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Growing Collaborative Outreach Efforts to Support the Well-Being of Communities

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EDITORIAL

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De-Stressing on Campus

L ibrary outreach programs and activities that focus on de-stressing and well-being are prevalent in public, school, and academic libraries. Communities face many stresses and libraries try to meet their communities' needs by providing outreach activities that engage users with library resources and services. Students, such as on our campus, face many of the same stresses as the larger community, but with the additional strain of exams, standardized testing, and other end-of-course tests.

The professional literature offers resources on different types of de-stressing programming for libraries, yet it lacks discussion on how to establish partnerships or deepen existing relationships to support patrons in the area of de-stressing and well-being. Through our project we sought to engage students during their periods of heightened stress, to promote library and campus resources, and to strengthen our relationships with campus and community partners.

As a former public library employee and a school librarian, we wanted to create a collaborative, creative, and low-cost de-stressing program during the week of exams for students at our library. Our institution is a large, public land-grant, R1 university located in the southeast region of the United States. It currently serves approximately 20,000 undergraduate students and 5,000 graduate students and has campuses located across the state (Clemson University 2019). The main campus has four libraries: the main library, an education media center, a special collections and archives unit, and an architecture library. In the fall of 2018, the university's library system was in a transition phase; it had a new library administration and many new employees. There was no position that was truly dedicated to outreach to students, and nor was there an events or outreach committee. The library had not offered any de-stressing programming to students in many years.

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Many public, school, and academic libraries offer programs and services to support the wellness of their communities. From fitness programs, therapy animals, and de-stressing activities, libraries support their communities in creative ways. The creation and maintenance of partnerships is integral to these outreach initiatives. Working with campus partners, we sought to do something similar for our campus community. We called on our knowledge of collaborative strategies that had we gained in our public- and school-library experiences to create a de-stressing program during exam week at the main library on campus. What started off in the fall of 2018 as a program composed of small-scale activities has developed into a week-long,

multifaceted program—all through the strengthening of collaborative efforts between partners at our university. Although this article examines the collaborative programming experience at an academic library, the methods for strengthening collaborative efforts—as well as the next steps—can be applied in various library settings, especially those looking for low-cost options for de-stressing activities.

Cultures of School and Public Libraries

Our initial collaborative efforts began between just the two of us as we came to realize, within a few months of meeting, that we had many experiences in common: we were both fairly new to academic libraries and had previously worked in other types of libraries; we were both facing similar challenges in our new positions, such as feeling siloed in our roles and overwhelmed with learning new systems and institutional knowledge; and, most significantly, we were both trying to create opportunities for student engagement with the library.

In the next sections, each of us will describe our experiences in our previous roles as they relate to the culture of collaboration and community engagement.

Culture of the School Library

In my experience, the culture of school librarianship is based on collaboration. As a school librarian, I was taught how to collaborate with classroom teachers, students, and other school community stakeholders to support the success of students. School librarians endeavor to make the school library the hub of the school, where young people feel welcome and safe, and where they can get excited about reading, working with others, and using critical thinking skills. As is the case for many school-library programs, I encountered a lack of funds to support activities and materials, so I used creative problem-solving and sought DIY projects that I often found online. Asking for donations or help from families/parents and other community partners was part of my experience in order to offset the cost of needed materials or to help when we were understaffed. I was fortunate to have the support and encouragement from my administration to try new strategies and approaches to learning; this was invaluable to our culture of learning as educators. Essential to this was using reflection to refine our work. As educators, reflection is an important tool we used to think on what went well or what needs to be improved in a learning opportunity so that the needs of students are met.

From my professional experience, I came to value creative problem-solving, collaborative efforts to support student success, and a willingness to try new learning strategies and activities to support students. All of these values I brought with me to my academic-library position. Although the culture of the academic library is quite different, I strive to apply my values and skills to my position, which include making the library a welcoming place, supporting student success, and collaborating with others.

Culture of the Public Library

The culture in the public library where I worked—a small branch of a library system in a rural community—was a friendly and supportive one. The staff inherently understood that we needed to work collaboratively in order to better serve our patrons. For many of our patrons, it was the only place they could go to check their email, read the newspaper, or borrow DVDs. Many of them came to the library every day, so we were able to build rapport with the patrons and, in turn, create programs that appealed to them. Although the county and library

administrators were supportive of our efforts to engage with the community, there was not a large budget for outreach activities. Staff had to be creative with the programs that we offered, and we often adapted ideas for activities using materials we already had on hand.

This experience taught me that making personal connections with library users is crucial to building a sense of community and to providing the best experience for our patrons. I wanted to achieve that in my new role at the academic library. Although building rapport with students has not been as easy, I have sought out opportunities to work with colleagues who also want to develop a supportive community and engage with students to create a positive library experience.

Blending Cultures

As we shared our experiences in our previous roles and the challenges we were facing in our academic-library roles, we realized that collaboration and relationship-building were endeavors we both valued and missed from our previous work. We also realized we each brought varied strengths to our positions that would help meet a need in our academic library—student engagement and outreach. We saw this need as a priority, and we could work together to meet it.

