

Show Them What They Need to Know (It's For Their Own Good!):

Our Adventure in Creating a Library Open House for Graduate Students

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Abstract

Where are the graduate students? A few reference librarians were again discussing the graduate students at our campus. The students did not sign up for graduate workshops held during the spring and fall semesters (literature review, annotated bibliographies, advanced research techniques, etc.), they did not drop by during office hours; yet when they called or stopped by the reference desk they were often amazed and thrilled at the resources and information the librarians provided them. How do we get graduate students into the library, or attend office hours, or sign up for workshops? We decided upon a library open house for graduate students on our campus. How did we create the event? What mistakes did we make? What would we change?

Keywords: graduate students, academic library open house, graduate student library interaction

Introduction

Where are the graduate students? A few reference librarians were discussing graduate students on our campus. The students did not sign up for graduate library workshops held during the spring and fall semesters (literature review, annotated bibliographies, advanced research techniques, etc.), nor they did not drop by during office hours; yet when they called or stopped by the reference desk they were often amazed and thrilled at the resources and information the librarians provided them. How do we get graduate students into the library, or attend office hours, or sign up for workshops? It was a dilemma we did not believe was unique to our library. Our reference and instruction department knew we had resources that would be helpful to graduate students—specialized research help, citation tools, creating alerts in databases, retaining search histories—but how to get the information about these tools to the students?

We were not sure why the graduate students do not contact us before a major assignment or why they do not attend workshops designed especially for them. We were not sure why the graduate students did not utilize the resources available to them. Perhaps they thought they should know everything about research and using a library or maybe they did not have the time to schedule an appointment or attend a workshop. The librarians knew they could make research so much easier for them. We needed to get the word out that we were great sources with valuable tips and knowledge to make their research lives easier. How could we accomplish that goal?

One librarian had been looking at ways to increase our interaction with graduate students and introduce them to library resources; she found several library websites promoting open houses for their graduate students. After a brief discussion, the librarians

agreed to the idea with the goals of creating an open house where students could meet discipline librarians informally and without the stress of needing immediate assistance with an assignment. The librarian who suggested the open house was asked to plan the event for the fall semester. A secondary goal was showcasing resources and services to assist graduate students with research. What follows is our adventure in planning the open house, attendance for the three years the open house was held, mistakes we made in planning the event, and our goals to improve future open houses.

A bit of information about our Midwestern university; it was founded in 1865 and is a public, co-educational doctoral granting institution. For the 2014-2015 academic year our total enrollment was over 12,200 students and about 18% of that enrollment was graduate students; with 6.7% international; 8% enrolled full-time and 11% were part-time students (Indiana State University, 2015). Our library is five floors, with the reference desk and reference librarian offices on the first floor. The reference librarians hold weekly office hours in the library and are very willing to schedule individual appointments with students for research assistance.

Literature and Web Review

The Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts database (LISTA) was searched for information on library graduate student open houses using a variety of terms: open house and graduate students, library open house and graduate students, library open houses and graduate students, graduate students and library services, and library outreach and graduate students. The database was searched for articles from 1965 to 2015. Although the search did yield results, none were pertinent to the topic of graduate students, open houses and academic libraries.

The next step was to search the web for information on academic libraries and open houses for graduate students. We wanted to gather ideas on what other universities were offering their graduate students as an introduction to library services. The search term library open houses for graduate students was used to search Google. This search proved more fruitful than the LISTA searches. Several sites were found about academic libraries hosting open houses for their graduate students. An open house at Western Michigan University library offered free food and beverages for their students. The graduate students could tour the library and look at the research collections. Students could chat with the faculty and staff at the event and enter a raffle for a variety of prizes (Western Michigan University, 2009). The online flyer for the 2014 open house for graduate students at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville advertised learning “how the library supports your research and teaching, meet your department’s subject librarian and learn more about resources in your field” (University of Tennessee at Knoxville, 2014). The Knoxville open house also gave students the option of learning about citation tools, inter-library loan and Library Express delivery. Refreshments and a chance to win door prized completed the invitation.

