Exploring the Impact: After-hours Programming and Strategies for Enhancing Academic Library Community Involvement

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Public programming is an essential strategy for academic libraries to engage communities and highlight their services. This study examines after-hours programming (i.e., after 5 p.m. and/or on a weekend) and whether it draws larger attendance. Drawing on data from various departments within a university library system, the research identifies attendance patterns and examines how scheduling influences attendance. By comparing after-hours and traditional workday programs (i.e., Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.), the study explores how flexible programming can enhance access and engagement. The findings offer insights into how timing adjustments can maximize library impact and better serve patrons, contributing to the discussion on innovative public programming.

Introduction

Exploring the impact of after-hours programming is essential, as it offers academic libraries opportunities to enhance access, increase participation, and engage with individuals who are unable to participate during traditional hours. By examining such programming, libraries open the door to enriching the flexibility, inclusivity, and accessibility of library services. While formal community engagement in higher education often refers to reciprocal, institution-wide partnerships with external communities, academic libraries also play a crucial role in fostering inclusive participation and accessibility through program design. This study focuses on how after-hours programming can extend that ethos of access and responsiveness, even when the intended audience remains primarily campus-based. Academic libraries offer a variety of public programming that covers topics relating to educational, recreational, and social activities. Public programming now plays an increasingly prominent role in shaping the user experience. These programs range from educational workshops to social and cultural events, offering meaningful engagement for students, staff, and faculty alike. Although not always designed to reach beyond campus borders, many of these events intersect with broader goals of accessibility and user-centered service design.

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This study addresses a critical gap in understanding how academic libraries can optimize their public programming strategies through evidence-based scheduling and delivery formats. Many communities increasingly recognize libraries as vital knowledge hubs. The authors' empirical research demonstrates that both virtual offerings and weekend scheduling significantly enhance attendance across demographic groups, particularly among those facing traditional access barriers. By examining after-hours programs and alternative formats across multiple library units at a major university, this research provides valuable insights into the relationship between program accessibility and community engagement. The findings reveal that after-hours programming significantly increases attendance through enhanced flexibility and enables broader participation. These results can directly inform strategic decision-making by library administrators and program coordinators, ultimately leading to more inclusive and impactful community outreach efforts in higher education institutions. The study's emphasis on both temporal and modal accessibility represents an important contribution to the growing body of literature on academic library outreach and community engagement.

Public programming represents a structured and organized occurrence where individuals convene for a defined purpose or activity. Programs can differ widely in their scale and intent, spanning from intimate gatherings with few attendees to expansive festivals. Core elements that define a library program include its specific purpose, the participants involved, and the activities undertaken. Library programming serves diverse functions and contributes to the library's mission of community engagement. This study defines after-hours programs as gatherings held outside of traditional hours, specifically those happening beyond the 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday time frame. These programs may occur during the evening or night, and program coordinators typically design these occurrences to offer a more informal atmosphere. After-hours programming can be social, educational, or entertainment-oriented, often targeting a broader or different audience than daytime programming. Libraries frequently employ this type of scheduling to create inclusive experiences, catering to individuals who may be unable to attend during regular operational hours.

Literature Review

A review of the literature reveals a variety of outreach efforts by academic libraries with a shared emphasis on fostering collaboration and increasing awareness of library resources across diverse academic communities. Notably, many of these programs took place during evenings or weekends, strategically planned to accommodate participants' schedules and maximize accessibility and engagement. Effective library outreach evolves to meet the changing needs of academic and local communities, with several strategies emerging as central to increasing engagement. Libraries are embracing innovative tools such as virtual workshops, social media campaigns, and interactive digital exhibits to reach audiences in fresh ways. By aligning promotion and delivery methods with technology and emerging trends, libraries remain relevant and dynamic in an increasingly online academic environment. Highly sought after and culturally relevant programming highlights a need for more intentional, impact-driven outreach efforts that balance trendiness with meaningful outcomes and documented evidence of success (Carter & Seaman, 2011; Diaz, 2019). Leveraging these programming methods attracts patrons by making activities appealing and accessible.

