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Abstract

Past research has indicated that social connection with their community is an important factor in the retention of graduate students. To help address this need, a Rowan University librarian led an interdepartmental team of collaborators from across campus in developing a series of outreach events specifically for graduate students, which evolved over time to include more and richer programming and opportunities for socialization. This article describes the evidence basis for these events' inception, the essential components of each iteration of the event and its programming, and the results of holding these events, including both their successes and their failures. Recommendations are included for other professionals who may be considering similar outreach efforts for their graduate and professional student populations, so that others can learn from these experiences.

Keywords

graduate students, retention, outreach

Peer Reviewed Article

Partners in Graduate Student Retention: A Library-Led Outreach Collaboration

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Abstract

Past research has indicated that social connection with their community is an important factor in the retention of graduate students. To help address this need, a Rowan University librarian led an interdepartmental team of collaborators from across campus in developing a series of outreach events specifically for graduate students, which evolved over time to include more and richer programming and opportunities for socialization. This article describes the evidence basis for these events' inception, the essential components of each iteration of the event and its programming, and the results of holding these events, including both their successes and their failures. Recommendations are included for other professionals who may be considering similar outreach efforts for their graduate and professional student populations, so that others can learn from these experiences.

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Introduction

Retention of graduate students has been a significant ongoing concern in higher education for decades. In their 2010 study of master's and doctoral student completion, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) found that only 66% of STEM master's students completed their programs.¹ The same study found that no more than 75% of doctoral students completed their degrees even "under highly favorable conditions."² These low rates of graduate persistence have negative impacts on universities, particularly in the form of lost revenue from student tuition. Even more so, however, they negatively impact students, who must pay a substantial portion of the cost of postgraduate education without achieving the ultimate benefit of a degree. It is in the interest of all stakeholders to ensure that every possible

effort is made to support graduate students to program completion.

Rowan University is one institution that shares in these challenges regarding graduate programs. Rowan is a public R2 university in southern New Jersey with just under 20,000 total students, and provides significant vocational and economic educational support for the surrounding area. Concerns about graduate retention at Rowan were first brought to the attention of Rowan's Instruction & Education Librarian in 2018, shortly after beginning employment at Rowan. The Librarian was invited to serve as a representative of the University Libraries on the university's Graduate Advisory Council. Graduate Advisory Council is a body that brings together representatives from each of the university's col-



leges and departments that host graduate programs, along with administrative stakeholders, to discuss policies and matters relevant to graduate education at the university. Participating in this group brought graduate retention concerns to the attention of the Instruction & Education Librarian, who then sought to determine how the Libraries might be able to help to address them.

Two main supports libraries could provide emerged from the professional literature. The first of these is academic support for graduate students, through providing resources and information literacy instruction, which the Instruction & Education Librarian identified as an area in which the Libraries were already actively engaged. The second support that emerged from the literature, however, was facilitating social connections between graduate students and their peers, faculty, and librarians. The Librarian found this to be an area where the Libraries had not tapped as much potential. With this in mind, the Instruction & Education Librarian gathered a collaborative team of librarians, staff, and administrators in support roles for graduate students on campus, in order to organize a social event for graduate students. Beyond the libraries, this team included representatives from the office of Global Learning and Partnerships, the office of the Dean of Students, and the office of Graduate Research Services. The event would be based in the library and draw attention to its other support functions, but would also introduce students to other resources and support systems across the university. Our primary goal was for the event to help increase graduate students' feelings of belonging and connectedness to the institution, and thereby encourage them to persist in their programs. Over the course of its development, this event evolved and changed significantly in form, but that central purpose remained the same.

Literature Review

To determine the role that libraries can play in graduate student retention, it was first necessary to determine the factors that best support retention. CGS's study of master's students found that the strongest predictors of persistence were student motivation, social support in general but support from family in particular, and work-study-life balance.³ CGS studies of doctoral student persistence, meanwhile, found the strongest predictors to be institutional fit, strong faculty-student relationships and mentoring, finances, environmental factors of the program, disciplinary research demands, students' ability to navigate the administrative aspects of the program, successful orientation, and peer support and cohesiveness.⁴ Higher levels of formal research training may also lead to greater persistence through the dissertation stage.⁵ For doctoral students from underrepresented groups in particular, however, the most important factors in retention appear to be somewhat different. In these cases, the key factors are motivation and determination, social support especially from family, having mentors and advocates, adequate financial support, support from peers, the availability of professional and career guidance, fit with the institution, and the first-year transition.⁶

