

## Collaborating with Strangers Evaluation

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### CoLAB Description.

CoLAB Planning Series® was created by Bess de Farber, certified professional facilitator and the UF Libraries' grants manager, in 2002. CoLAB processes have been facilitated in groups ranging from 17 to 120 people and have produced extremely positive results. Over 1,500 participants representing 700 organizations have participated in sessions sponsored by libraries, library associations, universities, United Ways and Community Foundations throughout Florida; Tucson, Arizona; and Baltimore, Maryland.

Focusing on existing assets is one of the most effective ways to inspire creativity (Fritz, 1998). Moreover, innovation thrives in open environments where each person feels comfortable sharing his/her ideas. By providing a space that encourages open communication, contribution and creativity, participants will make connections that spark new possibilities, perspectives and ideas. Whether it's a project, approach, or solution to a problem, participants will find inspiration from conversations with "strangers."

In a university setting, the CoLAB process can help students find partners for research or other projects, organizations to join or create, and/or faculty members who can mentor for navigating the academic system. Similarly, faculty and researchers can meet new colleagues, graduate and/or undergraduate students. The variety of assets available through collaborative teams is truly endless.

The CoLAB Planning Series® processes offer methods for achieving a myriad of results. It has been used to solve community problems such as literacy and HIV infection in youth. It effectively connects "strangers" at a conference, and it can develop long-term community alliances among nonprofit leaders and program designers. For example, at the University of Arizona (UA), this process was used to connect NGOs and government agency personnel working in the Sonoran Desert, many of whom had never met and were clueless about each other's research and advocacy programs. The Sonoran Desert Knowledge Exchange was born.

### CoLAB at the University of Florida

Collaborating with Strangers is a set of workshops conducted by the University of Florida Libraries to connect students and faculty. The CoLAB can take as long as 12 hours to fully implement. During the 2012-13 project period, students, faculty and staff participate in an abbreviated version of the CoLAB (2 hours). The workshops are a large group process for participants to meet one-on-one in a "speed meeting" to share their passions, interests, skills and resources. The meetings are set up to allow a safe

and facilitative environment where students and faculty can meet, exchange ideas and build networks for collaboration.

Each workshop begins with participants completing a description of their study or research interests, their strongest skills, a list of groups or networks they are involved in, and something that most people do not know about the participant. This information is then pinned to the individual participant to share in their “speed meetings” with other participants. After an introduction of the purpose and the potential benefits of the workshop, and presentation on combining forces and generating creative ideas, participants meet one-on-one with other participants for three minutes. At the end of the three minutes, participants are asked to find someone who they have not spoken to yet and repeat the process. This process continues for the rest of the workshop. In the end, participants are asked to debrief what they discovered and learned, their next steps, and to complete an evaluation of the workshop.

In addition to the workshops, a website was created (<http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/communications/CoLAB/home.html>) to facilitate collaboration after the workshops. The website includes descriptions of the participants from each of the UF workshops and email addresses so participants can contact other participants and engage in ongoing conversations for possible opportunities to combine forces.

This is an evaluation of the second year of funding for the CoLAB series. The [evaluation](#) of the first year of the CoLAB series at the University of Florida was very positive. One theme that arose in the evaluation from 2011-2012 was that the CoLABs would be more beneficial if participants were there for a common reason. This year (2012-2013) provided a series of workshops advertised and conducted on a specific theme. The themes for the CoLABs at UF were:

- Grant Seekers -- October 2, 2012
- In and Outside the Humanities -- December 6, 2012
- Grant Seekers (Grant Writing Course) – January 31, 2013
- Sustainability -- February 21, 2013
- Books and Objects of Study -- March 20, 2013
- Sex and Gender Differences in Health -- April 30, 2013

Evaluation reports are available for each of the workshops above. This report is a summary of the evaluations of all workshops in 2012-2013.

In 2011-2012, workshops were only 1.5 hours in length and this year the workshops were 2 hours. The results reported below are also more positive than the results from 2011-2012 particularly for the length of the workshop. During the two hour session, the number of rounds of one-on-one meetings ranged from 11 to 17. Thus, the more positive views toward the length of the meetings may be due to the increased time. However, it also may be due to the other change to theme-based meetings. Both changes in the CoLABs appear to be worth continuing in any future CoLABs. Based on the results of the evaluation, it is clear that UF would benefit from continuing this program as implemented in 2012-2013.

