

# **Be All That You Can Be: Targeting Library Orientations to Military Cadets**

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## **Introduction**

At Texas A&M University, the Corps of Cadets is the largest and oldest student organization on campus. Each summer, nearly 1,000 freshman recruits participate in the Corps' Freshman Orientation Week (FOW), a military-style orientation. Buzz cuts, white T-shirts, physical training, and academic success seminars introduce new cadets to life in the Corps and at the university. Due to their participation in FOW, cadets miss out on many other traditional freshman orientation opportunities. In order to reach this large and highly visible freshman cohort, the University Libraries adopted a military-inspired orientation approach that built upon the unique nature of FOW. Librarians strategically used the bonds formed by cadets over the grueling week of FOW by gamifying the presentation, incorporating competition, and relying on the cadets' sense of camaraderie to create a fun and meaningful experience. This chapter presents a case study on how to target particular audiences in first-year orientations, specifically student cadets.

## **Literature Review**

Many academic libraries provide orientations and outreach to students on their campuses. However, little has been written about targeted outreach to military-affiliated populations. Recently, librarians have begun developing outreach strategies to serve student veterans, including such efforts as military-themed events and exhibits, partnerships with campus veterans offices, oral history projects, and participation in campus orientations for veterans (Hudson, 2016; LeMire, 2015; LeMire and Mulvihill, 2017; Mills, Paladino, and Klentzin 2015; Samson, 2016; Sojdehei, 2013). Less has been written about another military-affiliated population: cadets and midshipmen. Landers and Youngman (2009) describe a joint library-military cultural training program that integrates the campus ROTC program. Fawley and Krysak (2013) describe how librarians at Norwich University, one of the six senior military colleges in the United States, serve as de facto mentors for cadets through integration in a Corporal Academic Mentor program. The lack of literature on the topic of library outreach to cadets and midshipmen is surprising, as these students may differ significantly from other military-affiliated populations such as student veterans and service members. Unlike student veterans and service members, who are attending school after starting or completing their military service, many cadets and midshipmen are traditional college students who will not enter the military until after completing college. Many colleges and universities, even those that are not military colleges or service academies, will have cadets and midshipmen on their campuses. This chapter fills a gap in the library literature, illustrating how orientation programming can successfully reach this special population on mainstream college campuses.

## **Background**

Texas A&M University is the largest university in the state of Texas. The main campus in College Station is home to over 66,000 students, approximately 51,000 of whom are undergraduates. The undergraduate student body tends to be fairly traditional, with the majority of students coming from within the state of Texas and entering college directly from high school. Many students come from families with a long history of attendance at Texas A&M, although 26% of the student body is first generation college students. The Corps of Cadets plays a highly

visible role in the campus life and community. Over 2,400 cadets participate in the Corps and A&M commissions more military officers than any institution other than service academies (Corps of Cadets, 2017; Texas A&M University, 2017).

The University Libraries boasts a robust first-year outreach program that reaches well over 70% of the University's 12,000+ first-year students each year through participation in orientation programs and library orientation events. In addition to general first-year outreach efforts, the First Year Experience and Outreach Librarian, with the support of the other authors, identified specific groups on campus that could benefit from targeted outreach efforts. One of these groups was the Corps of Cadets. Members of the Corps have major time commitments throughout the semester, ranging from physical training to participation in charitable events to mandatory study time. Accordingly, these students can have limited opportunities to visit the University Libraries to learn the full extent of library resources and services. We reached out to Corps leadership to request an opportunity to speak to all incoming members of the Corps, a total of approximately 900 students. The Corps provided us with an opportunity to present to these students during FOW in three large groups, with each presentation lasting 75 minutes.

Although we were excited about the opportunity to speak to these students and about the length of our presentation time, we also knew we had some barriers to overcome in order to make our presentation engaging and impactful. One barrier was the format of the session. We would be presenting to students in a large, auditorium-style format during orientation, before students had even begun classes. Another major barrier was the Basic Training-type format of FOW. We anticipated that students would be exhausted, sleep-deprived, and experiencing information overload. We knew we would have to be creative in order to make the library presentation memorable.

Before we could brainstorm presentation strategies, we had to establish our learning outcomes. We determined that library resource awareness was the most appropriate learning outcome for this environment and identified several resources (e.g. course reserves) that were most likely to be immediately useful to incoming first-year students. However, we also determined that a major learning outcome would be for students to identify the library as a key stakeholder in the Corps of Cadets and in the success of incoming cadets. We wanted to draw a direct connection between the library and the Corps so students would see the library as relevant to their own experiences. This learning outcome helped shape both the structure of the presentation as well as the engagement strategies we used.

The first strategy we employed was to recruit multiple speakers. We wanted to incorporate library speakers from our five libraries in order to break up a long presentation and to represent the breadth of the University Libraries, but also so we could include multiple library employees with a connection to the Corps of Cadets. For example, we included a librarian who is a former Corps member, a staff member who works with Corps history in Special Collections, librarians who are military veterans or service members, and a student worker who was a member of the Corps. Each of these speakers was encouraged to talk about their connection to the Corps or the military in order to explicitly draw the connection between the library and the Corps.

