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Designing a Library Orientation for First Year Students with Disabilities Through the STEPS Program

Jamie L. Goodfellow

Sheridan College, jamie.goodfellow@sheridancollege.ca

Janice Galloway

Sheridan College, janice.galloway@sheridancollege.ca

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Chapter: Targeting Specific Populations, Tags: Partnerships

Designing a Library Orientation for First Year Students with Disabilities through the STEPS program.

Introduction

Sheridan College is a diploma and degree granting institution with three campuses in the Greater Toronto Area of Ontario, Canada, with an estimated population of 21,000 full-time students.

During each academic year, Sheridan Library participates in a variety of orientation sessions for specific faculties, programs and departments. In 2014 the library's approach to orientation programming changed when it sought to increase its focus on the quality of the first year experience and introduced a First Year Experience Librarian. A 'First Year Library Team' was created with representatives from various student-centered departments across the college with the goal of supporting academic skills development. The Accessible Learning department, which works with students who have disabilities, became an active partner in the Library's creation and re-design of orientation programming.

At Sheridan, approximately 2,500 students with disabilities are registered with Accessible Learning. Due to their specific needs, they are offered a unique orientation program called *Summer Transition Experience Program at Sheridan* (STEPS). STEPS programming includes sessions offered by a variety of services and partners across Sheridan and typically has approximately 60 students attend.

This chapter will address the evolution of the partnership between the Library and Accessible Learning, the design of new orientation programming for students with disabilities, as well as successes, challenges and future plans.

Literature Review

Benefits and Methods of Partnering with Student Affairs

There is much to be found in the literature on the mutual benefits of partnerships between the Library and Student Services. Some authors point to the fact that the two groups "share a common goal, i.e. to help students succeed" (Swartz, Carlisle & Uyeki 2006, p.113). Love & Edwards (2008) agree, stating, "both aim to equip students with tools and resources needed to succeed in their studies and with their evolving personal, social, emotional and academic endeavours" (p.21). Forrest (2005) speaks to the fact that both Libraries and Student Services offices tend to focus their outreach to faculty first but argues that these groups have much to gain by forming partnerships with each other (p.12).

Alongside studies about the benefits of collaborations between the two groups, there are a number of articles that offer strategies to do so. One author recommends "looking for opportunities such as different programmatic developments...[and] thinking creatively about how any aspect of the library or library staff skills could possibly contribute to their students' academic success or campus engagement" (Jenkins 2013, p.28). In addition, Love & Edwards (2008) state "finding a partner/collaborator on...campus will not be difficult if librarians are willing to expand the definition of what an academic library 'should be'" (p.24).

Several studies focus on participating in orientations or developing particular workshops in partnership with Student Services. One paper discusses a pilot workshop entitled "Library Research Made Easy" that "covered search techniques for library databases, including breaking a topic into separate concepts" (Hurvitz, Benvau & Parry 2015, p.13). A similar session was offered for students with a goal to "break down some of the fears

that students may have around research, equip them with some knowledge of what is expected in research in higher education, and encourage them to refine their own research practices” (Kaye 2014, p.17). Rhoades and Hartsell (2008) discuss the success of their library workshop within the new student orientation and suggest that the orientation office has something to gain from library participation “because an important goal of orientation is to provide students with tools for success, and libraries help students become successful” (p.5). It is clear that libraries have realized the collaborative potential to be found by partnering with student-centered groups, particularly Student Services.

Departments within Student Affairs

While there is a good deal of information on partnering with Student Services in general, the literature on specific partnerships with libraries is scant. Writings on partnerships with Career Services (Hollister 2005) and Academic Advising (Pan, Valliant & Reed 2009) can be found. In addition, there are some studies focusing on work with Student Services to support particular groups such as Millenials (Tenofsky 2007) and transfer students (Tag, Buck & Mautino 2007). These studies are few and far between and it is clear that this is an area ripe for further study.

Accessible Learning and Supporting Students with Disabilities

Out of all the possible groups that might work within Student Services, there is little to no mention of partnering with Accessible Learning Departments or supporting students with disabilities outside of supportive technology or space within the library. Love and Edwards (2008) give a long list of possible groups working within Student Services including groups such as campus recreation and psychological services (p.22). Disability Services is listed but no further details are given in terms of what a collaboration might look like. Jenkins (2013) mentions that their library will be looking to develop a collaboration with the Accessibility Office in the future (p. 29) but says nothing further on the topic. One author describes their library’s liaison program which has a liaison librarian to various student organizations and offices in addition to academic departments. The liaison to Disability Services “communicated with that office and arranged training about working with disabled patrons for Libraries’ staff” (Crowe 2010, p. 156). These few examples suggest that partnering with Accessibility Services is still a very new and largely unexplored area of collaboration.

Developing a Partnership with Accessible Learning through the First Year Library Team

In 2014, Sheridan Library hired a First Year Experience Librarian (since revised to ‘First Year Academic Skills Librarian’) with a mandate to strengthen supports to the academic skill development of students in their first year of College. Part of the function of this role was outreach as well as active involvement in the variety of orientations that occur at Sheridan on a yearly basis.

To achieve this goal, the First Year Experience Librarian recruited a broad spectrum of student-centered groups across campuses to join a new First Year Library Team. Membership included representatives from: Library, Tutoring, International Center, Accessible Learning and First Year Transitions. The library was particularly eager to partner with The Learning Strategist from Accessible Learning. This role brings expertise on learning strategies such as time management, note taking and studying skills and provides a unique perspective and skill set supporting students with disabilities. Prior to the formation of this team, library support specific to students with disabilities was limited. It was hoped that the addition of this role to the team would ensure that the library was offering inclusive support to all first year students.

