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Making and Shaping a Library Experience for Students Living in the Residence Halls: Designing a Residence Hall Library and On-Site Librarian Position at the University of Oregon Libraries

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Designing a Residence Hall Library and On-Site Librarian Position at the University of Oregon Libraries

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Ngoc-Yen Tran is the Outreach and Student Engagement Librarian at the University of Oregon. She received her MLIS from the University of Washington iSchool and her BA in English and BA in art history from Willamette University. Yen's job is multifaceted but the majority of her time is spent creatively managing a small residence hall library called the Global Scholars Hall Library Commons, building and sustaining campus partnerships, working with international studies department students and faculty, and developing opportunities that engage students with the UO Libraries and librarians. She is currently active in ACRL-OR as a member-at-large, the outreach round table, the OLA 2014 conference planning committee, and active nationally as the vice-chair/chair-elect of the ACRL Arts Section. When she is not interacting with students or campus partners, she is crafting or out on a hike.

Think back to your college or university experience. Did you live in the "dorms"? What were they like? My first year in college, I lived in a three-story building constructed in the early 1960s. My room on the second floor was small and square with white concrete tiled walls, light-colored wood everything, and two twin-sized beds pushed to the sides, flanked by a desk next to the window and a vanity/dresser/closet by the door. The restrooms and showers were down the hall and I had to walk to the cafeteria for food. Although simple, it was a space for me to adjust to college, socialize, study, and sleep, and I loved every moment of it!

You probably had a very similar experience like the one I had, but within the last 10 years, you may have noticed how different on-campus living goals and facilities are for our students. A resurgence in creating residence halls that purposefully and more transparently integrate academics into residential living is transforming student on-campus living experiences. This change at the University of Oregon (UO), gave the UO Libraries an opportunity to partner with University Housing and Residence Life on a new project: the development of a library in a residence hall and a full-time on-site librarian to manage the space, collections, and technologies, and to reach out to the students in the building and surrounding residence halls. This is my Library Commons.

With only one academic year since the opening of the building and the Library Commons (2012-2013), I do not have quantitative data that assess student learning. However, I now have a better understanding of how to make and shape a library user experience for first-year students living in the residence halls at the UO. What I have learned may be helpful to institutions with already established residence hall libraries, those interested in developing one, or those thinking about ways to conduct outreach to students in residence halls.

Imagining the Global Scholars Hall (GSH)

The Global Scholars Hall (GSH) is a community where students are encouraged to bring what they learn in the classrooms back to their living spaces. The students in the GSH belong to at least one of seven academic programs: The Robert D. Clark Honors

College, College Scholars Program, and/or one of the five immersive language programs which include Chinese, Japanese, German, French, and Spanish. Curricular and co-curricular activities enable students to live and learn together through a common global theme, interest in language acquisitions and mastery, and linked courses. To mentor these students, Residence Life professional staff members, undergraduate Resident Assistants and Language Assistants, a Scholar-in-Residence, and a Librarian are easily accessible for conversations.

These types of on-campus living communities are not new; living-learning environments can be traced back to 1264 with the residential colleges at Merton College in Oxford, England where the goal was to have faculty and students living together in order to develop a communal and intellectual space (Ryan 1992). It has only been since the 1990s that the development of living-learning communities have reemerged in higher education as many studies have proven the benefits of living-learning communities to student academic success and retention (Brower & Inkelas 2010; Inkelas 2008; Kanoy & Bruhn 1996; Tinto 2003).

Seeing the value of learning communities in residence hall libraries, the design of the GSH with its 460 beds, six classrooms, a gourmet eatery, demonstration kitchen, and a library commons, as well as the people who work in the hall, all facilitate the creation of a residence hall where students are active participants in their intellectual and academic experience.

Creating the GSH Library Commons

Similar to living-learning communities, residence hall libraries have also had a long presence on college campuses for a variety of reasons (Oltmans & Schuh 1985). The earliest was at Harvard University in 1928 where house libraries were developed within each of the seven residences. These house libraries, under the guidance of tutors (now known as resident assistants) and resident librarians, were meant to be centers for living, learning, and intellectual life (Morgan 1931). Seeing potential in this library model to enrich learning, many institutions between the 1920s to the 1980s developed and supported residence hall libraries (Stanford 1969). But with the increase of students, insufficient staffing needs and budgets, and other factors, many were discontinued. Even so, some residence hall libraries continue to be in operation today, including University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Indiana University.