Building our Collaborative De-Stressing Program

With just two weeks to go before exam week in the fall of 2018, we learned that no de-stressing activities were planned within our library and that it had been years since anything like this had been implemented. We felt this type of programming could be helpful for students as well as an opportunity for the library to try something new. We also thought it would help us to better understand the needs of our students and to build a sense of community.

We began by establishing goals for the program—including a learning outcome—and aligning them with the strategic plan of the university and the library. We then discussed activities we had implemented at our previous libraries to engage our communities; they had involved different types of games and crafts, as well as food to draw patrons to the events. We also searched online for new ideas. and we ultimately put together a set of activities and giveaways throughout the week that cost a total of $70, as we already had some of the required items. We distributed scented bookmarks and candy with motivational quotes attached, set up a white board for students to post their frustrations, and hosted a station to make DIY stress balls.

From our previous library experiences, we knew we had to be proactive in reaching out to students and showing our enthusiasm for the activities. We delivered the de-stressing program from two tables in our main library's lobby for two hours each weekday. We tracked the number of students who stopped by our table each day and noted any comments that would help us plan future programs. We did not know how students would respond to the program; our only expectation was that we would engage with students as best we could, as we had both seen activities/events that were poorly attended at our previous libraries. By the end of the week, we reached over 900 students and received a lot of positive feedback. Students were appreciative of the activities and some of the comments we received included "This is pretty nice, not going to lie," "Why weren't you here last semester?" "This is exactly what I needed," and "I love my campus. I wish a tour was going through to see this."

Buoyed by the initial success of the programming, we sought to make improvements for the coming semesters, especially since we had more time to plan. With support from our supervisors, we planned to have a recurring event

during exam week. Part of a successful library program or event is to continue to tailor it to meet the needs of the community, yet two constraints held us back: lack of funds to provide more substantial activities and lack of the expertise in helping students cope with exam-related stress. To address these limitations, we considered whether we could partner with other campus entities to bring both resources and expertise to our program. We were used to collaborating with parents, volunteers, and community members to help with library events and programs at our former libraries, so we brainstormed what groups on campus had similar outreach goals to ours.

We met with staff from the counseling center and the student success center and shared our goals, learning outcomes, and ideas for the de-stressing program. We discussed how our organizations could help one another to meet our mutual goal of serving students. The counseling center explained that they had had limited success at their previous exam-week activities due to poor attendance; they wanted to empower students by teaching them how to de-stress. The student support center wanted to raise awareness of their services in a more proactive way, as many students knew of their resources only when they needed help. The main library is usually packed with students during exam week, so the library could help our partners meet their needs of reaching students, while they could help us with our lack of resources and expertise. Over the course of a few meetings and emails, we brainstormed ideas and coordinated a week-long program featuring a quick DIY activity that would take 1–2 minutes for students to complete, along with a longer stress-relief activity, including yoga, progressive muscle relaxation, and deep breathing exercises facilitated by a counselor from the counseling center.

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To market the program campus-wide, we jointly created promotional materials; we wanted to convey the message that the co-sponsors of the de-stressing program were all on-campus offices with resources students could access anytime. At our former libraries, we were used to making our own in-house flyers, promoting events on our libraries' social media channels, and creating book displays to connect the collection to these events. We called on this experience to promote the de-stressing program on campus, and we relied on our newly-formed collaborative partnerships to bolster the advertising and marketing.

Each of our campus partners has their own social media channels, so we created content for each to post, in addition to paper flyers that we could each distribute through our offices. While the program was running, the library promoted its activities through Instagram Stories and Twitter posts. We also created a book display to highlight materials about managing stress and promoting wellbeing, such as yoga books and DVDs, and meditation books. Flyers were distributed throughout the library and at the services desk.

Our marketing and communication strategies evolved over time as we gained experience, and we looked for more ways to get the word out to students. We reached out to a contact in the housing and dining office and were able to get our activities promoted on the electronic displays in lounges of the dorms for the duration of the event. We also reached out to our student affairs office and had them promote the event on their social media channels. Finally, we coordinated with the library's marketing and communications team to have our event included on the library events calendar on the library's website.

With our second iteration of this programming, we quickly discovered what was popular with the students and what didn't resonate. We had many students

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participate in the quick DIY activities, but had low attendance for the longer activities. Regardless of the turnout, we all considered it a success. With these new partnerships, we felt confident that we could have a greater impact in helping students learn how to care for their wellbeing during stressful times.

We have continued to revise our programming based on student feedback. Through conversations with students and posing questions on dry-erase boards placed in strategic locations around the library we have elicited from students what they would like to see at library events. Over the past three semesters we have added activities such as yoga, puzzles, board games, and coloring sheets to see what was popular with students. We have also brainstormed other possible avenues of partnership.

We were both accustomed to tracking attendance levels at programs and events at our previous libraries, but we wanted to do more than just count people at the de-stressing activities. We wanted to find a quicker and simpler way to evaluate the impact of the activities on students, so we partnered with our web developer to build a smiley-face assessment tool, like those that can be found in airports. The web developer was able to create a similar application and we placed an iPad loaded with the tool on a stand near the library exit for students to quickly provide their feedback.

