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# Planning Academic Library Orientations

## Case Studies From Around the World

Edited by Kylie Bailin, Benjamin Jahre and Sarah Morris



# **PLANNING ACADEMIC LIBRARY ORIENTATIONS**

**CHANDOS**  
**INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL SERIES**

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Edited by

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Chandos Publishing is an imprint of Elsevier  
50 Hampshire Street, 5th Floor, Cambridge, MA 02139, United States  
The Boulevard, Langford Lane, Kidlington, OX5 1GB, United Kingdom

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

### British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-08-102171-2

For information on all Chandos publications visit our website at <https://www.elsevier.com/books-and-journals>



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*Publisher:* Jonathan Simpson

*Acquisition Editor:* Glyn Jones

*Editorial Project Manager:* Lindsay Lawrence

*Production Project Manager:* Swapna Srinivasan

*Designer:* Miles Hitchen

Typeset by TNQ Technologies

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## CHAPTER 16

# Marhaba, Welcome: Orienting International Students to the Academic Library

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New York University Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

**Chapter Themes:** Partnerships; Targeting Specific Audiences.

### INTRODUCTION

A recent systematic review on international students and information literacy found that there are five main recommendations from Library and Information Science researchers on how to best instruct international students: collaborate with other campus units, train library staff, assess library offerings, create cultural awareness, and develop library instruction programs (Houlihan, Wiley, & Click, 2017, p. 258). Seeking to incorporate these research-based recommendations into our daily practice, we decided that our first pilot project should be to revamp the library orientation program. As a result, first-year students have tiered interactions with the library where they are introduced to the basics of Western-style academic libraries. We incorporated the findings from the systematic review by using strategic language, collaborating with the Office of First-Year Experience (FYE), assessing student learning, using active-learning activities, and creating a community of practice through a series of teaching enhancement workshops.

### ABOUT NYUAD AND EARLY ORIENTATION EFFORTS

New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) welcomed its inaugural class of 150 students in the fall of 2010. Since that time, enrollment has grown to just over 1000 students representing 110 nationalities. The student body is extraordinarily diverse and high achieving. Our students speak 116 languages, and 92% of the class of 2020 speaks two or more languages. Four percent of students who applied for the class of 2020 were accepted and had

a median SAT score of 1510 (out of 1600) and ACT of 33 (“By the Numbers – NYU Abu Dhabi,” n.d.). NYUAD is a liberal arts college with engineering and offers 22 majors in traditional liberal arts fields such as music, political science, and physics. NYUAD is a degree-granting campus of New York University, which consists of two other degree-granting campuses (based in New York and Shanghai) and 11 academic centers where students take classes but cannot complete a degree (NYU Abu Dhabi, 2016). Faculty and students move throughout the University’s campuses to teach, learn, and conduct research.

The Office of Student Life hosts “Marhaba Week” before the first week of classes that is designed to help students with the transition from high school to college, while also adjusting to living away from home. Marhaba is the Arabic word for welcome, and it aims to introduce students to academic and nonacademic resources, faculty, and staff. The Library has participated in every Marhaba week, traditionally offering tours to incoming students. Over time, the orientation has evolved from a “talking heads and tour” approach that did not invite participation, to a Cephalonian method tour that “pair[ed] images with question prompts” (Brown & Barr-Walker, 2013, p. 485) to its current form designed to meet the needs of our culturally diverse student body.

## INCORPORATING EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH

To incorporate more evidence-based recommendations into our library orientation, we revisited past scholarship by current and former NYUAD librarians, which helped provide local context and population-specific recommendations. Ilka Datig (2014, p. 350), conducted a mixed-method study of our student population showing that students typically associate the library with books, a quiet place to study, and academics; they also had varied opinions of librarians. Datig (2016, p. 64) also conducted a citation analysis of social science senior capstone projects and found “heavy reliance of students on journal articles and the large influence of professors and other mentors on students’ citation behavior.” Datig and Russell (2015, p. 812) conducted a survey about intellectual property and found that, contrary to popular belief, many international students are aware of and care deeply about academic integrity—related issues.

We also analyzed feedback from a survey distributed to students from the class of 2018 who participated in the inaugural library workshop. The first workshop, completed by 92 students (less than one-third of the class)

showed positive results. Discoveries included noting that the testing instrument was imperfect because of language and question structure and that several students commented that too much information was covered.

