Kylie Bailin

From "The Research Games" to tours

The evolution of first year orientation activities

At the beginning of each year, the Lafayette College Library runs a first year library orientation, which is not mandatory and therefore has consistently struggled with turnout. In the fall of 2013, I decided to choose a theme that tied into a popular new movie, which was being released at the same time. Our first year orientation was to be "The Research Games," which tied into *The Hunger Games* movie. In addition to the popular theme there were a few promotional successes, which created a larger than usual turnout.

Participants in the "The Research Games" at Lafayette College.
Photo credit Vicky Walters

With some minor changes for improvement implemented, the same theme was used again in the fall of 2014 as the second *Hunger Games* movie was released. Feedback from students who participated in both "Research Games" was collected and analyzed in order to determine student satisfaction with the orientation.

This feedback helped reinforce my thinking about the need to reinvent the orientation activity and perhaps change it drastically and run library tours instead.

Game development

Lafayette College is a small liberal arts residential campus, where most of the students would already be familiar with the main library building. However, what is mainly left off their mandatory orientation activities or campus tours are the details of what resources and services the library has to offer both physically and online. The main outcome of this game was to show students what we have and where to find it. Specifically students upon completing this game should:

• become familiar with the physical layout of the main library space;

• know what library and IT services are offered at different locations;

• become aware of online material such as library databases, ebooks, and streaming music and film resources;

Kylie Bailin is director of outreach and access services at Lafayette College, email: bailink@lafayette.edu

- become aware of physical resources such as books, journals, reference books, DVDs, circulating technology, the browsing collection, and Special Collections; and
- get to know some of our friendly library and IT staff.

Promotion

In order to try and boost turnout, various promotional strategies were employed. The main prize that was offered to students was the promise of a free t-shirt to the first 50 students who registered to attend. This hopefully was a great enticement to the students, but it also allowed us to see in advance how many wanted to attend.

I created an online registration page using the survey software Qualtrics, which was advertised on Facebook and Twitter, in an email to first year students, and on the library website. Unfortunately, using Facebook ads to target first year students was impossible, as most new students had not identified with Lafayette. The email that was sent to all first year students was probably the best way to promote this event, and we saw a huge spike in registrations after it went out. In 2013, the total number of online registrations was 77, with a total of 41 who actually showed up on the day. In 2014, we had 66 registrants, and 47 attended the event. There was a reminder email sent out, but I suspect that more signed up to get a t-shirt and then had conflicts later.

Game play

Students were asked to meet outside the library at the registration table, where they received their t-shirt and were given a number assigning them to a "district" as a team. The orientation began with an active component in which a member of each team or "district" competed in a brief race for a bag of library resources in front of the library. This simulated the race for resources that each tribute competed for in the movies.

The bags of resources contained a variety of materials, including books, journals, DVDs, circulating technology, and an SD card (which had a movie that IT created showing

its services) that each team had to return to one of six stations (circulation, reference, browsing, Special Collections, IT, and media) in the library. Each team had a map that indicated the station where they should start, and then directed them where to go next. Once the teams were at each station, they learned about what resources and services were available to them both physically and online. After about five minutes at each station, the teams rotated to a different station on the map.

Successes

One of the major successes of this orientation included having a popular and exciting theme. The students loved that this orientation was based on *The Hunger Games*, as it was immediately relevant to something they already were interested in. The t-shirts were especially popular because they used a similar font to the one used in the movie. We used a clever tag line, "All research begins with a search" instead of the quote from the movie that "Every revolution begins with a spark."

Also making the orientation team-based, rather than in the past having students going through a self-guided scavenger hunt on their own, made it more social and interactive with other new students. And finally there was a huge buzz that was created outside the library as all the pre-registered participants signed in and collected their t-shirt. An improvement I made in 2014, after receiving a few complaints that there was not a finale or winner, was to have free pizza and brownies in the library café at the end of the games, which also gave the students a chance to socialize.

Opportunities

Some of our successes actually created opportunities for improvements. However, due to the nature of the games we were not able to implement all of them for the 2014 event. One issue that was hard to address was calling the orientation a game, which implied that there would be competition. The logistics of the orientation required that all the teams finish around the same time as they each rotated

to a different station. Therefore there was no real winning team.

However in 2013, one team that felt they finished first wanted to be declared the winner. In addition to wanting more competition, even though the students already received their t-shirt at the start, that same team thought there would be more prizes at the end. This brought out the need for a finale or after party with food. There was kind of a let down when that team that finished first asked what happened next and I said their prize was the t-shirt, knowledge, and playing the game.

