Growing OkraOut: A Case Study

Lessons from 5 Years of Collaborative Design, Development, and Implementation While Building an LGBTQ+ Library Outreach Program

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In the past five years, Delta State University's academic library has made significant efforts to develop sustainable outreach programs that support the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+) community. This program has increased the library's visibility and enhanced its image among its students, faculty, and staff. The article describes the outreach program's effort, and the collected data will provide a framework for others interested in designing and hosting such programs, including adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background Information

Members of the Roberts-LaForge Library at Delta State University have hosted an LGBTQ+ Pride event for the past five years. The event and committee are known as OkraOut, which refers to the university's student mascot of the Fighting Okra. The student body voted on the mascot in the late 1980s/early 1990s as the school's unofficial mascot. Inspired by Boyer's (1996, p. 18) definition of scholarship of engagement, this committee held diverse events to promote library services, while also increasing the quality of engagement activities for the local community and the university population at a small college campus.

Problem Statement

The LIS literature on the information needs of, and specific outreach to, LGBTQ+ students is an emerging focus of Academic Libraries, yet there are still few examples in the scholarly literature of programs like OkraOut. This case study aims to detail the process of developing such outreach to help address that gap. This study also adds to the current body of research, examples, and knowledge concerning collaborations between universities, across campus, and the community in outreach programs.

Introduction

Many libraries provide inclusive acknowledgments in their mission or vision statements. However, equally important is how libraries can do more to celebrate and proudly serve all users. We, as librarians, must go the extra step to celebrate and give visibility to our most "invisible

regulars" (Naidoo, 2013, p. 40). This article suggests ways for academic libraries, specifically, to be more proactive and to move beyond simple steps such as mission statement language, or buying more LGBTQ+ books for June Pride displays.

The Seeding Stage

The authors met and began working together at Delta State University in 2016. They witnessed a need in their community and were motivated to create an event celebrating a specific population of patrons. ALA's (American Library Association) Gay, Lesbian, Bi, and Transgender (GLBT) Round Table Toolkit states that:

> It is vital to create a welcoming environment for GLBT library users in their communities, campuses, and schools. Library users of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, nationalities, socio-economic classes, and abilities look for materials that include and celebrate diverse experiences within GLBT communities and promote accessible and inclusive programming. With this statement in mind, the authors recognized that their academic library was not fulfilling the needed accessible and inclusive programming.

This need was even more crucial as the authors' library is located in the middle of the Mississippi Delta. Delta State University is a small four-year public university with library services that serves around 5,000 students, faculty, staff, and community members. According to the University's mini factbook of 2020–2021 (Delta State University, 2021), Mississippi and Tennessee are the top two states represented among the students. Two thousand four hundred forty-one students were from Mississippi, and sixty-two were from Tennessee, two hours north of Cleveland, Mississippi.

Currently, there are no explicit, comprehensive statewide non-discrimination protections for gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people in Mississippi. Instead, there are discriminatory anti-LGBTQ+ laws, including the MS HB 1523 and the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act. The legislature allows people and organizations to decline services to queer people based on religious beliefs. In 2021, Mississippi's governor signed SB 2536, an anti-transgender sports bill, marking the first piece of specifically anti-transgender legislation to become law. These laws restrict and negatively affect the LGBTQ+ community. Unfortunately, the number of harmful laws against the LGBTQ+ communities is rising nationwide; the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) declared 2021 the "worst year for LGBTQ+ state legislative attacks" (Ronan, 2021).

Tennessee is also home to sweeping anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. Such bills include anti-transgender legislation SB126, which restricts access to gender-affirming care by limiting health providers' ability to prescribe Hormone Replacement Therapy to prepubertal minors. Violations of this bill result in a misdemeanor. Along with the anti-transgender sports bill that the Tennessee Governor signed into law, the HB3 and SB228 bills prohibit transgender students from participating in school sports and require student-athletes to be gendered as assigned at birth, demonstrated by their original birth certificate. Outside the school buildings and inside the state's communities, there are the HB1182 and SB1224 bills, which require businesses that allow people to use restrooms according to their gender identity to post a warning at the entrance of the building and bathrooms.

The authors were aware of the political atmosphere in their region; in addition, they witnessed an interest on campus for LGBTQ+ displays within the library, so they sought to create an event or outreach opportunity for inclusion. Previously, there was a Gay and Lesbian Alliance Student Organization, but it had declined in interaction over the years. At the inception of OkraOut, there were no current on-campus, or even in-community, support groups or events for LGBTQ+ individuals. Outreach activities allow libraries to serve users by being more visible, and developing more substantial campus and community relationships, and so the authors started planning what would become OkraOut.