Our attention to evidence-based research allowed us to transform our library orientation program by rooting programmatic decisions in research, while adjusting as needed to fit our local context. Our goal is that students have the skills necessary to succeed in their academic programs. Because we know our student body has differences in understanding of libraries and research, our program is designed to address these issues (Datig, 2014). Unlike previous classes, the class of 2020 learned about the library during Marhaba Week through a series of tiered activities including the following: an all-campus scavenger hunt, a library open house held in the second week of the semester, and a mandatory library workshop in the fall. The open house and the scavenger hunt introduced students to “spaces and faces,” whereas the workshop introduced them to basics of library research: navigating the catalog and one major database, identifying keywords and synonyms, and using Boolean operators.

## CAMPUS COLLABORATION

*Collaborating with campus partners not only makes planning your library orientations easier, it makes them more relevant to your students.*

Campus collaboration is an important aspect of any library orientation program, but as a new university with limited resources, the NYUAD Library has continually relied on our campus partners to help promote library services and resources. The Office of FYE oversees the planning and execution of Marhaba Week and has been our main orientation partner. Based on feedback from previous cohorts, the office works to connect students with the academic community, which includes an introduction to the library, without overwhelming them with too much information.

The creation of a new program to help first-year students acclimate to the University called First-Year Dialogue (FYD) gave us another opportunity to partner with our friends in Campus Life. FYD is designed to serve “as a conduit for understanding and navigating first year students’ university experience while also contextualizing their time living and learning in the United Arab Emirates” (Neugebauer, 2016, course description). At NYUAD, the FYD program is different in that it is facilitated primarily by staff members and is not a credit-bearing course. Librarians and library staff serve as facilitators in the FYD program.

The Office of FYE collaborates with us on two other events held during orientation week: a campuswide scavenger hunt and the library open house. The scavenger hunt is designed to familiarize students with the entire campus, and the library participates with 10–15 different tasks or questions that require students to engage with library staff and resources. Example questions include: “how many librarians work at NYUAD” and “stump the librarian—ask a librarian a question and if he/she cannot answer in 2 minutes, you win!” The library open house is part of the extended orientation, which is hosted during the first month of classes. Students are invited to learn about library resources and staff through a series of fun-filled activities. Participants who received stamps from all 10 stations received a complimentary library coffee mug. Participation in the open house is required, and the majority of students attend. We work with colleagues in Campus Life each year to revise the scavenger hunt and the open house to ensure highest impact.

## **LIBRARY INSTRUCTION**

*International students are best served with tailored library instruction sessions; create a user-focused program designed to meet their information needs.*

At the core of our library orientation program is the FYD library workshop. This 50-minute active learning—based session encourages students to work together to achieve three learning outcomes:

- Navigate the library website, especially the library catalog, to efficiently access library materials.
- Identify keywords and synonyms to conduct efficient, effective, and flexible database searches.
- Build a search statement using keywords and search connectors to find the most relevant results within databases.

All librarians teach from one lesson plan to ensure students have the same learning experience. The workshop begins with a review of the learning outcomes and a quick discussion of previous library experience. Librarians ask students to verbally agree to active participation and to creating a “shared library experience” that will be beneficial to new students, especially given the diverse student body. Next, students are split into groups and given a title and author to locate a book on the shelves. The first group who returns to the instruction room receives a piece of candy and demonstrates how they found the book to the rest of the class. Together, students and the

librarian discuss issues and challenges related to finding books. Next, the librarian reviews the “Library Resources for First-Year Students” Research Guide, and students discuss search strategies for locating information in databases. Then a student “librarian” is selected to demonstrate to the class how one can locate information in EBSCO Discovery Service, NYUAD Library’s discovery tool. At the end of the session, students complete an online quiz and receive a piece of candy for participation.

## ASSESSMENT

*Assessment is essential to any successful program; be sure to collect, analyze, and make changes based on your assessment data.*

Because the library session is a required component of FYD, one author developed a quiz that captures students’ attendance and also assesses their grasp of the learning outcomes. The online quiz, distributed via Qualtrics, has 10 questions that directly correspond to the three established learning outcomes. Results were quite positive with 312 out of 323 students completing the FYD library workshop and almost all attendees receiving a score of 80% or higher.

The survey also requests feedback about what students learned, what is still unclear, or what they would have liked to have been covered and allows them to make any other general comments. Student feedback has been extremely positive. Comments include the following: “I found this session really helpful and I would recommend all freshmen to attend,” “awesome session,” “the data librarian is a righteous dude,” and “the most useful workshop in FYD.” Students also commented on the active-learning activities and atmosphere: “it was very interactive” and “I liked the friendly casual atmosphere of the session.”

When asked what they would like covered or what was still unclear to them, a large number of our students indicated that they would like further academic integrity and citation assistance. Students made additional comments related to seeing more examples of Boolean search operators, and several suggested that the librarian select better, more relevant search examples. Librarians acted quickly on many of these issues, including bringing print library workshop flyers, selecting more appealing search examples, and incorporating more discussion related to Boolean operators. Programmatically, librarians are working to incorporate more academic integrity and citation-related issues into core classes, which are similar to general

education requirements, and encourage critical thinking. Overall, gathering and analyzing quantitative and qualitative feedback have allowed our orientation program to develop and become more user-focused.

