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Designing Engagement for Academic Libraries

By Betsy Whitley and Amy Burger

What Drives Us

Research shows that when it comes to engagement, retention, grades, and academic skill development, using libraries is good for students, and library use contributes to student success. Providing experiences that engage students both academically and socially is high on the list of successful retention efforts, according to sociologist and educator Vincent Tinto (2012). Where better for that to happen than the library?

While libraries have been stereotyped as quiet, exclusive places, they have actually served throughout history as gathering places, community places, and democratic places. Libraries are part of the social infrastructure or “third spaces,” so called by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, places where people gather, like parks, pubs, cafes, and plazas. Unlike businesses, there is no expectation that users must pay to be in a library’s space.

When promoting the library as “place,” consider that engagement and providing engaging activities:

- adds to the sense of community and connection (social, cultural, and academic)
 - with scheduled events to participate in with others by intent or chance
 - with rooms and seating to read, hang out, drink coffee, eat lunch,

and for team projects and study groups, etc.

- nurtures the *idea* of both the library and the world of scholars and scholarship as relevant and inclusive to young adults and the community—the library has something for everyone and is not exclusive
- relieves both library and academic anxiety by encouraging relaxing visits offering opportunities to connect and unwind.

At Dalton State College, we have striven to address each of these points in our outreach efforts. Over half of our students are first generation, and many are second-language English speakers, to whom college may seem especially new or confusing. In addition to the campus itself, the academic library may be perceived as intimidating, a significant factor in the phenomenon of library anxiety.

Library anxiety was documented by librarian and researcher Constance Mellon in 1986. Mellon’s work led to her holding “warmth sessions” to build rapport between students and librarians. Carol Kuhlthau’s research on information seeking additionally clarified that an uncertainty factor inherent in the research process also fosters anxiety. Anxiety and discomfort need to be dispelled in order for students to choose to use libraries.

Some library anxiety may be expressed as “I hate libraries,” by those who don’t know how to use the library. The resulting feelings of



discomfort, incapability, helplessness, not smart enough, not belonging, and shame can lead to a mindset that is closed to the idea of libraries.

This mindset and discomfort may give rise to the idea that the library is an exclusive place, for scholars only, not “me.” Engagement in libraries can lead to a mindset change, so that more students change their point of view to “I do belong here,” and “I am a scholar.”

What We’re Doing at Dalton

The majority of students new to Dalton matriculate in the fall, which means they attend the mandatory orientation over the summer. While for years, the library’s role at this event was a place at a table with a display board, in the past few years, we have garnered a spot on the schedule of breakout sessions. While not every student at orientation chooses to attend our session, those who do learn about the library in a low-stakes game modeled after the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga’s wonderful [Library Mythbusters](#) activity. Like Mellon’s warmth sessions, the goal of the orientation is more to put a friendly face on the library than it is to inform students of printing costs, resource sharing, or food and drink rules—although the session does that as well.

When fall rolls around, the college hosts a weeklong Week of Welcome event to mark the beginning of classes. Roberts Library has participated in this event for years, predating our employment at Dalton State. In

recent years, the library has used games, film screenings, food, and prize giveaways to host our own open house event. These events have

been themed: in 2016 and 2017, we hosted an all-day Library Carnival, and in 2018 reduced the event to two midday hours with an Alice in Wonderland theme. Reducing the event’s duration allowed library employees to maintain library services and focus our creative and enthusiastic energy for a more manageable event. This event encourages students to encounter the library space and employees in a fun and approachable way that we hope contributes to the lessening of library anxiety.



Another event we host regularly is Stress-Free Week, during finals. The library offers extended hours, crafting workshops, games, a coloring station, and visits from therapy dogs, and provides free drinks (coffee and cocoa in fall semester, coffee and fruit-infused water in spring semester).

The three aforementioned events are the most significant in terms of time, cost, and effort. They are also less focused on information literacy skills than simply illustrating the library’s atmosphere of welcome and approachability.

Smaller-scale events have a role in our library too. During the year, we frequently offer

passive programming, such as a DIY poetry station in April, DIY snow globe table in December, and make your own Valentine in February.



Not only do we develop activities that bring students into the library, we make efforts to get the library out on campus, attending community events and campus activities. Even something as simple as eating lunch on campus periodically can make the library more visible as a part of the campus community.

Like many academic libraries, campus patrons are our primary users, but we are open to the community as well. Some of the outreach events we offer are publicized in the local newspaper and actively marketed as open to the public. These include author talks, which bring writers to the library to discuss their work, and many of the activities in our yearly summer reading program.

The summer reading program was developed after library leadership recognized that campus events during the summer semester were limited. The summer reading program involves book talks, workshops, and larger events. Each summer, the reading program is themed. Recent summers have focused on themes of food, travel, mystery, and pop culture. Notable events for the last two of these were a live-action murder mystery game and a Harry Potter birthday celebration, which included a wand-making activity.

In summer 2018, Roberts Library underwent the first phase of a planned years-long construction

project, and as a result, did not offer a summer reading program. However, we made sure our patrons were aware of the project's progress by sharing updates on our social media accounts. Because much of the library and the ongoing work was shrouded by plastic sheeting, this virtual engagement was welcomed by curious users.

Where We Plan to Go Next

While attendance numbers and verbal participant feedback are valuable, the only program for which we've conducted a formal assessment has been the live-action murder mystery game. In that case, feedback from attendees was positive, which was encouraging. However, we realize that planning and implementing ways to gather and incorporate user feedback is an important next step for our efforts.

Roberts Library has several events planned for the spring 2019 semester. We encourage you to consider trying some of your own.

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