

Lost and Afraid in the Library: How Academic Librarians are Conquering Library Anxiety Today

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Introduction

College is certainly an emotional and stressful time in a person's life, and unfortunately, one source of anxiety in a student's life is often the library. "I'm sorry to bother you" or "I just don't know where to begin!" are phrases commonly heard at a reference desk that are usually accompanied by a look of concern or confusion. This negative emotion felt by these students is called

Library anxiety

A History of Anxiety

1986, *Library Anxiety is Defined*

In a groundbreaking qualitative study, a professor of library science in North Carolina named Constance Mellon conducted a two-year study, asking 6,000 students about their feelings toward library research. Her findings showed that 75-85% of students responded with fear.

"Students' fears were due to a feeling that other students were competent at library use while they alone were incompetent" (Mellon 1986).

1992, *Qualitative Data With the Library Anxiety Scale (LAS)*

Sharon L. Bostick's PhD dissertation paved the way for future qualitative research with the Library Anxiety Scale. Reduced from an initially-tested 294 statements, the LAS uses 43 statements about the library to determine a user's level of anxiety.

New research

New studies rely on both old and new methods of research to study library anxiety in academic libraries. Researchers often incorporate modern technology into studies about the relief of library anxiety.

Symptoms and Origin

Library anxiety occurs when a user feels discomfort or fear when conducting research in the library. Common descriptors of negative emotions felt in a library include:

Phobia Scared to death
Nightmare lost
Fear of the UNKNOWN

Where do these emotions come from? Possible emotional barriers that prevent users from feeling comfortable in the library include:

- I. Users feel they are bothering the librarians.
- II. Users feel stupid or ignorant.
- III. Users believe they should know the answer to their question already.
- IV. Users believe asking a question implies failure on their behalf.

Antecedents

Various predetermined factors may affect how a user views the library experience and the emotions they feel when going to the library.

Antecedents of library anxiety include:

- I. Race, gender, age
- II. Native language
- III. Year of study
- IV. Resources available
- V. Experience with technology and the library

As both technology and international relations expand, it has become easier to conduct research locally and globally to gain a better understanding of how certain factors contribute to library anxiety in academic libraries.

Methods for Relief

Literature about library anxiety offers much guidance for academic librarians to use in numerous situations.

Instruction

It is important to consider whether some students prefer the anonymity of formal instruction workshops or the personal attention of informal instruction.

In-person Reference

A librarian's body language, the approachability of the reference desk, and the pace of a reference interview all contribute to the existence of library anxiety, and it is important to consider these factors at all times.

Virtual Reference

Virtual reference through chat or email provides a comfortable barrier between the user and the librarian that helps relieve anxiety.

Library Events

Events that invite students into the library to explore and become comfortable with its layout and resources are perfect for preventing and relieving library anxiety. The beginning of the school year is the perfect time to hold a scavenger hunt or photo contest to get students familiar with the library's resources!

Staff Training

Starting a conversation about providing better customer service is the first step towards building a friendly and welcoming atmosphere.



"184; Stress level: Midnight" by "Sarah V." Creative Commons License (CC-BY2.0). Accessed October 13, 2015. <http://tinyurl.com/pthuhtm>.

Implications

Librarians are in a perfect position to use new techniques to conquer library anxiety in academic libraries. They represent the friendly face of the library and help make the library experience a great one!

So why should academic librarians strive to diminish library anxiety amongst users? Library users are more likely to use the library's resources and keep coming back for more if they are not intimidated by the research process or by the library itself.

Reflecting on the library experience and individual users' emotions while using the library is imperative to attain a welcoming, friendly atmosphere.

References

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