Establishing Partnerships

From our experiences at public and school libraries, we viewed librarianship through the lens of collaboration. Although our academic library was not as highly collaborative as our previous workplaces, particularly around outreach initiatives, we knew that working together would strengthen our outreach efforts. Our library did not have an outreach librarian or committee, so we brainstormed ideas to extend our outreach efforts. Table 1 presents some of the brainstorming questions we used to guide us in our work to establish partnerships. Deepening Collaborative Efforts

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Brainstorming Questions

1. Who in our library has outreach responsibilities similar to our own?
2. Who works with outward-facing events or activities for library or organization visitors?
3. Who in our community (on or off campus) may have similar goals similar to ours in working with students and visitors?
4. Which organizations has the library collaborated with in the past?
5. Who may have outreach programs or initiatives within their organization?

Table 1. Brainstorming questions for establishing partnerships

Saunders and Corning (2020) discuss the spectrum of collaboration, noting that collaboration can range from cooperation to more fully integrated collaboration. Cooperation can include the sharing of space and resources, whereas more integrated collaboration includes capacity-building efforts where partnering organizations "provide programs that are clearly intertwined and share resources and funding." (Saunders and Corning 2020, 1-2)

Our collaborative journey has centered on growth—building capacity so we can continue to meet the needs of our students. To facilitate communication with our partners we used collaborative planning documents, assessment data, and notes from our reflective sessions which were recorded and shared in Google Docs. We also implemented a debrief protocol after each week of

programming. Table 2 outlines the reflective questions we used in our debrief sessions.For our planning efforts, we used a perpetual Google Doc file so we could refer back to milestones on our collaborative journey. We focused on growth and how we could make continuous improvements to our activities, marketing strategies, assessment strategies and reflective data and feedback.

Debrief Questions
1. What went well with the activities/program? 2. What do we need to change for next time? What areas need to be improved? 3. Based on our assessment data, what activities do we need to revise? 4. Are there any other partners that we could collaborate with to strengthen support for students?

Table 2. Debrief questions for outreach activities

Although we chose to use Google Docs, any collaborative editing software can work. Table 3 provides some other suggestions for free, collaborative workflow tools.Issues and Challenges

    With the many benefits of collaboration come many challenges. Lack of funding, staff, and time are ever-present constraints, and competition/ownership of ideas often test collaborative efforts (Saunders and Corning 2020). We had support from library administration for our de-stressing activities, yet

Collaborative Resource	Access Details
Google Drive Google Documents (Google Docs) Google Slides Google Sheets	One person needs a Google account to create a Google Document, but partners do not need a Google account to view or edit the Google Document, just an email address.
Trello	Can get a free account for basic level. You can invite partners to project management details by inviting them by sending an invitation to their email.
freedcamp	Free online collaboration tool to help you stay organized with task lists, project boards and more.

Table 3. List of collaborative tools/resources for outreach

some of our colleagues questioned the role of the library in providing such activities for students. One librarian questioned our expertise in dispensing stress-management advice. We took this opportunity to clarify we were not offering advice but were promoting activities and resources for students to engage with and, hopefully, relax.

    Before collaborating with our partners, we had very limited resources and lacked the time and staffing to provide activities to the students. These challenges were overcome by finding partners who had similar goals; we came together to improve our services, share our resources, and work efficiently together.

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Future Directions and the Online Environment

We had planned additional activities and stronger collaborative partnerships for exam week of spring 2020. These included hosting a visit from a local therapy dog organization, local massage therapists, and working with new partners to distribute food during late afternoon and evening hours. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has disrupted these plans as students and employees were sent home to finish the semester online. Working at home has forced us to think about program delivery in new ways. We found ourselves wondering how we could expand de-stressing activities to the virtual environment. We revisited our original brainstorming questions, such as what organizations are providing online services that could help with stress relief during this taxing time? Since we couldn't rely on "library as place" to promote our program, how could we reach students?

With limited time, and with our current partners unable to collaborate due to having to adapt to modified campus operations, we formed a new connection with the housing office on campus. We explored options for hosting a virtual movie night and partnered with the housing office to host a movie watch-party and discussion. Although we had only five participants for the movie night, we were able to establish a new partnership with a campus group we may not have interacted with otherwise. One of our future goals is to continue looking for new partners to support students, whether with online or in-person activities or programs.

Conclusion

Establishing and developing partnerships can be highly beneficial to library outreach efforts, yet they can also be quite challenging. When the work environment does not have a long history of partnering with other groups, or when limited resources make it difficult to launch new initiatives, collaboration can seem daunting. We were fortunate that our prior experiences at a public and a school library motivated us to prioritize collaboration in order to support students, despite the challenges we faced in starting something new. Collaboration can start small and grow over time. Over three semesters, we have continued to learn and refine how to provide de-stressing outreach programs for students and how to collaborate with others. We continue to think about how to meet our students' needs in an online environment. In a time when so many in our communities are under considerable stress, libraries can work creatively and collaboratively to deliver de-stressing programming to their users.

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