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Party with a purpose

The library open house

At the beginning of fall semester, many libraries host open houses in an effort to showcase library resources and services, particularly to incoming students and new faculty.¹ The Auburn University library routinely hosted a fall open house, but while well-intentioned, it tended toward rather static displays placed throughout the library. Librarians and staff also were on hand to talk about library services, such as interlibrary loan and subject specialist research assistance, with any faculty and students who might happen by.

Such was the library's fall open house in 2005, which also coincided with the first day on the job of a new dean. While she appreciated the effort, she suggested that the libraries consider different ways to invite and engage users. The dean still wanted to highlight services, but she also wanted a more welcoming atmosphere, one that would allow users to explore the library in a fun and more relaxed way in order to combat library anxiety.

As the dean rather succinctly and infamously phrased the charge, "Students meet librarians, librarians meet students, and nobody gets hurt." How could the library, then, turn the open house into an event that students and faculty would actually want to attend?

There is no denying that in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), football is an integral part of university culture. At Auburn, Jordan-Hare Stadium sits in the heart of the physical campus. Fall is a time when many eyes

turn to a new season, with hopes of wins and championships. Alums descend onto campus game weekends to set up tents, grill food, and socialize before and after games. In addition to the more than 84,000 who will actually attend the football game, it's estimated that an additional 20,000 come to campus simply to join in the fun.² In building upon this boundless interest and tradition, the organizers decided that the open house should evolve around a tailgate theme, and thus Tailgate @ the Library³ was created. Even the timing of the event reflected the theme, as we decided that the open house would be held on the Friday before the first home opening game. This past fall our open house celebrated its ten-year anniversary.

Tailgate @ the Library is an actual tailgate event *inside* the library. For three hours (10 a.m. to 1 p.m.), we place tailgate tents at crucial library service points, such as reference and circulation. Tents are also placed in library partner areas, such as the writing and tutoring centers, which are also housed in the main library. As students enter the doors, they receive a "ticket" and are invited to visit each tent in order to learn about the station and have their ticket punched. Students turn in their completed tickets in order to be eligible for door prize drawings. Reaction has been very positive and the event averages

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more than 3,000 guests each year.

Planning an open house of your own? Here are some points to consider, along with more details on our event.

- **Build on a local theme.** Not everyone embraces football like the SEC, but consider local traditions, events or cultures and how the library might situate itself into that context. What is unique and special about your campus or library?

- **Be creative.** “We’re going to do what in our library?” Be bold in thinking outside of the box, and turn the stereotypical image of the library on its head. Doing something out of the norm will certainly garner greater

and what do you want them to know? Our emphasis is on incoming freshmen, new transfer students, and new faculty—those who are most unaware of our resources and services. No one is turned away, however.

- **Send invitations.** Students won’t just show up for a library event. We promote Tailgate @ the Library in a number of different ways right up to the event, as research tends to suggest that students do not plan ahead much in advance. Students at summer orientation camps and summer bridge classes receive bookmarks with the event time and place indicated. We also pass them out at the Libraries Information Oasis



Users visit the Tailgate Tent at the reference desk.

interest and participation.⁴ Tailgate @ the Library is now firmly ingrained in campus culture, and returning students make a point to attend the event each year.

- **Know that this is *not* an impromptu event.** As with any big party, planning is key. A Tailgate committee begins planning the open house five months in advance. In addition to representative department members, other key personnel—the building manager, purchasing agent, development office, and communications director—also take part. A crucial part of the planning is the development and approval of the event budget.

- **Create a guest list.** While everyone is welcome to the open house, there is a targeted guest list. Who do you want to come

on the main student concourse the first two days of classes. Special invitations go to students who have registered for Freshmen Year Experience classes. In addition, the Office on Transfer Students, Office of International Students, and International Student English Center promote the event to their constituents.

Ads appear in the student newspaper’s welcome week edition and in the two weekly editions just prior to the event. Social media is an important component, and there is a dedicated Tailgate Facebook page⁵ and Twitter tag.⁶ The university’s Office of Information Technology adds a screenshot to screen savers for all of the computers in the library. Posters and banners go in the library two weeks before the event and fly-

ers are distributed to residence halls. Student workers decorate the front windows of the library with wash-off paint.