Keeran and Forbes (2018, p. 250) note that the four critical elements of a successful outreach program are: 1. strategic vision and planning; 2. program development and implementation; 3. community outreach; and 4. expanding outreach audiences. This article's authors relied on these elements and worked specifically to expand outreach to include all patrons. Librarians and staff have an ethical and professional duty to provide information to all they serve. For example, the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights and Codes of Ethics* urges librarians and libraries to offer resources and services to all persons, regardless of their backgrounds or views. The authors assembled a committee to contribute ideas, planning, and developing and implementing action. The duties of the event planning committee also included providing information on sexuality, gender identity, and coming out for library patrons. This outreach was to position the library as a key information source for the queer community.

Literature Review

As mentioned, the information needs of LGBTQ+ students in academic libraries is an emerging focus of LIS literature. Strategies, case studies, and best practices for providing library support and services to specialized student populations are responses to this need. The authors have included similar studies within this literature review for further interest.

Research suggests that LGBTQ+ students may experience higher than-usual stresses and difficulties when transitioning from high school. According to Dentato et al. (2013), identity formation often occurs during high school and further on through the colligate experience. There is a growing understanding that libraries must also be active in supporting that development (Dentato, et. al, 2013, p. 10). Renn and Bilodeau (2005, p. 42) add that the post-secondary curriculum—including the library—is vital in facilitating LGBTQ identity development. They viewed models of identity development through the perspectives of student affairs professionals. Doing so developed helpful literature concerning LGBTQ+ people of color, life span approach to LGBTQ+ identity development, and approaches to transgender identity development.

Mehra and Braquet (2011, pp. 401–422) examined the reference department and how they assisted LGBTQ+ patrons. They created an exploratory practice-based framework that identified strategic goals, objectives, and activities for each of the five areas of modern-day references, such as access to electronic resources, user instruction, library commons, outreach liaison, and virtual reference, with a focus on meeting the needs of LGBTQ individuals during the coming out process. They utilized qualitative studies and action research conducted by two library and information science professionals in an academic library. They sought to extend the idea of a traditional reference interaction—one focused solely on information provision—to a more encompassing conceptualization and implementation that designs, delivers, and accesses

reference services in a community engagement context to develop fair and equitable services for LGBTQ patrons. Todorinova and Ortiz-Myers (2019, pp. 66–87) engaged public services librarians working in administrative or managerial positions in a conversation about LGBTQ+ needs. There was uncertainty between the library's role in promoting LGBTQ+ friendliness and the role of the larger university, which may be related to the uncertain position of the library in the campus environment. However, the empathy that librarians, in both decision and non-decision-making roles, have towards LGBTQ students opens up the possibility of deeper conversations and proactive, innovative support services in the future.

Hawkins et al. (2017, p. 316–327) detail conversations among professionals in health sciences librarianship about the needs of LGBTQ patrons. The authors echo the importance of understanding the terminology, and of developing standard cultural competencies in serving LGBTQ users. An example of this in action is hosting safe space training. Safe space training workshops provide information on LGBTQ+ culture and engage in identifying and avoiding microaggressions in speech or actions.

Another example of the importance of providing resources that support and celebrate underrepresented communities is creating helpful library guides. Kohout-Tailor and Klar (2021, p. 173) recommend creating multiple guides and working with various partners on campus. They wrote, "once you identified areas that may need support, creating or growing a partnership to make sure the resources truly meet a need is next. Communicate with colleagues both within and outside of your library or institution to make connections and start the conversation of how best the library can provide resources that support EDI programs or initiatives." They offer a starting point on how to begin a form of outreach.

Editor and Student Engagement Librarian at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Zoe Bastone (2020, p. 24) explains, "that while there is a wide agreement that outreach is a necessary component in an academic library's operations, there is a gap in the literature regarding how to create outreach programs that are efficient and effective and can account for unexpected additions to the outreach program." This article helps fill that gap by discussing the programming of a small academic library. The outreach examined in this article developed through collaborations between universities, across campus, and within the community. However, as mentioned, there is a lack of previous research in academic libraries on building LGBTQ+ outreach events within a case study format. For example, while the authors searched in the database LISTA, "case study" and "outreach programs or outreach services" brought up only 90 hits between 1978 and 2022; 42 included academic libraries, and none included the words "queer or LGBTQ or gay or LGBT or lesbian or homosexual or transgender." The authors will focus intensely on outreach to develop strong outreach campaigns for underserved groups. This is especially important given the continued growth of minority enrollment in higher education (Puente et. al, 2009, p. 30). The article will reveal the methods of adaptability that the committee used to meet the changing needs of their outreach program over five years and during a world pandemic.

