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Principles and Practices for Library Outreach to First-Year Students

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries recognize that outreach is best undertaken as soon as students arrive on campus for their first year. Librarians have designed creative methods for engaging incoming students with the resources and services provided by the campus library. Such outreach is increasingly important as prior experience using library resources and services among incoming first-year students decreases. This paper reviews the rationale for employing several methods of outreach to first-year students and provides examples of creative means for doing so implemented successfully at American colleges and universities. Hope College's information literacy objectives and its library's outreach programs, both as initially conceived and as they have evolved in the years since, are given particular attention as examples of varied, dynamic approaches to first-year student outreach.

When first-year college students arrive on their campus as new members of the community, they become acquainted with the academic and social cultures of the place and people. A vibrant library is part of both these aspects of collegiate life. Academic librarians have established a tradition of outreach to first-year students using creative, informative methods of raising awareness of the services and resources provided by the library. They can draw on the ideas of others to design programs that suit the culture of an individual campus and library.

A 2005 survey reported on by Audrey Williams June in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2006) found that more than half of the responding students considered the library “extremely important” or “very important” in their college selection decision. Clearly if the library is a significant part of the reason students are on our campus, we want to make them feel welcome, comfortable, and equipped to use its resources and services. Librarian Mariana Regalado places the library and information literacy in the larger context of student success, academically and socially, as “a crucial element in fostering first-year students with the competence, confidence, and connections they need for a smooth transition to college” (2003, 90).

Incoming students speak of fears about the size of the library, uncertainty about where to look for resources, and discomfort with asking library staff for

help (Cahoy and Bichel 2004, 50). First-year students are expected to possess research skills more advanced than those required by typical high school curricula but most arrive underprepared for the transition to the rigors of college research. Just 39% of first-year students at four-year colleges and universities achieved the minimum score for proficiency on 2006 and 2007 Educational Testing Service assessments of basic information literacy (Tannenbaum and Katz 2008, vii). Academic librarians, administrators, and classroom faculty share an interest in educating first-year students to effectively use information resources and library services (Barefoot 2006).

When OCLC (the Online Computer Library Center, a library service and research group) surveyed college students in 2005, respondents reported heaviest use of library web sites, catalogs, online databases, and electronic journals among all of the digital resources made available to them (OCLC 2006, 2-5). These resources match those most frequently taught to first-year students, according to a survey in which more than 90% of responding librarians reported teaching first-year students how to use either the library catalog, its databases, or both (Boyd-Byrnes and McDermott 2006, 11). Methods employed by librarians to inform incoming students about these tools are as diverse and dynamic as the students themselves.

I. FIRST-YEAR COURSES

Survey data reveals that the most frequent source of structured interaction between incoming students and their college library is a first-year course that includes information literacy among its learning objectives (Malone and Videon 2003, 8). Examples of how information literacy objectives are taught by librarians during one or two library-focused classes within a first-year course abound. Methodologies are continually revised to maintain the currency of the content presented and the engagement of the classroom faculty members and librarians involved. Grinnell College's latest redesign of its first-year information literacy program generated nine instruction guides that address the information literacy skills Grinnell's librarians agree are essential for today's college students. Designed for flexibility, each of the nine guides requires just twenty to thirty minutes of class time, can stand alone or be taught in combination, and are web-based but can be taught without computer access (Rod and Stuhr 2007, 224-225). The University of Minnesota reaches first-year students enrolled in English composition classes through its *Unravel the Library* three-part series of information literacy classes. Focused on essential services and resources, *Unravel the Library* reduces the quantity of information presented in favor of increasing the amount that is retained (Houlson 2007, 91-92). Grinnell College and the University of Minnesota serve as just two examples of the methods libraries nationwide are using to integrate themselves into first-year courses.

2. LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Librarians are members of learning communities at some colleges that create them for first-year students. At Arizona State University, librarians participate in first-year learning communities by designing information literacy-focused assignments, embedding library resources in the course management system, and participating in the online class discussions so that students and librarians interact regularly, in-person and online. The university's faculty handbook mandates that librarians participate in all of the curricular design for each learning community, insuring that information literacy is part of each group's activities (Young and Duverney 2006, 64).

3. PEER-LED PROGRAMS

At some colleges, first-year seminar leaders are undergraduates themselves, supervised by faculty, librarians, and student advising staff. Washington State University's peer-led first-year seminars are optional and linked to traditional 100-level classes. Librarians train the peer leaders who, in turn, provide information literacy instruction to their first-year students. Among the established learning outcomes for the seminars are writing research questions, citing sources, and avoiding plagiarism (Ursin, Blakesley, and Johnson 2004, 284-285).

4. STAND-ALONE COURSES

Rather than integrate information literacy skills into a first-year learning community or seminar course, some colleges have established a stand-alone course. Birmingham Southern College started one called *InfoMania: Creating, Managing, and Seeking Information in the 21st Century* with learning objectives that meld information resource and information technology awareness and skills. The class includes a student-designed service learning component wherein individually or in small groups, students serve children, the elderly, and the college with information and technology-based projects (Malone and Videon 2003, 61-67).

