

Be Our Guest: Engaging Graduate Students through Specialized Outreach Events

Tina Budzise-Weaver^a and Kathy Christie Anders^b

^a Humanities & Social Sciences Librarian, Texas A&M University

^b Graduate Learning and Outreach Librarian, Texas A&M University

Abstract

In an effort to reach out to graduate students at a large research university, the Performance Studies Librarian and the Graduate Studies Librarian at Texas A&M University Libraries partnered to develop the pilot study, *Dinner with Your Librarian* program, wherein those librarians took a number of graduate students out to dinner. The primary goals of this program were to establish a rapport with the students and to assess their current knowledge of resources in the library. Additionally, the librarians wanted to forge a connection with the graduate advisors in order to encourage future collaborations between the graduate students and their liaison librarians.

Introduction

Many graduate students are in the difficult position of being expected to be professional researchers, although they may have had little research instruction in their undergraduate careers to prepare them for the level of research required in graduate school. Consequently, graduate students may be reluctant to reach out to faculty members and even librarians to ask for help because they do not want to appear unknowledgeable. How, then, is a librarian to establish a meaningful academic relationship with graduate students who often do not venture outside their departments? The “Dinner with Your Librarian” program at Texas A&M University Libraries offered students a way to connect with their liaison librarians outside of the more traditional points of contact, such as one-shot instruction sessions, which are often fifty-minute one-time sessions, or recommendations from advisors. By taking the students to dinner, the Performance Studies Librarian and Graduate Studies Librarian were able to converse with the Performance Studies and Communications graduate students in a non-formal setting and ask tailored questions. Unlike in traditional information literacy instruction, the students were not expected to complete a class assignment or remember specific databases. Instead, the students were encouraged to speak freely about the library’s resources and learn about services of which they were not aware. The goal of the project was to elicit honest feedback and communication from graduate students by interacting with them in a relaxed, non-academic environment.

This paper will describe the “Dinner with Your Librarian” program, the pre- and post- dinner surveys administered to assess students’ awareness of library resources, and event planning and funding. While the surveys yielded valuable insights into graduate students’ awareness of and comfort with library services, the comments they made during the dinner itself about their research and plans for future work proved even more valuable. This IRB-approved qualitative project provided information to help in planning for scalability and further outreach, such as

expanding the “Dinner with Your Librarian” beyond the initial two departments engaged at Texas A&M.

Literature Review

The services offered to graduate students by academic libraries are not only helpful, but they are often necessary for graduate students to be academically and professionally successful. Instead of being primarily concerned with how library collections can support graduate research, academic libraries are increasingly reaching out to graduate students to offer workshops (Rempel, 2010) and even classes (O’Clair, 2013) to help graduate-level students develop their information literacy knowledge and skills. Given the role that librarians can, and often do, play in graduate education, it is important to conduct outreach to graduate departments and students to keep them informed about the services the library has to offer.

One might think that the need for outreach is minimal because graduate student populations are academically advanced and comfortable with the library. However, library anxiety among graduate students correlates to poorer study skills (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 2001) and to perfectionism (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 1998). To lessen library anxiety among graduate students, librarians at Miami University “focus[ed] on personal, relationship-centered research support... [and] emphasized building trust with graduate students” (Brinkman and Hartsell-Gundy, 2012, p. 29). Building this trust is important, because much of what academic libraries have to offer at the graduate level is the expertise of their librarians. Librarians are able to advise students about advanced research strategies and obscure sources of information; therefore, connecting graduate students with their liaison or subject librarians is a key part of outreach. Interpersonal outreach is necessary because while “students are very comfortable with the library building, they are not comfortable asking for assistance from library personnel when using library resources” (Harrington, 2009, p.183). Although graduate students may not have the same fears about the library that undergraduates do, they still experience library anxiety.