Research Questions
The research questions for this study were as follows:

    RQ1. How to start an outreach initiative?

    RQ2. How to continue to grow an annual program?

    RQ3. How to react during a period of dramatic upheaval and change?

Data Collection
Methodology
There is published research that quantifies the development, and even influence, of library outreach on student and community involvement with their academic library, as academic libraries commonly host events to attract students and the surrounding community. These events can provide opportunities for interaction, generate informative discussion, and familiarize students with the library's services. Yin (2017, p. 5) describes qualitative case study methodology as: "Whatever the field of interest, the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. Case studies allow you to focus in-depth on a case and to retain a holistic and real-world perspective." This article presents a checklist of the four critical elements of a successful outreach program. The checklist includes strategic vision and planning, program development and implementation, community outreach, and expanding outreach audiences. The objective of this article is to provide academic libraries and their staff with practical application of this checklist by linking all its four elements with the authors' experiences.

The definition of the case study evolved through the work of the library committee, which works tirelessly to conduct an event each year. Collaboration between the authors began during the Summer of 2017. Shortly after, the authors met to work together and—over an extended period—shared similar thoughts and feelings in order to understand and analyze the university's overall climate, where LGBTQ+ issues remained largely unaddressed. This unified desire for outreach grew into a huge show of celebration of LGBTQ+ people that also provided exploratory data-collecting possibilities. The resulting committee included university staff, faculty, and students. The committee later incorporated more help from community volunteers as well. Officially, the committee was first called to order by two library staff members and three university faculty members. The group's strategic vision was to grow campus LGBTQ+ support and engagement and then have the student organizations take the eventual reigns. This committee never saw themselves as the sole owners of OkraOut, but as developers and supporters of the campus need. They built the programs and structure. The committee began meeting at the beginning of each Fall semester. For the first couple of years, weekly meetings were held in the library up until the event occurred in October. After the event, a meeting would be held to review and start plans for next year. As the COVID-19 pandemic began, the resulting committee meetings were held through email and occasional Zoom meetings.

Delta State University's campus is a small area with close collaborations. Because of that, library administration, as well as other departmental administrations, were updated frequently on the developments; this event planning committee would not have been able to accomplish its visions without their support. Committee members were also provided time for the meetings and events. The committee itself had to be built up before building OkraOut. At first, the committee members were similar-minded individuals that were supportive of each other and known to each other through different outreach programs. Then, after the event began to be known throughout campus as an annual event, more volunteers and students reached out. The effort led to the development of a significant LGBTQ and ally network that facilitate future programming and support. This article represents the actualized and envisioned library services for the progressive support of LGBTQ individuals, as described in the following section.

Findings
RQ1. How to Start an Outreach Initiative?
Germination Stage

Strategic vision and planning are the first critical elements of a successful outreach program. The beginning of the growing stage of okra is called the germination stage, in which the seeds will produce some roots and leaves. Following this metaphor, the OkraOut program first sprouted in October 2017. That year, Chase Ollis published an article through the Association of College and Research Libraries (2017) calling for libraries to "Standing Up for Our Communities." He wrote:

> Faced with a dramatic policy shift that contradicts the core values of libraries, an awakening of hate groups empowered by the shift, and the perpetual suspense that accompanies uncertain times, librarians are rising to the challenge of maintaining safe spaces in America's libraries by advocating for intellectual freedom and declaring that libraries are for everyone.

Ollis illustrated the charge for engagement in communities. While providing access to LGBTQ+ resources is essential, providing a diverse, inclusive space and educational opportunities is crucial.

In October 2017, the university held the first LGBTQ+ History Month Celebration with an inaugural event called initially OkraOut Front. The event's purpose was to bring together the university students, faculty, staff, and local community members who support and advocate for an inclusive and diverse society. More importantly, the event ensured that queer people on campus and in the local community were being represented and recognized with access to diverse collections and services—a priority for the library. The idea for the OkraOut Front library outreach event first appeared in June 2017 after one of the authors posted a picture promoting the academic library's pride book display. The image received a lot of interest on social media, and the authors began further engaging with students who had revealed that they were queer. The positive engagement revealed a need as little was held to support queer people on campus and locally.

