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Marketing First Impressions: Academic Libraries Creating Partnerships and Connections at New Student Orientations

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Introduction

Creating positive perceptions of academic libraries can occur at more than just the reference desk or during library instruction. Librarians can and should take advantage of other occasions to promote their library. New student orientations provide an ideal opportunity to be more innovative and proactive in creating first impressions of library resources and services. When librarians become involved with orientation programs, positive interactions can begin before students even start their first semester.

Orientation programs are designed to help students adjust to university life and ultimately improve retention rates, graduation rates, and grade point averages. Many studies show the success of these programs. For instance, Busby (2002) states, that at Stephen F. Austin State University, "the average GPA of the college freshmen who attended orientation between the years 1986-1994 was 2.11 on a 4.0 scale with a standard deviation of .059. The average GPA of the college freshmen who did not attend orientation between the years 1986-1994 was 1.73 on a 4.0 scale with a standard deviation of .077" (p. 46). Becoming familiar with university resources like the library is one way students adjust to university life, and the earlier students learn about the library, the sooner they can begin to use it to improve their research skills. As Tenofsky (2007) explains, "Librarians can make a difference in these students' lives […] These collaborations will benefit not only the library and the students, but also the institution with its retention efforts" (p. 292).

A common element missing in library participation in new student orientation is a distinguishable role outside the walls of the library. Salzer (2003) discusses the idea of promoting resources and services outside a physical library by saying, "Librarians must take a proactive approach, viewing strategic marketing of their services and resources as critical to their continued survival"(p. 4).With this idea in mind, Florida State University Libraries became involved with the university-wide orientation program. In this article, we examine this proactive way to market first impressions of the library outside the library facilities.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on how libraries are reaching first year students and how orientation programs benefit those students.

Efforts of libraries to reach first year students

There is not a great deal of literature on the role of libraries in university-wide orientation programs. Alexander, Gaither, and Tuckett (2000) describe the University of Michigan Libraries' role in new student orientation, and discuss effective techniques for reaching students. Tenofksy (2007) emphasizes collaboration and describing the success that followed working with the university's orientation services. Utah State University Libraries assessed their involvement in a for-credit freshman orientation program called Connections, which reaches approximately 1,200 students and takes place the week before classes start. Cahoy and Bichel (2004) discuss an interactive and informal library open house as an alternative to traditional library orientation at Pennsylvania State University. Most articles examine marketing efforts for undergraduates, instruction programs aimed at first year students (either in first-year experience courses or through English composition courses), or living learning communities.

Some of the literature shows librarians searching for ways to effectively market and promote library resources and services. According to Nims (1999, p. 251), says that "[p]romoting is simply employing creative ways to make library products and services visible to users." Block (2001) believes a successful library is one that informs users about services and convinces them to use them. Noel and Waugh (2002, p. 2), contrasting marketing efforts at Indiana University Libraries and Abbott Laboratories, acknowledge that "getting users to use the library and making them aware of the library's services" is an important ingredient in success.

Librarians are concerned with the effect of library instruction on first-year students. The University of North Texas assessed their collaboration with the English department to provide instruction for two core curriculum classes. Byerly (2006) explains the importance of these classes for establishing a foundation for students, stating that the library uses "this one-shot session to lay the foundations of information literacy by providing instruction on basic research skills, catalog searching, database searching, and finding help from a librarian" (p. 590). Other academic libraries, such as Central Missouri State, are being innovative by promoting to freshmen the benefits of semester-long library instruction courses, which they market to the students before they have even arrived at campus (Lawson, 2000).

In recent years, many university libraries have made attempts to become involved with living-learning communities. At Kent State University, "the librarian team believed that the library had a unique role to play in enhancing the first-year experience for these students. Becoming involved with learning communities could be an opportunity for librarians to provide additional guidance and nurturing of students' information literacy skills" (Voelker, 2006, p. 73). Involvement with learning communities gave them many chances to interact with students outside of the library. Frazier (2006, p. 28) reports on the benefits that the librarians at SUNY at Buffalo received from participating in learning communities, including "enhanced visibility on campus, the chance to network with faculty from a variety of departments, and numerous opportunities to improve teaching skills."

