media engagement, and the number of partnerships remain useful indicators. Instead, quantitative measures can be combined with qualitative evidence such as participant responses, partnership development, repeat engagement, and stories demonstrating how people interacted with the institution. Santiago et al. (2019) emphasizes the importance of assessing outreach at the broader programmatic level rather than viewing individual events in isolation.

From Program to Institutional Strategy

The experience of JAWSFest suggests that successful arts-based engagement does not begin with a large budget or a comprehensive advancement strategy. It can begin with a strong idea, an institutional space, and partners willing to participate. This strategic component develops by asking what the program makes possible.

For professionals working in advancement, communications, fundraising, alumni relations, libraries, or community engagement, four questions can provide a starting point. The questions to ask are straightforward: What experience are we creating? Who can help us create it? What does this experience communicate about our institution? How will we know whether it strengthens a relationship? Those questions shift the emphasis from producing events to creating connections.

Arts-based initiatives will not replace traditional advancement or fundraising strategies, nor should every cultural program be expected to generate financial support. Their value lies in their ability to create environments in which relationships can begin and grow.

A student exhibiting a painting, a family entering a university library for the first time, a musician sharing regional history, or a community organization becoming an institutional partner may seem far removed from traditional advancement work. Yet each represents a point of connection between an institution and the people it serves. Advancement begins with those connections.

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