Perhaps paradoxically, while graduate students are less likely to ask for help, they prefer to talk to people when in need of research assistance. Barton, et al. found that graduate students like face-to-face interactions and would welcome more chances to learn about how to use the library (2002, p. 136). Library instruction is still necessary at the graduate level, because “graduate students are not always as up-to-date with library tools and new technologies as we think they are. Many [are] unfamiliar with tools like citation databases and the benefits of controlled vocabulary” (Rempel and Davidson, 2008, p.8). Having librarians provide research instruction for doctoral students may help improve graduate student retention rates (Harris, 2011). Librarians, recognizing that graduate students do not always have the skills they need to complete advanced research projects, have begun creating instruction programs specifically for them. In order to create opportunities for such instruction to be successful, however, graduate students must feel comfortable coming to librarians for assistance and be aware of the services that the library has to offer.

“Dinner with Your Librarian” Background

At Texas A&M University Libraries, librarians reach out to graduate students through events. Some of the largest graduate events librarians attend are the resource fairs held by the Office of Graduate and Professional Students. These resource fairs, held at the beginning of the fall and

spring semesters, have approximately 500-700 attendees, and the librarians see approximately 200-300 people over the course of two hours. As one can imagine, interactions at these large events are generally brief, perhaps two minutes or so, with the goal of giving students a positive first impression of librarians and a handout with an overview of the services at the libraries that pertain to graduate students. Additionally, students receive the name of the subject librarian liaison for their discipline. At the beginning of the fall semester, librarians also attend an ice cream social for graduate students from all disciplines. This social has around 300 attendees, and librarians casually chat with as many students as they can to reinforce a positive first or second impression of the library. As large as these events are, they reach only a fraction of the approximately 14,000 graduate and professional students at Texas A&M. Subject liaisons are also responsible for a considerable amount of individual outreach to the graduate students in their disciplines, attending beginning-of-the-year orientations and teaching one-shot classes. Some, but not many, are embedded in graduate programs. This type of outreach, while invaluable, is also inconsistent. The temperament of the department plays a large role in how involved librarians are in graduate education and research assistance. Additionally, some liaisons have thousands of students in their disciplines, while others have far fewer.

At a school the size of Texas A&M (~58,000 students), variety in the mode of outreach employed by librarians is to be expected. Texas A&M is fairly siloed, and individual colleges, and sometime departments, function like mini-universities. Given this scenario, it is not reasonable to expect that one form of outreach will be successful for all departments and students. The individual colleges are too unique for this to happen. With this in mind, the authors set out to find a way to reach out to students in smaller departments that do not have the same level of resources as larger departments. At Texas A&M, these departments are generally in the fine arts. Texas A&M is a STEM-heavy school, with nearly a quarter of the entire student body in the College of Engineering. Other large departments include agriculture and veterinary medicine. Given that the fine arts are not heavily represented at the school, the authors wanted to find a way to engage with this population—specifically the graduate population, who were not regularly encountered during larger outreach events.

The College of Liberal Arts houses the department of Performance Studies and Communications. The College enrolled ~800 graduate students for the spring of 2016. Although Liberal Arts is not generally seen as a dominate college on campus, it has dedicated subject liaisons to rely on for the latest library research and services. Within the College of Liberal Arts, Performance Studies has one of the smallest graduate programs, with 14 graduate students enrolled for the Spring 2015 semester, when the initial study was conducted. The Department of Communications had 46 graduate students enrolled for the Spring 2016 semester. Tailored outreach towards these departments is vital to increase interest in the library and ensure that students feel supported.

Methodology

The Performance Studies Librarian and Graduate Studies Librarian designed a qualitative study in which they invited graduate students in relatively small departments in the College of Liberal Arts out to dinner. Participants completed a pre- and post-test survey during the event. The departments selected included Performance Studies and Communications. The studies were approved by the Texas A&M Institutional Review Board (IRB), and were funded through

proposals submitted to our internal Library Faculty Research Committee. The IRB approved meeting with students in each discipline on two separate occasions, conducting pre- and post-test surveys, contacting the students through email, and holding the "Dinner with Your Librarian" event off-site at a restaurant that had provided permission. The Performance Studies Librarian contacted the graduate advisors of each department to inquire if such a program would benefit their students. After support from the academic advisors was gained, the graduate students were invited to the event through email and asked to RSVP to attend dinner with their librarians at a local restaurant off-campus. The restaurant was chosen because it was a business-casual eatery with an eclectic menu broad enough for all dining preferences, and the authors felt that the restaurant's ambience and décor was well suited to professional students. The goal was to provide the students with a nice meal in a casual setting while identifying their usage of library resources and confidence in their research expertise.

