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# Minding the Gap: Grassroots Efforts to Enhance the Graduate Student Research Experience

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# MINDING THE GAP

## Grassroots Efforts to Enhance the Graduate Student Research Experience

*Susan R. Franzen, Sarah Dick, and Jennifer Sharkey*

### Introduction

Addressing the needs of each student population is a core value and service of academic libraries. However, the level and type of outreach varies significantly from library to library. This is particularly true of graduate student populations. Some libraries have highly formalized programming, and some even have dedicated floors or buildings. For others, efforts are informal and rely on individual subject librarians to meet the needs of students in their respective disciplines. With less formalized programming, students are more likely to have gaps in knowledge and skill set as the level of interaction can vary among librarians. Strong collaborations within the library and across campus are essential for establishing and sustaining library-focused graduate student programming.

The library literature provides many examples of collaborations that assist graduate students in becoming successful scholars. Many studies focus on embedded librarianship or, specifically, partnerships between librarians and subject faculty based in curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Less has been written on partnerships that span the university, especially among student support departments, libraries, teaching faculty, and graduate students. In addition, partnerships based on structured administrative projects rather than organic grassroots efforts are more common models in many libraries.<sup>2</sup>

Many librarians acknowledge that graduate students have unique information fluency needs. In this context, it can be challenging to break free of the “information synthesizer” mode of instruction often used for undergraduate students.<sup>3</sup> Discerning between master’s and doctoral students is also relevant for certain aspects of programming.<sup>4</sup> Literature review training is one of the more common types of needs identified.<sup>5</sup> However, academic libraries engage in a variety of different efforts geared toward graduate students. Early assessment studies show graduate students have a variety of interests, such as citation management and selecting quality journals.<sup>6</sup> These interests are also evident at Illinois State University, historically an undergraduate teaching college, where efforts have begun to meet the needs of graduate students at a grassroots level.

## Background

Illinois State University, the first public university in Illinois, founded in 1857, is primarily an undergraduate institution with 20,784 undergraduates and 2,454 graduate students. Within the university, there are twenty-one master’s and nine doctoral programs encompassing disciplines across the university. The university consists of seven colleges made up of Applied Science and Technology, Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, Fine Arts, Nursing, and Milner Library. Although it was founded as a teacher education institution (a normal school), the university’s vision has shifted to encompass a broader role in its educational initiatives. The university is set to shift again toward increased graduate student numbers and programming in response to the possibility of decreased undergraduate student enrollment and increased competition with comparable schools. This changing focus toward graduate students requires matching efforts in library initiatives.

At Illinois State University, library outreach to graduate students has been indistinct from undergraduate students. While graduate students often use the library for study and to work with their subject librarians, historically most services offered at the library occur without input from other graduate student-focused departments on campus. Neither the library nor the university has developed a systematic, collaborative plan for meeting the scholarly needs of these students. However, what has emerged is a grassroots effort to meet the needs of graduate students in a holistic way by creating partnerships across campus to develop workshops, both practical and academic, on topics of interest to future scholars. A major part of this effort centers on Milner Library at Illinois State University, particularly based on the work of three library colleagues.

To expand services to graduate students at Illinois State University, three colleagues worked together to create partnerships across campus to better reach

graduate students who were unaware of the resources available to them. The Graduate School Librarian and Copyright Officer is the main contact for the Graduate School, as she is embedded in the department and works closely with the Director of Graduate Studies to find innovative, effective ways to reach out to a diverse, disparate population. This partnership was strengthened by the fact that the current director is dedicated to improving programming to graduate students. The second librarian on the team is the Head of Information Use and Fluency, with many connections across campus that include most of the non-academic departments on campus. She has served as the main coordinator of the library programming developed for graduate students. The third librarian on the team is the Nursing and Health Sciences Librarian, who works closely with graduate students on their research and scholarly communication. As a colleague of the original two team members, she shared her input on the graduate school programming and offered to present content on scholarly communication she had originally developed for the nursing PhD students.

Through their campus-wide connections, each librarian organically developed specialized workshops and resources. The fruition of workshops as a dedicated series resulted from the strong partnership with the Graduate School and the recognition of each librarian on the importance of combining efforts. While the graduate student programming has been in place in the library for four semesters, the team continues to look at ways to promote, develop, and improve the workshops in conjunction with other partners on campus.

## The Evolution of the Collaborations and Partnerships

Throughout the growth of this grassroots effort, each librarian's skill set and partnerships brought complementary strengths that greatly impacted the program's success. Steven Bell stated that librarians "have a knack for observing service and educational gaps, and then figuring out ways to work with faculty, students, and other academic support colleagues to close them. Librarians lead by leveraging collaboration to get things done."<sup>7</sup> An excellent example of collaboration is embedded librarianship, where partnerships naturally develop.

