



# Using Student Volunteers in Library Orientations

**Kathy Christie Anders**  
**Texas A&M University**

**Stephanie J. Graves**  
**Texas A&M University**

**Elizabeth German**  
**Texas A&M University**

## **Abstract**

Student volunteers can be a valuable resource for library outreach programs. This article details how our academic library leveraged several registered student organizations (RSOs) to create our freshman orientation video and staff our library's Open House. Using student volunteers in orientation events helped reduce library anxiety among student participants, engage our freshman audience, and create meaningful connections between library services and campus life.

**Keywords:** student volunteers, library orientation, library programs, engagement, outreach, open house, video tour, library anxiety

## Introduction

Student volunteers can be a valuable resource for outreach programs. This paper presents two case studies on how the Texas A&M University Libraries leveraged several registered student organizations (RSOs) to create our freshman orientation video and staff our library's Open House. Using student volunteers in orientation events helped reduce library anxiety among student participants, engage our freshman audience, and create meaningful connection between library services and campus life. Through these case studies, readers will discover how to:

- tap into their campus student volunteerism culture,
- leverage student organizations,
- positively employ affect for student volunteers and student audiences.

## Literature Review

Library orientations are helpful for introducing students to the spaces, collections, and services that libraries provide. In addition, they can help create “sticky relationships” with students. Wilcox and Chia (2013) describe how they turned to the business concept of “stickiness,” or having a product that gets and keeps user attention, to analyze how their library sticks with their users. According to the model they followed and the survey they conducted, they found that one way for their library to increase stickiness was to “ensure that engagement remains positive” (p.184). Library orientations, particularly those that feature student workers and volunteers, can go a long way towards creating positive engagement.

One barrier to user engagement can be discomfort on the part of the student population. For some first-year students large academic libraries can be intimidating, and orientations can serve as icebreakers when students can informally ask questions about library services and become more comfortable with library staff. These orientations can come in different formats: in-house scavenger hunts, classroom visits, library tours, etc. Regardless of their format, they serve as important introductions to the academic library.

Library anxiety, Mellon observed in her foundational 1986 article, refers to the “feelings of being lost” in the library (p. 162). Students, this study found, had negative emotions when they entered the library. She reasoned that these emotions “stemmed from four causes: (1) the size of the library; (2) a lack of knowledge about where things were located; (3) how to begin,

and (4) what to do” (p. 162). In short, students become overwhelmed by academic libraries both because of their size and because they do not understand how materials are organized or how to find them. In a valuable large-scale study at Utah State University, Brown et al. (2004) found that library orientations can help students lose some of that library anxiety (p. 398). In order for libraries to effectively engage the student population, they must be seen as being welcoming, and students must be able to see themselves in the library.

When student volunteers are involved in outreach events, other students can see them navigating library spaces and services. By using student volunteers in this way, libraries can draw upon the wealth of benefits that come from peer-assisted learning. Both peer tutoring and cooperative learning, major schools of peer learning thought, demonstrate social benefits for students. Maheady (1998) states that peer-assisted learning “increase[s students’] feelings of self-worth, and create[s] a more positive learning environment” (p. 50). Many studies have shown that peer learning results in “transferable social and communication skills and in affective functioning” such as “improvements in self-esteem, liking for partner or subject area” (Topping, 2005, p. 635). Students’ emotions concerning the library are so important that Schroeder and Cahoy (2010) called for affective learning to be incorporated into the revision of *ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, citing the *dispositions* of the *AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner*. Recently, the affective domain was incorporated into the dispositions of the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015). Addressing affect and increasing positive emotions towards the library are some of the goals of outreach events; thus having peers present to educate and assist students is vital.

Given that negative emotions are a part of the barrier to student use of the library, creating an outreach campaign that focuses on the affective dimension is an appropriate solution for changing student perceptions about library spaces, services, and staff. Presenting the academic libraries as welcoming is important for creating a positive first impression with new student groups. Texas A&M University Libraries presented the library as a “happy” place by creating a playful orientation video and hosting a fair-style open house. Orientation events focusing on how students feel in the library rather than specific library services are not altogether common in library open houses, but they do prove to be successful. Previous to our own Open House, the Penn State University Libraries found that developing an affective, fun open-house event increased positive engagement with their student body (Cahoy & Bichel, 2004). Being inviting can diminish students’ feelings of the library as an intimidating place.

