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Breaking the Ice: Using Non-traditional Methods of Student Involvement to Effect a Welcoming College Library Environment

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Introduction

The Daniel Library at The Citadel hosts library events throughout the year with the expectations that engaging with students will reduce library anxiety and will create a connection between the student and the library. This article seeks to examine whether or not these purposeful efforts to interact with college students in the library are successful. A survey was administered in order to measure the impact these events have on the students' perception of the library and the librarians.

Background

The Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina, is located in Charleston, SC and has an undergraduate student body of about 2000 cadets, all of whom reside on campus in military-style barracks. The college supports 18 undergraduate major programs, the student/faculty ratio is 13:1, and the average undergraduate class size is 21. The college's Daniel Library has 8 full-time faculty librarians and 16 staff members. NOTE: Approximately 1000 graduate students are enrolled at The Citadel, but this article will focus primarily on the undergraduate student as library patron. The collection consists of nearly 300,000 print volumes, over 85,000 electronic books, and over 100 subscription databases. Throughout the academic year, faculty librarians teach approximately 150 information literacy sessions to both undergraduate and graduate students. While the military structure, the cadet and faculty uniforms, and the fortress-like architecture make the college unique, the librarian-student relationship is not. Librarians at the Daniel Library are motivated to connect with students just like other academic librarians are; witnessing the students' library anxiety and seeking ways to minimize it.

Literature Survey

College students are accustomed to campus-wide systems where administrators, professors, and librarians require students to use online procedures to complete course registration, to request information, to submit assignments, to pay institutional fees, and to perform limitless other tasks. At the same time, college libraries have strived to be not only a building wherein students study, interact, and research, but also (and arguably more so) an online portal through

which a patron may access scholarly articles, retrieve call numbers, discover digitized material, browse online newspapers, review course guides, and seek research assistance on these and other academic and non-academic efforts. Convenience, ease, speed, and familiarity with and acceptance of electronic research and communication tools are the bases for libraries' implementation of virtual reference, online library account access, research consultation request Web-based forms, and more. Do patrons' reliance on and librarians' endorsement of the use of virtual communication and research methods inadvertently widen an existing void between the students and librarians? The literature shows extensively the apprehension that the majority of students experience in regards to using a campus library, beginning with Constance Mellon's (1986) library anxiety study that revealed 75-85% of the 6000 students surveyed would describe their library experience as being fear-based (160).

Knowing the existence and prevalence of library anxiety, librarians must carefully consider the modern methods used today to interact with students. Lesley Brown (2011) states, "virtual reference is an alternative to face-to-face reference that allows the library to reach a broader audience, giving individuals the tools to gain a better understanding of how information is organized" (314). While that is certainly the intention of the service, it is important to be mindful that the technology may alienate a student or reinforce their anxiety when approaching a librarian in person. Brown continues: In essence, reference librarians remain on the cutting edge of trends in the field of information services, adapting to technological advances and adapting technology to better serve users. Understanding that user needs go far beyond new trends in reference services and new technology is something that librarians must also recognize in the twenty-first century. The profession as a whole must continue to work on developing better interpersonal "soft skills" along with other proficiencies in order to provide the best services in library reference. Perhaps acknowledging the existence of library anxiety is the natural first step. In order to gain a better understanding of the issue it must be recognized as a real dilemma for some, and before librarians can be empathetic to users that suffer from library anxiety, librarians must themselves be better informed of the issue (316).

In a college library, there are continual efforts to reach students through modern technology, but this pervasive library anxiety still exists (Nicol 2009, 278). The librarian's position is a balance between efforts to appear welcoming while still accepting the reality that reference desk shifts do not necessarily lend themselves to making eye contact with each student individually while appearing friendly and waiting for a student's question. The literature on college student development reflects what interests librarians as information professionals: the need to connect with, engage with, and involve students to help with their scholarly success (Axelson and Flick 2011; Kuh and Gonyea 2003; Wolf-Wendel et al. 2009). In the library, initial steps toward this goal can be made by connecting with and "breaking the ice" with the student who is struggling with library research and who is fearful when seeking assistance. There is a need for harmony between technological methods for research and conventional face-to-face human contact such as the reference interview, just as electronic books exist alongside traditional print books in the college library. Anecdotally, toward the beginning of each information literacy class, when library faculty introduce electronic books to the students, they are asked informally about their preferences and use of electronic books. Typically about half of the students agree that e-books are better or just as good as print books. The other half usually notes that they prefer to be able to flip the pages and to bring the physical book back to their room. Similarly, library faculty can expect that digital methods of communication and research may alienate some students and can discourage them from interacting with librarians.

