Library WOW! Fun Outreach and Orientation in an Academic Library

By Willie Miller and Mindy Cooper

Abstract

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis's (IUPUI) Division of Student Affairs leads a two-week festival of activities at the beginning of each fall semester known as the Weeks of Welcome (WOW). IUPUI University Library participates in this initiative by setting up a WOW table in the library's lobby and welcoming new and returning students with activities and giveaways. This article will provide detail on the planning and implementation of this outreach initiative and authors will provide best practices from five years of successful execution.

Keywords: outreach, orientation, academic libraries, student engagement, student affairs

At the beginning of the fall semester at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), the Division of Student Affairs leads a festival of activities which aims to immerse new students in the campus culture and to inform those and returning students about units, services, organizations, and opportunities which exist to assist their academic success. These jam-packed two weeks are known as the Weeks of Welcome (WOW). IUPUI University Library participates in this initiative by setting up a WOW table in the library's lobby and by welcoming new and returning students with prizes and activities.

Orientation at IUPUI

IUPUI is Indiana's premier urban university, with 19 schools and academic units granting degrees in more than 200 programs. More than 30,000 students come from all across the U.S. and from 142 countries to study on our campus (IUPUI, 2014). To inculcate new students into the campus culture and welcome back returning students, Weeks of Welcome (WOW) (Division of Student Affairs, 2014). Most academic and service units on campus participate in WOW in some capacity, either hosting events, partnering with others, and/or giving away promotional material. Through collaboration in orientation services, libraries can make a difference in the lives of first-year students, which can benefit an institution's retention efforts (Tenofsky, 2007, pg. 292).

Many academic libraries participate in or create their own orientation for new and returning students. Librarians at Pennsylvania State University have appealed to students' affective feelings about the library by hosting an open house organized around a party theme, including games, prizes, and incentives (Cahoy & Bichel, 2004). In a related fashion, IUPUI University Library does its part for the campus welcome by setting up a table display and playing games to teach new and returning students information about the library's services and resources during the first week of fall classes. WOW provides the library an opportunity to engage with new and returning students before coursework fully begins, a time when energy is high and minds are open. We channel the excitement of the new academic year into a fun library outreach effort.

Planning and Popcorn

The University Library Campus Outreach Group (COG) plans the library's WOW effort. This group comprises four librarians and four library staff members, and its function is to promote University Library resources and services to IUPUI students, faculty, and staff in support of the IUPUI mission. COG represents the library at orientation events, creates marketing materials, and develops outreach programming.

A major goal of WOW at the library is connecting students to librarians and library staff. "The library", Regalado (2003) points out, "is more than just a place for studying or becoming information literate: it is a crucial element in fostering a broad-based and positive student experience" (p.90). As the library is a place of people invested in student success and academic achievement, we believe that our faculty librarians and staff are our greatest resource and assets.Therefore, it is important they be on display during this event. COG coordinates the scheduling to allow most librarians and many library staff to serve at the welcoming table and meet students.

We also use this event to connect students to the library's resources and services. One way this goal is achieved is by providing promotional materials and swag from the library's database vendors to the students. We use the materials to distribute information about the library's holdings, and the swag is used as prizes for games. COG augments the swag from vendors by ordering two or three small giveaways for the library (such as temporary tattoos, staplers, notepads, etc.), including a library t-shirt.

COG also creates handouts and/or library pamphlets for the WOW table, offering more substantial pieces of information about the library for new and returning students. The library's pamphlets for new students (undergraduate and graduate) and faculty and staff received honorable mention at the 2013 ALA Best of Show and PR Xchange sponsored by the Library Leadership and Management Association. These handouts complement a series of four 6' banners which graphically display the library's mission to inform, connect, and transform.

Figure 1: Former Associate Dean of Collections, Access, and Information Robin Crumrin stands in front of the WOW table, ready to welcome students to the library

Figure 2: From the left: Director of Library Development, Kindra Orr plays a game with a student; image of 2013 library t-shirt

Games

The University Library attracts students to the table by offering popcorn and uses a prize wheel to help connect students to the library through an informal, fun information activity (Regalado, 2007, pg. 90). Students are asked to answer questions about the library and earn prizes.

Figure 3: Graduate student Stephanie Derrick takes a spin on the prize wheel

Initially, the games we used involved simple true or false and multiple-choice questions dealing with library polices, services and resources. The games were color-coded on the wheel with one color for each set of games and one additional prize slot. The prize wheel inserts were simply labeled "Trivia." For the library staff, the sets of games were printed on corresponding sheets of paper. The library staff person would choose one of the questions from the colored sheet that matched the slot on which the spinner wheel landed.