5. ONLINE INSTRUCTION

Library instruction for first-year students can be moved away from direct, personal contact and replaced with digital instruction, a transition with a practical and pedagogical rationale. Libraries with limited staff resources and large student populations have found that moving their first-year programs to an online format allows them to reach more incoming students. Even some colleges with smaller student populations use digital technology for outreach to a generation of students accustomed to acquiring new information online. The digital format provides an enhanced opportunity for assessment, an added benefit of providing even part of the first-year outreach program through a tutorial or virtual tour. The University of Richmond uses a set of nine online tutorials

incorporating a virtual tour, web page orientation, introduction to plagiarism, copyright restrictions, citation methods, information about the university's computing resources, and advice for accessing help. The tutorials conclude with an assessment (Malone and Videon 2003, 131). Librarians at Hunter College have found that their assessment data is useful in the library and to the college as a whole because their VOILA! tutorial reveals a number of proficiencies just as students enter the college (Ondrusek et al. 2005, 411). At Ball State University, librarians use their online tutorial's assessment to inform the content they cover later during an in-person library class. Ball State librarians believe that this dual-format first-year instruction reaches students effectively by providing basic information digitally and then personalizing the content and answering lingering questions during in-person class sessions (Muth and Taylor 2002, 116).

6. OPEN HOUSES

An open house welcomes first-year students to the library and, hosting libraries hope, makes them more likely to use it as they adopt new study habits and undertake research projects. The library at Penn State University's University Park Campus hosts an open house over the course of two days near the start of each semester. First-year students meet librarians and library staff, become acquainted with the library's physical layout, and leave with small gifts and raffled prizes, including a semester's worth of free textbooks from the campus bookstore. The open house occurs a few weeks into the semester when students are particularly receptive to its message of a welcoming, service-oriented library prepared to help them do their best work (Cahoy and Bichel 2004, 50-52, 54-55).

7. THEME EVENTS

Librarians at some colleges have transformed the open house into an interactive mystery tour or scavenger hunt. The mystery event at Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York, called *Mission Quite Possible—A Library Adventure*, asks students to collect clues and decipher them by finding essential library locations and using basic resources such as the catalog and a periodical database (Marcus and Beck 2003, 23-24). Swarthmore College struggled with reaching new students who all too often, librarians believed, overestimated their ability to perform research. The librarians have found that first-year students are more receptive to library instruction after their initial semester. In response, librarians created a scavenger hunt to introduce incoming students to the library. According to Swarthmore College librarian Pamela Harris, "we have come to learn that orientation is the beginning of a process. The evolution of successful research skills begins with the first step in the door. Orientation should be an introduction to the library, in-depth research skills

and a familiarity with the library collection will develop gradually over the coming four years” (2002, 67). Harris’s comments highlight an apparent tension between librarians’ desire to introduce first-year students to the library as a vibrant space and to initiate the learning of information literacy skills in the first weeks of college, a pedagogical issue for future exploration by researchers.

8. COMMON READING PROGRAMS

When a college asks all first-year students to read a single book, that college’s library has an opportunity to connect the book with its collections and incoming students with the library as a place for reading and discussion. The library at The University of Montana creates informative web pages on the selected book and recommends related reading. At Plymouth State University, an exhibit visually ties the library to the common reading experience. Librarians can connect to the shared reading experience by facilitating discussions, authoring discussion guides, assisting faculty members with their preparation for the book discussions, or hosting speakers on topics related to the book. Depending on the tone a college conveys with its shared reading, the library may use it as a means of promoting recreational reading on campus and the library’s collection as a source of extracurricular activity (Cahoy and Snavely 2007, 127).

9. RESIDENCE LIFE COLLABORATIONS

Even at colleges where first-year student programs are based in the student development or residence life sector of the college, libraries can be involved. Librarians at Duke University bring resources and reference services into dormitory life through their *Librarian in the House* program (Cahoy and Snavely 2007, 128). Academic Peer Assistants (APAs) at DePauw University are juniors and seniors who live among the first-year students. Librarians view the APAs as gatekeepers, recognizing that if the APAs are aware of library resources and services, the new students they mentor will be, also. Librarians train APAs before the start of the semester and then use their connections with the APAs later in the term when the librarians themselves spend time in the dormitory computer labs answering questions and orienting first-year students to the library’s web site (Ruediger and Neal 2004).

10. THE HOPE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

A number of the practices discussed thus far have been incorporated into library outreach to first-year students at Hope College, an undergraduate, liberal arts college of approximately three thousand students where incoming classes number about eight hundred each fall. Hope College’s Van Wylan Library is a center of research, study, technology, and social activity on a residential campus in Holland, Michigan. Four reference and instruction librarians, along with

the Head of Public Services, are responsible for designing outreach to incoming students as part of a comprehensive instruction program. Some first-year student outreach is facilitated by the library's Marketing Team, a group of librarians and staff.

Hope College's First-Year Seminar, or FYS, now in its ninth year as a required course for incoming students, "helps introduce new college students to the life of the mind and to the kind of college-level learning expected in other classes at Hope College—learning that is an open-ended, life-long process..." (Reynolds 2007, 12). From the beginning, the library has been part of FYS but the nature of the interaction between it and the library over those nine years has been a dynamic one under continual revision as services and resources change, as do the expectations and needs of first-year students.