While none of these factors are directly library-related at first glance, there is evidence that library services can support graduate student retention, either directly or indirectly. Multiple studies have found correlations between more frequent library use by students and those students' GPAs, and these correlations tend to be especially strong at the graduate level.⁷ Library expenditures have been found to directly correlate to student retention in general, with the strongest correlations at doctoral institutions existing between student retention and salary lines for professional staff.⁸ Students in higher education who use the library late into the night have

also been found to be more likely to graduate, across programs and levels.⁹

Recommendations have also emerged for how library services can support the factors that CGS has found to be most relevant to graduate student retention. Multiple studies recommend or describe positioning the library as a facilitator of interpersonal relationships for graduate students. Libraries may foster relationships between students and librarians as a form of faculty-student mentorship,¹⁰ or between student peers with the library as setting and support.¹¹ A number of other recommendations focus on promoting library services as academic support for graduate students' studies. This can be accomplished by targeted marketing of graduate student services, providing information literacy instruction and support, partnering with other academic services on campus, and extending library night hours to accommodate common study habits.¹² There is also some evidence that orientation for beginning graduate students is a significant factor in retention, and could be bolstered with a first-year experience similar to those available for undergraduates, including a library and information literacy component.¹³ Other innovative approaches have included providing graduate student employment and integration by engaging students as editorial staff for in-house journal publishing,¹⁴ and providing specific library support for student teaching.¹⁵

Additional recommendations have been made for specific demographics of graduate students. There is evidence that master's students, for example, may particularly benefit more from curriculum-integrated library services, such as those available through an online course shell, than from services that they need to seek out independently.¹⁶ A recurring recommendation for doctoral students is that more in-depth and robust information literacy instruction is needed at this level, ideally embedded in the program in the form of a full credit-bearing course, or part of one.¹⁷ Other recommendations for library

support of doctoral students include facilitating peer connections through communities of practice such as study or writing groups, providing instruction and mentoring on tasks like managing program requirements, research organization, grants and funding, or time management, encouraging graduate student voice in library collections, and creating doctoral-student-specific spaces in the library building.¹⁸

Graduate students from underrepresented identity groups are also a demographic group of particular concern when it comes to retention, and specific recommendations have emerged concerning these students, as well. The most common suggestions to libraries in this area are to attend to matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their own policies, procedures, spaces, staffing, and instruction, and also to consider providing programming on matters that have been observed to be of particular concern to these students, such as work-life balance, stress, securing financial support, and writing skills.¹⁹ There are a number of other miscellaneous recommendations as well, such as providing space for student groups to socialize,²⁰ creating programming highlighting the successes and achievements of members of underrepresented groups,²¹ representing underrepresented groups in collections, exhibits, archival materials, programming, and reading or discussion groups,²² partnering with other campus organizations supporting particular groups,²³ and giving responsibility to specific individuals within the library for providing programming and developing collections focused on specific groups.²⁴

Evolution of Graduate Student Events

Fall 2019: Graduate Student Library Social

The first iteration of the graduate student event was styled as a Graduate Student Library Social. This idea was initially conceived and developed by an interdepartmental team, consisting of librarians and representatives from the office of

Global Learning and Partnerships. This office was, at the time, responsible for oversight of the university's graduate and professional programs. The event was held in an open house style on an evening in late September, in a gathering space in Campbell Library, on the university's main Glassboro campus. A light dinner was catered by the university's food services, and a designated children's play and coloring area was made available. Students were encouraged to bring their families and children as desired. "People bingo" sheets were also provided as an icebreaker activity, to encourage attendees to socialize with and learn more about one another. Completed sheets could be submitted in order to enter a drawing for a gift card. Tables were set up in another portion of the space, and representatives from numerous university offices were invited to attend the event and provide literature and giveaways. Many of these elements were originally suggested by members of the planning team who were also current graduate students at the university, and their insight into graduate student needs was highly valuable.

In the course of the planning process, however, it came to the team's attention that two other events for graduate students had coincidentally been scheduled by other university offices on the same day. The Dean of Students had scheduled a discussion forum that afternoon for graduate students to raise issues and give feedback about their needs from the university, and the Graduate Research Services Specialist from the Office of Research had scheduled a workshop in the late evening on thesis and dissertation preparation. The thesis and dissertation workshop was to be held in Campbell Library, as well, and the discussion forum was to be held in the student center, which is directly next door to the library building. Once the planning team became aware of these events, we immediately saw the potential for these to be complementary, rather than competing, programs. We reached out to

the Dean of Students and Graduate Research Services Specialist, and were able to coordinate our efforts. The scheduling of the three events was adjusted so that they would take place consecutively with short breaks between, and each event would advertise the one following and shepherd students to it. The food planned to be offered at each event was coordinated as well, to make best use of our respective budgets.