Weekend and evening programs are increasingly important as libraries strive to meet the unique needs of individuals with busy or non-traditional schedules, including both students

and the community who are balancing work and personal commitments. Offering programming at various times acknowledges the demands of student parents (Hung-Chu et al., 2021), first-generation students (Hodge, 2022; Stocking, Bucy & Ramirez-Reyes, 2024), and underrepresented students (Bucy, 2021; Long, 2011). Acknowledging that many students, faculty, and community members are unavailable during regular weekday hours, libraries have begun to strategically schedule events, workshops, and often office hours during evenings and weekends. This flexibility allows library resources and support to be more accessible to a wider community. Catalano et al. (2017), Strittmatter (2008), Wagner and Cho (2019), and Wallace et al. (2021) all illustrate the strategic use of evening or weekend events by academic libraries to foster engagement and collaboration. Catalano et al.'s weekend event for artists designed to teach health maintenance and prevent physical strain took place outside regular hours to accommodate participants' busy schedules, resulting in a higher-than-expected turnout. Similarly, Strittmayer highlights a 2008 evening cocktail reception which aimed to build social connections with new faculty while providing library services, an approach more effective than traditional daytime outreach methods. Wagner and Cho's 2017 series of focus groups to identify desirable student services prior to and during finals played a crucial role in implementing programming for late night library usage. Wallace et al.'s study of a 2015 annual evening showcase event for faculty achievements echoes the success, showing how after-hours events allowed for networking and collaboration while raising awareness of library resources. These examples underscore the effectiveness of hosting library outreach events during the evenings or weekends, thereby offering both flexibility for attendees and the benefit of cultivating informal settings to enhance engagement. Innovative outreach efforts aimed at specific user groups highlight a shift toward strategic, relational approaches. By moving beyond programming during traditional hours, these initiatives create more meaningful, relevant, and user-centered experiences that foster stronger connections.

Methodology

Libraries use public programming as an opportunity to share what libraries do and engage with the community in meaningful ways. By focusing on public programming at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Library (University Library), this study aims to identify how the timing of programming influences attendance.

Data Collection

This study uses data from August 1, 2022, to August 31, 2024, comprising 1,173 unique recorded library programs, including lectures, workshops, open houses, and social events. These occurrences span multiple departments and formats, offering a robust dataset for examining patterns in attendance and scheduling. The authors drew data from Springshare LibInsight, an assessment tool used by all units within the University Library to log event statistics. The study excludes Savvy Researcher workshops, information literacy instruction (ILI) sessions, and staff trainings, as these constitute instruction-based programming. All three fall outside the public programming scope of this study. This exclusion ensures that the study focuses solely on programming designed for broader community engagement. The authors analyzed attendance data by calculating the average number of participants and divided each attendee category, such as intended audience, to understand participation trends. The authors segmented the data into three primary categories: multi-day programming (i.e., programming that

spans more than one calendar day), programming held after hours, and programming held during traditional hours. Multi-day programming is a distinct third category because these events often span evenings and weekends and lack a single start time. The authors analyzed them as their own category, counted in overall results, and not reassigned to after-hours or traditional hours for the time-of-day comparison. The authors then compared these categories to determine any significant differences in attendance.