The initial FYS library component required that students take a brief tour of the library during their first weeks on campus and complete a CD-ROM-based tutorial on the fundamentals of finding information at Hope's libraries. Successful completion of the tutorial, required by FYS instructors, necessitated responses to an assessment at an accuracy level of 90% or higher. Professor Kelly Jacobsma, Head of Public Services, designed the tutorial, initiating a new form of information literacy instruction at Hope.

Different members of the faculty teach FYS each semester, often assigning diverse and rigorous research topics that necessitate library instruction beyond that in the tutorial. As a result, librarians worked closely with many FYS instructors to craft research assignments and lead library classes that provided students with additional instruction on research resources and processes. After several years of use, the frequent updating of the tutorial due to rapid changes in library resources became burdensome. This challenge in combination with the positive reactions to the tailored library classes resulted in setting aside the tutorial in favor of promoting individual librarian interaction with as many FYS sections as possible. Close collaborations between librarians and FYS instructors resulted, as did connections between students and librarians.

The tour of essential library service points and spaces continued, even after use of the tutorial ended. Initially completed over the course of the first few weeks of the semester, librarians tightened tour schedules so that all first-year students completed their library tour during the first week of classes. Tour staffing changed so that in later years most librarians, library staff, and some student employees provided tours. The content of the tours evolved as service points became more important than information formats and locations. For example, in the early years of the tours, first-year students saw an example of a bound journal and received an introduction to archival journal storage. They saw sample pieces of microfiche and the location of readers and printers. In later years, the tours eliminated content of this nature in favor of more detailed descriptions of media services, computer assistance, and the accessibility of research help both in-person and online.

Two years ago, librarians agreed to discontinue the tour and replace it with an activity named *Meet a Librarian*. All first-year students were expected to visit the reference desk during the first week of classes. On arrival, each received a personal greeting from a reference librarian, a brief review of the library's web site, an explanation of reference services, an introduction to services available elsewhere in the library, and a visual orientation to the first floor. Attendees received a mechanical pencil imprinted with the library's contact information and a certificate for one free cup of coffee or tea in the library's café. Librarians considered the outreach aspects of *Meet a Librarian* to be successful with participation by more than 90% of first-year students each year.

Though an effective form of outreach, *Meet a Librarian* was taxing on the five librarians expected to dialogue with approximately eight hundred students over the course of five days. As a result, yet another variation on the introduction to library services was planned for the fall of 2008. A library video, a marketing and outreach concept piloted in the summer of 2007, has been re-scripted with an increased emphasis on orientation for first-year students. The script is largely student-written and features students guiding one another in the discovery of library services. Librarians hope that the video, peer-driven and interjected with humor, will welcome and communicate library services to first-year students at least as effectively as *Meet a Librarian* but without the high demand it placed on the librarians.

At the same time *Meet a Librarian* replaced library tours, the tailored FYS library classes gave way to a standardized library class intended to teach a fundamental information literacy skill. The tailored library research classes that edged out the tutorial had become highly intensive, with many entailing multiple library instruction sessions using advanced research resources while other FYS sections had no library involvement after the tour. Evidence of many positive outcomes existed for those FYS sections that involved research instruction; however, librarians shared a belief that all first-year students would be better served by providing instruction on several essential information literacy skills that they would likely be called upon to use early in their college experience. Librarians designed a standard hour-long class that uses active, collaborative learning to illustrate the differences between popular and scholarly periodical sources and to introduce a general periodical database as a source for both types of articles. At the start of the class, librarians explain to the students that discerning between scholarly and popular sources, whether viewed in print or online, is a skill professors often expect students to possess. The rationale for locating an article in a periodical database rather than through an internet search engine is also described. Students interact with sample periodicals and with the database using a predetermined topic. A limited assessment of the standardized session in the fall of 2007, its second year, indicated that a majority of students had been called upon to use the skills learned in the FYS library class during their first semester. Establishing this foundational skill in FYS has

allowed librarians to teach more advanced retrieval skills in the 100-level English composition course that also integrates information literacy objectives.

The FYS program at Hope College is well-established, as is the library component within it. Library-related content in the FYS program has evolved to meet the needs of incoming students, a process that will not cease with the video and standardized library class planned for the fall of 2008. The library's First-Year Seminar program is intended, as are other creative, informative programs at hundreds of colleges and universities in the United States, to raise awareness of services and resources, encouraging their use when a first-year student has a question, concern, or simply needs a space for study, collaboration, or contemplation.

Diverse, dynamic programs ranging from welcoming open houses to prize-winning scavenger hunts, and from online tutorials to in-person class sessions, draw first-year students into the library, in-person and online. Librarians reinforce the centrality of the library through active participation in learning communities, residence life, and student development programming. They will continue to monitor trends in the existing information literacy level of incoming students, the level required of them in college, and methods for guiding first-year students who are acquiring the research skills they need to succeed in the classroom and laboratory.

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