The physical space of the Library Commons consists of a main space with four-people tables, soft furniture, a presentation practice room, study rooms, a seminar classroom, and a small print collection. Without a door to close off the space, the Library Commons is essentially open 24/7 but is staffed about 70 hours a week by library student workers. The collection is mostly digital but include a small print collection containing less than 400 items that meet the needs and interest of students in the hall and surrounding communities or are related to courses or events in the hall. The books and magazines are available for checkout, even after hours by the students at the 24/7 Housing Service Center. There are seven macs and PCs available for student use, a printer, and group and presentation equipment in the study rooms. Direct user services consist of library student workers and librarian who assist faculty teaching classes and students in the building with technology, collections, and research help. The Library Commons is not currently a hold or pick-up location, nor do we offer reserves services because the workload was unsure in the first year; these are some services we are looking into offering in the second year.

The mission of the Library Commons is to be a welcoming and intellectually engaging learning environment for all students, but especially first year students as they transition from high school to college. It is also a space to introduce students to the resources required
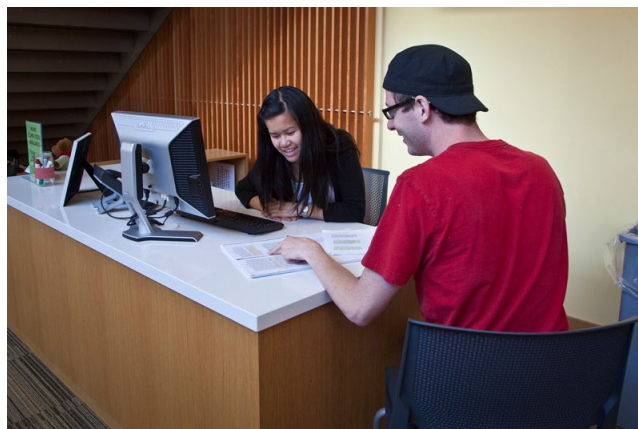
Bright and comfortable, students have everything they need to be productive in the Library Commons, including a library student worker to assist with the collections, technologies, and research.

The 3 reservable group study rooms and practice presentation room allow students to collaborate and work in groups.

Downstairs on the first floor, the full-time on-site librarian is available afternoon and evenings to help with research needs.

for college-level research and scholarship, and a friendly librarian who can mentor them as they develop new knowledge.

Designing the librarian position

Librarians have been visiting residence hall libraries with a mix of success because students were often unsure what the librarian was doing there and what librarians could help them with. As the on-site librarian in a physical library space, the students understood some of the reasons why I was in the building, which helped to break down some interaction barriers (Long 2011; Strothmann & Antell 2009). By working afternoon and evening hours, I was in the midst of when and where the students were conducting research, working in groups, and studying, giving them more opportunities to talk to me formally and informally about their research needs.

Formal and informal instruction

A lot of what I did in the hall was to have conversations with students and parents. This included anything from summer orientation sessions, tours, move-in day, move-out day, and whenever I was spending time in the GSH and Library Commons. What I wanted out of these conversations was to make the students and parents more aware of my presence and to create a friendly and welcoming atmosphere.

Besides interactions with students and parents, I also made sure the Resident Assistants (RAs) and Language Assistants (LAs) knew who I was and how I could help them and their residents. All RAs are required to take a course in spring term that introduces them to development theories and campus resources. Both spring terms since my arrival at the UO, I have visited the course and talked to the RAs and LAs about how they can help their residents engage with the Libraries and librarians. Through readings, a presentation, and small group discussions, the student staff reflected on their first college research experience, identified challenges they faced, and learned to recognize when their residents may be experiencing these same challenges and other potential issues related to looking for information. Together, we developed strategies on how they can identify and support their residents. Having conversations with the RAs and LAs is important because as people who have constant contact with our students, they can identify the issues and advise and encourage the students to use library resources or to talk to a librarian.

Programming and community participation

Although I do not live in the GSH, I organized programs of interest to students in the hall that encouraged them to see me as an active and knowledgeable member of the hall community. The programs were a mix of activities and some were in collaboration with Residence Life professional staff and the Scholar-in-Residence. The following are examples of successful and not so successful events.