Benefits of orientation programs

The leading authority on new student orientations and their benefits is Ward-Roof and Hatch's revised edition (2003) of Upcraft, et al. (1993). Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CSA) (2001), speaking on new student orientations and their impact on student retention, notes that orientation programs are shifting by promoting orientation through a "clearly academic perspective" (Ward-Roof, p. 197). Mann (1998) also discusses the correlation between orientation programs and student retention and academic success. And according to Hadlock (2000), "[o]rientation is

often the first time students get a complete picture of the university and it therefore plays a pivotal role in student success."(p. 28). Barefoot (2000) also speaks about the idea of initial perceptions, noting the inclusion of academic programs at new student orientation as a unique chance to shape students' first impressions (p. 17).

Background

In 2004, the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) released a summary report of its first online survey created to gather statistics on its 637 member institutes' orientations, in which 237 members participated. The study found that 64% reported orientation as mandatory and 45% reported their program occurred over two days. When asked to list the components included in both the student and parent programs, there was no specific mention of campus libraries. This absence of library participation is striking in light of the fact that 48% of responses indicate that time is devoted to academic matters. With this backdrop, we consider Florida State University Libraries involvement in the Florida State University (FSU) orientation program in 2005, 2006, and 2007.

Each year, thousands of FSU freshmen and their families attend a mandatory two- day new student orientation arranged by the University Office of Orientation. The orientation is a prerequisite to every FSU freshman's academic journey. Between 2005 and 2007, the Office of Orientation reported that there were 6,600 students per year attending the orientations. In an attempt to personalize and accommodate such large groups of students, the orientation period covers a six-week period during May and June.

During the two-day orientations, students and their families attend programs to learn more about the FSU community and culture. Students and parents are initially introduced to scheduled orientation events through a brochure received upon arriving for orientation, which provides titles, locations, and short descriptions of sessions (See appendix 1).

One group of concurrent sessions, which takes place during the first day of orientation, is the campus networking session. The networking sessions serve as an opportunity for freshmen and their families to learn more about particular campus organizations or services. In 2005 and 2006, nine organizations participated in the networking sessions, while the number of participating organizations increased to fourteen in 2007.

The networking sessions create a unique opportunity for university academic and support services to make 45-minute informational presentations, which take place in a row of adjacent classrooms in the Student Union Building. Before each session, many organizations compete intensely to attract attendees. Organizations participating in the networking sessions use different methods and techniques to convey their information.

At the end of each two-day orientation participants assess the orientation. One section on the evaluation form asks students and family members to rank the network sessions in one of five categories: 1) excellent, 2) good, 3) average, 4) poor, and 5) failing. The Office of Orientation compiles and makes data from these assessments available. The following discussion is based on this evaluation data.

Discussion

During the 2005, 2006, and 2007 orientations, FSU Libraries connected with approximately 2,416 of the 16,169 students and family members who reported attending campus networking sessions (numbers of attendees tabulated by the number of those filling out surveys [See appendix 2]). The following paragraphs will examine the Libraries' impact and effectiveness during the campus networking sessions by analyzing the combined percentage of attendees and their rankings.

In 2005, the library session drew its smallest percentage of networking attendees, with only 9.4% of those attending. At each session two librarians, who represented various units with the library, presented a PowerPoint slide show. Before each session, the librarians were in the classroom waiting for students and families to arrive. They engaged in small talk with attendees and gave them informational folders until the presentation began.

In 2006, the library session drew its largest percentage of networking attendees, with 19.8% of those attending. After learning what worked and did not work the previous year, the Libraries decided to take a more proactive approach. During many of the 2006 presentations there were actually three librarians. Two librarians stayed in the classroom to chat and pass out information, while the other actively recruited attendees in the hallway. Even when the presentation began, one librarian stayed in the hallway to convince those passing by to stop and attend the library session. It was during those friendly interactions that more information packets were distributed to students and family members who did not even attend the session.