To assess the success of the Library Social event, we recorded attendance by graduate students (excluding the campus representatives at the event who were not also current graduate students). We also asked attendees to complete a brief paper half-sheet feedback form as they left the event. Approximately fifty attendees were counted at the Library Social, although only three feedback forms were completed. On all of the completed forms, a 5 out of 5 selection was made for satisfaction with the event, but none of the submitters provided any substantive qualitative feedback. Ten completed "people bingo" sheets were submitted for the gift card drawing, however, indicating that a number of attendees did engage with this activity. Event organizers who work directly with graduate students also reported hearing anecdotally from individual graduate students that they enjoyed the event, and were appreciative of having a set of a programming focused specifically upon them.

Spring 2020: Graduate Student Day

The attendance and positive (though admittedly sparse) feedback the fall event received were sufficient to be encouraging, and so we planned to hold a second iteration in February of 2020. This time, all of the organizers of the separate events of the fall came together early in the planning process, and coordinated from the outset. We developed a revised version of the program where the forum, workshop, and social would all be held consecutively over an afternoon and evening in the same location. For centrality and convenience for catering, we selected a large

meeting room in the student center as the venue. The events were re-branded as a single event called Graduate Student Day. All organizers pooled our previous budgets to provide both light refreshments during the discussion forum at the start of the program and a light dinner during the social at the end. We were able to invite representatives of more campus offices and units to table at the event, as well. None of the attendees at the previous event had ultimately brought children, so we omitted the play area from this version's social, although families were still explicitly welcomed to attend along with students. The new space also made it possible to have university staff record the events, and to set up a more prominent welcome table and thus collect attendee sign-ins. This allowed us to track attendance with more granularity, and send event recordings and other follow-up materials to attendees afterward. Recordings and other materials were also shared with online-only students, which made it possible to include them to a degree in the event. Sharing a single venue did also mean, however, that the space was still set up with auditorium-style seating at the start of the social event, which made it more physically difficult for attendees to mingle and engage in informal conversation. Forty graduate students attended for at least some portion of this event. Given the low success rate we observed with feedback forms the previous fall, however, direct feedback was not collected.

Spring 2021: Graduate Student Days

The spring 2020 event was successfully held before the COVID-19 pandemic had fully risen to national attention. Less than a month afterward, however, Rowan closed campus, and shifted to remote learning for the remainder of the spring semester. The disruption associated with this change, along with the heavy summer workload required to prepare for a remote fall semester, discouraged all participants from planning another version of the event for fall 2020. During the fall semester, anticipating that in-person

gatherings would still be restricted in spring of 2021, the Instruction & Education Librarian began planning a third, fully-online graduate student event for February of 2021. Encouraged by the success of combining multiple events into a single afternoon, the Librarian brought in even more campus partners to create a full mini-conference of graduate student programming. Similar to previous versions, the schedule included a virtual thesis and dissertation workshop and a discussion with the Dean of Students, as well as a virtual resource fair with multiple campus offices, and socializing periods at the end of each day. New programming was also added, however, incorporating other campus offices and groups. A welcome and introduction was delivered by the deans of the newly-formed Schools of Graduate and Professional Studies. The Assistant Director of the Wellness Center's Healthy Campus Initiatives program also led a workshop on stress management and well-being. Additionally, three doctoral students were invited to present on their research in a panel discussion.

The event was held via Zoom over the afternoons of a Friday and Saturday in early February. Attendees were invited to register in advance and provide contact information, which made it possible to track interest in the event and provide links and shepherding to each of the sessions. After the program, registrants were also sent an online follow-up survey on the event's relevance and convenience for them. All students who had registered were encouraged to complete the survey, whether or not they had ultimately been able to attend.

Attendance and Feedback

The first two events in the 2019-20 academic year had remarkably similar outcomes. Both events were reasonably well-attended, at approximately equal rates, but we were unable to gather substantive evaluative feedback. The short surveys that we did receive were positive,

but very few were completed. Also notably, the library social was perhaps the best-attended of all three events in fall of 2019, with a regular flow of students for the duration. In spring of 2020, however, the discussion and workshop were well-attended but most students left quite early in the social event. It is perhaps significant to this outcome that the order of events in spring of 2020 was changed to hold the social event last.