Our second engagement strategy was to include a game. FOW is a powerful bonding experience for cadets, so we expected that these students would be receptive to team-based interactivity. We relied on the Corps of Cadets to provide us with our teams. Military culture includes an element of rivalry between the different branches of service (e.g. Army vs. Navy), and we anticipated that student cadets would be acculturated to this type of branch or unit identity and that we could use these pre-existing affiliations to form our teams. The game itself was very simple. We created a “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire”-style activity to ask questions about library services. We brought a volunteer cadet onto the stage to answer a question and simultaneously projected the question on stage using Poll Everywhere as a way for the volunteer to “Ask the Audience” for help. We included this element since we anticipated that incoming cadets were unlikely to be very familiar with library services. In practice, this activity proved more challenging to implement than anticipated as many cadets had their phones taken away as part of FOW. However, the bonds established in FOW provided the solution, as cadets demonstrated no shyness about shouting out answers to their buddies on stage – though they often found it hilarious to intentionally direct students to an obviously incorrect answer. Given this success, we opted to continue to use Poll Everywhere in subsequent years despite continued restrictions on phone usage.

## **Impact**

The impact of library outreach and orientation presentations is sometimes difficult to measure. When librarians give orientation presentations for external groups such as FOW, the originating organization often maintains the registration and/or attendance data. This can make it difficult to implement common assessment methodologies such as pre- or post-assessment surveys. Librarians must work collaboratively with the hosting organization and within the confines and restrictions of the hosting organization’s program and assessment plan, as we had to do with FOW. Additionally, the sheer size of many of the student populations can be daunting. In the case of FOW, the population totals around 900 students each year.

Despite some of the challenges of doing assessment in large orientation presentations, we have found ways to demonstrate the impact of the library presentations to the Corps of Cadets. At a base level, repeat business for orientations is certainly an indicator of success. In the case of FOW, the University Libraries has used the request to return for multiple years as a measure of the impact of our program. The library presentation is a valued part of the FOW experience as evidenced by our inclusion in a tightly packed schedule. On a campus of our size, there is a large number of student success services that could be highlighted for incoming cadets. The inclusion of the University Libraries year after year, sometimes at the exclusion of other services, demonstrates the impact of our presentation. It also clearly demonstrates the value the FOW administration places on the library presentation and the services we provide to cadets.

Another way to measure the impact of a program is allocation of time. Multi-day programs such as FOW are complex, and the demand on cadets’ time is immense. It’s worth noting that the Corps of Cadets has allocated a full afternoon to the library’s three 75-minute presentations. It is not uncommon for the library to be given 15-20 minutes to present during other campus events.

The time we spend with FOW means that the librarians can deliver a more impactful and engaging experience, which, in turn, solidifies the value of the presentation.

Librarians working in these environments can also collect and analyze anecdotal evidence of impact. While they may lack the statistical rigor of more traditional methods such as surveys, anecdotal evidence can enhance other assessment measures to provide a more robust picture of the impact of a program. Anecdotes can come from those attending library presentations and those organizing it. In 2016, the best comment came from an A/V technician who mentioned that he thought a library presentation would be boring, but that he found the presentation fun and actually learned something. Additionally, the librarians and staff who have given the FOW presentation regularly report being recognized on campus. It is common for a cadet to say, "Aren't you that librarian who came to FOW." Recognition as impact is a highly valued measure, as it demonstrates that students find librarians' contributions meaningful to their campus experience.

Finally, classroom assessment techniques, or CATS, can be employed in large scale orientations. Instructors can measure students' understanding of a topic by doing something as simple as asking students to raise their hands. New technologies can also be used to gather data. For FOW, we employed Poll Everywhere as a method for getting student feedback. We were able to assess student responses to library questions about services, hours, and collections. What did students already know and where were their gaps in knowledge? This data is useful in planning curricula from year to year. Cadets also enjoyed seeing their responses displayed on the screen, adding to the excitement of the game.

## **Conclusion and Future Directions**

Successful outreach to unique populations such as military cadets requires careful consideration about the culture of that population as well as the limitations of the environment in which they operate. Our FOW presentation was effective because it was tailored specifically for this particular population. By reflecting on the unique culture of the Corps and the experience of FOW, we were able to recognize several potential barriers to a compelling library presentation and identify concrete strategies that we could use to overcome those barriers and make our FOW presentation memorable, both for those who presented and for our cadets. The University Libraries' successful integration into FOW illustrates one example of how libraries can leverage existing programming, cultural norms, and gamification into library orientations in order to meet students where they are.

Our presentation at FOW was a progressive first step toward integration into the Corps of Cadets' existing programming. We plan to continue our orientation efforts but also hope to expand programming into other unique Corps programs, such as their new learning center facilities. Our experience with FOW also has shown this integrative approach to be a successful model for unique populations. Future goals include applying similar models to other cohort-based student groups such as our dual enrollment and provisional admission programs.

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