Variables and Key Data Points

The study extracted several key data points for analysis: program time, attendee count, intended audience, and type of programming. It is important to note that LibInsight's data reflects only the status of the intended audience, not the status of the actual attendees. The dataset includes the date as well as the start and end times. The authors analyzed attendance data by calculating the average number of participants and categorizing intended attendees to reveal participation patterns. Analysis is descriptive and the authors report means, medians, and distributed summaries. The authors did not perform hypothesis tests, so differences should be interpreted as associations rather than statistically validated effects. To classify programs as after-hours, the authors manually reviewed each entry, marking those that fell outside the traditional workweek hours of Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The classification process included a 30-minute buffer, placing programs ending between 5 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. as within traditional hours, based upon the assumption that participants could not realistically leave work and attend an event that ended shortly after business hours. Additionally, the authors noted programming held on weekends, as well as after 5:30 p.m., and combined them to determine which occurrences were labeled as after-hours. Attendance counts, as recorded by individual University Library personnel into LibInsight, represent raw headcounts and were not altered by the authors. Intended audience categories are standardized from the original dataset into five distinct groups: "All Groups," "Campus Community," "K-12," "Non-Affiliated and/or Non-Local Users," and "Non-Affiliated Community Members." Definitions for each audience type can be found in Table 1.

Limitations

The analysis revealed several limitations. First, some program records lacked completeness. Of the 1,173 unique programs, the authors marked 72 "unknown" because the original data entry did not include a program time, which made it impossible to classify these occurrences

TABLE 1
Intended Audience Categories

All Groups	Programming open to everyone, regardless of affiliation
Campus Community	Programming specifically targeted toward university affiliates, including students, faculty, and staff
K-12	Programs aimed at kindergarten through high school senior students, whether on campus or in the local community
Non-Affiliated and/or Non-Local Visitors	Programs directed toward participants who may be visiting from outside the local area and/or who are not affiliated with the university
Local Non-Affiliated Community Members	Programming aimed at local community members with no formal ties to the university

as multi-day, after-hours, or traditional hours. Another limitation is promotional variability across different campus libraries. Library locations differ in how intensively they promote programs; thus, higher attendance at certain programs may partially reflect stronger marketing rather than timing alone. LibInsight does not track this data. Future assessment should capture these fields to model their effects alongside time of day. Finally, the authors encountered significant taxonomic challenges when categorizing activities. Library workers use an online, self-reporting mechanism; thus, completeness and accuracy can vary, particularly because of the lack of formal definitions to categorize program types and the ability to select multiple categories for programs. This ambiguity does not determine the time-of-day variable, but it does affect which records are included as public programming. The LibInsight system requires staff to select from ten programming types without providing clear definitions. This absence of precise definitions necessitated researcher intervention to establish meaningful definitions. The complexity emerged from substantial categorical overlaps, making systematic classification difficult. By developing nuanced definitions for each programming type, the authors discovered that seemingly straightforward categorizations in fact mask underlying methodological complexities and heterogeneous interpretation by the library's many contributors. Because the LibInsight administrators in the University Library do not provide any category definitions as a guide, there is inconsistent use of labeling across the library. By rigorously examining the scheduling, intended audience, and attendance data, this study seeks to provide insights into how flexible scheduling shows a positive association with attendance. The methodology ensures that the analysis focuses on relevant public programming while accounting for key factors, such as timing and intended audience type.

Discussion and Analysis

This study analyzes the association between time of day and attendance for public programming. Program types are used to define the analytic set and to present descriptive counts; however, the timing comparison does not model differences by type. Using start time to define timing, after-hours programming averaged 72 participants, compared to an average of 45 for programs held during traditional hours. A detailed audience distribution shows that "Campus Community" programs constituted the largest portion of total attendance

The dataset analyzed encompasses a wide range of program categories, each serving a specific role in promoting engagement, education, and information sharing. This study categorizes the types of public programming offered at the library, for which the authors developed operational definitions, including general events (97), exhibits (57), lectures (616), on-site visits (516), online exhibits (7), other miscellaneous events (65), tours (185), and workshops (201). The total number of programs is higher than the number of unique programs because library workers can select more than one category when inputting information. The categorization emphasizes lectures and on-site visits, reflecting the library's strategy of combining educational and interactive engagement within its programming. The breakdown of these types, along with definitions for each identified category, can be found in Table 2.