Reese's & Research: Putting the pieces together

In fall term, I held evening office hours but no one ever showed up; even though I was not holed away in an office in the main library, I was still holed away in an office and they did not want to come to me. In winter term, I made a change and started having evening office hours in a high-traffic space in the building's café. I brought my laptop, a bowl of Reese's Pieces candy, and started calling it Reese's & Research: Putting the Pieces Together. At first, the candy and their curiosity drew in students, then they started stopping to ask quick citation questions or quick library-related questions, and then eventually students started coming to ask in-depth research questions. Even though the numbers were never very high, it was a successful way to reach out to students. By consistently being there at the same time every week, students were able to plan a visit to see me. Additionally, by being in an open space, students who had no intention of stopping by to ask me a question did so because it was on their mind and they happened to see me there.

Words & Pictures: Comics and Graphic Novels Book Club

I have always wanted to start a book club but with time being so precious to students, I had to come up with a solution. After some informal polls, in spring term I started a comics and graphic novels book club because the students in the community were already checking out these types of books and reading them required little time commitment. I created a poster that would catch their eye: colorful and with characters from comics, graphic novels, and manga series that they knew, and marketed it throughout the GSH and on our social media streams. Five enthusiastic students consistently showed up to our three meetings (first week, fourth week, and eighth week of the term) to make selections and to have discussions. Although it was a small number of students, the interactions I had with them made this program a success. Over sweets and tea, members of the club led the discussions and we talked for at least three hours each meeting about the book, other must-reads, and about life.

Working in the video game industry

Developed as a pre-event to a student-sponsored video game triathlon event in the GSH, this program transformed into one where professionals working in the video game industry would come to talk and answer questions about how they made their love of video games into a career in the video game industry. Without many contacts, I looked at the Silicon Shire website (http://siliconshire.org), a listing of tech companies in Eugene, and emailed a few game development companies and asked if they would be interested in presenting. Three folks from Pipeworks in Eugene graciously agreed to give a personal narrative and answer questions from students. I created a minimalistic poster with just an image of an old Nintendo controller and had them posted in the GSH and the Libraries around campus and sent the poster to student groups and the computer science and graphic arts department on campus. About 50 students showed up to the event. The combination of word of mouth and hanging posters through student groups and departments made the event a success.

Tea with TED

TED talks can be inspiring, informational, and outright entertaining. When the GSH leadership team was asked if we wanted to collaborate with the Robert D. Clark Honors College on an event where we provide tea and snacks and discuss TED Talks, we happily agreed. We selected dates for the event and each person was responsible for choosing TED Talks and leading the discussion. My Tea with TED event was around Valentine's Day so I chose Karen Fisher's talk about why we love. I created a poster with a QR code to the TED Talk in case students wanted to watch it beforehand and to gather their thoughts. On the day of the event, I brought books from the UO Libraries written by Karen Fisher to the event. Only two students showed up to Tea with TED. One of the problems was the day we chose for the program already had other events and marketing was very minimal. The plan is to try this program series again in the fall with more advance advertisement and on a day and time that may work better.

Other responsibilities

Besides the Library Commons where my responsibilities are to manage the space by developing the collections, room and technologies management, basic classroom technology support, maintaining the Library Commons' online presence, and supervising, training, and mentoring library student staff, I also participate in the larger UO Libraries community by taking part in committees, outreach to the international student population, library liaison to the international studies department, and providing instruction to our Freshman Interest Group program, writing program, and other courses.

Conclusion

The residence halls on our university and college campuses are changing as administrators are more purposeful and intentional about integrating academics into residential living. The evidence of the academic and personal benefits of living-learning communities where students bring what they learn in the classrooms back into their living spaces are overwhelming. This is the perfect time for academic libraries to partner with Residence Life and University Housing to create high-impact experiences for the 80 percent of first-year students who choose to live on campus.

At the University of Oregon, the UO Libraries in 2012 opened the Library Commons in a newly built residence hall and hired a full-time on-site librarian to manage the space. Overall, the first year of the Global Scholars Hall Library Commons was a success: 27, 665 students used the space from across the campus, 25 percent of the collection circulated, and I, the librarian, was able to make connections with the students in the halls. Through conversations with students, the convenience of access to the library's resources, technology, and librarian research support, have all contributed to making and shaping a positive library experience for those in the Global Scholars Hall and the surrounding residence halls, and to student academic success on campus.

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