Engagement and Involvement

Axelson and Flick (2011) stress that definitions of "student engagement" are "often tangled semantically as well as conceptually" (41), but they point to Alexander Astin's research wherein he "suggested that a student's involvement ('the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience') produces learning in direct proportion to that involvement" (40). This concept and the National Survey of Student Engagement's (NSSE) emphasis on the importance of "faculty-student contact" and "participation in collaborative learning experiences" with regards to student engagement (Axelson and Flick 2011, 40) can and should both be applied to the library. The library, as one unit in the college student's tenure at the institution, can leverage the roles it plays--as both a place of social refuge and a place for serious researchers--to connect with students in a meaningful way that will, in turn, create a welcoming, scholarly atmosphere. This is in contrast to passively expecting students to seek out the library, automatically know what the reference desk is used for, and understand that librarians' sole mission is to assist with the customers' academic.

Making the Connections with Students

Student development researcher Kuh (2003) suggested, "you become integrated through involvement and engagement, by devoting effort to things that promote positive outcomes. You don't get integrated academically or socially unless you do something." As a library, and as a component of the institutional mission to cultivate student success, librarians have an obligation to uphold a policy of engagement and involvement with students to enhance their academic experience and to assist in their development. Library faculty also must address the previously mentioned issues of library anxiety and apprehension about asking for assistance. This concept is what Kulthau (1991) refers to in her research on students' information search process (ISP): "The central premise of all this research is that the uncertainty which initiates the ISP causes confusion and doubt and is likely to be accompanied by feelings of anxiety. These feelings are a function of constructing meaning and are natural in the ISP" (369-370). It must not be solely up to the student to approach the reference librarian; it is up to the librarian to seek out the student who needs research help in the ISP. This can be performed directly (through roving reference, for example), but can also be done indirectly and in non-traditional, social ways--by hosting events, parties, demonstrations, and contests that encourage interaction and that begin to fill the chasm between the student and the librarian. These outreach events serve three purposes: to ease library anxiety; to involve and engage students in their campus environment; and to promote library services.

Each semester during reading period (the time between the end of the term and the first day of exams), the Daniel Library hosts "Doggy Day" during which puppies and dogs from local animal shelters are brought to the library. Inspired by similar programs at colleges around the nation, the event has a dual mission: to connect librarians and students in a non-traditional, relaxing setting so the library and its staff members are considered to be open, welcome resources; and to help students relieve some pressure before exams begin. Researchers like Reynolds and Rabschutz (2011) document the benefits of these types of events and show that interaction with animals can have a positive impact on college students' welfare and emotional health during this tense time of the semester.



Periodically, to incite a conversation with passersby at the reference desk, librarians will hold a Candy-Counting Contest, a Reading Contest, or a brief questionnaire that will be followed by a drawing. During holidays such as Halloween, Christmas, and Valentine's Day, a large container is filled with candy and students are encouraged to guess the number of candy pieces in it. Similarly, for the Reading Contest, a container is placed at the reference desk that invites passers-by to tell the librarians what book they are reading and to describe it in a few sentences. Using an innocuous conversation starter like these contests can help to close the gap between librarians and some students. The drawings will award the winner with snacks, candy, or a gift certificate to the library coffee shop. Minimal effort and money are devoted to these contests, but the face-to-face conversations that encourage an open dialogue between the student and the librarian can be valuable. For example, one of the responses from a recent questionnaire indicated that the student was having difficulty with library journals; the student then has the option to leave an e-mail address for a librarian to follow up with them, which this student did. The value in connecting with a student that may not have approached the reference desk otherwise is evident.

Daniel Demos is an endeavor that highlights databases, citation assistance, or other library resources for the purpose of promoting the service and to once again create a connection with the student body. The informal demonstration is brief and times/days vary in order to reach different students. The fall semester will feature a collaborative Daniel Demo with the campus' Academic Support Center tutors and will follow a Citadel Graduate College and Evening Undergraduate School Appreciation Party during which pizza, snacks, and drinks are served for these students. The library hosts a similar appreciation event for the Veterans Day Breakfast each year.

Do these events matter? Are librarians reaching students in the way intended? Evidence of the programs' success and limitations were discovered through a simple survey.

Survey and Results

After Institutional Review Board approval of the brief, six-question survey, contact was made with faculty in the English department and a class visitation schedule was made by the library liaison. Participating faculty members afforded the librarians liaison the first 10 minutes of their classes to introduce the survey, to explain that participation was anonymous and voluntary, and to describe the purpose of the questions. The survey was conducted in six classes, for a total of 116 undergraduate students. The results show that about 71% of respondents use the library for an academic or information-seeking purpose (67% for research and homework, and 3.5% for other directional or "ready-reference" type inquiries). This is significant because these are the instances during which students would have the most contact with a librarian. The other options, printing/copying and checking Facebook/e-mail/other Web sites, would likely require the least amount of interaction with librarians. More simply, this 71% is also noteworthy because it offers librarians a snapshot of what the majority of patrons are seeking when they enter the library.