The first step in growing OkraOut was to find collaborators. Both authors held staff positions at the library at the time but were supported by the library's administration to pursue various campus and community engagements. Identifying nonprofit organizations and LGBTQ+ allies was time-consuming, but not impossible. A partnership with the academic library on the university's campus and statewide organizations was essential to the development of the event. Locally, there were a few campus and community organizations, including the University's Quality Enhancement Plan, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee, the Gender and Sexuality Alliance student organization, and the Mississippi Department of Health with its HIV/AIDS chapter. Most organizations supporting diversity were based in Jackson, a two-hour drive from campus. These groups included the Human Rights Campaign of Mississippi and Free Mom Hugs of Mississippi. The authors also sought assistance from other university organizations. For example, in the program's first two years, the committee collaborated with the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies, as well as the Center for Inclusion and Cross-Cultural Engagement at the University of Mississippi. This partnership helped extend awareness and provided additional educational and planning tips for the OkraOut committee.

The University of Mississippi's organizations had more funding and experience in offering diverse programs. Such support watered OkraOut's roots. The authors conducted research and held conversations. A small committee began to grow, and their first act was to plan the first pride event for the university.

On October fifth, 2017, the OkraOut outreach celebration was held a week before National Coming Out Day. National Coming Out Day is an annual LGBT+ awareness day observed on October eleventh to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in "coming out of the closet." The event was advertised in the first-year seminar courses, campus publicity, via social media platforms (Facebook), among staff and faculty members, and printed materials were distributed around campus and placed on community boards. The side of the library's lawn stood as a stage where student bands, poets, and ensembles performed music written or composed by queer individuals throughout history. The Delta State University's marching band opened the event by playing "Over the Rainbow." The authors prepared an LGBTQ+ movement history timeline to provide more information, resources, and facts.

The program included 114 RSVPs and was free, open to the public, and family-friendly. The event educated the audience about the use of pronouns, acknowledged Mississippi organizations that support LGBTQ+ people, illustrated how to find help or answers, and identified persons that would provide support and assistance on campus and in the state. This first event was seen as a success. With that in mind, the committee and the library administration decided that the program should continue to grow and become an annual library outreach event. The first crucial step of starting an outreach initiative was deemed a success by the feedback from participants. For example, a community member wrote on Facebook:

> God sent you here for a reason, and keep doing great things so that all people can feel love and acceptance!!! You are amazing and I can say that even though we have never met!!! I feel compelled to share my story of my family and the struggles we have faced Much Love to you and yours (Anonymous, community user, 2017).

Further, a student commented, "Thank you so much for sharing! This is amazing" (Anonymous, DSU student, 2017), and a faculty member added, "Great job tonight! Thank you for your efforts! My class enjoyed!" (Anonymous, DSU Faculty, 2017).

The second step of a successful outreach program is the development and implementation stage. Once ideas are promising, it is important to continue to repeat and build upon them. In 2018 sprouting occurred again, and the OkraOut committee met to repeat the successful library outreach event. Many of the setup props as the previous year were used again. To continue the music essence, "Vogue" was settled as the theme of the 2018 LGBTQ+ History celebration.

The guest speaker in 2018 was someone whom one of the authors befriended the previous year when researching OkraOut, Dr. Jaime Harker. She spoke at the event and again the next day at Delta State University's art gallery about her book, *The Lesbian South*. Before the event, the committee advertised a Google form that allowed patrons to share their personal coming out stories, including the option of remaining anonymous or releasing their name. The stories were then printed out and shared at the outreach event. Later, the university's archives and museum archived the responses with permission.

At the end of the 2018 event, a local dance teacher was invited to teach classic vogue dance moves, and then the crowd could take part in voguing down the stage. The university's then

president and vice president of student affairs led the voguing. Students, faculty, and families took part in the large dance party. The dancing crowd was large, growing from around 100 to 200 participants from the previous year. Officially on the OkraOut Facebook website, 129 people RSVPed. A student later commented on the site, "love that they included an ally flag" (Anonymous, DSU student, 2018). A faculty member wrote, "Love this!" (Anonymous, DSU faculty, 2018). After the event was officially over, an open mic night for poetry was held down the street at a local coffee shop.

