



CHAPTER 25

IMPROVING GRADUATE STUDENTS' RESEARCH SKILLS

The Graduate Student Research Series at the University of Florida

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Academic libraries are increasingly prioritizing outreach and seeking innovative ways to assist new constituencies. However, these efforts have sometimes been limited and incomplete. Most library programs still focus heavily on a set of fairly traditional services, which include information literacy instruction, reference services, assisting with reference citation software, and so on.

While such services are crucial for student success, they tend to focus more on providing basic information, often to undergraduates, and much less on helping graduate students with more complex aspects of their academic work, particularly research. It is generally assumed that graduate students already know how to be good researchers or that their academic departments will teach them, but these students nonetheless face unique scholarly and information needs. Not only do they have to learn how to navigate the library's resources, particularly when they come from a different institution or country, they also often need assistance with basic research skills. This is an area where librarians can help.

This chapter describes an effort at the University of Florida to address the needs of graduate students and broaden library offerings to this constituency. First, we outline the development and implementation of this library program, the Graduate Student Research Series, which was created to provide more thorough, holistic research assistance to graduates. We describe the nature and contributions of this program and discuss issues that we encountered as well as the lessons we learned along the way. We conclude by offering some best practice guidelines for libraries interested in pursuing this broader type of approach.

Literature Review: The Graduate Student Experience and the Academic Library

Numerous scholarly studies have examined the needs of graduate students, needs which are fairly similar across institutions. However, these studies have tended to focus more on identifying problems than on solutions, and therefore have not necessarily investigated or examined how libraries can meet graduate student needs.

These studies show that graduate students express an interest in face-to-face workshops on a wide variety of topics, many related to the research cycle: finding sources, creating posters, writing a literature review, learning about copyright and open access, applying for grants, and so on. Many libraries already offer some of these workshops, but the articles highlight an important issue. Indeed, graduate students are often unaware that they can ask librarians for research assistance or unaware of the services that librarians and libraries can provide and therefore do not know these workshops exist.¹ This likely explains why there is often a low attendance at these sessions.²

Most importantly, however, the literature sketches a theme of unmet graduate student needs. The graduate student experience is fundamentally department based; subject departments contain advisers, resources, and administrative responsibilities for degree programs and degree progress. But departments vary widely in the resources they provide to graduate students, and even in the best cases, gaps remain. This is echoed by the more generally decentralized nature of university-level services for tasks like teaching. Finally, library offerings have also been somewhat narrow, and thus it can be useful to collaborate with other campus units.³

These findings have served as an inspiration for the Graduate Student Research Series. This chapter extends the current scholarship by reporting on this program and by providing a concrete example of how one large academic library has addressed these needs.

Involving the Library

The general picture that emerges from the literature is one of multiple, wide-ranging academic needs for graduate students, needs that are only partially and inconsistently met in a highly decentralized university system. While the library and librarians cannot (and should not attempt to) replace students' academic departments and advisers, we believe that librarians still can contribute more fully to the graduate student experience. Librarians can fill certain gaps in graduate students' training, in particular for certain facets of the research process that are rarely addressed by others. Librarians, therefore, have a crucial role to play in the academic career of graduate students.

Workshop Planning

To contribute to graduate training at the University of Florida, the two authors, the European studies and political science librarians, accompanied by a third colleague, the anthropology librarian, created a four-workshop sequence: the Graduate Student Research Series (GSRS). We chose to focus on research because it lies at the core of the graduate experience. While the graduate student career encompasses many other elements, such as teaching and taking classes, students typically need to complete an intensive research project such as a master's thesis or a PhD dissertation in order to receive a graduate degree. Moreover, graduate students are also increasingly encouraged to publish academic articles, and this requires training and support.

The GSRS focuses on guiding graduate students through the academic research and writing process. We sketched out a sequential, four-step program that covers a logical and coherent set of elements required for advanced research and scholarship (see figure 25.1).

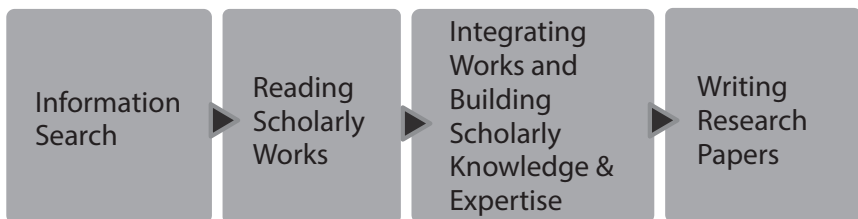


Figure 25.1

Four sequential steps required for advanced research and scholarship.