In 2007, the library session drew 13.1% of those attending. The orientation strategy mimicked the 2006 orientation by trying to reach students and family members in the hallway. In 2007, however, the orientation team added another twist. To create a more relatable element for students, two staff members who were recent FSU graduates participated in each session. This meant each session had two librarians and two staff members. Despite incorporating staff members, the number of total attendees dropped below the 2006 totals. The addition of five new networking sessions and a poor classroom location may have made the 2007 percentages significantly lower. Equally important as the number of participants, the library session repeatedly ranked very high among the other networking sessions when evaluated. When compared with the other sessions, the library session was consistently ranked in the top third of organizations (See appendixes 3 and 4). The sessions introduced students and parents to the libraries' resources and to provide them with a chance to meet and talk with librarians and library staff. In 2005, 42.2% of students and family members rated the presentation "excellent," while in 2006, 68.9% gave an excellent ranking. Over the three-year period, the libraries achieved an average excellent ranking of 56.8% by all attendees combined. It is believed the proactive approach of making personal connections inside and outside the classroom directly impacted the evaluations. The high rankings on the evaluations seemed to demonstrate that students and family members received a positive introduction to the libraries' services and staff.

Conclusion

Most universities and colleges have some kind of orientation provided by the student services office, and it seems natural for campus libraries to be involved. Cawthorne (1966) observes, regarding learning communities, that "[l]ibrarians are partnering with student services staff to welcome students to their campuses and provide valuable orientations" (p. 666). Another way to build these partnerships is to participate in campus-wide orientation programs. The FSU new student orientation partnership between academic services and student services ultimately benefits both the university and the student. When students take advantage of library resources at their library, they will have a better college experience. Regalado (2003) remarks that, "[t]he library is more than just a place for studying or becoming information literate: it is a crucial element in fostering a broad-based and positive student experience. Librarians can provide first-year students with the competence, confidence, and connections they need for a smooth adjustment to college" (p. 90). Introducing students and their families to library services during orientation starts the process as early as possible.

Collaboration between the libraries and orientation offices is an area ripe for research. It seems very few have researched the effects such partnerships entail. There is much to gain by these collaborations, which increase the presence of libraries on campus and lead to other interactions. Being a part of the orientation program allows librarians to reach students they might not reach in any other

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context. These informal sessions may allow librarians to talk to students in a less overwhelming way than during formal instruction. The participation of libraries also benefits the orientation office, because an important goal orientation is to provide students with tools for success, and libraries help students become successful. The library presence at new student orientation also stengthens the link between libraries and the family members of incoming freshmen.

Realizing the lasting impact first impressions have on people (DiGirolamo, 1997; Kleinke, 1975) and the critical need to create positive perceptions among incoming freshmen (Upcraft, 2005), FSU librarians continue to demonstrate how participating in the Office of Orientations' networking sessions is an excellent way to introduce students to an academic library. Moreover, they have illustrated how personalizing resources and services provides a critical first connection with new students and their families and may encourage students to use the library in achieving their academic success.

Appendix 1

Library title and description that appeared in the 2007 campus networking session brochure.

Get the Research Edge at FSU Libraries

Take this opportunity to meet some of the FSU Libraries staff and hear about the exciting services and resources that the libraries have to offer. We will introduce you to the various libraries on campus and show you some of the wonderful resources available to you from on or off campus. These include online databases, electronic books, and thousands of online journals—everything you need to complete your research at FSU!

Appendix 2

Students, family members, and combined total of those attending library networking session.