RQ2. How to Continue to Grow an Annual Program?
Young Seedling Stage

OkraOut saw a change in its direction and size as it further bloomed in 2019. The third step of a successful outreach program is the inclusion of community outreach; thus, in 2019 the OkraOut committee sought entertainers from outside the university. In a bit of foreshadowing, Liam Stack had written, earlier that year, a piece in the *New York Times* titled, "Drag Queen Story Hour Continues Its Reign at Libraries, Despite Backlash" (2019). He wrote on the rise of Drag Queen Story hours throughout the country, even in areas with discriminatory laws. Stack (2019) noted that:

> Drag performers regularly entertain children at libraries and community centers in progressive enclaves like New York and Los Angeles as well as red-state towns like Juneau, Alaska, and Lincoln, Neb….Melissa Bean, who started the Middle Tennessee chapter of Drag Queen Story Hour, agreed. Unfortunately, backlash often takes place as well. For example, two libraries in central Ohio canceled drag events after receiving what the library council said were "hostile threats." Stack poignantly added in the interview a quote from Ms. Bean, the statistics of the L.G.B.T. community and how many people might be in it don't change because of your ZIP code and your population density, said Ms. Bean, who lives near Sparta, population 5,029, There are L.G.B.T. people here who need us.

At OkraOut's first committee meeting of the year, members agreed that 2019's outreach event should be more extensive, including multiple activities and outreach formats, as the previous two years had been so successful. Inspiration for a theme came from the New York Public Library, which held a program called Love & Resistance: Stonewall 50, referring to the Stonewall Uprising—a series of protests by members of the gay community in response to a police raid at the Stonewall Inn in New York City—in 1969. Those protests have become a symbol of resistance to social and political discrimination.

With that in mind, the theme emerged as OkraOut Resistance and History: An event to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, a milestone in the LGBTQ+ History movement. To celebrate in a larger fashion, the committee enthusiastically chose to host the first-ever drag show on campus. The committee utilized social media, including dressing up in unicorn costumes, printing flyers, creating videos, and advertising on the university's marquee. This event was free and family-friendly. The music, costumes, and performances fit a family-friendly event. A rainbow cake and cupcakes were shared, and various campus and equality organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign, MomHugs.org, and My Brother's Keeper, hosted tables with provided information on resources.

Because of backlash to the wording of being family-friendly and some negative messages on social media in response to a drag show, the location was moved from the library's lawn to a theater on campus for easier security. Those security concerns were brought to the attention of the campus police. Although they were found unwarranted, the event has moved indoors to monitor entrances better. This proved helpful as, according to the RSVPs on the group's webpage, the committee was expecting at least 133 people. However, the event had its largest turnout, and the performance theater—which has 350 seats—was standing room only.

The OkraOut committee experienced support from faculty, staff, students, and community members. Before the event, community members posted support on social media by writing, "Y'all come out and support Okra Out! this Thursday. Bring your kids. Show them that the diversity of humans is beautiful. And if you disagree with that, keep your hatefulness to yourself" (Anonymous, Community member A, 2019). After the show, many community members reached out with stories such as the following:

> I couldn't believe people I know and thought I liked were saying horrible things. I lost so much respect for many people bc of all of that I'm proud dsu is doing this and proud people like you guys are here to help They talk about bullies in schools where they are the bullies of this town in my opinion. It's so sad If there is ever a time for others to learn I'll be happy to share how my own family learned to accept my trans brother And there is way way more to the story (Anonymous, Community member B, 2019).In response to the first drag show on campus, attendees posted, "This was our 3rd year to go to Okra Out as a family. It was such an amazing event, as usual, and our family and friends had a ball!" (Anonymous, drag show attendee A, 2019) and, "We had so much fun at the 3rd Okra Out! The kids absolutely loved the first-ever drag show at DSU" (Anonymous, drag show attendee B, 2019).

Before the drag show, a faculty member held an OkraOut Pride yoga session outside the theater. Also, an exhibit of the national campaign from Zeiss Lenses Americas shared different interpretations of love in the theater's lobby. With the permission of the local photographer, Rory Doyle, his photographs of local members of the LGBTQIA+ community—including Delta State University professors and students—were also displayed (with the subjects' permission).