Evaluators attended the CoLABs. As a result, the following observations were also noteworthy. Participants often began “speed meetings” hesitantly. However, they quickly saw the value of the meetings. The change in environment was obvious by the third round of “speed meetings”. By the third round, there were clearly observable changes with an increase in volume of discussions, participants standing closer together, and greater animation among the participants including pointing at features on each other’s signs. Thus, participants were more active in their interactions by the third round.

Participants

Six CoLAB workshops were conducted. The workshops ranged in size from 17 to 80 participants with 220 total participants. The sample was composed of a pretty even mix of graduate students, undergraduate students, and faculty members: undergraduate students accounted for 32.6% of the total sample of participants, while graduate students and faculty members each accounted for 27.7% of total sample of participants. Although these demographics were evenly represented in the overall sample, the demographics typically were not evenly distributed in the individual sessions. In four of the six samples, one of the three demographics accounted for more than 50% of the total number of participants.

International participants accounted for 23.9% of the total sample of participants, including as much as 58.8% of an individual workshop. While not as highly represented as in the 2011-2012 academic year when they accounted for 41.6% of the overall sample, international participants still accounted for a very significant proportion of the overall sample in the 2012-2013 academic year.

Workshop Evaluation

All participants completed a seven-item questionnaire at the end of each workshop. Two of the items required open-ended responses. The aggregate results for each item are described below.

***(Question 1) Length of Collaborating with Strangers Workshop***

Participants were asked about the length of the workshop. The majority of participants (80.0%) felt that the length of the workshop was appropriate. A few participants (6.36%) indicated that the workshop was too long, and although many participants noted that the three-minute “speed meetings” were too short, only one in ten participants (10.0%) felt that the workshop itself was too short. The results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Too Long	Adequate	Too Short	No Response
14 (6.36%)	176 (80.00%)	22 (10.00%)	8 (3.64%)

***(Question 2) Overall Evaluation of Workshop***

Participants were asked to provide an overall evaluation of the workshop. The overwhelming majority of participants rated the workshop positively, as 49.1% of participants gave the workshop an “excellent” rating and 44.1% of participants gave the workshop a “good” rating. Only 3.18% of participants gave the workshop a “fair” rating, and no participants gave the workshop a “poor” rating. The results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	No Response
108 (49.09%)	97 (44.09%)	7 (3.18%)	0 (0.00%)	8 (3.64%)

***(Question 3) Would you attend a workshop like this again?***

Participants were asked if they would be willing to attend a similar workshop in the future. Nearly all participants (88.2%) responded “yes”, indicating that they would be willing to attend a similar workshop again. A small minority of participants (7.27%) indicated they would not attend a similar workshop in the future. The results are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Yes	No	No Response
194 (88.18%)	16 (7.27%)	10 (4.55%)

***(Question 4) Would you recommend this collaboration process to other students/faculty?***

When participants were asked if they would recommend the CoLAB process to other students and faculty members, more than nine out of ten participants (90.5%) said “yes”. By contrast, only 3.64% of participants said they would not recommend the CoLAB process to other students/faculty. The results are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Yes	No	No Response
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199 (90.45%)	8 (3.64%)	13 (5.91%)
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***(Question 5) CoLAB Workshop Results***

Questions 5.1-5.2 were 5-point Likert scale items in which participants were asked to evaluate personal outcomes related to the workshop. Options ranged from “Strongly Agree” (5 points) to “Strongly Disagree” (1 point). The results of these questions are described below.

***(Question 5.1) I feel more confident in my ability to approach people I don’t know.***

When participants were given this statement, 47.3% of participants marked “Agree” and 30.0% of participants marked “Strongly Agree”. 18.2% of participants marked “Neutral”, less than 1% of participants marked “Disagree”, and less than 1% of participants marked “Strongly Disagree”. In terms of the 5-point Likert scale, the average response among all participants who responded to the question was a 4.09. The results are shown in Table 5.1.

