

A Student walks into a University Library...

(And how we're helping them once they're here.)

The beginning and end of every semester at Sydney University are busy times in our library. Stress levels go up, study spaces are occasionally argued over, and students stand in (what probably seems to them) never ending queues to speak to a staff member. How can we, Site Services staff at Sydney University Library best support and engage with these students at these times?

The Library in its traditional model was no longer necessarily meeting all the needs and expectations of students. As libraries everywhere are adapting their public face to providing more inclusive, collaborative services, we too at the University Library look for new ways to engage with and support our community.

A coordinated outreach program was introduced to assist our students during peak times throughout the year. The Events and Communications Group was formed at the start of 2016, consisting of Site Services staff from across all of our main library sites. We look at how we can best champion the library, and, by extension, the university experience. During the peak times at the beginning and end of semesters we do this by providing non-traditional support to our students, which includes moving away from the more formal interaction that often occurs at a desk.

Sydney University has 36,000 undergrad and 28,000 post grad students, 10,000 of which are international students from 140 different countries. The Library is composed of twelve library sites over seven campuses, catering to over 4.3 million visitors every year. Fisher Library alone is made up of 9 floors with over 2000 seats- a big difference to the school or public library most of our first year students would have previously used! On top of orienting themselves within the campus as a whole, the library comes with its own challenges and can be, despite our best intentions, intimidating and confusing. Wanting to assist students at point of contact and aware that a desk can create a barrier, "Meet and Greet" and a library concierge service were introduced in 2016.

Meet and Greet

During Orientation Week and the first two weeks of semester, staff are stationed at the library entrance, providing an immediate, obvious presence for new students coming into our library. This is particularly necessary in Fisher which, due to its layout, has no obvious service point directly at the entrance. Students have the opportunity to ask questions away from a desk, which, for some, can be intimidating. Without that physical barrier, psychological barriers are often removed too. We are able to approach those new students who are looking lost, and they in turn don't feel they are "wasting our time" or needing to preface every question with "This is probably stupid". We hope that by providing this relaxed, friendly initial encounter they will feel confident in seeking help from us when they next need it. Wearing red t-shirts with the question "Can I Help" in large letters means that there is no confusion about whom to approach, and students know we are there to answer their questions.

While the Meet and Greet component is primarily concentrated at Fisher, scheduled library tours, also initially only at Fisher have commenced in some of the other sites. The tours aim to briefly familiarise students with some of the library's physical spaces such as the returns chutes, self-checks, or printers, and also showcase some of the "shiny" things in the library, such as sleep pods, bookable desks and the study spaces. Multi-lingual staff are on hand in some sites to conduct tours in languages other than English. We keep the tours fairly brief, however if we can show students the main features of the library, and what we think will be most helpful to them, then hopefully they will feel comfortable enough to explore and start to view the space as their own as well.

Exam Ready

“Exam Ready” as a library-wide program also commenced officially in 2016. This program grew out of discussions held with students about how best to support them during the exam period at the end of semester. Along with outreach programs held in the library, we do this by providing them with a space to relax, talk and spend some time away from the stresses of extended study.

Destressing activities including colouring in, board games and knitting, and fiddly things such kinetic sand, Rubik’s cubes and origami are provided for the students in “chill out zones” within the libraries. Free earplugs are massively popular: “Big jars of shoosh” are set up at the info desks for students to come and help themselves. The outreach component of this program is about encouraging students to take a short study break which we actively promote by distributing fruit around the main study areas of the library every afternoon.

Pet Therapy has also proved to be a big hit in the library. Initially we had puppies and kittens from the Sydney Dogs and Cats Home visit and, while popular, there was a limitation on how many students could mingle with our furry visitors. With this in mind, the following semester we booked the Delta Society Therapy Dogs for a “Paws the Pressure” visit. The dogs were not restricted to a room, freeing them up to visit the other library sites across the Camperdown campus, and as they are trained therapy dogs they loved the attention lavished upon them during their time here.

The success of Exam Ready as a program in supporting students and promoting good mental health provided the library with an opportunity to successfully apply for seed funding from “Healthy Sydney University”. This group is engaged in creating a university of healthy people, healthy places, and healthy policies. Seed funding is available to initiate projects or activities and Exam Ready was a program which fitted into their funding criteria. This funding has enabled us to continue expanding the Exam Ready programme and what we provide.

Initiating these programs in the spaces we have, and with our high student numbers does present challenges. Concentrating on the larger sites can leave the smaller sites feeling neglected, however, budgets and staffing can only stretch so far, therefore decisions have to be made about keeping a program or activity to a particular site, rather than stretching resources and ending up with a below par outcome.

The University library is spread across sites all over Sydney and varies greatly in size, location, physical layout, and student cohort. We take into account feedback from staff and clients across the sites, and identify the programs that work effectively where. Events are promoted through social media and advertising, and we get collect feedback from guerrilla and online surveys. At the conclusion of both Orientation Week and Exam Ready our hits and misses are assessed within the Events and Communications Group and senior library staff.

New ideas are trialled with each program-this year we had library branded show bags to hand out during Orientation, while during Exam Ready we introduced juggling workshops, "Shut Up and Study" sessions, which provided undergrads with a structured study program previously only offered to postgrad students, and our Positivity Walls on which we encouraged students to "leave a note, take a note" took on a life of their own. This coming Exam Ready we are looking to partner with other professional departments from within the university to deliver workshops for students concentrating on study/life/work balances.

While these programs and events are carried out primarily across the different campuses by Site Services staff, staff from other divisions within the library can volunteer to become involved. Sometimes staff are reluctant to volunteer for a program, but after they have stepped out of their comfort zone they realise it's not that scary after all, and that involvement is actually rewarding, both personally & professionally.

Competing priorities are another issue- project deadlines need to be met throughout the year, often at the same times we are running our programs, however we are continually delighted and heartened by the generosity and willingness of our co-workers to help us when we put the call out.

Conclusion

We aren't claiming to have invented the wheel here. Academic institutions around the world have introduced or are introducing outreach programs similar to ours; however this is the first time that a structured, relatively uniform program has been put into place across the different Sydney University Library sites. Handing out fruit and corralling visiting dogs may not seem like proper library work to some, but we consider it a vital part of our library outreach and student support. It's also about coming out from behind the desk and interacting with our students in their environments, and hopefully going some way in reducing their "library anxiety." Our "Bridge to Knowledge" works in a number of ways- in how we try new ways to connect with and support our students, how we connect with our volunteering colleagues, and how, with added outreach, and finding new ways to provide interaction away from the desk it hopefully and most importantly allows for more opportunities for our clients to connect with us too.

