

Sarah Barbrow, Carol Lubkowski, Sara B. Ludovissy, Sarah Moazeni, and Karen Storz

Up to speed

Library staff and first-generation students get together

Developing campus-wide programs to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion continues to be an ongoing priority for many colleges and universities across the country. Academic libraries are well positioned to support this work because they are embedded in so many of the functions of their institutions. Moreover, academic library staff have been writing about and practicing critical information literacy and intersectional feminist pedagogy in service of creating spaces in which all patrons can learn and grow.¹ For example, the Oberlin Group, of which Wellesley College is a member, has collaboratively drafted a guide specifically for aggregating resources that promote equity, diversity, and inclusion in libraries.²

Here at Wellesley College, library staff have been thinking about how we can do more to support our campus-wide Inclusive Excellence initiative, launched in 2018.³ The Inclusive Excellence initiative seeks to increase the economic diversity of our students, build institutional structures to ensure all students can succeed and thrive, and bring in and support diverse faculty perspectives.

While it has always been the case that not all of our students arrive with prior experience and comfort with library spaces, services, and staff, Wellesley's Inclusive Excellence initiative has given us the opportunity to think about new ways of breaking down barriers students encounter regarding the library. Staff are particularly interested in addressing these obstacles for first-generation

students (FGS), a rapidly growing population on campus making up 15% of the total student body in 2018.⁴ Over the past several years in particular, students on our campus have articulated a need for focused support for FGS, encouraging staff and faculty to consider how we meet the population's needs.⁵ There is already a structure in place on our campus for connecting with Wellesley's FGS. A class dean organizes two FGS cohorts who meet biweekly throughout the academic year to bond and network as a group, check in on academic progress, and identify services on campus that are available to them.

With this backdrop, in fall 2018 and 2019 Wellesley College instruction librarians and archivists planned a speed-networking event called a SpeedShare to introduce Wellesley FGS to the libraries and their staff.⁶ Dean Rebecca Garcia, director of Wellesley First (an umbrella identity for FGS programming on campus), commented that this type of event corresponds with the mindset she strives to instill in this group of students, given

Sarah Barbrow is science librarian, email: sbarbrow@wellesley.edu, Carol Lubkowski is music librarian, email: clubkows@wellesley.edu, Sara B. Ludovissy is assistant archivist, email: sludovis@wellesley.edu, Sarah Moazeni is research and instruction librarian, email: smoazeni@wellesley.edu, Karen Storz is research and instruction librarian, email: kstorz@wellesley.edu, at Wellesley College

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their shared self-identified background. She reflected, “We do a lot of work around community and interdependence, so I [like] the way that this [SpeedShare] is styled so that it continues that message: that this is a group of folks that have some resources, and that they want to work with you throughout your four years here.”⁷

Definition of a SpeedShare

A SpeedShare is a lively networking event in which individual “sharers” talk for three minutes with a small group about who they are and what they do, and then field questions for an additional three minutes. At the end of the six minutes, each sharer rotates to a new group and repeats the process. At the end of the event, all sharers will have visited and shared with all groups.

Preparing for the SpeedShare

Coordinating with Garcia, we scheduled two lunchtime SpeedShare events in both fall 2018 and fall 2019. Organizing the events during the already scheduled lunch meetings of the FGS cohorts meant that participation was not dependent on extensive outreach or subject to competing student priorities.

We then scheduled planning sessions for interested forward-facing library staff in order to get buy-in and ideas for the proposed event. The planning sessions allowed us to be clear about our goals, map out logistics, design a handout for students, and plan practice sessions.

Our main goals for each event were to meet our current FGS cohorts, introduce them to library staff, and provide a window into the vast array of resources—human, digital,

and physical—the libraries have to offer. We assembled a representative and interested group of staff that included colleagues from library collections, research and instructional services, special collections, and archives.

Staff prepared three-minute scripts covering who they were and how they could help students and presented them during scheduled practice sessions. The two practice sessions each fall were critical to the success of the SpeedShare. In addition to motivating staff to prepare their talking points in advance of the event, the sessions enabled partici-

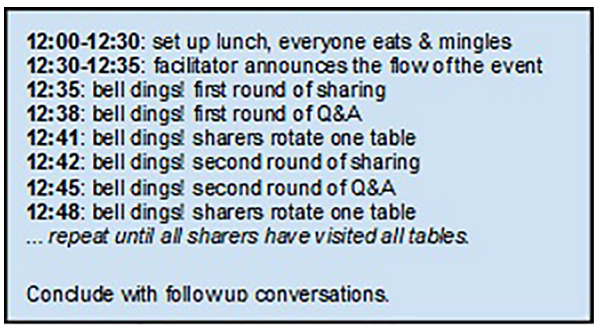


Figure 1. The timeline of SpeedShare.

pants to make sure that they were able to cover the most relevant material in only three minutes. It was very useful to have one of the event organizers present at both practice sessions to hear everyone’s presentation, give feedback, get an overall picture of what the students would experience, and figure out the optimal way to arrange the room.

The SpeedShare event

We reserved the first 20 minutes of the hour and a half we had with the students for a buffet lunch and time for low-stakes conversation and mingling, so library staff could connect with the FGS cohorts in a casual manner before the SpeedShare began. Once students finished eating, library staff spread themselves throughout the room. Each of the six-to-eight library staff members sat at a different table, joined by a few students.

To begin the SpeedShare, a facilitator announced the structure of the program, rang a bell, and the sharing began. After three minutes, the facilitator rang the bell again to signal a question-and-answer period, where students could ask about anything they just heard or were curious about. In 2019, many

library staff took a different approach, hosting a conversation with the FGS over the course of the full six minutes instead of strictly adhering to the three-minute structure.