Information search was an obvious first step; not only does finding scholarly sources represent a logical starting point, it also leverages one of our core skills as librarians. Once scholarly sources are located, they need to be read, so covering effective reading skills was a good second step. And, ultimately, since academia is a written enterprise and graduate research centers on the production of written work, effective writing made for a useful fourth and final element.

The nature of the third step was initially a bit less clear. After considering what is needed to bridge the gap between the second step of reading and the fourth step of writing, it was evident that students must be able to integrate and synthesize works they have read into a coordinated body of knowledge, or expertise, before it can guide the production of their own research work. Accordingly, a session based on novice-expert research⁴—a body of work that outlines the nature of expertise and how it can be efficiently acquired—built nicely upon step two, and set the stage for step four, thus providing an effective transition.

Workshop Execution

At this point in time, the GSRS has been through three complete iterations. Each time, we conducted a sequence of four 50-minute sessions, following the schematic outlined in figure 25.1, offered over a one-month period. Our workshops are held on the same day and at the same time and place throughout a given semester. They are free to attend, and attendees are not required to register. These sessions are primarily aimed at graduate and professional students from humanities and social science disciplines, but ultimately, they are open to anyone wanting to attend.

Promotion of the GSRS included posting notices to Listservs and social media (through the different UF Libraries' Twitter and Facebook accounts), placing posters in the library, and asking subject liaison colleagues to provide information to their departments. These efforts have yielded an average of twelve to fifteen attendees per session. These are a diverse mix of graduate students, with an occasional undergraduate, and even faculty colleagues from the library. Across this time, we have had students from nineteen different majors, spread over eight of the sixteen colleges at the university. There has been a strong international student presence, far larger than the percentage at the university as a whole; international students seem to feel more need for research skills instruction than American students.

Assessment

We distributed evaluation forms to workshop attendees at the end of each se-

mester. Initial assessment suggests that the Graduate Student Research Series has been well received and effective. While our assessment instrument did not solicit quantitative scores, the evaluations have been largely positive. A comment from a graduate student in linguistics was illustrative: "I truly enjoyed every one of the ... research sessions offered by you and other scholars at the Library West. All the information provided was very helpful and enriching." Accordingly, we feel that our approach highlights an important way that academic libraries can leverage their central "hub of the university" status to provide well-targeted services that demonstrate substantial value for graduate students.

While the feedback from the students has been positive and encouraging, we did encounter several issues that prompted concern and discussion, and that are helping us improve future iterations of the workshops.

Issues and Lessons Learned

Presenter Expertise and Session Quality

As noted previously, the GSRS originated as a collaboration between three librarians at the Smathers Libraries. All three of us have PhD degrees in our own fields and are experienced classroom instructors. Thus, we possess a broad range of subject field expertise and a range of library experience, with information search being our most relevant strength.

Nonetheless, we did encounter some clear limitations. While the first session invoked our librarians' expertise, and the third session drew on the extensive social science background of one of the authors, our lack of exposure to reading and writing pedagogy was apparent in the second and fourth workshops. Reading and writing are specialized topics, with their own literatures and expertise, and none of the presenters had had formal exposure to these areas. Lacking this, these sessions initially offered what essentially involved a patchwork of suggestions and ideas gleaned from education-based literatures. This did not produce presentations appropriate for a graduate-level audience, and, accordingly, the quality varied across the four sessions.

Academic Backgrounds of Attendees

Another issue has involved the wide range of academic backgrounds among session attendees. Originally, we expected that the workshop series would attract humanities and social sciences graduate students, but we quickly realized that many students from the sciences were also attending. For some sessions, this did not pose a problem—finding sources or reading effectively are fairly similar

across fields—but other skills, particularly involving the formats used for writing papers, can be highly discipline-specific.

Our solutions to these two problems, both involving our limited expertise in the face of the attendees' wide range of academic disciplines, have been partial up to this point. In the third iteration of the GSRS, we collaborated with the Smathers Libraries' chemistry librarian on the fourth session, dedicated to writing effective scholarly papers, since she would be better qualified to discuss the proper writing of STEM papers. Future plans include seeking collaboration with relevant campus centers of expertise, for example, the University of Florida's University Writing Program, which can provide needed expertise that we lack as librarians.

Collaboration and Timing of Sessions

Another important issue has involved the timing of the sessions. As noted, the GSRS began with three librarians. Given our use of fifty-minute sessions, and allowing for setup operations, transitions between presenters, and so on, this allowed only about fifteen minutes per presenter. These segments were often too short to permit full development of material, and, relatedly, presenters often found it difficult to stay within their allotted time, which created some tensions. Presentations by three different people can also seem choppy, and this undermined smooth coordination across segments.