The University of Georgia at Athens (UGA) libraries held an open house in August of 2015. Their advertisement provided a wealth of information about their event; informing students what the event would cover, when it would take place and where. The UGA advised students to “meet your librarians, learn about key online resources and borrowing privileges, and tour the building. Representatives from various Libraries’ departments will be available...to demonstrate research tools including the GIL Find catalog...and citation management tools Endnote and RefWorks” (University of Georgia

at Athens, 2015). Refreshments and door prizes were also available at their open house. George Mason University in Virginia will host their graduate student open house twice in September 2015. Their event is scheduled for the afternoon of September 3rd and the morning of September 18th. The additional date and time may address the problem of trying to find a convenient time for librarians and graduate students to meet and talk. Their open house provides the opportunity to “meet your subject librarian—learn more about resources in your field! Discover research services; data services; open access publishing; special collections, and more! Bring your laptop—we’ll get you up and running with essential tools...” (George Mason Libraries, 2015). Tours and snacks are also offered during their open houses.

York University in Toronto, Canada, will hold an open house in early September of this year. They promote the event as a time to “meet your subject librarians who can help with your research, learn about the collections, services, and facilities available to you, explore key databases and other e-resources, ask questions and make connections, and eat, drink, mix and mingle” (York University, 2015).

All of the open houses for graduate students offered food and drink and supported students meeting the librarian for their discipline and learning about the resources available to them. Several institutions offered additional resources including research tools, technology assistance, and signing up for services. The most common length for the event was 90 minutes, with a few schools extending their events between 2 and 4 hours.

Planning the Open House

The open house was held on the first floor of our library in a large room dedicated to campus and community events. The room was created in 2008 and is around 600 hundred square feet and holds some 350 seats for a lecture style event. A glass wall divides the room from the rest of the first floor of the library to deter noise. This would allow the reference librarians to be in one location with a variety of resources to show the graduate students. Because graduate studies can cross disciplines, we would be able to collaborate and introduce the students to additional librarians they might find helpful in their research pursuits. Final approval was sought from the Dean of the Library along with a small budget to pay for refreshments; the Dean provided a budget of two hundred dollars for the event. The inaugural event was scheduled for August 28, 2013, from 2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. We wanted to hold the event early enough in the semester before everyone developed commitments and heavy schedules.

Advertising the Event

We advertised the event in several formats across campus. Flyers were printed in vivid colors and placed on classroom bulletin boards and the student union. They were also distributed to academic offices involved with graduate students. The flyers listed the event, free food and drink, and the information and resources the graduate students could expect during the open house including meeting the librarians for the academic disciplines, learning how to set alerts in databases, retaining your search history, and other tips and tools for research help. Our university has a campus wide e-mail distribution; targeted e-mails were sent to graduate faculty and graduate students. The system allows two notifications for events; one e-mail was distributed three days before

the event and the second one on the day of the event. The open house was promoted on the library homepage for three days before the event. The library blog and the library Facebook page displayed event information and tweets about the event were automatically generated by the blog. The librarians wanted the graduate students to know we existed and were useful in providing research expertise, locating obscure citations or journals, citing resources and using citation tools to keep track of research. It was emphasized that students could come and go as they pleased and that the event was free. Additionally, the Dean of the Graduate & Professional Studies sent e-mails encouraging faculty to advise their students about the event.

A large sign was placed in the lobby of the library a week before the event, advertising the open house. A welcome sign was also placed outside the room holding the open house so students could easily locate the event.

In addition, word of mouth advertising was performed by several of the librarians. A librarian who conducts the annual five minute library introduction during the campus wide international student orientation the week before school begins talked about the open house and what students could learn by attending. She emphasized that the event was free and food would be served. Several librarians mentioned the event during orientations for various graduate studies. In 2015, a librarian was invited to speak at the new graduate student orientation sponsored by the Graduate & Professional Studies School; she highlighted the event and why graduate students should stop by and meet their discipline librarian.