Two (discouraging, but useful) findings came from the survey. Only about half of the students were either "aware" or "sometimes aware" of the library promotions, events, and parties throughout the semester: about 47%; fifty-three percent answered "No" when asked if they were aware. When asked if they participated in the events, about 82% answered that they did not; about 17% had participated on some level. Perhaps the most encouraging responses are shown in the final two questions where students answered that they felt more welcome in the library (60%) and more comfortable asking librarians (also 60%) when thinking about the library events and their impact. This suggests that perhaps simply knowing that the library is a venue that promotes engagement, and an open, inclusive atmosphere is enough to at least make a positive impression on college students.

The purpose of the survey was to get feedback on students' use of the library, their awareness of library events, and their perceptions of the library and of librarians in the context of feeling comfortable and welcome. While this process was intended to measure these issues, conducting the survey *itself* became a method of reaching out to students and marketing

library resources; allowing the students to see a library presence within their traditional classroom reinforced the idea that librarians want to cultivate their college development and success.

It is worth noting that at The Citadel, some freshmen are under the impression that they are not permitted to participate in special events such as these. During the fall semester, “knobs” (freshmen cadet recruits) have not been “recognized” yet—meaning that the Fourth-Class System, the military training system, is still in effect. Furthermore, cadets are at ease in the library, but not outdoors, so some undergraduate students (especially underclassmen) may be hesitant to relax and socialize outdoors. This survey was conducted before the spring semester Doggy Day, Daniel Library’s most successful event, so those freshmen who felt they were not allowed to participate in the fall event and who had yet to participate in the spring event would have answered negatively to the survey.

Library faculty announced the events through various methods on campus—e-mail, intra-campus listserv, and flyers—but, based on feedback, improvements can be made. Some students overlook e-mails from campus entities as reflected in the comments section of the survey: “They are not always easy to figure out when the events are. Spread the word better (e-mails)”;

“More well known! Want to know about more events”; “I don’t even know what Puppy Day is. It would be cool for e-mail notifications”; “Maybe I am oblivious, but I never saw any promotion for said events.” Efforts to promote it face-to-face and to increase the frequency of the announcement e-mails will be made for future events.

Daniel Library faculty also learned about the programs’ success in other ways: “The events are a great way to decompress. The library is a great place to study and relax”; “Very welcoming atmosphere. Easy to study”; “I am already comfortable asking for assistance”; “They are very helpful in accomplishing your goals in which you set out to accomplish there”; “The library is a safe haven for knobs, thank you”; “You guys are great!” Librarians are on the right track with persistent efforts to involve students in the library, to reduce library anxiety, and to promote library services. There are improvements to be made specifically with communication about the events to the student body, and there is a need for continual research on how special events and promotions impact students, but initial examination of library faculty efforts is encouraging; gradually, with consistent efforts, the library can expect to minimize anxiety. Furthermore, with each new class that matriculates, the library is presented with another 700 freshmen with whom librarians will need to connect.

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Survey Instrument:

Please circle which category of student you are:

Graduate Student

Evening Undergraduate Student

Cadet

Veteran Student

1. How often do you use the library?

- (a) daily
- (b) a few times a week
- (c) a few times a month
- (d) a few times a semester
- (e) I never use the library.

2. For what do you *primarily* use the library?

- (a) Checking email, Facebook, various Web sites
- (b) Researching, working on homework
- (c) Printing, copying
- (d) Directional, informational questions
- (e) I never use the library.

3. Are you aware of various Library promotions, events, parties, etc. throughout the semester?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- (c) Sometimes

4. Have you participated in any Library events i.e. Puppy Day, CGC/EUGS Appreciation Day, Veterans Appreciation Events, Reading Contests, Daniel Demos, other promotions?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- (c) A little

5. Thinking about these Library events and their impact, what is your impression of the *Library*?

- (a) I feel *much more* welcome and comfortable using the Library.
- (b) I feel *a little more* welcome and comfortable using the Library.
- (c) I feel *much less* welcome in the Library.
- (d) I feel *a little less* welcome in the Library.
- (e) There is no change in how I feel about the Library.

6. Thinking about these Library events and their impact, what is your impression of the *Librarians*?

- (a) I feel *much more* comfortable asking Librarians for assistance.
- (b) I feel *a little more* comfortable asking Librarians for assistance.
- (c) I feel *much less* comfortable asking Librarians for assistance.
- (d) I feel *a little less* comfortable asking Librarians for assistance.
- (e) There is no change in how I feel about asking Librarians for assistance.

Are there any comments, questions, or observations you would like to share about Library events and promotions and their impact?