The first "Dinner with Your Librarian" invited all graduate students from the Performance Studies department and was conducted in the Spring 2015 semester. The second event, conducted in the Spring 2016 semester, invited all 46 graduate students from the Communications department. A total of seven students participated in the events. The Communications subject librarian was also asked to attend the second dinner in order to meet and interact with the graduate students in his liaison department.

At the dinner, the graduate student groups were asked to complete a pre- and post- dinner survey. The pre-test survey (see Appendix A), which was seven questions long, asked the graduate students the number of semesters they had completed at Texas A&M. It also gauged their level of comfort with the library by asking about the frequency of their visits and asking them to identify library resources they used. An exhaustive list of resources were provided, and students were asked if they had heard of each resource and, if so, if they had used it. During the dinner, the librarians present discussed library services and opportunities to locate research for the graduate students' thesis and dissertation topics within the library. The post-test survey (Appendix B) was also seven questions long and was administered to determine if the participants felt more comfortable with the library after dinner. The post-test survey included open-ended responses for comments about the "Dinner with Your Librarian" experience and asked participants if they learned something new.

Because the sample size was too small to be reliable or statistically meaningful, this study is not meant to be representative of the general population of graduate students. Instead, the librarians were able to use both the survey responses and the in-person interactions with the graduate students to gather more information about an important subset of the campus population, finding out what some graduate students think about specific topics and what materials and services they find important and helpful; results such as this are valuable as a means of piloting further studies before investing significant resources into projects, and could be used as the basis for a larger qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods study in the future.

Results

The pre-test survey gathered information about the graduate students' current knowledge of the library. There was great variety across the seven responses regarding the number of completed

years in both graduate programs. Students had completed between one and five years of graduate school at Texas A&M. The pre-test survey results showed that students who had spent one to three years in graduate school felt they were close to expert or expert in their proficiency in research, while students who spent four to five years in graduate school identified as experts. Almost all of the participants had been the recipient of some kind of previous contact with the library, and only one of the participants had never spoken with a librarian. Although all graduate students surveyed were close to comfortable or comfortable using library resources, it was notable but perhaps not unexpected that the students who had been in graduate school longer reported a familiarity with a higher number of library services.

Table 1: Pre-Dinner Survey Results

Number of Years as Graduate Student	1 year	2-3 years	4-5 years
Library Services Used: Yes	<i>Online Databases, Physical Books, Ebooks, Media, Get it For Me, Public Study Spaces</i>	<i>Online Databases, Physical Books, Ebooks, Media, Get if For Me, Course Reserves, Library Instruction Sessions (Taking), Archives or Special Collections</i>	<i>Online Databases, Physical books, Ebooks, Media, Suggest a purchase, Get It For Me, Ask Us, Subject librarian reference (at the desk), Course Reserves, Study Rooms/Individual Study Spaces, Public Study Spaces, Workshops, Library Instruction Sessions (Taking and Teaching), Citation Management Software, Systematic Review/Literature Review Consultations, Archives or Special Collections, GIS Software Consultations</i>
Library Services Used: No	<i>Suggest a Purchase, AskUs, Subject Librarian reference (at the desk), Course Reserves, Study Rooms/Individual Study Spaces, Workshops, Library Instruction Sessions (Taking and Teaching), Citation Management Software, Citation Analytics Consultation, Archives or Special Collections</i>	<i>Database Trials, Suggest a Purchase, AskUs, Subject Librarian reference (at the desk), Study Rooms/Individual Study Spaces, Public Study Spaces, Workshops, Library Instruction Sessions (Teach), Citation Management Software, Citation Analytics Consultation</i>	<i>Database Trials, Custom Instruction Materials/Services, Citation Analytics Consultation, Open Access Publishing, Copyright and Fair Use Consultations, Institutional Repository</i>
Library Services Used: I don't know what this is	<i>Database trials, Custom Instruction Materials/Services, Systematic Review/Literature Review, Open Access Publishing, Copyright and Fair Use Consultations, Institutional Repository, and GIS Software or Consultation</i>	<i>Custom Instruction Materials/Services, Systematic Review/Literature Review, Open Access Publishing, Copyright and Fair Use Consultations, Institutional Repository, and GIS Software/Consultations</i>	