The wheel was successful in the first year, so we expanded the content to inform students about more library services and resources. We grouped together similar questions from the three sheets and arranged them into categories. These categories or games were named "Get a Room" (special rooms and areas of the library), "Shhhh!" (library policies) and "Check this Out" (circulation services and loan periods/limits). We came up with games that introduced students to their subject librarian, to the Library of Congress classification system and to new library services and new methods of getting help.

We use a number of pictures to facilitate our games. "Who Am I?" involves a page with pictures taken from LibGuides of all the subject liaisons. Students are asked about their major, and if they can point out their librarian. Business cards are also provided to the students so they can contact the librarian when needed. "Picture This" involves photos taken around the building of service points and useful equipment/collections. Students are asked to name the floor on which the various points of interest are located. Additionally, we have a fun picture game, "Which One Doesn't Belong?" in which students choose the one item that cannot be found in a particular area, floor, or in the building in general.

Some of the games require the use of library iPads. Students must find information using our library's mobile site playing "UL on the Go." To solicit opinions on new library services, such as text and chat reference, we have used Survey Monkey and Google Drive to create questionnaires to be completed for "Is This Thing On." We compile the data and distribute it to team leaders or project managers who are working on the survey's selected topic.

There are two games that deal with the location of books using LC classification. In a simple version called "Map It," the student is asked about their major. The staff person at the table would then give a handout with the general LC classification system. The student then finds their subject area on the handout and then locates the area in which books with that call number would be found on a library map provided to them. To advance the learning outcome of "Map It" from knowledge to application, and to give an opportunity to win a library t-shirt, students playing the "Call Number Challenge" must go to the stacks and find a book that matches the call number found on a strip of paper. The call number usually is in an area associated with the student's chosen major. After returning with a book matching the call number, the student is awarded a library t-shirt. Students are always excited about the prospect of being able to win one.

Rounding out the 12 slots, there are two categories in which students do not have to answer questions about the library, but just have to either ask library staff a question that they have about the library, (Ask a Librarian), or tell us something about themselves (Tell Us About You). This is a great way to determine what people may not know about the library and let students see that library staff are approachable people and available to answer their questions.

What We've Learned

Over the years planning WOW events, we have learned many things about managing projects, people, and popcorn. The most important: support from our colleagues and library administration is vital. We are fortunate to have library administration that values the potential of first-contact with new students and returning students during the fall semester. COG typically is allotted approximately $2000 for giveaways, t-shirts, and supplies. This budget funds our WOW effort, and leftover giveaway prizes are available for librarians to use with classes or for COG to use during other outreach events.

Good relationships with colleagues are important to get volunteers for WOW. Cahoy and Bichel (2004), note that it is important for staff to feel a vested interest in the success of the event and to be trained in their roles (pg. 53). We usually require about 40 volunteers to do various tasks: make popcorn, play games, talk to students, etc. These tasks are speciously simple, but things can easily get stressful when an average of 150 students an hour visit the table. Every year, we provide training to staff and volunteers to review the games and materials.

Good relationships with database vendors are also important. Most COG members do not have direct contact with vendor representatives, so we rely on our acquisitions team for contact information. In cases in which the library has strong ties or a new subscription, we usually get better items (t-shirts, universal phone chargers, highlighters, pens, keychain lights, etc.) and not just handouts.

However, we have also learned that students are happy to receive just about anything as a prize. We have also given away card-sized ice scrappersand the t-shirts continue to be popular. For this reason, we make t-shirts hardest to earn. Students have to either demonstrate finding a book in our stacks through the "Call Number Challenge" or another higher-intensity task.

In WOW planning meetings, we try to remember that WOW is about fun. Students are excited to be on campus and in the library. We want them to learn about the library, but it is essential that we create structures to support maximum fun. If a game is too complicated, we take it out. If a student answers a question incorrectly, they still get a prize. Everyone is welcome, everyone wins, and we all have fun. Again, Regalado observes, "[l]ibrarians can provide first-year students with the competence, confidence and connections they need for a smooth adjustment to college" (p. 90). Events such as Pennsylvania State's Open House or IUPUI's WOW are a great way to engage students with library staff and to create memories linked to positive feelings of accessible services and friendly people in the library.

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Bios
Willie Miller has been Chair of COG since 2011, and Mindy Cooper has been a member since the group was created in 2009.