This distribution of program categories provides a comprehensive view of the types of programming analyzed, each contributing unique insights into the reach and impact of public programming efforts within the academic library context. Lectures are the most frequently tagged (616 records; 52.5% of programs), followed by on-site visits (516 records; 44.0% of programs). Tours (185 records; 15.8% of programs) and exhibits (57 records; 4.9% of

TABLE 2
Program Categories

Event	Classified as general "events," these 97 occurrences encompass various types of gatherings not specified within other categories. This broad category may include meetings, informal gatherings, or events designed for social interaction and networking.
Exhibit	The 57 exhibits recorded in this category display curated collections of artifacts, documents, or thematic presentations, often with an educational or cultural focus. Exhibits offer passive engagement, are typically open to the public, and can range from historical artifacts to thematic presentations relevant to current library programming.
Lecture	This category, representing the largest portion with 616 recorded occurrences, involves presentations where speakers deliver structured information on a particular subject. Lectures are often designed to educate, inspire, or inform an audience on topics relevant to the library's mission.
On-Site Visit	The 516 on-site visits consist of group tours or organized visits where participants explore library facilities or special collections. These visits offer an opportunity to engage directly with library resources in a hands-on environment, fostering a deeper connection with the institution as well as the material. This category was named by LibInsight administrators and does not reflect a dichotomy between virtual and in-person programs.
Online Exhibit	This smaller category, with seven entries, represents exhibits available exclusively online. Online exhibits allow for digital engagement with library collections, reaching audiences who may not be able to visit in person, thus expanding access to library resources.
Other	The "other" category, with 65 occurrences, includes activities that do not fit into the predefined categories. This group captures a range of miscellaneous programming that supports the library's mission but does not align directly with other specific categories.
Tour	The 185 occurrences categorized as tours involve guided exploration of library spaces, resources, and special collections. Tours provide a curated look at library offerings, allowing visitors to gain insight into the library's structure and function.
Workshop	With 201 workshops recorded, this category comprises interactive sessions where participants actively engage in skill-building activities. Workshops often emphasize practical, hands-on learning experiences, allowing attendees to develop new skills or knowledge in a collaborative setting.

programs) appear less often. Because categories are non-exclusive, percentages sum to more than 100%. Taken together, this distribution indicates a programming emphasis on education engagement (e.g., lectures and visits), supplemented by smaller volumes of tours, exhibits, and other formats.

The analysis involved a system filtering process to refine the dataset and focus on after-hours attendance patterns in public programming. An analysis of programming distribution by time reveals that a small, but notable portion of the dataset—71 or approximately 6% of the total—lacks recorded dates or times, which reflects potential gaps in data entry by the initial recorders. Therefore, the analysis excluded any programs with unknown timing (whether after-hours, traditional hours, or multi-day) to clarify attendance trends based on established time categories. Multi-day programming constitutes 103 entries and accounts for 9% of the total. After-hours programs include 153 events, representing 13% of the total. Traditional