| | Students | Parents | Combined Totals |
	2005	2006	2007
Students	163	624	425
Parents	204	667	313
Combined Totals	367	1311	738
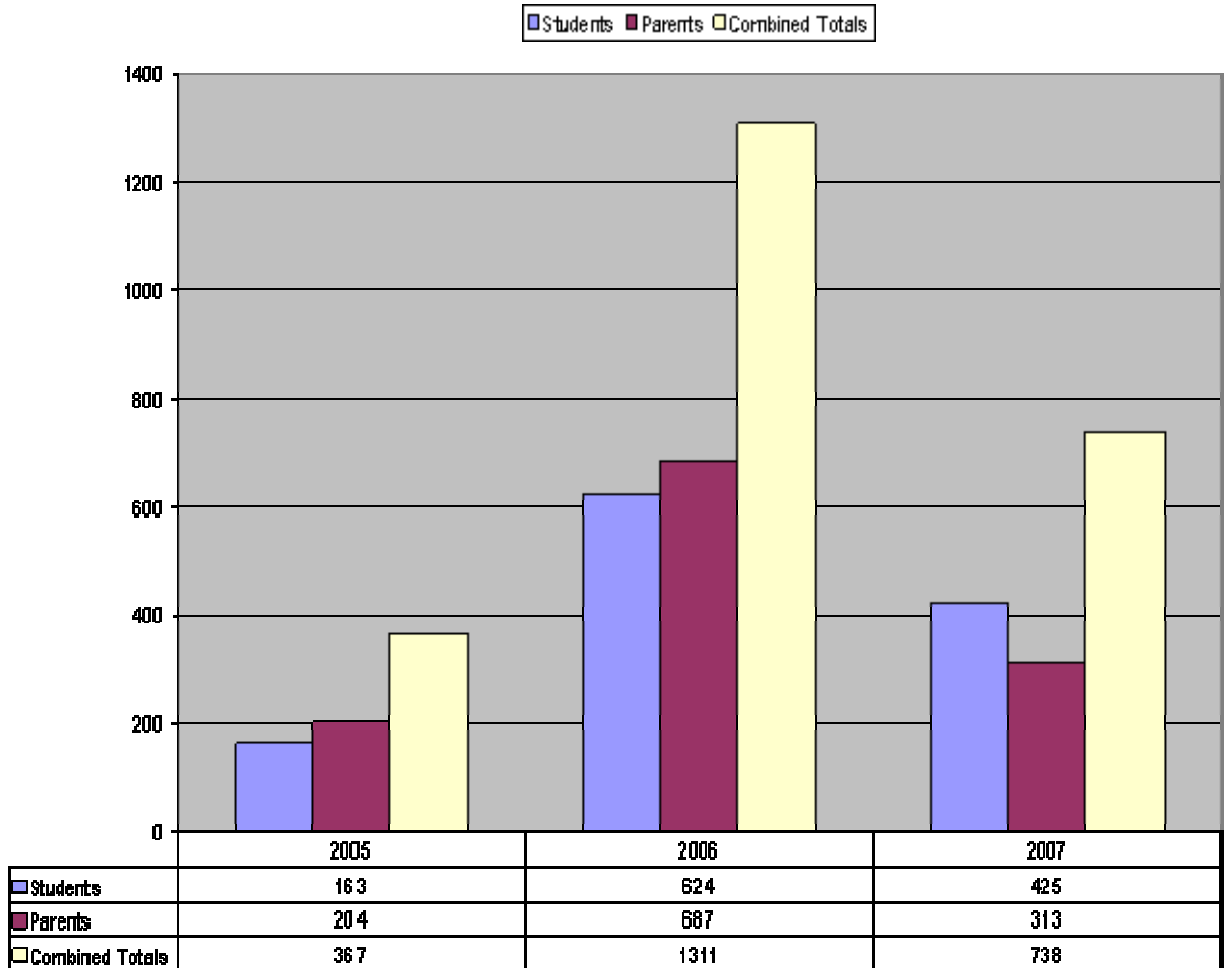
Appendix 3

Student networking session rankings and student library evaluations

New Student Orientation
Student Campus Networking Quality Rankings
(Mean: 1=(Excellent), 2=(Good), 3=(Average), 4=(Poor), & 5=(Failing))

2005	Rank	Participants	Mean	Percentage of Total Orientation Attendees
International Programs	1st	457	1.46	24.27
Campus Libraries	2nd	163	1.58	8.66
FSU Card	3rd	321	1.59	17.05
Computing on Campus	4th	237	1.61	12.59
Money Matters	5th	625	1.65	33.19
Show me the Money	6th	297	1.76	15.77
Keeping in Touch	7th	173	1.84	9.18
Parking	8th	282	1.85	14.97
Career Portfolio	9th	279	1.99	14.81

2005	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Excellent	95	5.0	58.3
Good	46	2.4	28.2
Average	18	1.0	11.0
Poor	3	.2	1.8
Failing	1	.1	.6
Total	163	8.7	100.0

2006	Rank	Participants	Mean	Percentage of Total Orientation Attendees
Change Your Major	1st	950	1.30	28.51
Keeping in Touch	2nd	880	1.34	26.41
Parking	3rd	1148	1.37	34.46
Campus Libraries	4th	624	1.40	18.73
Pre-Health Majors	5th	1418	1.43	42.56
International Programs	6th	1156	1.45	34.70
Scholarships	7th	555	1.46	16.66
FSU Card	8th	665	1.47	19.96
Computing on Campus	9th	532	1.49	15.97