In addition to reducing library anxiety, using student volunteers in outreach programs can be a cost-effective way to scale up library outreach initiatives. Though budgets have

tightened in recent years, the prominence of outreach in academic libraries has increased (Dennis, 2012). Student volunteers can be recruited at little or no cost as help for staffing events and providing entertainment. For the university library's orientation events, student groups volunteered their time and services free of charge. In return, the university library held a special viewing party and a catered reception and gave the participants t-shirts. Needless to say, the cost of the reception and t-shirts was far below the cost of hiring professionals.

Seeing students in the library also prepares incoming students for future library experiences. Increasingly, reference desks are being staffed by student workers (Gremmel, 2013), so students can expect to see their peers behind the desk. Libraries looking to engage their student population can use student workers as volunteers to make connections with their future patrons by pointing out that students already work in the libraries.

## **Understanding Your Student Volunteerism Culture**

A key element of success for engaging student volunteers is tapping into the preexisting student culture. This environmental scan can uncover strategic student groups and initiatives that can aid library outreach efforts. Investigating campus culture is not necessarily difficult or time consuming. Libraries should ask themselves some of the following questions to get started:

- How can the library take part in student traditions that are an important part of campus life?
- How does the library take an active role in existing student activities?
- What is the culture for student participation in campus events?
- How can the library engage with student groups on campus who do philanthropic work or require community service hours?
- How is the library leveraging their student workers as library student ambassadors? Could this be increased?
- How does the library incentivize or reward student volunteerism?

Librarians can contact the offices for student activities, residence life, registered student organizations, student government, and new student orientations. These campus offices can quickly help libraries assess the campus climate and tap into existing student programs. Library student workers can also serve as a focus group for gauging the culture of student volunteerism and participation.

## **Our Campus Culture**

The Texas A&M University Libraries are fortunate to have a deeply engaged and responsive student body. With a total enrollment of over 62,000, we are one of the largest universities in the nation. Undeterred by the size of the student body, the campus is dedicated to creating leaders and responsible students. Our student body has a remarkable degree of participation in campus events. With over 1,000 registered student organizations, the campus culture both supports and expects student participation in campus life. Keeping this in mind when recruiting student volunteers, the university library is mindful of the six core values students learn at the university: integrity, loyalty, respect, excellence, leadership, and selfless service. In particular, the university library tries to promote leadership and service among their student volunteers. The emphasis on student involvement is crucial to understanding how our library has leveraged campus culture into effective library outreach.

The university library strategically taps into the existing campus traditions by participating in two key campus events, new student orientation camps and the fall open house. These are large-scale orientation programs that take place before classes begin in the fall semester. During the summer months many incoming students participate in four-day orientation camps that take place at camps in the woods. College freshmen attend a “Fish Camp” and transfer students attend “T-Camp.” Campers learn about the university’s traditions and hear tips on becoming successful college students and for creating meaningful relationships with small groups. The university library has the opportunity to visit each camp and give a 20-minute library orientation presentation. For the fall semester of 2014, the library visited nine camps and presented to over 6,500 incoming students. This is the largest learning and outreach opportunity available to the library.

The second orientation event takes place once students arrive on campus. They participate in a series of pre-semester events, called Gig ‘Em Week, created to help them navigate the large system. The university library hosts an Open House that is open to all new and returning students. We aim to foster positive feelings about the library; engage students in learning about our services through fun, interactive, or memorable interactions; and give them a sense of belonging to the library and university. During the Fall 2014 Open House, over 3,622 students visited the library.

The size and scope of these two orientation events can be intimidating for librarians to plan. It can also be difficult to provide students with a meaningful interaction with the library

on such a large scale. As the library's participation and reach have grown over the past few years, we have learned to leverage library student workers and registered student organizations to help meet the goals of our programs. Students are typically recruited based on the needs of the programs. When knowledge of library services is necessary, library student workers are a valuable asset. When programs require special skill sets, registered student organizations can provide skills not typically found amongst the librarians. Student volunteers proved to be integral to the success of the university library's outreach programs because of the practical help they provide in staffing events, but, more importantly, because of the ways they welcome other students into the library.