The role of the librarian embedded in the Graduate School, though evolving, encompasses the meaning of embedded librarianship: "focusing on the needs of one or more specific groups, building relationships with these groups, developing a deep understanding of their work, and providing information services that are highly customized and targeted to their greatest needs."<sup>8</sup> This singular position of embedding within the university administration itself, the

Graduate School, provides the librarian a distinctive perspective and understanding of student and programming needs, which include the broad view of the school's goals as well as the practical needs of students.

Out of such observations came the start of many conversations, first among those in the department. In this case, the Director of Graduate Studies, Graduate School Librarian, graduate assistants working in the Graduate School, and staff enjoyed the freedom to think aloud, share ideas in a free-flowing manner, exchange the "What about this!" notion, and ponder the means to bring those shared thoughts to fruition in an atmosphere that inspired collegiality and excitement!

The Graduate School Librarian gathered ideas for possible programming through continued intradepartment discussions and direct conversations with graduate students, such as Bagels with the Director or as an invited member of the Graduate Student Advisory Council and the Graduate Coordinators meetings. These delightfully exciting and interesting conversations led, in wandering fashion, to discussions of graduate student needs with library colleagues to start the programming plan.

Based on the information from the Director of Graduate Studies and supporting data, an initial list of possible workshops was created and then circulated to subject librarians for comments and suggestions. Librarians were able to provide additional anecdotal evidence that was not captured during the investigatory stage. With the final list, the library team and director discussed which workshops filled the biggest need for students.

Following the work of Marcus, Covert-Vail, and Mandel,<sup>9</sup> the Director of Graduate Studies, the Graduate School Librarian, and the Head of IUF focused on a main theme as related to library services, Growing a Researcher, which became the Graduate School Professional Development Series. Dates were scheduled and posted to all relevant websites, sent to departmental Graduate School coordinators, posted in social media, and sent via email to individual graduate students. Librarians developed and delivered specific workshops on selected content areas, including citation management, research poster design, and thesis or dissertation formatting.

After the initial pilot workshops, the Graduate School coordinated a meeting with all of the workshop partners from across campus, including Milner Library, a graduate student, Graduate School administration, and representatives from the Career Center, the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology (CTLT), and Office of the Cross Endowed Chair for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The meeting focused on current campus-wide offerings, potential expansion of these training opportunities, overlapping efforts, and where gaps existed in graduate student professional development. This enabled the group to identify broad topic categories, to develop corresponding workshops, and to address programming gaps.

This planning session resulted in fifteen distinct workshop topics—a direct result of the group focusing with a positive emphasis toward what students needed versus what was not being offered. After two years, continued communication occurred to discuss student feedback, attendance, and needed content revisions. An additional Milner workshop, “Selecting Journals for Publication,” was scheduled. Geared toward nursing students and developed by the Nursing and Health Sciences Librarian, the session was changed to include resources related to all disciplines. Collaboration with the Graduate School Librarian/Copyright Officer incorporated more content, including copyright and licensing, a further example of the organic growth and evolution of the program.

## Method for Key Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry

Successful collaborations and partnerships are exemplified in the initial conversations that occurred naturally among the three librarian collaborators. The team’s conversations, without realizing it, followed many of the tenets and practices of appreciative inquiry (AI). As the efforts and collaboration evolved, critical components of successful conversations included an attitude of positivity and discernment, practicing deep listening, and utilizing reflective thinking.<sup>10</sup>

In his 1986 doctoral dissertation, David Cooperrider developed the theories for AI, an approach to organizational development.<sup>11</sup> AI provides a methodology to “identify positive core strengths relative to the ‘affirmative topic’ being addressed and then initiate concrete operational steps to achieve its goals.”<sup>12</sup>

As a methodology, AI can easily be adapted or modified for use in any size group, whether in very large strategic planning projects or in the more intimate setting of workshop planning groups. It is known and used in higher education, in libraries, and in graduate student classrooms.<sup>13</sup>

AI is implemented through the 4-D Cycle, although for the workshop planning group the first step was most applicable. Step one of the cycle, Discovery, is selection of the affirmative topics, which then become the focus of the interventions. Selections, “carefully crafted questions,” are framed in the positive. This step is in many ways the most crucial, as it sets the overall tone for appreciating (identifying) and building upon the “positive core strengths” or unique factors that contribute to organizational excellence. The additional steps include Dream (What might be?), Design (What should be the ideal?), and lastly, Destiny (How to empower, learn, and improvise?).<sup>14</sup>

