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## Ideas, Hints, and Tips

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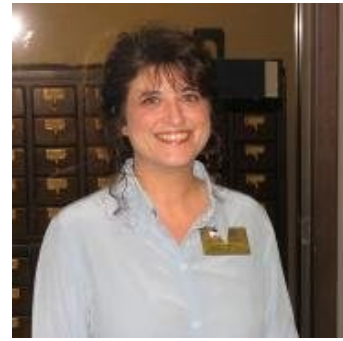
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## Ideas, Hints, and Tips

Reference librarians today rely on an impressive arsenal of databases and software to connect patrons with the information they seek. We're ready and waiting to answer their questions, but what if they don't ask?

If students have a topic, they may search the library catalog, use GALILEO to begin a search for articles, or scan through suggested resources in subject guides. They may or may not ask for assistance from reference librarians. These methods can be successful if students know what they are looking for.



What do they do if they don't have a topic? For those needing ideas, there are good databases to peruse for controversial topics. But what about the students who haven't had a library class yet, honestly do not know how to begin the research process, and, for that reason, may feel intimidated or embarrassed to ask a librarian for help? How can we reach out to this segment of our users?

What about student displays? Is there a place in today's academic libraries for traditional displays? What about peer-to-peer assistance?

As a culmination of musing with colleagues over the higher-than-ever gate count at my library coupled with declining reference questions, discovering a writing contest sponsored by UGA libraries that encourages student scholarship, and trying to frequently update 2 display cases under my purview; I had an idea for revitalizing librarian-patron interaction by using highly visual displays that encourage student awareness of available materials and their appropriate use.

Current students seem to prefer peer assistance rather than asking a reference librarian to assist them. Why not capitalize on this trend and allow research-savvy students to help their peers by creating displays with a librarian assisting in the selection of pertinent materials? Students are resourceful and creative, and they generally know what appeals to other students. This approach also gives recognition to good scholarship and provides the students with a commendable service activity to add to their resumes.

I experimented with this idea over the last couple of semesters, using student assistants in my department. I asked them to create a display of materials that could be used to write a paper or make a presentation on a specific topic in their field. Throughout the process, I checked their sources and made suggestions, asking them to act as if they were actually planning to write the paper, complete with a thesis statement and a bibliography.

One student, Samuel Russell, examined the economic impact of tobacco in the South. Included in the display were maps, Georgia documents, federal documents, a thesis, a video, books from our collection, and articles from journals available to Georgia Southern University library patrons. Samuel also included materials on the negative health impact of tobacco and suggestions for other lines of inquiry.

A second display created by Jadarelle Stanford bridged the gap between application and practice in public health, using theories of health educators and statistical analysis to show how their roles in sexual and reproductive health are linked as a primary prevention strategy. This display was also used to

promote Jadarelle's class presentation to the student body and to highlight a related guest speaker.

I am working with a third student, Xavier Green, to determine the best way to share his crime prevention exhibit online, in addition to his traditional display in the Learning Commons. Most academic libraries can easily publicize these exhibits on their blogs or in their newsletters.

The purpose of the exhibits is to engage students by offering attractive ideas for projects and papers. The exhibits also help them to visualize the different types of materials their professors expect them to use, as they may not be familiar with the vast resources available to them. The displays include invitations to ask for assistance at the Information Desk and assurances that all materials in the display may be checked out. By having fellow students create the displays, I hope to help reduce the barrier that exists between students and the information they seek.

Libraries should consider taking this student display idea a step further and sponsoring a contest for the best bibliography displays. Students thrive on competition and love to win. By giving incentives to contest winners, sponsoring libraries will encourage widespread participation and increase student engagement beyond their presence in the building. With the help of media outlets (such as the student newspaper, library blogs and department web pages and newsletters), the library and the participating students will gain recognition for their contributions to campus scholarship. Librarians will have an opportunity to interact with students and demonstrate their ability to add value to research, thus dispelling the notion that the Internet has usurped the role of librarians. The appeal of sponsoring a bibliography exhibit contest as opposed to a writing contest is that librarians will not be tasked with reading submitted papers, only with checking thesis statements and citations, making the workload more feasible.

We have only a limited time to engage with students, so finding ways to maximize the quality of our interaction is essential. The use of visual displays and the idea of making them houses for research queries help to extend that limited time. By recruiting students to showcase their research via displays in the library, librarians can become more involved with the current and future needs of the students they serve.

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