By keeping the focus of these events on the students, we have tapped into the campus culture of student leadership and participation. This is important because students look to fellow students to set examples for behavior. By showcasing student dance groups in the library's orientation video, student audiences could see peers being comfortable and relaxed in the library spaces. Student volunteers for the Open House welcomed fellow students into the library, again demonstrating that the library is a place for students, not just professors. By focusing on students, we have effectively delivered the message that the Texas A&M University Libraries are essential to a successful college experience.

### **Case Study: Making a "Happy" Video with Student Volunteers**

Orientation programs at Texas A&M University are an integral part of the campus traditions. As mentioned earlier, freshmen have the opportunity to participate in a 4-day orientation retreat known as Fish Camp, and transfer students attend T-Camp. In 2014 Fish Camp celebrated its 60th year where a record-breaking 6,500 students participated over the course of seven four-day sessions. T-Camp holds three camps of approximately 350 participants, two during the fall and one additional camp in the spring semester. Campus services have the opportunity to make presentations to large groups of students during camp sessions. As technology has developed, it is now common for the presenters to show short 3-8 minute videos followed by question and answer sessions. Creating videos has been an effective way to keep students entertained as they sit through multiple presentations because these videos often have high production value, are engaging, and are custom made for the Fish Camp audience. However, the students take in a great deal of information during these large presentation settings. It was the goal of the library to create a video that would stand out among the other

videos as well as simply give students a good feeling about the library in order to reduce library anxiety and engage the first-year audience. In order to do this, we wanted to highlight actual students who were happy using each of our five libraries.

## **Planning and Design**

The Texas A&M University Libraries' team consisted of the members of the Learning and Outreach Department and the Marketing Department. Together we met to brainstorm ideas for a video to present at Fish Camp. The group discussed many ideas and reflected on previous videos, advantages and drawbacks of those projects, and best practices within their respective areas of expertise. In the end we decided upon some guidelines that would lead to success:

- Make it relatable to students by using popular music, themes, and using real students.
- Keep it simple; focus on just a few key points.
- Make it relevant to students by emphasizing the services that help them the most as they are getting started.
- Hire professional videographers and trust their skills.
- Do not try to do too much and dilute the message.

Using these guidelines, the team decided to create a video tour through the five university libraries with student dancers set to the song "Happy" by Pharrell Williams. The song "Happy" was chosen to help build upon our focus on the affective dimension of our outreach campaign. "Happy" was a good fit for this video not only for its high energy and positive message but it also allowed us to capitalize on the fact that Texas A&M University was named the happiest campus in America by *The Daily Beast* in 2013 (Twenty happiest colleges, 2013). Following the guidelines for our general video, we engaged a local videographer who developed a series of continuous long shots. The video starts with a student dancing outside and up the steps into the first of six library buildings. Through continuous movement and dance, the video highlights services in each area of the building while presenting the broad range of spaces that the library has to offer. The total production time was approximately two months; it included a meeting with the director, one and a half days of filming, and then six weeks of editing and production. The end result was a four-minute 43-second video that has been



viewed over 68,000 times and has received national recognition.

## **Leveraging Registered Student Organizations**

In making the video, the student dancers were extremely important to the success of the video. The use of students was intended for the incoming first-year students to see themselves in the actors using the library, thus reducing library anxiety. We used three dance troops on campus: Fade to Black, a hip hop group; Aggie Wranglers, a country dancing group; and Salsa Fusion, a Latin dance group. This diversity of dance styles created a wide appeal for the different preferences and backgrounds of our incoming students.

The dance students brought their knowledge of movement and their dance expertise to the creation of the video. Librarians had to do very little choreography, instead relying on the skills of the dancers. Soliciting the leadership and knowledge of these student groups is one way that the library helped to contribute to the learning mission of the university. Dancers not only provided labor but also provided leadership and learned how to make a dance video. The video proved to be an engaging product for students and a valuable learning experience for our student dance groups.