Unfortunately, while organizing longer sessions might seem to be an obvious solution, this is not a relevant option for us at this point. Assessment revealed that graduate students prefer shorter, fifty-minute sessions, as these fit more easily into their already busy schedules.

To remedy this issue, we decided that only two librarians at most should lead any particular session, and in some cases, one librarian took responsibility for an entire session. This has eased tensions and smoothed presentations, while also allowing us to create more in-depth development of material.

Best Practice Guidelines

Recognize Your Limits

While programs like the GSRS extend library services beyond traditional library programs and offerings, this kind of broader approach can also reach beyond librarians' training and competencies. As noted, we had difficulty in addressing our attendees' diverse range of disciplines and presenting reading and writing skills at a graduate-appropriate level, and at first, we essentially tried to bluff our way

through. While students had no apparent complaints, this offended our own sense of professionalism. It is important to acknowledge one's own disciplinary limits.

Consider Staffing

To build upon the previous point, the makeup of our original team was not particularly optimal. Our common origins in humanities and the social sciences yielded a substantial overlap among our academic orientations and skill sets, which necessarily left us thin in other spots. Based on this experience, it would seem useful to evaluate the backgrounds of the presenters and to assemble a productive, wide-ranging group of librarians and other academic professionals in order to ensure that the workshop experience will be highly relevant and professional.

Assess Each Session

Reasoning that circulating assessment forms after each of the four sessions would be unnecessary and repetitive, we originally distributed an evaluation instrument following completion of the entire workshop. Unfortunately, the response was poor, and the attendees who did respond had difficulty remembering their reaction to each particular session. Accordingly, we have concluded that collecting evaluations at the end of each session is well worth the few minutes of time that this takes.

Cross-promote Workshops

Attendance is often a concern with library programs, and this was true for the GSRS. Thus, effective promotion represented another priority. Along with the strategies outlined earlier such as social media, posters, and Listservs, we also cross-promoted our workshops. In later iterations, we collaborated with colleagues who were offering their own programs in data management, data curation, copyright, and institutional repositories; all parties listed others' workshops on their own promotional materials. This not only serves to boost attendance, it also provides an excellent opportunity for graduate students to see all of the academic resources provided by libraries and librarians.

Conclusion

Librarians can and should play a role in graduate students' career experiences; programs like the Graduate Student Research Series provide one example of

the kind of graduate services expert librarians can offer. The program has been successful, and the consistently good attendance highlights the need for these kinds of workshops at our university. While there have been some issues with the series, we have learned from our experiences, and we constantly aim to improve the workshops. Our goal is to ensure graduate students receive strong and appropriate training so that they can become the most successful researchers.

Notes

1. Colin Beard and David Bawden, "University Libraries and the Postgraduate Student: Physical and Virtual Spaces," *New Library World* 113, no. 9/10 (2012): 445, <https://doi.org/10.1108/03074801211273911>; Hillary Bussell, Jessica Hagman, and Christopher S. Guder. "Research Needs and Learning Format Preferences of Graduate Students at a Large Public University: An Exploratory Study," *College and Research Libraries* 78, no. 7 (2017): 981, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.7.978>; David Gibbs et al., "Assessing the Research Needs of Graduate Students at Georgetown University," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 38, no. 5 (2012): 272, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2012.07.002>; Hannah Gascho Rempel, Uta Hussong-Christian, and Margaret Mellinger, "Graduate Student Space and Service Needs: A Recommendation for a Cross-campus Solution," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 37, no. 6 (2011): 483, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2011.07.004>.
2. Bussell, Hagman, and Guder, "Research Needs," 992; Bonnie L. Fong et al., "Assessing and Serving the Workshop Needs of Graduate Students," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 42, no. 5 (2016): 575–76, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2016.06.003>.
3. Bussell, Hagman, and Guder, "Research Needs and Learning Format Preferences," "Research Needs," 993; Fong et al., "Assessing and Serving," 575–76; Rempel, Hussong-Christian, and Mellinger, "Graduate Student Space," 484–85.
4. John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and James W. Pellegrino, *How People Learn* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000), 31–50.

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- Rempel, Hannah Gascho, Uta Hussong-Christian, and Margaret Mellinger. "Graduate Student Space and Service Needs: A Recommendation for a Cross-campus Solution." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 37, no. 6 (2011): 480–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2011.07.004>.