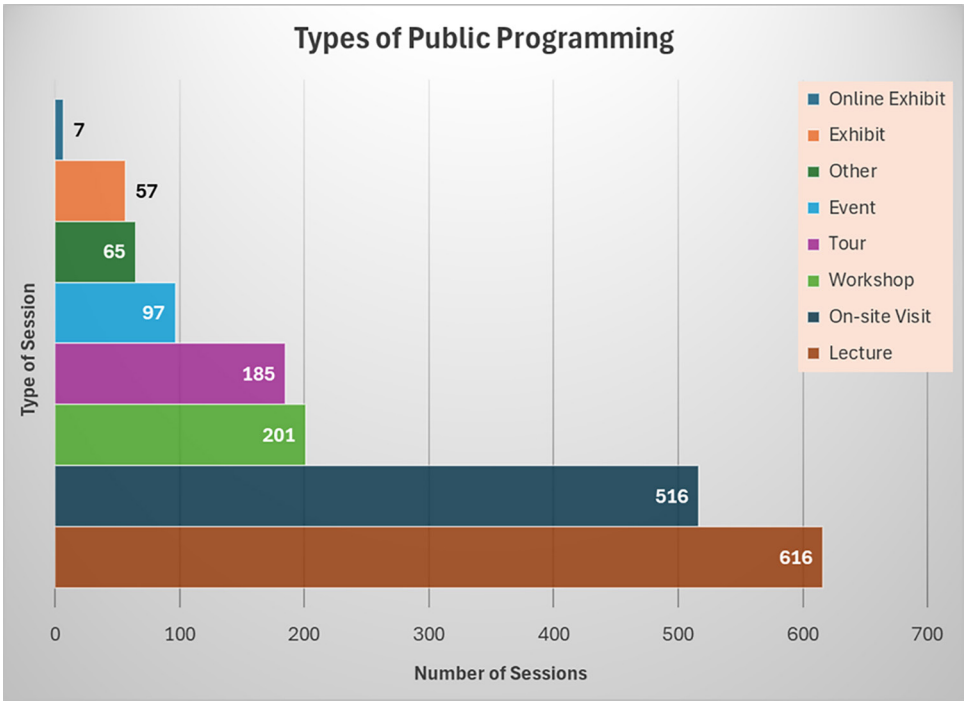


Figure 1. Types of Public Programming.

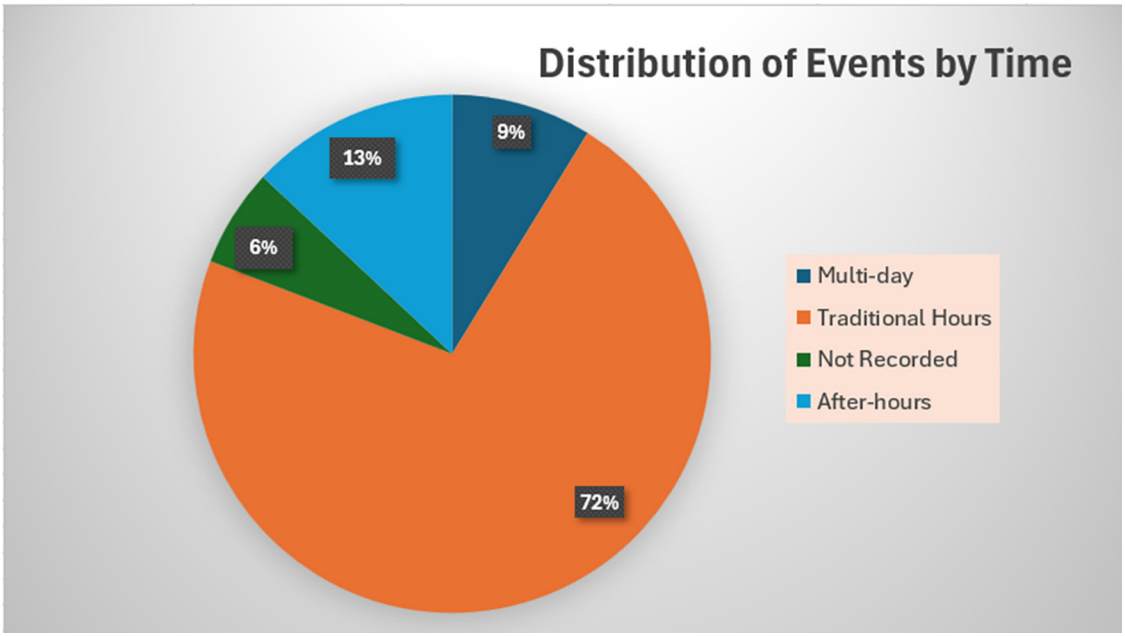


Figure 2. Distribution of Events by Time.

hours program types dominate the dataset with 845 occurrences, making up a significant 72% of all recorded occurrences.