## **Successes and Next Steps**

The “Happy” video was very successful. Feedback received from Fish Camp indicated that the library’s presentation was a favorite. It is the hope that the library will continue to receive positive reactions from the students. Due to the continued focus on “Happy” within the outreach campaign and the high cost of the video production, the “Happy” video was reused for the 2015 Fish Camp sessions. In order to keep it relevant to new students, however, a new video will need to be created. For the 2016 year, we plan to create a new video using the same guidelines as the “Happy” video where we focus on the affective idea that the library is a place where you want to be. Additionally, we will continue to use student volunteers for our videos. This process itself is a learning opportunity. It is our intention that the learning outcome for these student volunteers is that they become more aware about library services as well as enhance their leadership skills.



## **Case Study: Making a “Happy” Event**

The Texas A&M University Libraries have embedded themselves into the student campus culture through the libraries’ Open House event. The seminal event takes place during Gig ‘Em Week, the campus-wide week of welcome. This week-long series of events takes place the week before fall classes begin. It is organized by New Student and Family Programs through the Offices of the Dean of Student Life. Campus partners, organizations, colleges and departments, and even the local area community are involved in creating a welcoming environment for all new and returning students.

Groups are encouraged to host events, which are publicized widely through campus marketing and social media channels. Large-scale events are tagged as a Gig ‘Em Week Signature Event. The library’s Open House has obtained Signature Event status by meeting a certain set of criteria. Events must have an attendance of at least 500 for more than three years, be open to the entire student population, free to attend, and the event organizers must fill out post-event surveys maintained by New Student and Family Programs. As a Signature Event, the library’s Open House enjoys privileged status on the Gig ‘Em Week marketing poster, schedule of events, and we retain the ability to choose the date and time. We are also guaranteed that other programs will not conflict with our time slot.

### **Planning and Design**

While the library’s Open House has been going on for a few years now, in 2014 the library added an active learning component; and in keeping with the spirit of the campus culture, the library’s Open House established a set of outcomes for the event:

- Foster positive feelings about the library,
- Give students a sense of belonging to the library and university,
- Engage students in learning about our services through fun, interactive, or memorable actions.

In 2014, students came to the main library for a two-hour event. They were treated to food, prizes, t-shirts, entertainment, and library information booths. Library units developed carnival games to briefly highlight their services. Fourteen different games were offered, and students were asked to participate in at least three library games. Examples included library

blackjack, an interlibrary loan cake walk, the AskUs fortune tellers, a word wall sponsored by the writing center, and a “Guess which one costs more?” journal game. The games allowed librarians to teach students about library services in a fun and engaging way, also one of our articulated outcomes.

## **Volunteer Management**

The success of the event has created issues of scalability. An event of this magnitude requires a significant pool of volunteers and should be considered carefully during the planning process. We are fortunate to have the continued support of library administrators who encourage library-wide participation. Over 85 volunteers from the libraries’ staff, faculty, and student workers participated in making the 2014 event a reality.

The theme of the library orientation video, “Happy,” was also used for the 2014 Open House. Easily identifiable during the event, all volunteers were sporting “Happy” t-shirts. Our library student workers played a special role in our event management and success. These students served on our frontline service points and were an important touch point both for understanding and meeting our student needs. Student workers participated in every aspect of the Open House, from preparation, to event staffing, to cleanup. They helped unload boxes, counted swag, moved furniture, staffed the library games, handed out food and water bottles, provided crowd control, took tickets, passed out t-shirts, and ran errands throughout the event. The Learning and Outreach Program Assistant coordinated the flow of student work helpers to the various team leaders using a walkie-talkie system.

Honoring the commitment of both their time and talent is important to maintain a motivated group of student volunteers. Student worker volunteers received “Happy” t-shirts and snacks during the day of the event. They were clearly marked as library staff by their libraries’ lanyards and nametags. Additionally, their youth and exuberance added to the carnival-like environment. Incoming students could see that their fellow students were engaged in putting on the event. It sent a clear message that the library was not only there for the students but had a place for students to participate as workers and leaders in student life.

## **Leveraging Registered Student Organizations**

Despite the large amount of library engagement, more volunteers are still needed to make Open House a success. The setup for our Open House is labor and time intensive. We have learned to use student organizations to address issues of scalability and help reduce the number of library staff hours needed to organize the event. Our Marketing Manager has helped by connecting the event to the coed service fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega (APO), that he advises. Over a dozen students from APO volunteered an entire afternoon of their time to help organize the library's Open House. Students formed an assembly line and packed over 3,500 bags of library-related swag to be distributed to Open House guests. The labor involved was repetitive and laborious, so we were mindful about making the bag-packing event fun. We played dance music, made games out of who could pack the most bags at once, treated the students to pizza, and gave each student volunteer a "Happy" t-shirt.