The virtual event in spring of 2021, meanwhile, had slightly over 30 registrants initially, but fewer than ten students actually attended any part of the event. Recordings were posted online after the event, but also garnered only a handful of views each. There were also only 4 total responses to the feedback survey, but those received indicated that the timing and content of the event were only moderately helpful to potential attendees. These results were discouraging, particularly after the relative success of the previous two in-person programs, but at the same time, this failure may be instructive for the organization of future events.

Discussion

Limitations

Lack of rich assessment has been noted as a perennial problem in studies of outreach programming,²⁵ and unfortunately this study is subject to the same limitation. Evaluation of the success of these evolving events has been mostly limited to attendance counts, which may not paint a completely accurate picture. We attempted to collect more direct feedback from attendees at each event, but received very low response rates, which is a common problem for optional event evaluations.

Unfortunately, given the original motivation for developing these events, it is also difficult to establish the impact of these events on graduate students' engagement and sense of belonging.

Our efforts at collecting feedback proved insufficient to measure any influence on these factors that the events might have had. The online event, also, was particularly limited in its potential impact on students by the uniquely challenging circumstances of the 2020-2021 academic year. Our future programming in this area should be designed to include feedback mechanisms that will successfully indicate its impact on student engagement and sense of belonging, rather than gauging students' positive or negative impressions, or the events' logistical convenience.

Successes

With these limitations in mind, from an attendance perspective, the first two events can be considered a success. For a university with approximately 3,600 graduate students, most of whom attend online or remotely while also working full-time, a turnout of fifty students at an inaugural event of this nature is relatively robust. If the event had remained identical on the second iteration, furthermore, we might have expected an increase in attendance, but considering that the format and location were significantly changed, maintaining a steady attendance level when repeating the event within the same year was encouraging. In spite of the lack of recorded evaluative feedback, additionally, all of the event organizers reported hearing anecdotally from students that the events were highly appreciated and well-regarded. The primary focus of Rowan University has remained for some time on undergraduate education, and many of its graduate programs are still relatively new, or are somewhat isolated from the rest of the life of the university. University employees who serve our graduate students have often heard (also anecdotally) complaints that these students feel underserved and overlooked by the majority of services and events on campus. As a result, students who attended these new events seemed to be pleased that a program like this had been of-

ferred specifically for them. This informal feedback gave an encouraging impression that, at least for some students, these events helped to support their engagement and sense of belonging at the university, as intended.

Another success related to these events, which might be more easily overlooked, is their impact on campus partnerships. In the process of working together on event planning, we established and strengthened collaborative partnerships between different units across campus that serve graduate students. The Libraries worked closely with the office of Global Learning and Partnerships from the earliest stage of this project, and also forged additional connections with the Dean of Students and the Office of Research. By bringing our parallel events together into one, we also increased communication and interaction between our units. The Instruction & Education Librarian also established contacts in other offices and departments from across the university by inviting their participation, both in the tabling and resource fair portions of each event, and in programming for the spring 2021 virtual mini-conference. Improving these lines of communication between units that serve graduate students is valuable for coordinating our services to students, and for any future outreach events. The process of developing this series may in many ways have been as important as the events themselves.

Failures

Neither, however, can these events be described as a complete success. The virtual event in spring of 2021, in particular, did not live up to the success of the previous two events. This was particularly disappointing given how much the program had been expanded, and how much effort and coordination had gone into its delivery. Given the few lukewarm responses to the feedback survey, it is possible that many students found either the content or the timing of the program to be insufficiently compelling. At least

part of the problem, however, was most certainly the extraordinary circumstances students were facing at the time of the program due to the pandemic, and the demands of the situation on their time. Many Rowan graduate students are not only working full-time and engaging in graduate study, but also caring for children, who were likely attending school from home at the time of the program. It is easy to see how even a single interesting session of a mini-conference could have seemed like too much time to invest in a non-essential task. This event was conceived as a way to create much-needed community and socializing time for graduate students during a period of additional isolation, which seemed like it might help to attract attendees. It is clear in retrospect, however, that pragmatic issues of time, virtual meeting fatigue, and general fatigue should have been given greater weight in considering whether to offer another event (and a much lengthier one) at this juncture. Especially when compared with the success of the in-person events, the low attendance of this virtual one may also suggest that much of the perceived value of graduate student programming is the opportunity to meet and mingle with other graduate students face-to-face, particularly for students who ordinarily participate primarily in online programs. Another virtual meeting with their fellow students may not have been as compelling for this population.