TABLE 5.1

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Avg. Response (out of 5)
66 (30.00%)	104 (47.27%)	40 (18.18%)	2 (0.91%)	1 (0.45%)	7 (3.18%)	4.09

***(Question 5.2) I am more comfortable with people in other disciplines.***

When participants were given this statement, 44.6% of participants marked “Agree”, 25.9% of participants marked “Strongly Agree”, and 22.73% of participants marked “Neutral”. Only 2.3% of participants marked “Disagree”, and less than 1% of participants marked “Strongly Disagree”. In terms of the 5-point Likert scale, the average response among all participants who responded to the question was a 3.97. The results are shown in Table 5.2.

TABLE 5.2

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Avg. Response (out of 5)
57 (25.91%)	98 (44.55%)	50 (22.73%)	5 (2.27%)	1 (0.45%)	9 (4.09%)	3.97

***(Question 6) Did the CoLAB facilitation process help you access new resources, knowledge, and/or grantseeking information? If so, describe.***

This question required participants to formulate an open-ended response. The majority (66.4%) of participants responded to the question positively. 15.5% of participants gave a mixed response to the question, and only 2.3% of participants gave a negative response to the question. However, a significant proportion (15.9%) of participants did not respond to the question. The results are shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6

Positive	Mixed	Negative	No Response
146 (66.36%)	34 (15.45%)	5 (2.27%)	35 (15.91%)

Recurring responses to this question included the following responses:

- Yes, I met possible collaborators that I plan to follow up with.
- Yes, I met people with similar interests.
- Yes, I met people with different perspectives.
- Yes, I met people with different backgrounds.
- Yes, I gained new ideas for collaboration.
- Yes, I gained new ideas for research.
- Yes, I learned about a new club/organization.
- Yes, I learned about an interesting graduate school program.
- Yes, I improved my communication skills with strangers.
- Not really, but I enjoyed communicating with new people.
- Not really, three minutes was not enough time to get to know someone.

***(Question 7) What was the most useful part of the workshop and why?***

This question required participants to formulate an open-ended response. The majority of participants gave a response that included “interacting with others”. Recurring responses to this question included the following responses:

- Gaining experience communicating with strangers.
- Interacting with people in other disciplines.
- Interacting with faculty and older students in my field.
- Interacting with people with new ideas.
- Interacting with people I normally would not encounter.
- Networking.
- Making possible connections/meeting possible collaborators.
- Finding people to help with a project.
- Interacting with students; it made me feel useful.
- Reading about projects others are involved in.

- The PowerPoint because it had a lot of useful tips and effectively communicated overall goals.
- The poster because it helped spark conversations.

### Summary and Recommendations

The CoLAB provides a unique workshop for students, faculty, and staff at the University of Florida. The program allows participants to meet in an environment that facilitates interactions specifically regarding collaborative research. The evaluation shows that the program is well organized and has positive effects on the participants. They report learning communication skills that can be used with strangers and collaboration techniques that can be used with individuals within and beyond their disciplines.

The post-workshop questionnaire results reveal notable improvements in the CoLAB program from the 2011-2012 academic year to the 2012-2013 academic year. Overall ratings of the program were more favorable, as many fewer participants rated the workshop negatively. While 7% of last year's participants rated the workshop as "fair" or "poor", only 3.2% of this year's participants rated the workshop as "fair", and none of the participants rated the workshop as "poor". Moreover, concerns about the length of the workshop seem to have been largely alleviated. While 18% of last year's participants indicated that the workshop was too short, only 10% of this year's participants indicated that the workshop was too short.

This year's participants agreed more strongly that they are more confident in their abilities to approach people they don't know, as the average Likert scale response to the statement increased from 4.00 to 4.09. However, this year's participants agreed less strongly that they are more comfortable with people in other disciplines, as the average Likert scale response decreased from 4.02 to 3.97. Individual workshops may not have been as heterogeneous with regard to disciplines in the past year. When asked to state the most useful aspect of the workshop, most participants gave a response that included "interacting with others". In the future, workshops must continue to be focused on allowing individuals to interact with one another as much as possible.