Libraries of all sizes can reach out to fraternities, sororities, or other campus groups (academic or otherwise) that have any sort of service component to come to libraries to prepare for outreach events. If it is difficult to contact such groups, consider reaching out to the faculty and staff who act as their advisors. They may be able to help identify if working with the library is something in which the organization would be interested. Additionally, keeping the atmosphere light and playful can make even the preparation for an outreach event enjoyable. Creating contests and handing out awards can be a great way to engage your student volunteers. Student groups were also involved in entertaining students during the Open House event. As students waited in line to enter the library, the student improvisation theater group, Freudian Slip, and student illusionists performed tricks and skits. The collaboration was beneficial to the library and the student organizations. The student groups had a captive audience for promoting their organization and practicing their skills. The library benefited by keeping students entertained and happy while waiting outside in the summer heat. The improv students cracked jokes, acted out skits, and bantered with waiting students. They even created good natured library jokes that they have used during the past several Open House events.

Libraries looking for volunteers can also tap into student groups who want to publicize themselves. Try putting out an open call for student groups to audition for outreach events or work through the campus coordinator for student groups to find ones that would welcome the opportunity to have a large audience. In particular, this can be a valuable opportunity for groups looking to recruit new members.

## **Successes and Next Steps**

The Open House has enjoyed tremendous growth. In 2009 it drew 400 students, growing to an attendance of over 3,622 in 2014. Students return year after year, many wearing their library t-shirts from the previous year's Open House. Attendance growth and repeat participation demonstrate success in meeting our outcomes for fostering positive feelings and a sense of belonging. By keeping the atmosphere light, jovial, and happy, our student volunteer organizations help us create a feeling of acceptance and warmth when students experience the library for the first time during our Open House. The success of this partnership has been so great that the library has relied on student volunteer participation for several years. For the future the library is considering ways to develop a tool that will assess the impact of the event on student attendees.

## **Conclusion: Considerations for Your Library**

The Texas A&M University Libraries orientation program is an example of how libraries can effectively use student volunteers. Working with student groups is not without its challenges. Other libraries looking to leverage student volunteers should keep in mind several principles of successfully working with student populations:

- Tap into the culture of your campus.  
Working within the traditions and culture of your campus will help situate the library as central to student life. Do not reinvent the wheel. Do an environmental scan and take advantage of opportunities to tap into established programs.
- Make volunteerism into a learning experience.  
Highlight the ways that students can learn by volunteering for the library. Consider the learning outcomes that you would like for your student volunteers and offer the students opportunities for leadership. The effect will be a more engaged volunteer force and students who will take your message out to their respective groups.
- Leverage existing groups.  
There are many groups on campus that have community service hours as a requirement. Contact Greek organizations or student groups for assistance. Many are looking for projects and ways to contribute.
- Timing is crucial.

Time of year can drastically affect your plans. We particularly struggled during the summer when many students were not on campus. Students also have a wide range of commitments, and sometimes students' schedules change with little notice. A great deal of flexibility needs to be maintained. Some factors that can lead to success in working with these groups include:

- offering a range of times when students can volunteer,
  - being prepared with backup plans when students are unable to show up,
  - being mindful that this is a learning experience for student volunteers and not just free labor.
- Affective motivation is important.

It sounds simple, but students want to have fun and know that they are making a difference. Make sure that you sell the volunteerism as an engaging, fun way to contribute. Thank student volunteers liberally, both privately and publicly. Give them gifts to thank them for their efforts and let them know how their contributions added to the success of your program.

The university library's orientation program has successfully leveraged student volunteers to scale a large outreach program. However, student volunteers have added more than free labor. The presence of student volunteers shows that students are at the heart of the libraries. Furthermore, the student volunteers were able to participate in learning and leadership opportunities that tie into the educational mission of Texas A&M University and its core values. The use of student volunteers in library outreach programs has been a strategic collaboration of significant importance. We hope to continue to grow this program with more opportunities for student engagement.

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