Students meet with a librarian during "The Research Games." Photo credit Alena Principato

In 2014, at the end of the games we served free pizza and brownies in the library café, which did create a finale atmosphere and time for socializing. Initially I was planning to work in some more competition with small prizes as they journeyed around the library, but this proved difficult to implement.

The other challenge of the orientation is that it is not infinitely scalable in terms of numbers. Since there are only six stations and each team begins at one of those, the number of participants is limited by how many students can comfortable fit into one of six teams. I think that the maximum number of students per team would be about 15 for a total of 90 students. Any more than that I would make learning and participating at each station difficult.

The total first year class is more than 600 students, so as promotion and awareness increases, it is possible this will become unwieldy. The other promotional aspect that I would like to increase in the future is getting more residential advisors (RAs) to bring their residents and make this a floor activity.

However, the RAs were asked to contact me to secure a spot in addition to having their students register, so I would know how many teams would be taken up by them. We had one participate in 2013, but the RA did not contact me in advance. Again this is not easily expandable since there are only six teams, and we do not want them all to be taken up by certain floors. The other area where this orientation was limited was in terms of lifespan. By tying the games to a popular movie, this orientation will not always be relevant to incoming classes as this movie fades from the spotlight.

Student feedback and future directions

After running the orientation again in the spring semester of 2015, I solicited feedback from the participants from both 2013 and 2014. Out of a total of 88, I received 24 responses: 83% said they enjoyed participating in "The Research Games," while 92% said that their participation helped them to understand what services and resources the library had. This means that two people who did not admit to enjoying the orientation said it helped them. The orientation made 75% more comfortable in, and likely to use, the library, and 79% said it made them more likely to ask a librarian for help with an assignment.

While it is satisfying that a majority of students surveyed had positive feedback about the orientation, I still am facing the issues

mentioned above concerning competition and scalability, which I could not fully address. The issues about wanting more competition came out in the feedback as one said that having the word "game" in the "title was completely misleading" when in fact the orientation felt more like a tour.

The other issue that came out in the feedback was that some felt the orientation was too juvenile. Designing fun library games that also educate is really challenging and often does not accomplishes both goals. This led me to consider other options, such as running library tours during the first couple weeks of classes, which could address these issues, be far easier to implement, and would reach more students. Library tours not tied to a popular theme might lose some of the draw for certain students but at least they do not have a limited lifespan.

I also asked the students if they thought that a library tour from a librarian would be just as useful, and 71% said yes. For this last question, I asked them to explain their answer. Of the people who said that tours would not be as useful, I think most of them were not clear that this tour from a librarian would be much more in depth than the general campus tours, which do not cover all that the library offers.

Some made comments that they would not have paid as much attention to a librarian giving a tour. However, the orientation actually involved several librarians giving them information at each station, which was essentially a tour. A few others said that the orientation was fun and interactive and made them feel more comfortable to ask questions.

I believe that by incorporating some of these fun aspects such as food, prizes, and socializing into tours, we can achieve better results. In fact, one student commented that they "enjoyed the experience because it was laid back and I could ask questions. Just provide that atmosphere by giving students what they want: food and conversation!"

By having multiple tours, we can deliver the experience to more students, and, as one student said, "be more flexible to peoples' schedules."

To bring more competition into the tours, I plan to have an Instagram photo contest, which will serve a dual purpose of promoting our social media platforms and, as one student said, having a "real prize" with gift vouchers will add a competitive element. We will also have a quiz at the end in which teams will compete against each other to win Lafayette Library brain stress balls. Every student will also get a branded pen and sticky notes. Another improvement mentioned by a student is to give a handout outlining the key services of the library that they will learn on the tour. This was actually something that I was already planning to incorporate because we needed a more concise update to our library student handbook, and this brochure will be one of our key promotional materials.

Conclusion

Overall, this first year orientation theme was a success both in terms of execution and promotion. Even with the challenges mentioned above, the majority of students enjoyed themselves and learned about the library at the same time. However, even by incorporating many of the improvements mentioned above, some of the inherent issues around competition and scalability remained. These issues can be addressed by offering a series of generic, yet informative, library tours instead. Providing multiple tour times will accommodate more students' schedules.

The tours will also provide a social aspect with freebies, food and competition with quizzes, and an Instagram contest. While we can be proud of creating "The Research Games" orientation, the experience and the feedback from students confirmed the need for a new direction for our first year orientation.[1]

Note

1. You can see more photos from "The Research Games" at www.flickr.com/photos/laflibref/sets/72157635567914725/and https://www.flickr.com/photos/laflibref/sets/72157647473117671/. ✄