Across 1,173 unique programs, the dataset records 37,667 total attendees engaged in public programming at the University Library. By timing category, after-hours programs accounted for 153 events (13%) and attracted 8,204 attendees (22% of all participants), reflecting interest in programming outside of traditional operating hours. Multi-day programs accounted for

103 events (9%) and drew 4,310 attendees (11% of all participants), indicating participation across extended event durations. Unknown timing accounted for 72 programs (6%) and 1,761 attendees (5% of all participants). Traditional hours programming accounted for 845 events (72%) and attracted the largest portion of attendees with 23,392 (62% of all participants). On a per-event basis, average attendance was 53.6 for after-hours, 27.7 for traditional hours, and 41.8 for multi-day, indicating higher attendance per occurrence for after-hours despite the programs being less frequent. To contextualize these totals, attendance is summarized by intended audience type within each timing category. For all intended audience types, it is important to note that multi-day programs tend to skew with more attendees because the program itself lasts longer with more opportunities for people to participate.

All Groups

This audience type encompasses both campus affiliates and the public. Overall, this audience type was the focus of 89 events; Table 3 shows the attendance distribution. These findings indicate that after-hours events for a broad audience foster higher average attendance than traditional hours. This suggests that a general audience of participants is more likely to participate during the after-hours timeframe.

Campus Community

Programming aimed at university faculty, staff, and students exclusively. This audience type had 443 events; the attendance patterns for this group can be found in Table 4. The substantial attendance difference between after-hours and traditional hours suggests that after-hours programming particularly benefits campus community members, who likely prefer the flexibility beyond regular work or study hours.

Non-Affiliated International and/or Non-Local Users

Public programming designed specifically for international or non-local visitors is a distinct audience group. The averages for this group, over a total of 40 events, can be found in Table 5.

TABLE 3
All Groups Attendance

	Number of Events	Average Attendance	Minimum of Attendance	Maximum of Attendance	Median of Attendance
Multi-Day	9	87	10	344	55
After-Hours	31	71	4	320	40
Traditional Hours	49	55	2	412	68

TABLE 4
Campus Community Attendance

	Number of Events	Average Attendance	Minimum of Attendance	Maximum of Attendance	Median of Attendance
Multi-Day	66	42	1	400	60
After-Hours	47	69	2	724	45
Traditional Hours	330	26	1	1,003	72

TABLE 5
Non-Affiliated International and/or Non-Local Users Attendance

	Number of Events	Average Attendance	Minimum of Attendance	Maximum of Attendance	Median of Attendance
Multi-Day	5	42	2	100	38
After-Hours	2	31	2	60	28
Traditional Hours	33	12	1	146	48

While the average attendance is generally lower for this group, after-hours events still reflect a significant increase compared to traditional hours, emphasizing the positive association of after-hours timing on participation.

Non-Affiliated Community Members

The attendance distribution for public programming designed for local community members who are not affiliated with the university, representing more than 46 events, can be found in Table 6. The marked average attendance difference between after-hours and traditional hours (91 vs. 25) supports the hypothesis that after-hours programming enhances engagement with the local community, maximizing accessibility and attendance.

Taken together, the data shows a consistent descriptive pattern. Although traditional hours programs make up the majority of programs (845 of 1,173; 72%), after-hours programs account for a disproportionate share of total attendance (8,204 attendees; 22%) relative to their frequency (153 of 1,173; 13%). On a per-event basis, after-hours programs draw larger attendance (mean 53.6; median 24) than traditional hours (mean 27.7; median 20), with multi-day in between (mean 41.8; median 20). In practical terms, a modest reallocation of programs into evening or weekend time slots is associated with higher attendance per event. Analyses are descriptive, with means and medians only, and do not assess statistical significance, so differences should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects. These findings suggest that strategic scheduling, which includes after-hours programming, can increase community involvement and accessibility in academic library settings.

Next Steps

In exploring the future of after-hours programming, several key steps could provide valuable insights that would enhance the reach and impact of library public programming. A first step could involve conducting surveys or focus groups with patrons to understand their demographics, interests, and motivations that drive attendance at after-hours programs.