AI does not ignore or negate real problems or obstacles to successful program or organization planning and implementation—the deficit-based ap-

proach—but rather focuses on “the deliberate search for what contributes to organizational [think workshop planning] effectiveness and excellence.”<sup>15</sup> Sullivan’s endorsement of AI in the library setting is reflected in her explanation of AI as the “process of collaborative inquiry to clarify the strengths, positive experiences, ‘good news,’ achievements, and best qualities of a group, an organization, a situation, a relationship, or an individual. It is a means to create change based on the premise that we effectively move forward if we know what has worked in the past.”<sup>16</sup> AI is reflective of shifting the attitude and therefore results in a successful atmosphere toward planning.

An example of equity participation with AI in action occurred during a meeting involving multiple campus partners to discuss and plan expansion of the Graduate School Professional Development Series. This type of inclusion in campus-level planning was unique and new for Milner Library, and the active partners included the students, the Graduate School, and the project team. The goal was to co-create “inquiry-based approaches to pedagogies... [to foster] synthetic thinking and analysis.”<sup>17</sup> Building upon the established belief that success is rewarded through positive actions, the planning team devised a structure to reflect equity through recognition of each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

## Identifying and Creating Content

A strong connection between an established theme and programmatic workshops is an important element in identifying and creating content. The Graduate School’s theme, *Growing a Researcher*, gave the library team a foundation and structure to determine the most effective programming for graduate students as future scholars and researchers. It allowed the librarians to make decisions, identify content, determine assessment, and plan for the future. Identifying materials need not be difficult, as the theme can serve as a pathway to recognizing existing content.

Prior to developing content, identifying specific student needs is important, and input should come from multiple sources rather than relying on one or two individuals’ casual comments or on an informal hallway conversation. A first step is to gather information from all of these through conversations with liaison librarians and review existing data. Due to close departmental relationships, librarians have plenty of anecdotal evidence regarding the types of training needs of students. This evidence is a rich source to begin the brainstorming process. Library session content and reference questions are other sources to identify potential needs. This is the methodology used by the Milner team to develop the final list of potential workshops given the Director of Graduate Studies. See appendix 33A for an example analysis of a workshop topic.

Most librarians and libraries already have significant content that can be used as the foundation for a workshop series. Content could be in the form of one-shot sessions, orientation programs, online guides, or common questions at a reference desk. Additionally, individuals with specific skills sets (e.g., word processing mastery) are another resource to consider. For instance, repurposing existing strategies, learning outcomes, and hands-on activities created for library sessions is a time saver. Doing a quick reference question analysis can reveal broad areas where students have the most trouble or confusion. Often librarians can create a general workshop outline based on common questions or established learning outcomes. From there, the content falls into place, as it can come from existing handouts, vendor training content, and existing help guides.

For Milner, the initial list of potential workshops given to the Director of Graduate Studies was based on content already generated. Much of it was in the form of online guides or discipline-specific presentations. The most time-intensive amount of work went into converting web-based content into hands-on activities suitable for a workshop. Some of the workshops converted more easily, such as the source management/RefWorks workshop, where most of the focus can be on the actual use and functionality of the system. Typical presentations, such as existing slide shows, when considered for workshops, required time and effort to convert. Utilizing books like Elizabeth Barkley's *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* become invaluable when identifying quality activities for a workshop.<sup>18</sup>

While these first offerings within the theme of Growing a Researcher may seem basic, the workshops were taught at a level of complexity greater than that provided to undergraduates. Given the wide international and diverse backgrounds, age ranges, work experience, and scholarly abilities of graduate students, these first workshops are crucial for forming a foundation for success as graduate students.

Formatting a thesis or dissertation, every graduate student's worst nightmare, may be an unusual workshop for a library. However, as an example of utilizing specific skill sets, the Head of IUF's extreme proficiency in Microsoft Word led to the development of this particular workshop. This not only greatly simplified (and corrected) the process, but also cleverly provided the entrée into many other discussions, including benefits of citation management systems, scholarly communication topics, copyright, and plagiarism. As a result of the formatting workshop, students inevitably attended citation management classes along with voicing greater understanding of (and relief about) the writing and formatting. From this example of a successful grassroots effort, the next steps are sustaining the partnership momentum.



## Sustaining Programming and Partnerships

Sustaining partnerships across campus is an ongoing process. Partnerships will ebb and flow, with some partners leaving for other projects, others changing their roles, and still others leading the charge, dedicated to seeing the project succeed. It is not uncommon for grassroots or organically generated programming to become a formalized program. Sadly, just as often these pilot programs fizzle and fade away.