Setting Up for the Open House

We wanted a welcoming atmosphere, conducive to chatting with the students, discussing their discipline and research needs, and showing them the services and tools available to them in the library.

In the center of the room, a table displayed several books we thought might be useful to the graduate students. Among the titles were *A Guide to Professional Development for Graduate Students in English; First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground; So You Want to be a Professor?: A Handbook for Graduate Students*, and *Teaching Creatively and Teaching Creativity*. The books were chosen by a librarian perusing the library catalog for books graduate students might find helpful in the areas of teaching, research, and writing. Students looked at the books but rarely checked them out for further review. During the three open houses we held, a total of three books were checked out. In addition to the books, students could also pick up handouts on upcoming library events, information on databases and the campus software bibliography resource. In addition, a white board was set up for students to anonymously write questions, concerns or ideas about the library. The librarians would respond and the questions and comments would be placed in the lobby for patron viewing. The white board remained blank.

Large round tables were set up in the room with three chairs at each table. Signs were placed on each table with the librarian's name and academic disciplines; the librarians placed a stack of their business cards on the table for students to take. The signs faced the entrance to the room, so students would be able to easily locate their liaison. Additional tables and chairs were scattered around the room for students to sit

and chat with each other. Librarians took their laptops to the area so they could show students how to add alerts in databases or save their search histories. A greeter stood at the entrance to assist students and count the number of attendees. In addition to the reference librarians, a systems librarian was present with a technology petting zoo consisting of tablets, e-readers, handhelds, and other gadgets helpful to graduate students. Systems also provided handouts with information on apps useful to the students. The Director of the Math and Writing Center attended to showcase the resources available to graduate students with citation or writing concerns. A staff person from Interlibrary loan was also present, demonstrating how to request an account from interlibrary loan (ILL) and the value of using ILL to locate resources our library did not own. In 2015, the head of Circulation also participated, advising students of services and tools Circulation provided for graduate students. We were ready to meet and greet the graduate students on our campus! We waited for the students to come through the doors, and we waited and waited.

Our first open house was held on August 28, 2013, from 2.30 to 4 pm; we had 54 students attend the open house. The next year, the event was held on September 3, 2014 with the same time frame. Our attendance went down to 46, not the direction we were hoping for. In 2015, the event was again scheduled from 2.30 to 4 pm, and our attendance plummeted to 33. The students who did attend any of the three years gave informal positive remarks on the event to the hostess as they left. The number of students attending was disappointing to some librarians, while other librarians believed that any number of students attending was a positive number. Views on the success of the event varied among the librarians. This year, two of the librarians had several students visit

their tables and engaged in discussions about their discipline and the resources and services the library provided. A librarian who e-mailed the new graduate students in her discipline had one student attend the open house and ask for assistance with a thesis. The student stated the e-mail encouraged her to come to the open house and meet the librarian. Other librarians had no students from their disciplines stop by the event.

Refreshments for the Event

As required by many universities, the edibles for our event had to be ordered through the campus catering system. We wanted to provide a nice array of items, believing free food would be a draw for the students in late afternoon. The librarian planning the event met with the library events coordinator to order food. Water and ice tea along with assorted cookies, lemon and raspberry bars, hummus and fresh fruit have been staples for the last two events. This year, we added additional choices including spanakopita, chicken empanadas, an appetizer tray of olives, cheese squares, pepperoni, artichoke hearts, and crudités and crackers with dip. The food proved to be very popular with several of the students congregating around the food table and talking to each other.

A Review of the Open Houses

The low turnout the first year was attributed to several factors; the “new” idea of a graduate open house for students, lack of sufficient advertising or not advertising early enough for the event. The attendance for the second year caused concern among the librarians. Perhaps the date and time were a detriment to students. We had increased our advertising with additional flyers and notices to graduate faculty. A few librarians wondered if waiting till later in the semester when assignments were due and students needed assistance would provide a higher attendance. A review of the 2015 open house a

week after the event found mixed reviews; some librarians felt they had made contact with several students and the event was a success for them while other librarians without any student contact thought other avenues should be pursued in engaging graduate students. Ideas considered for increased contact with graduate students included visiting graduate classes, sending introductory e-mails to the students with information on services and resources, and placing contact information for librarians on graduate class Blackboard sites. Although these ventures may lack the eye-to-eye contact the open house provided, it does offer additional ways for the librarians to connect with the graduate students.