## STAFF TRAINING

*Successful library orientation programs require group buy-in and energetic participation, so get started by creating a community of practice through teaching enhancement workshops and instruction meetings.*

Beginning in Spring 2015, we worked to develop a community of practice among librarians by facilitating teaching enhancement workshops. Workshop topics ranged from incorporating threshold concepts into library instruction sessions to using the flipped classroom method to maximize student learning. These workshops proved to be especially fruitful because of a redesign in the FYD curriculum for Fall 2016. The Library offered two main scheduled FYD library workshops instead of many sessions spread throughout the semester taught single-handedly by one person. To deliver instruction to 120 students at the same time with the largest room's capacity of 25, all eight librarians taught FYD workshops. There was little hesitation from librarians, even those who do not teach often, about participating in the delivery of the FYD library workshops because everyone participated in the teaching enhancement workshop focused on teaching and creating content for first-year students. Together, librarians worked to improve the FYD lesson plan by developing learning outcomes, selecting activities to address them, and creating a "common language." These group activities made all librarians feel invested in the FYD program.

Circulation staff, who work at the library front desk and are often the first line of communication, are crucial to the success of our library orientation program. Library staff are trained by reference librarians to assist students with basic reference questions, such as how to search for a book and locate it on the shelf. The training program includes the utilization of print materials, online quizzes, and group discussion. These basic reference skills allow library staff to help students participating in the campuswide scavenger hunt locate books on the shelf. Through discussion-based activities, library staff assisted with the development of our open house, and they created active-learning stations that introduce students to core library services. Additionally, library staff participate in

training offered by the Access Services Librarian and Human Resources. Typical training sessions include customer service, advanced catalog searching, advanced searching in Aleph, our Integrated Library System, the reference interview, as well as introductions to the wide variety of software supported by the library. Our library staff are often recognized for being approachable, knowledgeable, and friendly. Their eager participation in staff training and ability to communicate with students has indirectly improved our orientation program.

Moving forward, the Library will continue to facilitate a community of practice among librarians and promote staff training opportunities.

## **CULTURAL AWARENESS**

*International students come from diverse backgrounds and have different understandings of libraries and research skills, so make sure you identify each student's need.*

One of the goals of the NYUAD Library orientation program is to create a common, shared learning experience. NYUAD students come from all over the world and have a wide variety of experience with libraries, and the library strives to fill in the information gaps of all individual students (Datig, 2014).

As mentioned previously, librarians created a community of practice to develop orientation materials and improve their teacher-librarian skill set. Central to our practice was creating a common language to use while instructing first-year students. We wanted to emphasize the importance of the academic library by communicating that the goal was to create “a shared library experience” and “a shared research experience.” Librarians also strive to eliminate the use of library jargon and encourage all students to participate by affirming students’ comments and questions, rephrasing what students say, and building on (or correcting) as necessary. Participating in the library orientation program allowed all students to develop the same skill set, so everyone could be equal in the classroom.

Furthermore, with critical information literacy in mind, we use examples from a variety of cultures and countries, not just North America. We select books for the search exercise written by women, people from the Global South, people of color, and about a variety of topics. We ask for topics from the class while practicing Boolean search techniques but have sample topics ready that we hope are relevant to our diverse student body.



## FINAL THOUGHTS

With students from around the world who have varying levels of experience with libraries, we find that multiple, tiered interactions serve to prepare students for success at NYUAD. However, as the year has progressed, students are exhibiting signs of library orientation fatigue and feel that they already know what they need to know about the library. Beginning with the class of 2020, all first-year students are required to take a First-Year Writing Seminar. Accordingly, we are working with writing instructors to deliver embedded library instruction and critical source evaluation in this class. We will continue to gather multimethod assessment data to improve our orientation programs. This summer, we plan to adjust our orientation plans again and reduce the number of interactions with the first-year class, while still ensuring that new students have the information they need.

Our library orientation model could be adapted by any academic library that serves an international student population or that serves specific groups of students such as first-generation, transition, or commuter students. Keeping in mind the five core concepts laid out in this chapter—campus collaboration, staff training, assessment, cultural awareness, and library instruction—libraries could develop engaging user-focused programs that use evidence-based recommendations. Furthermore, we suggest librarians undertake multimethod research projects tailored to your library size and time constraints to learn about **your** students and their needs. We have found the research that we and our colleagues have completed continues to be extremely helpful in planning our programs.

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