TABLE 6
Non-Affiliated Community Members Attendance

	Number of Events	Average Attendance	Minimum of Attendance	Maximum of Attendance	Median of Attendance
Multi-Day	1	9	9	9	43
After-Hours	13	91	2	595	33
Traditional Hours	32	25	1	380	53

This audience analysis would help identify factors that attract a broader audience outside traditional hours and guide targeted outreach efforts. Another area for investigation could focus on analyzing the timing of programs, assessing how different times of day influence attendance and participation. This research may identify specific time slots where engagement is highest and suggest opportunities for alternative scheduling that cater to audience preferences. Expanding the dataset to include additional years or comparative data from other university libraries would also offer valuable insights into whether observed attendance trends hold across time and institutions. Such longitudinal data could reveal consistent patterns or changes in attendance, which would help refine after-hours programming over time. In addition to quantitative data, examining community partnerships associated with after-hours programming would help measure the impact of these occurrences on relationships with local organizations. By fostering greater accessibility, after-hours programs could strengthen community ties and pave the way for sustained and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Recommendations based on findings from this expanded analysis could further support after-hours programming by highlighting its benefits in community outreach, library visibility, and public accessibility. Investigating which program types and formats (e.g., hybrid, asynchronous, synchronous) resonate best with after-hours attendees could inform future programming decisions and provide insights into whether workshops, social gatherings, or collaborative projects generate the most engagement outside of traditional hours. Engagement metrics could go beyond attendance to include visitor feedback, repeat attendance, and active participation, offering a nuanced understanding of how after-hours programming enhances user experience. Establishing a variety of collaborative partnerships with other departments or community organizations offers another promising avenue for expanding after-hours programming. Partnerships have the potential to not only expand the audience base but also enrich event offerings, making them more diverse and impactful. By measuring the impact of such collaborations, through pre- and post-event surveys, attendance data comparisons, partner interviews, and cost-benefit analyses, organizers could demonstrate the value of these partnerships and support ongoing resource allocation.

In planning for the sustainability of after-hours programming, assessing resource needs for staffing, security, and budgeting is essential. Such evaluations would ensure that organizers make the program feasible and adequately supported in the long term. Conducting longitudinal studies to track attendance and engagement trends over time could further refine program planning. This analysis could reveal whether after-hours programming continues to be popular. It may highlight audience-specific preferences that shift over time. These insights could guide organizers in adjusting programming based on emerging trends, enabling libraries to remain responsive to the evolving needs and interests of their communities. Finally, the authors suggest a more standardized documentation practice with regards to documenting programming activities within the University Library. The development of clearer terminology and definitions within LibInsight will likely improve the tracking and evaluation of activities over time (Kiebler & Lafazan, 2020).

Conclusion

This research examined the association of after-hours programming on community attendance and engagement in one academic library between 2022 and 2024. The findings indicate that such programs increase the number of participants and potentially the amount

of community participation, which leads to libraries becoming more accessible and inclusive. Across all intended audiences—campus community, non-affiliated visitors, non-local non-affiliated community—average attendance was significantly higher during after-hours programming, such as evenings and weekends compared with traditional hours (i.e., Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m). This was a consistent trend, suggesting that the timing of programs plays a crucial role in attracting participants.

Several factors may contribute to increased attendance, including work and school schedules; flexibility and convenience; reduced time constraints; and proximity to other programs. Work and school schedules significantly impact participants' ability to attend programs. Flexibility and convenience emerge as critical considerations, allowing participants to integrate library programming into their complex daily routines. Reduced time constraints further enhance participation, enabling more people to engage with library offerings. These results underscore the value of strategic scheduling, advocating for after-hours programs to expand how the library serves the diverse needs of existing patrons and potential library users. By offering a greater variety of flexible access to library services, these programs not only accommodate schedules but also help broaden the library's reach, fostering greater involvement and inclusion.

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