However, for a partnership to be effective and sustainable, especially for a diverse, changing population like graduate students, a variety of factors need to be present. These include shared values, effective group communication, regular assessment and analysis of data, support from library administration and public services librarians, a stable pool of facilitators and support personnel, adequate skill levels of potential facilitators, and coordinated marketing. Research is clear that the success of any graduate student programming lies in catering to the specific needs of that population.<sup>19</sup>

After conducting a study of multiple universities across the country, Adrianna Kezar outlined multiple requirements necessary for collaboration to be successful across campus.<sup>20</sup> One common value across the institutions studied was high collaboration. Most often, collaboration is sustainable at “student-centered, innovative, and egalitarian” institutions, especially when valued by faculty, student services staff, and administrators and reflected in an institution’s mission statement.<sup>21</sup> Although the word *collaboration* does not appear in the ISU’s mission statement, the word and sentiment can be found throughout the university’s strategic planning document, *Educating Illinois*. The Director of Graduate Studies, the three Milner Library colleagues, and the campus-wide partners highly value their collaborative efforts, a key step in ensuring a sustainable program.

Communication is another key to sustainability—primarily communication to graduate students as well as to the faculty members who work with them. Librarians must communicate their value in the information, skills, and resources they have to share as well as their knowledge of specific technologies and scholarly communication. Reaching out to faculty members about any programs or services for graduate students is tantamount to success. In conjunction to the Graduate School marketing the programming, liaison librarians can promote these graduate student opportunities even if they themselves are not part of the endeavor.

Additionally, personal invitations to key faculty and administrators across campus to attend the workshop series themselves have the benefit of demonstrating the value so these key players can then encourage graduate students to

attend. At the Milner workshops, faculty members (who attended or were in graduate programs themselves) commented that they were not aware of the resources available to them through the library, nor were they aware that librarians are experts in the areas of scholarly communication or software applications such as Word or source management tools.

Another important aspect of program viability and success is consistent messaging, often the most overlooked. This is particularly important when partnering with another department or program. Any miscommunication can result in mistitled workshops or less-than-optimal program descriptions. It is also important for all partners to be clear on the registration process, such as who is handling the registration, when registration opens and closes, how the registration list is communicated to the facilitator, and who is responsible for sending reminder messages. The strong partnership between Milner and the Graduate School has made this portion of the programming easy and relatively seamless.

At Illinois State University, the team experienced the necessity of effective marketing efforts in order to reach graduate students. Ineffective publicity resulted in low attendance. Employment of multiple strategies ensures increased reach. While common, use of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and even Snapchat, for online engagement through likes, shares, and written testimonials encourages students to attend in the future.

Real-time distance communication also proved to be necessary to expand the graduate workshops. To provide a higher level of access to the workshops, each one was live streamed utilizing the program Zoom. While in-person attendance has fallen, live streaming attendance has steadily risen. Students appeared to appreciate the opportunity to attend via a collaborative online environment due to their busy schedules. Even though the numbers are preliminary, this is an indication that live streaming or prerecorded workshops need to be strongly considered. The benefit of in-person and live streaming is that students can ask questions and the facilitator can answer them immediately. In order to continue building and sustaining the program, the partners involved in the graduate workshops must continue to use online technology to make programming more accessible to the target audience.

As is the case with many libraries, budget cuts and personnel changes have affected the stability of the workshop program here at Illinois State University. Originally, the plan was to train two instruction librarians to help facilitate some of the workshops. However, both were reallocated to other areas within the library, making it difficult for them to be involved. Another challenge is identifying multiple individuals who have the needed tech skills or are willing to learn the tech skills to teach various workshops. While the current slate of workshops is minimally tech-focused, there has been a lack of willingness by librarians to learn the needed skills.

To grow and maintain programming as well as sustain partnerships, a necessary component is assessment. Currently, Milner faces several challenges in maintaining and growing the programming. Recent changes in staffing presents a level of uncertainty in continued support. Demonstration of high-level impact, both the value of the partnership with the Graduate School and the value to the students themselves, is needed. To get this, assessment needs to occur at all stages of the workshop programming cycle. Assessment data is highly valuable for use in making educated, targeted decisions about the effectiveness of programming for graduate students.

A good first step is to determine if existing workshops are meeting the expectations of students. At the end of each library workshop, participants were asked to fill out an online evaluation form. Attendees ranked their level of satisfaction with the workshop based on established learning outcomes and provided additional comments. Initial responses were very positive and verified that the initial workshop topics were well-chosen. Comments generated included: “It changed my life. You should require all grad students to attend,” and “This was sooooo helpful! ... I didn’t know what I didn’t know.” While this is a good start for doing assessment, more is necessary for long-term sustainability.