2006	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Excellent	430	12.9	68.9
Good	138	4.1	22.1
Average	43	1.3	6.9
Poor	7	.2	1.1
Failing	2	.1	.3
Total	624	18.7	100.0

2007	Rank	Participants	Mean	Percentage of Total Orientation Attendees
International Programs	1st	619	1.36	22.46
Major Changes	2nd	621	1.39	22.54
FSU Card	3rd	832	1.40	30.19
Pre-Health Majors	4th	598	1.40	21.70
Pre-Law Majors	5th	422	1.48	15.31
Campus Libraries	6th	425	1.50	15.42
FIG or FYE	7th	529	1.50	19.20
Scholarships	8th	428	1.51	15.53
Multicultural Affairs	9th	405	1.54	14.70
Computing on Campus	10th	554	1.55	20.10
Greek Life	11th	898	1.56	32.59
Financial Aid	12th	724	1.56	26.27
Health Insurance	13th	576	1.59	20.90
Parking	14th	633	1.70	22.97

2007	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Excellent	259	9.4	60.9
Good	129	4.7	30.4
Average	29	1.1	6.8
Poor	6	.2	1.4
Failing	2	.1	.5
Total	425	15.4	100.0

Appendix 4

Family networking session rankings and family library evaluations

New Student Orientation
Family Campus Networking Quality Rankings
(Mean: 1=(Excellent), 2=(Good), 3=(Average), 4=(Poor), & 5=(Failing))

2005	Rank	Participants	Mean	Percentage of Total Orientation Attendees
FSU Card	1st	536	1.57	26.35
International Programs	2nd	338	1.63	16.62
Campus Libraries	3rd	204	1.74	10.03
Computing on Campus	4th	304	1.76	14.95
Keeping in Touch	5th	280	1.77	13.77
Career Portfolio	6th	356	1.80	17.50
Money Matters	7th	1015	1.88	49.90
Parking	8th	261	1.93	12.83
Show me the Money	9th	471	1.94	23.16

2005	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Excellent	86	4.2	42.2
Good	87	4.3	42.6
Average	29	1.4	14.2
Poor	2	.1	1.0
Failing	0	0	0
Total	204	10.0	100.0

2006	Rank	Participants	Mean	Percentage of Total Orientation Attendees
Change Your Major	1st	978	1.39	29.71
Keeping in Touch	2nd	1135	1.40	34.49
Campus Libraries	3rd	687	1.48	20.87
Parking	4th	1214	1.50	36.89
International Programs	5th	1423	1.53	43.24
Computing on Campus	6th	686	1.55	20.84
Pre-Health Majors	7th	1755	1.55	53.33
Scholarships	8th	616	1.59	18.72
FSU Card	9th	634	1.60	19.26

2006	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Excellent	432	13.1	62.9
Good	191	5.8	27.8
Average	56	1.7	8.2
Poor	4	.1	.6
Failing	4	.1	.6
Total	687	20.9	100.0

2007	Rank	Participants	Mean	Percentage of Total Orientation Attendees
FSU Cards	1st	1018	1.45	35.41
International Programs	2nd	463	1.49	16.10
Pre-Health Majors	3rd	456	1.50	15.86
Major Changes	4th	546	1.54	18.99
Pre-Law Majors	5th	269	1.56	9.36
FIG or FYE	6th	533	1.63	18.54
Campus Libraries	7th	313	1.68	10.87
Multicultural Affairs	8th	246	1.69	8.56
Computing on Campus	9th	613	1.70	21.32
Health Insurance	10th	975	1.77	33.91
Financial Aid	11th	1251	1.79	43.51
Scholarships	12th	363	1.82	12.63
Parking	13th	651	1.83	22.64
Greek Life	14th	548	1.92	19.06

2007	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Excellent	149	5.2	47.6
Good	124	4.3	39.6
Average	35	1.2	11.2
Poor	1	.0	.3
Failing	4	.1	1.3
Total	313	10.9	100.0

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