Another area where these events have not been as successful is, as mentioned, in collecting evaluative feedback from attendees. Attendance numbers and word-of-mouth feedback may have been encouraging, but more in-depth responses would have been valuable to gather. Given the low rate of exit and follow-up survey completion (which is a common issue in these types of outreach events), more innovative strategies for collecting feedback during the event itself may be necessary. One such strategy, for example, might be a feedback wall at the event,

where attendees could provide quick ratings and identify elements contributing to their engagement and sense of belonging on a white-board or post-it notes. This and other non-survey mechanisms for collecting feedback would likely be worth considering for future events.

Concluding Thoughts

Outcomes and Future Directions for Programming

No single event or program will ever immediately foster engagement and a sense of belonging in students, nor were these events designed to do so. They were developed, held, and evolved as one element of a coordinated effort to increase the inclusion of graduate students, to which units all across the university contributed. Their primary outcomes were (anecdotally) a modest increase in goodwill from graduate students and (definitively) a strengthened coalition between different units supporting graduate students. The collaborative team that developed these events has considered these outcomes to be sufficient as to make the effort worthwhile, and deemed the events successful enough to be worth continuing.

Whatever failures and setbacks individual events might encounter, the benefits of making any cooperative outreach effort are significant. Developing these events forges partnerships between different campus units, and builds relationships between campus units and students. Missteps in the content or timing of programming may happen, and no event will be a perfect fit for the interests and schedule of every student. Our case demonstrates, however, that as long as the drive behind the development of programming is the genuine desire to reach out to graduate students and meet their needs, students will tend to recognize this fact and appreciate it. They may also be more willing to help craft programs would benefit them more in the future, once that level of goodwill has been established.

Since the founding of the Schools of Graduate and Professional Studies, it has seemed most reasonable for leadership of these events to be under their auspices, rather than those of the Libraries. The Libraries continue to be a partner and represented at the programs, but as of this time of writing, the Instruction & Education Librarian has successfully transferred responsibility for these events to leadership of the Schools of Graduate and Professional Studies. Our shared knowledge from past events has helped to guide the reinstatement of a hybrid version of this event, and will continue to inform future efforts to increase graduate student engagement.

Beyond these particular events, as well, the key collaborators in the original planning process have also continued to work to develop new offerings with the potential to support graduate student engagement and belonging. The Schools of Graduate and Professional Studies have gone on to gather and implement feedback on programming that graduate students find desirable, which has led to a focus on career- and publishing-related workshops and instruction for the 2022-2023 academic year. The Graduate Research Services Specialist has successfully launched thesis and dissertation writing bootcamps, where graduate students work on writing their theses and dissertations as a community with accountability partners. The Instruction & Education librarian, meanwhile, is working with Graduate Research Services, the International Center, and the Writing Center on the ongoing pilot of a writing group specifically for international graduate students. A significant percentage of Rowan's graduate students are international students, and these students tend to report particular feelings of isolation and need for writing support. We hope that all of these efforts will also help to foster positive feelings in graduate students about their community, and that this will lead to improved retention.

Possibilities for Future Research



The literature suggests that libraries can best support graduate student retention by being a hub for social connections, developing and providing research-related academic instruction and support services, and offering extracurricular learning that also supports academic success and personal well-being in graduate programs. The programs described here focused primarily on the first of these roles, and specifically on the goal of increasing engagement and feelings of belonging for graduate students by doing so. This is an area where libraries' potential contribution has not been extensively studied, and there is an opportunity for future research to investigate how we might best foster these positive feelings for graduate students. This is true at Rowan, as well as at other institutions. As our programming for graduate students continues to develop, the Instruction & Education Librarian and other collaborators should also develop

specific mechanisms to try to measure their impact on graduate students' sense of belonging and engagement. This may need to be accomplished more broadly and intentionally than with simple feedback at a particular event. A more robust study over a longer period of time, employing surveys, interviews, focus groups, or other methods in combination, with appropriate incentives for participation, would have a greater chance of yielding insights into graduate students' engagement and how it might be improved. As this is a population that past literature has shown to require particular care and have specific needs, it would be worthwhile for libraries to investigate more closely what part they can play in improving the graduate student experience.

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⁴ "Ph.D Completion Project"; Maureen Grasso, Melissa Barry, and Thomas Valentine, *A Data-Driven Approach to Improving Doctoral Completion* (Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools, 2007).

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²¹ Palumbo, “Championing Institutional Goals”; Wexelbaum, “Do Libraries Save LGBT Students?”

²² Palumbo, “Championing Institutional Goals”.

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