The OkraOut committee 2019 produced a series of zines for the first time in 2019. Three zines were created and published with information submitted by students, faculty, staff, and community members. The authors and artists included personal stories, poetry, artwork, and words of encouragement. They were promoted by the Language and Literature department. Once printed, student volunteers distributed the zines and left them throughout the student union and other sitting locations throughout campus. Two years before, Kate Kitchens, an academic reference and instruction librarian, presented the idea of zines at the Iowa Library Association conference in a presentation called "Moving Beyond Queer Acceptance: Creating a New Community Culture" (2017). This presentation focused on their guide, "Librarian Field Notes," for librarians who wanted to provide services to support their queer patrons but did not know where to start. Using zines was an avenue that offered a way to understand queer communities and their unique needs better. During the first year zines were printed in a faculty member's office, so they were in black and white. Student volunteers used crayons

to color in part of the title page. Later, when more funds were available, the committee could print the zines in color. The OkraOut zines became an essential and creative asset to the outreach events and continue today.

RQ3. How to React during a Period of Dramatic Upheaval and Change?
Flowering During Frosting Stage

The fourth element in a successful outreach initiative is to continue to expand the outreach audience. This aspect was even more necessary in the fourth year of OkraOut. Sometimes growth is difficult and must be pushed through, and the year 2020 certainly taught everyone a lesson in resilience. Association of College & Research Libraries' (ACRL) Standards for Distance Learning Library Services state,

> All students, faculty members, administrators, staff members, or any other members of an institution of higher education are entitled to the library services and resources of that institution, including direct communication with the appropriate library personnel, regardless of where they are physically located in relation to the campus; where they attend class with regard to the institution's main campus; or the modality by which they take courses. Academic libraries must, therefore, meet the information and research needs of all these constituents, wherever they may be. In 2020, every student became a distance learning student due to the pandemic of COVID-19, and the OkraOut committee had to decide how to provide services and outreach safely. Because OkraOut has evolved over the past few years into a multifaceted and flexible program, it could adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Greenblatt (2001) argues that the LGBTQ community has been transformed with the help of the Internet and social media. Those outlets contribute many opportunities for academic libraries to bring value to LGBTQ students in terms of information services, programming, collections, and much more. Many projects were fast-tracked to meet this unique need, including creating a webpage to host our events and present our mission statement and other information. The Systems librarian built an OkraOut online archive (https://www.deltastate.edu/library/okra-out/) to collect and make accessible photographs, personal stories, and additional information about the events of 2020 and previous years. To further spread the program's outreach and protect the collected stories, the committee contacted the Invisible Histories Project and sent OkraOut information to the Library of Congress for their LGBTQ+ archives.

By October 2020, the committee felt comfortable hosting one in-person event within federal guidelines. A Pride walk on the campus quad, a grassy area at the Delta State University entrance, was held. The event occurred outside, and there was enough room for social distancing while wearing masks. Pride packs were presented to the first 100 attendees. They contained stickers, flags with a tutorial on making them a face mask, zines, and LGBTQ+ fast facts. At the start of the walk, representation flags were displayed, and volunteers were encouraged to write stories and create artwork for future zines.

OkraOut grew in 2020 to be more than just the celebration on or around National Coming Out Day. It was a whole month of celebration, and outreach and virtual events were held throughout October. Through the new webpage, the library shared a drag queen story time of

a fabulous reading of Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas." The webpage also provided a link to the screening of the independent film Gay Chorus Deep South and a zoom pride yoga session. The site recorded 93 views that month.

Because of the program's growth, the committee also wanted to help the LGBTQ+ student organization on campus and looked for ways to increase visibility. In 2020, committee members applied for a grant with the L.G.B.T.Q. Fund of Mississippi to do just that. OkraOut was awarded a grant of $3,500, which was used for safe space training on campus for faculty, staff, and students and to help establish the student organization.

The committee sought to find a medium to meet the needs of the students on and off campus, and to continue the trend of increasing the number of events each year. To meet this challenge, they ensured an equal number of virtual events and in-person events in case of cancellations because of COVID-19 case spikes. OkraOut hoped for more in-person events in 2021, but the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to prove challenging. Nonetheless, 2021's theme was chosen as LOVE IS LOVE, and throughout October, a LOVE is LOVE Wall was present on the first floor of the Student Union. This poignant but straightforward theme reflected the past two years of trauma felt by the unceasing pandemic.