Asking the graduate students what library services that had used or were familiar with provided potentially valuable information to the librarians who work with them. The resources and services that are promoted and visible on the library's webpage, such as online databases, physical and electronic books, media, and the inter-library loan service, were used consistently by all participants. More specialized services that are primarily marketed through the Graduate Studies Librarian or subject librarians, were better known to graduate students who had spent four or five years in their programs, indicating that instruction and liaison work was getting this information to the students, but perhaps not quite early enough. Students who had completed one to three years of graduate work had not used or did not know about some of the library's popular and more specialized services and resources. These included "Suggest a Purchase," "AskUs" (reference services), citation management software, consultations, copyright and fair use, and GIS services.

Once dinner was complete, the graduate students were asked to take a post-test survey to gather feedback about "Dinner with Your Librarian," gauge their comfort level and during dinner conversation, and identify information they had learned. All of the graduate students selected a restaurant setting for future library outreach events. Six of the seven students were comfortable or more comfortable with the library after the event, but one student felt the same as they did before. Three out of the seven students wanted to schedule a follow-up appointment with a librarian, while one student did not want to (don't have time) and three were not sure. Three out the seven students responded that they would like to sign up for a library workshop, while the remainder were not sure or did not (didn't have time). Two students responded to a question asking if they would like more information about library services and followed up asking for information regarding an EndNote workshop upon survey completion.

The last two questions in the post-test survey provided opportunity for open-ended feedback. The students were asked, "What is one thing you learned about the University Libraries?" The students made note that they learned about library workshops, copyright workshops, thesis resources, reference software, and the Cushing Memorial Library & Archives collections. A sample of comments follow in Table 2.

Table 2: Post-Dinner Survey Comments

Question 6: What is one thing you learned about the University Libraries?	Question 7: Comments
<p>"The library workshops."</p> <p>"I didn't realize how quick/effective suggesting a purchase was."</p> <p>"Test databases are a thing; there is a grad area on the 6th floor."</p> <p>"I learned a lot about archives & test databases, also about using the library."</p>	<p>"I really enjoyed the evening and learned some new and interesting things about the library (copyright workshops)"</p> <p>"Very fun, informative, & tasty. I really feel as though my concerns and comments were taken seriously, the food was great!"</p> <p>"Very friendly professor experience, informative and receptive to our comments. I would do this again."</p> <p>"Thanks! It was nice to meet you and learn more about the library."</p>

In addition to the information received from the formal pre- and post-dinner surveys, the librarians who attended dinner found that the informal conversation with the students was very helpful when assessing where students might like more help. For example, one student was interested in learning more about using researcher information systems to promote scholarly identity. That is not the terminology that was used in the conversation, and one of the benefits of talking to the subjects in person was that the librarians were able to use appropriate, non-jargon terms that had meaning for the students. The librarians also received feedback on a recent website update. Many of the graduate students' suggestions for instruction or improvements for services came towards the end of the evening, indicating that students felt more comfortable sharing opinions with the authors after having had talked to them for an hour or so.

Conclusion

The results of the surveys conducted as part of the “Dinner with Your Librarian” program” underscore the important of targeted outreach to graduate students in addition to existent instruction and liaison services. Graduate students consistently used the resources that are most visible on the Texas A&M University Libraries’ website, but specialized services were used mostly by graduate students who were further along in their graduate careers. Some of the one-to-three year students were not using the library’s popular online reference service, “AskUs.” Since many graduate students have offices on campus, the authors assumed this would be a go-to resource to speak with a librarian remotely. This disparity revealed the need to examine both the marketing of that service and its ability to provide graduate students with adequate assistance. The graduate students also self-identified as expert researchers and were very comfortable using the library despite the fact that the majority of students who attended the dinners did not utilize over 50% of the services listed on their pre-dinner survey.