The most successful promotion efforts occur the day of the event. Library student workers set up a tailgate tent on the main student concourse and pass out candy and invitations to their fellow students. Also on hand are props for Instagram photos, and students are encouraged to share their Tailgate photos on social media. Sidewalk

also perform. The more special guests, the more students are likely to attend.

- **Serve refreshments.** No real tailgate is complete without food and drink. In an effort to reflect the theme, as well as the fact that the event occurs during the lunch hours, the libraries serve hotdogs and bottled water to our guests. Candy or small bags of chips also are available at the main tailgate stations. A popcorn machine is rented, and library staff pass out bags of popcorn just



One of the Tailgate's special guests, Aubie the Tiger.

signs are placed throughout the campus core. Large blow-up air dancers are placed at the front of the library. This past year, we made use of Periscope, and broadcasted live several times throughout the day.

- **Invite special guests.** Aubie the Tiger is the university's much beloved mascot, and a Tailgate just would not be complete without a visit. The Southeastern Raptor Center, which houses and cares for the eagles that fly into the stadium before each home game, usually attend. In addition to an eagle, they have also brought other birds of prey. Students had their pictures taken with the birds and learned about the conservation and preservation efforts of the center. Staff from the university's Louise Kreher Forest Ecology Preserve and Nature Center brought snakes, frogs, and turtles. The Auburn University Cheerleaders and TigerPaws Dance Team

outside of the front doors, while inviting students into the building.

- **Don't forget the music.** Music is an essential component to any event, and Tailgate @ the Library is no exception. The Auburn University Marching Band attends and plays inside the building, which is an attention-getter to say the least. It is not often that one hears or sees a live performance of the fight song adjacent to the reference desk. From time to time, music is played over the speaker system, as well, and the campus radio station has conducted live remotes for the event. Music in the library is another way to indicate that the event is special, and like the other activities, breaks down notions of libraries as staid and silent.

- **Share the fun (and the work).** The dean hosts an ice cream social and volunteer sign up a month before the event, which

signals administrative support for the open house, as well as an appreciate for those who work to make it happen. Most everyone in the library volunteers to help. Participants now receive a t-shirt. Some serve as greeters and guides, while others help with set-up and clean-up. The open house is an “all in” libraries-wide event, and everyone has an important role.

• **Other things to consider.** There are no RSVPs, so it may be difficult to determine or

With creative thought and careful planning, your fall open house can also be a successful event, and new users will become aware of what a welcoming, helpful, and useful place the library is. Build upon success, and make your library’s fall open house its own campus tradition.

Notes

1. Dennis G. Odom and Alexia C. Strout-Dapaz, “The “Open House: An Effective



Auburn University Marching Band playing inside the library.

estimate the number who might attend. Better to err on the side of extra food and drink. Do not forget the decorations. The building and tailgate stations are decked out in balloons and streamers in school colors. Even simple decorations signify that something special is taking place.

Mind the neighbors—signs are placed on every entry or exit door the week before the event informing users that it will not be business as usual during the event, and the library will be noisy. After the event, conduct a debriefing and thorough assessment of what worked well and what did not. Keep in mind that everything is scalable. While the Auburn Libraries event is rather large scale, smaller open houses with a more select guest list may be more manageable and appropriate.

Library Public relations and Instruction Tool,” *Reference Librarian* 32, no. 67/68 (2000): 175–86.

2. Natalie Avon, “Five Fan Favorite Tailgating Towns,” www.cnn.com/2010/TRAVEL/11/12/top.tailgating.towns/.

3. Nancy Noe, “Tailgate @ the Library” in *The Library Instruction Cookbook*, edited by Ryan L. Sittler and Douglas Cook (Chicago: ACRL, 2009).

4. Ellysa Stern and Rebecca Merritt Bichel, “A Luau in the Library? A New Model of Library Orientation,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 11, no. 1 (2004): 49–60.

5. The Tailgate Facebook page can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/tailgate.library>.

6. View tweets about the event at the hashtag #AULTailgate15. *zz*