With the support of the Office of Student Life, Delta State University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee, and the academic library, OkraOut held an adult drag show and fundraiser for the student pride organization at a local restaurant. Then a Rainbow Run on the campus's quad and a family-friendly drag show were held on campus. After Delta State University's second drag show, the audience was welcomed to visit tables with representatives and information about supporting health organizations. One of the article's authors also created the university's first Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion library guide in honor of OkraOut. This library guide quickly became the most viewed LibGuide for the Roberts-LaForge Library. As of September 2022, the DEI library guide has been viewed 1,144 times. The following closest number of views is the Dual Credit LibGuide, with 539 views.

Academic presentations were also held, one in-person and one virtually. In a first collaboration with the University of Memphis, author Dr. Phillip Gordon was invited to both campuses to discuss his book, *Gay Faulkner*, and present a lecture on acknowledging the Queer South. While Delta State University did have a moderately well-attended in-person event, the University of Memphis used live stream technology and witnessed a more significant online presence than the in-person event. OkraOut's virtual event included a presentation on "Teaching, Learning, and Living the Queer South" by Dr. David Baylis, a former faculty member. The online components were viewed 389 times.

With the grant funds described above, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee Chair organized virtual Safe Space training workshops throughout October. It worked with OkraOut committee members to help reorganize the Pride student organization at the university. The Pride student organization now includes 40 members, representing 1.64 percent of the student body.

The committee did recognize the difficulty of having lower on-campus numbers than in previous years. Nonetheless, during Homecoming—the last week of October—OkraOut had a float in the university's parade for the first time; the float increased visibility on campus and in the community. Responses to that year's OkraOut effort on social media included a comment from a community member that, "A colorful time was had by all," and a student posted, "Thank you for making this world a better and a little bit safer place!"

Plans for the Future of the Program, Okra Pod Bearing Stage

Feedback on OkraOut's outreach events was essential to gather because a few weeks after each event, we held a post-event committee meeting to determine improvements for the next year, and to celebrate our efforts to advocate for diversity and inclusion. Even with the trials of the last few years, the OkraOut committee has retained its excitement and vigor. The committee has only grown and continued to bring in individuals from all university areas. They all look forward to the future of the outreach programs. Most importantly, they plan to continue and strengthen collaborations with other higher education and nonprofit institutions. Building those connections and networking will boost the outreach possibilities. Of course, there is also a need to better utilize technology for virtual attendance in this new era.

Larger ideas include creating a statement about the commitment to diversity and inclusion, publishing that statement on our library site, and possibly planning monthly events instead of only holding in one month to encourage further engagement. More previously discussed, centralized events include having a gay mass in partnership with the local Episcopal Church, and creating a queer and trans-community closet with the university's Career Services. Currently, the committee is also looking at grants to use within the greater community. Again, these events rely on teamwork and the relationships built from them. The OkraOut program is sprouting new growths every year. The committee, which began with one event in 2017 has, five years later, hosted nine events throughout the month of October.

Conclusion

In repeating a statement from the methodology, this unified hope for outreach grew into a vast celebration of LGBTQ+ people, and provided exploratory data-collecting possibilities.

Through starting an outreach program, the authors realized that initiative and collaboration take time to implement successfully. However, the first step for librarians and staff is to recognize the power of library promotion and embrace the issues of their community. Services, resources, and materials are only small parts of what makes an academic library valuable to its campus community. The librarians and staff also have a one-on-one impact on the students and community. Over the past five years, OkraOut's committee has grown from five members to sixteen members, and has been chaired by a library staff member in four out of five years. This growth exhibits the volunteer spirit of the committee members.

Also, during that time, the committee witnessed the attendance of events swell from 100 people to over 350 people attending, with an understandable dip to 93 in 2020. (As seen in Figure 1.)

The main takeaway from that growth is that a library's marketing, outreach, and promotion should illustrate that the library cares and that it, with its partnerships, takes service seriously. This also exhibits the support and the resulting need for the outreach initiative. As illustrated, libraries, especially academic libraries, can and should play an integral role in helping LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff feels seen. Support should spread further than just an LGBTQ+ collection in the library. The Library Bill of Rights puts it best: "To that end, libraries and library workers should embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion in everything that they do." With the spread of outreach and the audience growth, Robert-LaForge Library's staff members have taken an active role in educating the community by instructing Safe Space sessions and utilizing grant funding. Safe Space training sessions have become a valid workshop on campus. Faculty, staff, and students are welcome to attend these semesterly sessions