One gap in assessment is the lack of large-scale input from the students themselves. In-person attendance at the workshops, while initially robust, has fallen steadily. There could be many reasons for this; however, without directly querying students, we can only guess at potential reasons and possible solutions. A more formal query would identify the types of library-specific workshops students actually need and want. Most graduate students desire workshops catering to their specific research needs and skill level; more basic workshops are often viewed as not necessary or not a good use of time.<sup>22</sup> The Graduate School has a dedicated email distribution list, so the library could collaborate on creating and sending a short survey as a good initial step. Being consistent about post-session evaluations is also important. Including a text box for suggestions of other workshops would be a low-barrier way to get additional ideas. Soliciting the Graduate Student Association Council for feedback is another avenue that could be used more regularly.

## Conclusion

As is evident in the literature and through this grassroots effort, targeting graduate student needs is worth the effort and a much needed endeavor. Due to unique circumstances within each library and institution, a cookie-cutter approach is not possible. However, the presence of a collaborative atmosphere is a main ingredient for successful programming. Fortunately, at Illinois State Uni-

versity, the dedication to a positive collaboration between the Graduate School and library planning team ignited the effort and contributed to the initial success. It also allowed each librarian to fill different roles and make contributions related to their strengths and skill sets.

For all fledgling programs, early successes may not continue, and unexpected changes affect sustainability. While Milner Library faces some challenges in creating formalized programming, there are strong indicators of continued success. Positive feedback from workshop attendees provides a strong incentive for all involved and tangible evidence for others to support these efforts. The dedication of the core librarian team is another sign that the program will continue to evolve. Lastly, commitment to collaboration by all parties will sustain communication and planning efforts, all of which contribute to an established program.

The role of assessment is vital to ensure continuance of any program as it provides quality data to show value and to argue for continued support and resources. It also provides a structured mechanism for continually improving programming as well as pushing it into an established service within the library and across campus. There are many assessment options for the library and the Graduate School to utilize. One key aspect is obtaining input from a larger group of students to identify potential trends in interests and utilization of the content.

For any library trying to meet graduate student needs, there are many aspects to consider. However, being aware of potential partnerships and thoughtfully considering in what areas to put forth effort will be key determinants in long-term success and sustainability. However, waiting until all of the pieces are in place will only lead to perpetual planning. Starting small and within the strengths of those involved sets the stage for an established program in the future.

## Appendix 33A: Example Analysis for a Workshop Topic

Due to the research-intensive focus of most graduate programs, utilizing a source management system like Ref Works can be a key tool. When considering Ref Works as a possible workshop, Milner's Ref Works-related data showed that over a five-year period (July 1, 2010–June 30, 2015), there was significant activity across reference transactions and library sessions. However, when the data was filtered to just graduate students, both master's and doctoral, the data dropped significantly (see table 33.1). Further examination of the reference transactions shows that the majority of questions were related to logging into the platform. A Ref Works guide, created in the summer of 2012, has seen robust activity every year indicating a need for continued support (see table 33.2). The guide also provided a general structure and content for a workshop. Examining Ref Works accounts showed that, on average, 40 percent of account holders were graduate students (see table 33.3). While graduate students were clearly utilizing this resource, the data showed training was sporadic. Due to this gap, identifying Ref Works as a dedicated workshop was easy.

**Table 33.1**

RefWorks-Related Statistics from July 1, 2010, to June 30, 2015

|                      | Reference Transactions <sup>a</sup> | Library Sessions |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Overall</b>       | 572                                 | 438              |
| <b>Grad Students</b> | 150                                 | 104              |

a. Transactions are comprised of in-person, instant message, phone, and one-on-one consultations.

**Table 33.2**

RefWorks Help Guide Views

| Academic Year                     | Views <sup>a</sup> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>July 1, 2012–June 30, 2013</b> | 4,868              |
| <b>July 1, 2013–June 30, 2014</b> | 7,200              |
| <b>July 1, 2014–June 30, 2015</b> | 6,793              |
| <b>Total</b>                      | 18,861             |

a. Guide was created in July 2012; no prior statistics are available.

**Table 33.3**

RefWorks Account Statistics from January 2013 to December 2015

|                   | Overall | Grad Students |
|-------------------|---------|---------------|
| 2013 <sup>a</sup> | 6,307   | 2,690 (43%)   |
| 2014              | 7,447   | 3,083 (42%)   |
| 2015              | 8,920   | 3,483 (39%)   |

a. Statistics prior to 2013 are not available.

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