Lessons We Learned in Planning and Executing the Event

With the small turnout of students each year, we wondered if increasing the advertising for the event would foster more attendance. Perhaps place the flyers on campus earlier, or visit some graduate classrooms and tell the students about the open house or personally e-mail faculty teaching graduate courses and request they announce the event in class and on Blackboard. Another mistake we made was not notifying the School of Graduate & Professional Studies about the open house the second year. This was an unintended oversight by the planners of the event and was rectified for the 2015 open house. The school did provide free pens and a flyer about their services for graduate students. An additional consideration would be to notify the individual graduate student organizations and ask for their help in spreading the word among the students about the event.

The date and time was an issue we struggled with; we thought holding the open house early in the semester might give the students more time to attend before their

schedules became very busy and they had less free time. Perhaps we should have waited till later in the semester when students were more involved in research projects and would be more open to finding out about the tools and resources to help them. One reason for low attendance in 2015 might be the date of the event. Due to scheduling conflicts, the Events Area in the library was booked for several days and we were limited in when we could hold the open house. We decided to hold the event during the first week of classes; students may have been overwhelmed with classes, meetings and buying books and missed the numerous announcements about the event. We noted that other universities offered raffles or free items; perhaps we need to consider offering prizes or freebies to increase the attendance at our events.

Future Plans

The reference librarians are currently debating whether to hold an open house for the graduate students in the fall of 2016 or look for other ways to connect with the students. We are considering the options available to us, possibly holding the event later in the semester or on a different day and time. We may need to abandon the “live” open house and create a virtual open house; allowing the students to view the event at their leisure. Creating a virtual open house would allow our increasing distance graduate student population to learn about the same tools and resources as on campus students. Increasing our advertising or changing the way we advertise may be necessary, adding more personal contact by approaching professors in person or appearing in graduate classes to talk about the open house might lead to more attendance at the event. Although it would be labor intensive, perhaps each librarian could reach out to their discipline graduate students via e-mail invitations to the event. Perhaps we forgo the open house


and e-mail graduate students, introducing ourselves and the resources we can offer them. Or do we nix the personal involvement and concentrate on instruction sessions their professors schedule or use LibGuides as a way to inform students about the tools and resources available to them. We are considering our many options on reaching out to the graduate students, from revamping the open house to creating more discipline specific events.

Our assessment for the open houses has been non-existent and is an aspect we need to include in any future events. Creating a simple survey for students to fill-out before they leave the event would be an option. We could also send a survey to all graduate students after the event, asking their opinions if they attended the event. If they did not attend, this would give students the option of telling us why they did not attend. Perhaps their answers would provide clues to improving future open houses.

Conclusion

Were we successful in reaching the majority of our graduate students? No, but we did reach some and we may have made a difference to those students. Perhaps those students will tell their fellow graduate students about the resources and librarians available to them on our campus. The librarians are exploring different ways to connect with the students and provide them with the skills they need to be successful researchers. We know the graduate students are out there and we will continue to look for ways to reach them so they know we are ready and willing to help them. We are very optimistic in our pursuit of exploring ways to reach the graduate students and provide services to them.

Flyer for the graduate student
open house at Indiana State
University




Library Open House for Graduate Students

Stop by this free event between 2:30 and 4 pm and meet the librarian for your discipline. Students will have an opportunity to learn about the research tools available to them, including Interlibrary Loan, scheduling research appointments with a librarian, setting alerts in databases, library workshops, placing books on hold, graduate carrels, recalling items, document delivery service, and much more. Refreshments will be served. Find out how a librarian can make your research easier and more organized!

Cunningham Library Events Area
Wednesday, August 19, 2015
2:30 pm to 4:00 pm

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