Once the question-and-answer period concluded, the facilitator rang the bell again and each library staff member moved one table over while the students stayed in their seats, and the six minutes began again (Figures 1 and 2). At the end of the 2018 event, we provided students with a handout of library staff pictures, contact information, and roles. In 2019, we modified the handout to provide more room for students to take notes and gave it to them as they arrived.

Reflections

Mingling and seating

During the unstructured meet-and-mingle portion of the 2018 SpeedShare, staff and students ended up self-segregating and mingling mostly among themselves. In 2019, we had staff members spread out at different tables to chat and eat lunch with students as they arrived. This set a welcoming and friendly tone that made the transition to the event itself smoother.

In 2018, two staff with similar roles were seated at adjacent tables and students heard similar presentations back-to-back. In the 2019 SpeedShare, we put more space between staff with similar responsibilities and had them coordinate their talking points to highlight different aspects of library services.

Format and timing

Library staff had mixed reactions to the scripted nature of a spiel followed by a Q&A. Although the small group format provided opportunities to make meaningful connections with students and show how friendly and accessible library staff were,

the scripts were sometimes felt to be at odds with these goals.

On the other hand, some who tried both impromptu and scripted approaches credited the more formal structure with helping them maintain focus and ramble less over the course of multiple rounds. Even those who scrapped their

script noted later that the work of preparing it was valuable. We were flexible about this in the 2019 iteration and continued to experiment to determine what worked best for each person.

Feedback received

In order to get feedback on each SpeedShare, we distributed a three-question survey to students after the event. Student reflections both years were uniformly positive. Many wrote about how much they learned about library resources and particular library staff. One student remarked, “I found that this was very useful in that it eased a lot of the anxiety I felt about approaching people for help—this time they approached us.”

Garcia reflected that the students had fun and enjoyed getting to know library staff. She appreciated that the event was a conversation rather than a lecture or presentation so that the FGS could get to know library staff one-on-one. She further noted that the event would

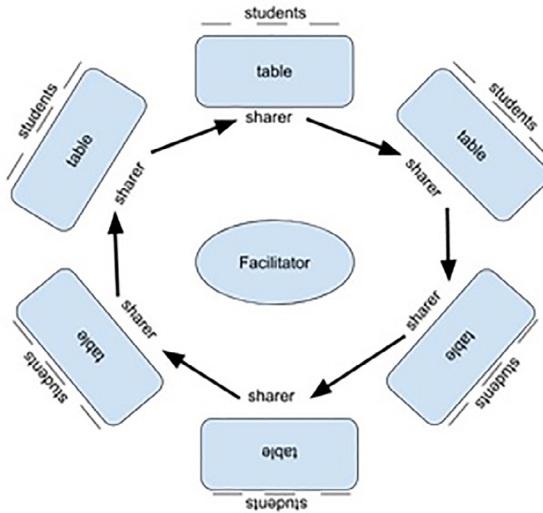


Figure 2. The flow of the SpeedShare.

help the students “. . . recognize that there are people here who will support them and move them forward and that they’re not alone.”⁸

Changes made for 2019

Reflecting on the 2018 SpeedShare, our team read a 2019 review of LIS literature on FGS, which inspired us to think more critically about how we originally developed our event.⁹ We realized we had planned it with a deficit-based mentality, a “model of education that focuses on what first-generation students lack instead of what they have.”¹⁰ Through several discussions, we considered ways of developing future programs with an asset-based approach.

For 2019, we built in more structured opportunities for library staff to learn from student participants, thereby empowering students to co-create the event itself by making the conversation more reciprocal. We:

- surveyed students ahead of time about their interests and experiences with libraries and the research process,
- increased the mingling time before and after the SpeedShare to set a more open tone and encourage conversation, and
- reframed the three-minute “question” period as a time for conversation, where students could share their thoughts and impressions, as well as ask questions.

Looking forward

In future iterations of this event, we think it will be incredibly valuable to broaden participation from library staff members. Wellesley College Library & Technology Services is a “merged organization,” so we have many student-facing staff members who are not librarians or archivists but who have rich perspectives, different support models, and different sets of skills and expertise. Therefore, moving forward, we would like to include makerspace staff and instructional technologists. Our challenge will be how to balance the number of staff we want to participate with the amount of time and the attention span students have to give.

In our experience, eight rounds of sharing is the maximum for an effective SpeedShare. Creating a representative group in just eight tables will require some creativity, but we are up for the challenge.

Conclusions

A key lesson learned from the FGS SpeedShare events was that making personal connections with the students is more important than communicating specific information about how the libraries can help them. As one staff member remarked, “Putting the student at ease and allowing time for a short dialogue may prove to be more beneficial in the long run.”

With the excitement of a slightly frenetic event and our emphasis on what we could share with Wellesley’s FGS, we missed an opportunity in 2018 to really listen to and learn from our students. Our planning work for the 2019 event prioritized ways in which we could more fully engage in two-way listening and learning. We hope that by listening to Wellesley’s FGS earlier and more often and hearing about their lived experiences and perspectives on research and the libraries, we can have even more fruitful SpeedShare conversations and more broadly continue to improve library services, spaces, and communities on campus for all students.

This event provides a structured, yet informal, opportunity for a wide variety of library staff to engage in conversations with FGS on campus. This is an event that could be replicated with a fairly conservative budget and with minimal planning. Staff participants provided positive feedback that clearly identified areas for improvement, and we are excited to continue to iterate and refine the event in the future. As Wellesley College continues to promote its Inclusive Excellence Initiative, we believe that the libraries are critical partners in building programming like our SpeedShare to deeply support our increasingly diverse student body.

Notes

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