FIGURE 1
Event Attendance
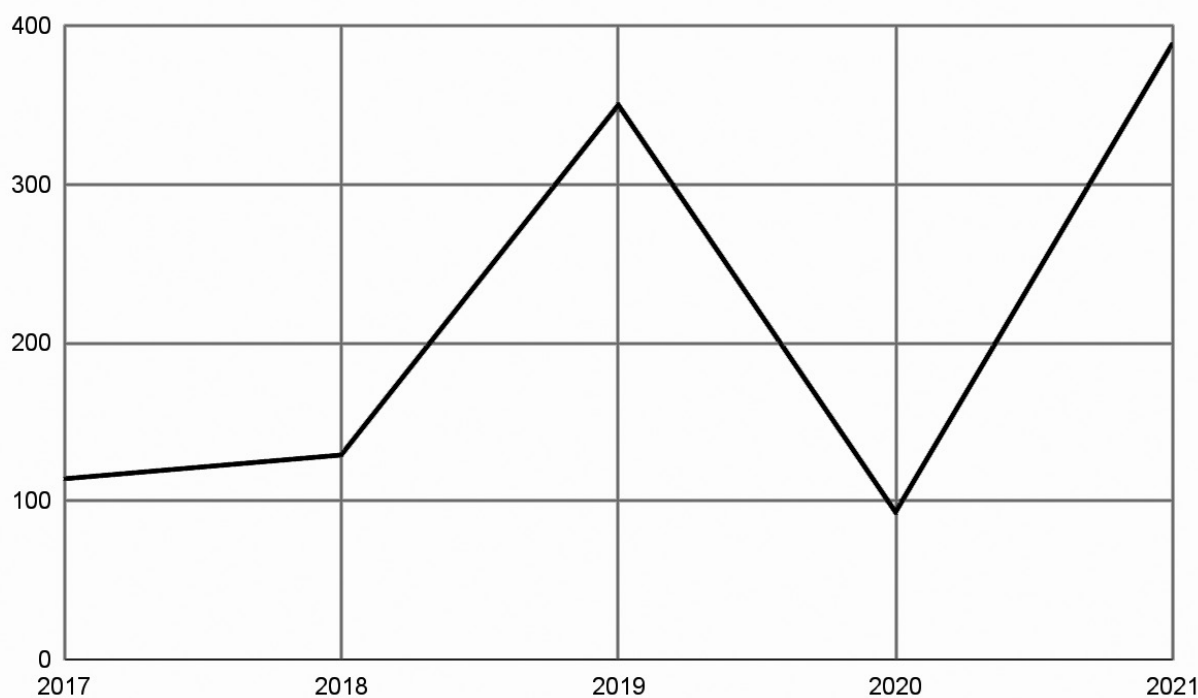
to learn more about pronouns and stereotypes to reduce the often unwelcoming, and biased, environment that LGBTQ+ people navigate daily. Ally connections are strengthened, and students will be aware that places of shelter are needed. A comment shared by a student after the fifth OkraOut expressed that it was truly appreciated.

This article concludes with the hope that the audience continues to give visibility, celebrate, educate, support marginalized communities, and identify ways to get engaged and advocate for queer people on campus and in their communities. The efforts can be small or large, but the action should remain. OkraOut was planned to be educational, festive, and entertaining while also bringing to the table essential questions about diversity and inclusion, thus showing support, and giving visibility to the queer people and allies on campus, and in the community. By spreading the idea that the library was an institution that guards and supports everyone's right to access knowledge and culture and advocates for all patrons, OkraOut positioned the library as a safe space. This article exhibits small and large efforts, but the essential fact remains that the ideas were planted, watered with support, and that the outreach began to grow.

Further Impact and Studies

Despite some improving social circumstances for some LGBTQ+ people, much progress still needs to be made. This article, in particular, can be helpful to libraries, librarians, and universities in recognizing the required progress. Librarians may realize that they need more training on LGBTQ+ terminology, culture, and information resources. Library administrators may find this paper useful in identifying connections between librarian outreach goals and the larger vision of library services.

Beyond the library, university and student affairs administrators may find this paper interesting as it emphasizes the role of collaboration. It also provides a valuable example of how the library can partner in broader university outreach initiatives and that wide-reaching impact can be felt with any outreach efforts. Ultimately, research will be needed to illustrate in more detail how well librarians address LGBTQ+ needs within their universities and communities and the role of academic libraries in those outreach initiatives.

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