

Opening Act: The Academic Library's Role in Orientation Planning and Evaluation

Zachary Lewis, *University of Dayton*

Katy Kelly, *University of Dayton*

This article describes a private, mid-sized university library's experience of hosting a music festival-themed event in the library building as part of new student orientation, with program evaluation and student learning assessment at the forefront of planning. The authors and co-planners discuss four years of data to explore the connection between library outreach and students' use of the library, their perceptions of the institution, and the role the event plays in shaping student success. We offer recommendations for collaborating with academic libraries and approaches in future cross-campus collaborations, including using a scaffolding approach to outline the goals and assessment of any orientation and outreach event.

Introduction

Every summer there's a build-up of anticipation for new students to arrive on campus. In partnership with orientation planners, many campus libraries initiate outreach strategies around these questions, "how can we make a positive first impression? What should students know by their first day of classes?" This article is about one university library's leadership in planning a required orientation event that featured music, games, snacks, and services presented at stations around the library. A cross-departmental, staff-driven process planned activities to go beyond an open house-style information table that is typical of an orientation event. Each first-year student engaged with library staff, information, services, collections, and programs. The library welcomed 7,281 first-year students total in the four years since its first event in 2016.

In this article, library planners explore event features, program evaluation, and measurement of student perceptions. Using four years of data, the findings support a library-centric required event through an academic affairs and student affairs partnership during new student orientation programming. We will discuss: What did students like, learn, or suggest? What was adjusted directly from student, faculty, and staff feedback year to year? Lastly, can a unit measure the impact of a 45-minute event on a student's academic success? Student affairs, academic affairs, and library practitioners can use these strategies to develop their own program.

Planning for Program Evaluation

In 2016, the library and the Student Transitions and Family Programs office identified the need for a required library orientation event and communication strategy to support student success and retention. The library was given time slots on the Monday before fall classes began to host groups of students throughout the day. In order for the information to stick, librarians used trends and pop culture embraced by our 18-year-old audience members. Since it was the end of summer, librarians incorporated a music festival theme — specifically Coachella, an annual music and arts festival in the California desert. The library's "Festival of Information" used

a printed ticket to guide students to every “stage,” or station, just like at a real music festival. Music, games, activities, and snacks presented at these stages guided first-year students around the library and communicated our services, staff, and resources. To provide sample demographics, in 2019, the class of 2023 comprised 2,050 students, 18% of whom were eligible for the Pell Grant. Students traveled from 41 states and 38 countries to attend — an important consideration in promoting the library as a welcoming place. The library’s positive and far-reaching activities on campus would benefit new students and foster their success at the university. Anticipated benefits included helping students become more empowered to make smart personal, interpersonal, and academic choices throughout their university career.

Each year, every 45-minute session during the seven-hour event brought up to 11 groups of 25 students, which ensured smooth traffic and a consistent, fun, interactive experience for every first-year student. The library’s communication strategies at the event were designed to build upon its reputation as a fun, welcoming, and resourceful place and to develop the students’ understanding of an academic library’s role in a student’s life. The planning team designed the themed stages around the identified program goals, covering important topics such as printing, study rooms, technology equipment, leisure reading, and friendly faculty and staff. Popular games and activities were scalable and adaptable, such as a memory board game about finals week stress relief services; a light-up quiz game about printing; a 360-degree virtual reality experience in the library study floors; an emoji-inspired book title guessing game; and an escape room puzzle using the digital magazine database Flipster. Archivists and librarians teamed up to introduce students to some of our unique holdings. Images of objects from our collections made for some fun buttons, cool temporary tattoos, and popular coloring pages. Recognizing that the library event fell in the middle of a hectic and busy orientation schedule, librarians planned the event with a relaxed atmosphere, providing an intentional break for the groups with comfortable seating and portable snacks.

Since planners knew a library event would be repeated year-to-year, evaluation was essential to gauge what worked well and what could be done better. At the event’s final stage, students provided qualitative feedback on Post-it notes each year, revealing their preferences under the categories “I learned,” “I liked” and “I suggest.” Staff planners and day-of-event workers also filled out an online follow-up survey immediately after the event. These comments, 2,750 in total across the four years, directly impacted planning for subsequent years in order to reset the focus on the event goals. Students’ Post-its every year gave evidence that our messages were getting across to the diverse and energetic groups; they also informed the planning for future events. The free snacks were a big highlight the first year, so those were expanded in subsequent years. The music, atmosphere, and the friendly staff were also noted in the Post-its, which showed some achievement in communication goals by the event itself.

Changes to the event were solely informed by data. Difficulties with crowding at the stations occurred in the first year, so more stations were added and spread out in subsequent events. The virtual reality tour of the fourth, fifth and sixth floors of the library came about after planners received curious comments about other spaces beyond the first floor. In year 3, a student employee planner suggested in the follow-up survey that we try keeping the orientation teams together, so each team would get one ticket and schedule and experience the event as a group. Library planners reorganized content so it would be engaging for groups of up to 25 students for about 5 minutes at time. This helped with crowding and lines and invited the upperclass student orientation leaders to participate. In year 4, the event took place on the library’s second floor in addition to the first floor. Large groups using the stairwells and elevators in a short span of time created unforeseen traffic issues, which will influence our future planning.

Assessment of Student Learning and Recommendations

At the end of year 4, planners investigated whether student data retrieved via student ID swipes collected upon entry to the building could connect to retention and student success. Upon further discussion, planners understood that our 45-minute experience was probably not substantial enough to have any causation or correlation to a student's academic success. Instead, the Post-its are used as evidence of student engagement and learning. This discussion shaped future library endeavors regarding student success. Shifting the focus from the impact of a single event to the culmination of habit-building programs, events, and activities steered us in a more scaffolded direction. Rather than examining the direct impact of an orientation event on retention, it is more effective to choose smaller goals. For example, it is more realistic to explore the impact of this event on library usage, then determine the relationship between library usage and factors contributing to student success, such as a feeling of belonging or academic success.

This scaffolded approach was expanded upon during a cross-campus collaboration that considered which aspects of the library would be most beneficial to feature during students' first three months at the institution. Paring down the objectives for orientation events makes setting goals simpler, and creates an opportunity for future programming which builds on the learning objectives of orientation.

Conclusion

University orientation planners should consider partnering with their academic library for the crucial introduction phase of university resources. Orientation planners should work with their academic library units to create meaningful planning and assessment strategies. Partnerships such as these can lay the groundwork for student success and retention by aligning goals to engage students in a way that makes them feel a sense of belonging and motivates them to be active on campus and in the classroom.