Although this study involved a small and less representative group of graduate students on campus, the librarians at Texas A&M University Libraries plan to continue gathering data and engaging with other graduate student departments through “Dinner with Your Librarian.” In the future, the authors plan to partner with other subject librarians to expand the program and test larger groups of graduate students. The goal of this outreach strategy is to provide less-formal settings in which students can speak with librarians in smaller groups. This type of outreach need not be at restaurants, however; poetry readings, socials, and reading groups, many of which are less costly than meals, provide great venues for outreach.

Certainly, this type of outreach cannot be the sole or main form of outreach for a university library with the need to scale-up outreach programs. However, there are benefits to intense, small outreach efforts, such as the quality of the interaction, which can make small-scale outreach a worthwhile endeavor. Small outreach interactions can also target student groups who may not be the focus of outreach events associated with larger colleges or disciplines and can be used to pilot larger outreach programs without requiring a great deal of financial and other resources. While the two “Dinner with Your Librarians” events described in this paper were attended by only seven graduate students, the librarians found the insight into the graduate student library experience valuable enough that the events will be continued in the future. The authors found that they received in-depth feedback that is difficult to gain during large scale outreach events. While the success of large outreach events can easily be measured by attendance numbers, niche



outreach programs for graduate students, although they do not have the volume of other outreach events, can provide unique opportunities for collecting information and forging connections.



Appendix A

Dinner with Your Librarian Pre-Survey

Thank you for participating in Dinner with Your Librarian! Please take a moment to fill out this survey (front and back). Please do not include any identifying information.

1. How many semesters of graduate school have you completed at Texas A&M University? _____
 2. How many semesters of graduate school have you completed overall? _____
 3. How comfortable are you with using library services?

A horizontal scale with two 'X' marks at the ends labeled 'Uncomfortable' on the left and 'Comfortable' on the right. In the center is a vertical line with a horizontal dash extending to the right, labeled 'I'.

4. In the past year, often have you spoken with a librarian?

Never Once a year Once a month Once a week Daily

5. How would you rate your proficiency in research?

A horizontal dashed line representing a spectrum from Inexpert to Expert. The line is labeled with 'X' at both ends. Below the line, the word 'Inexpert' is written under the left end, and 'Expert' is written under the right end.

- ## 6. Comments

1. The following table summarizes the results of a study on the relationship between age and income. The dependent variable is income, measured in thousands of dollars. The independent variable is age, measured in years.

7. Please fill out the following chart about which library services you use (mark X in the applicable box):

Service	Yes	No	Don't know what this is
Online databases (articles, government docs, etc.)			
Database trials			
Physical books			
Ebooks			
Media (CDs, DVDs, cameras, etc.)			
Suggest a purchase			
Get It For Me (Interlibrary loan)			
Ask Us (online or ask the desk, reference and circulation)			
Subject librarian reference (at the desk)			
Course reserves			
Study rooms or individual study spaces			
Public study spaces			
Workshops			
Library instruction sessions (for a class you are taking)			
Library instruction sessions (for a class you teach)			
Custom instruction materials/services			
Citation management software or instruction (Refworks, Endnote)			
Citation analytics consultation (counting how many times your work is cited by others, choosing where to submit articles based on impact factors			
Systematic review or literature review consultations			
Open Access publishing consultations			
Copyright and Fair Use consultations			
Archives or special collections			
Institutional repository (OAKTrust)			
GIS (geographic information system) software or consultations			

Appendix B
Dinner with Your Librarian Post-Survey

Thank you for participating in Dinner with Your Librarian! Please take a moment to fill out this survey. Please do not include any identifying information.

1. For future library outreach events, would you prefer a restaurant, library, or classroom setting?

Restaurant Library Classroom Other

2. Compared with how you felt before the dinner, do feel more comfortable using the libraries?

1 2 3 4 5
Less comfortable About the same More comfortable

3. Would you like to schedule a follow-up appointment with a librarian to discuss your research?

Yes No Not sure

4. Would you like to sign up for a library workshop?

Yes No Not sure

5. Would you like more information about library services?

Yes No Not sure

6. What is one thing you learned about the University Libraries?

7.

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