Accessible Learning and STEPS at Sheridan

Accessible Learning oversees supports for students with disabilities at Sheridan College. The goal of Accessible Learning is to provide appropriate accommodations for students so that they may receive a fair and equitable

education. In addition to providing accommodations, Accessible Learning offers enhanced services, which includes Learning Strategies training and participation in the STEPS program for first year students registered with Accessible Learning.

The focus of STEPS is to assist first year students with the transition into post-secondary education. The program first launched at Sheridan in 2004 and is offered to all students with a documented disability. Typically, 60 students attend STEPS and participate in sessions which are designed to be interactive and engaging to promote skill development for post-secondary studies. These sessions are presented by a variety of services: Library, Tutoring, Counselling, Health Services, Sheridan Student Union, Indigenous Learning, Student Advisement and Student Leadership and Engagement, offered across the College campuses.

The Library has participated in the STEPS program since 2004 offering a general information session about library services and participating in an Amazing Race summative evaluation. Through her role on the First Year Library Team, however, the Learning Strategist came to see that the library session could be expanded beyond a simple tour of the library. Through their joint efforts, a new vision of the library component of the STEPS orientation was able to take shape.

Re-designed Library Session at STEPS

The new library session was a complete remodel of the previous orientation. While the previous session was a true “orientation” - describing the collections, services and locations of the library – the new orientation was re-focused to offer a one-hour information literacy session with only a brief amount of time devoted to traditional orientation topics. While this may sound overwhelming (as students haven’t even started classes yet), the students who tend to participate in the STEPS program are keen and eager to learn. They also tend to have a lot of questions and are more willing to ask them in a group of their peers, rather than in a classroom setting.

Titled “Getting Started with Research”, the session walked students through the research process. Using an example topic, students worked together and developed a research question, brainstormed keywords, and wrote a search string. The librarian then used this search to demonstrate Summon, the library’s discovery service, and point to useful tools within this database to assist them with their searches (limiters, citations, etc.) The session followed the STEPS model of team building by necessitating that students complete the worksheet in small groups and report back on their answers and experiences in searching Summon.

Team building is an important focus in STEPS as it allows students to see they are not alone and have peers who face similar challenges. Strengthening these skills is important as collaborative learning is a key component in post-secondary studies. In addition, STEPS creates a safe and non-judgmental space so students feel more comfortable participating as active team members.

Discussion

The revised STEPS “Getting Started with Research” session is an adaptation of the library’s newly developed workshop for the first year communications course and is modified to include more time for hands-on practice. This course is mandatory for almost every program at Sheridan and teaches the essential components of research, writing, citing and presentation skills among other topics. Students typically take this course in the first semester of their first year. It is a natural fit for library support and a fantastic opportunity to ensure that the majority of first year students are taught the basics of information literacy.

Students who are enrolled in STEPS tend to feel anxious about the introductory communications course as they struggle with the content. They also typically receive accommodations to have a reduced course load each semester. These two things in combination result in most students choosing to take this course in a later

semester which can place them at a disadvantage when encountering research related skills in their coursework. Therefore, offering this session before they start their courses ensures they have exposure to information literacy instruction. Additionally, these students usually require more guidance and practice while learning new skills, so encountering this session again enhances their confidence and meets their learning needs.

Feedback collected from this session demonstrated positive results. Quantitative and Qualitative data were collected from participants using survey questionnaires. Fifty-five students in 2015 and fifty students in 2016 completed the STEPS programming questionnaires across Sheridan College campuses. The goal of the new research session was to help familiarize students with library services and introduce them to information literacy and research skills at the college level. This goal appears to be successful based on the feedback received from the survey questionnaires. The questionnaire asked students to rate the activities included in STEPS and the majority of students rated the library session as "Very Helpful". No students indicated that the session was "Not Helpful".

The survey questionnaire also asked students to respond to two qualitative questions; Question 1: "3 things you learned about yourself that will help you be successful at Sheridan" and Question 2: "3 things you may need to do differently to become successful at Sheridan". Responses typically include things like "making friends" or "time management skills", however this year, the library session was mentioned by a few students. Though responses were few in number, they are still quite valuable as STEPS includes twelve different sessions over the three days. For the library to be mentioned at all indicates that the session made an impact on these students.

Overall we felt the feedback was positive and decided to continue offering the "Getting Started with Research" session in the 2016 STEPS program. The survey questionnaire remained the same and again demonstrated positive results with the majority of students rating the Library session as Very Helpful. The qualitative questions asked in the 2015 questionnaire were revised in 2016 to ask students for general comments regarding the activities in STEPS. The majority of comments discussed a better sense of preparedness for the upcoming term but there was no specific mention of the library session this year.

In addition to collected survey data, anecdotal evidence indicates that the STEPS "Getting Started with Research" session is a success. Students who attended STEPS were more receptive to using library services as well as meeting with the First Year Librarian. Since the STEPS students had interaction with the Librarian in these sessions, they were less afraid to access the service as they were now familiar with who this individual was and what they can do to help the students.

Lessons and Future Plans:

The revised "Getting Started with Research" session has indicated positive outcomes for the students and has identified areas to continue and improve upon in the future. Having students work through the research process together is very effective with this audience. They are more comfortable asking questions and receiving help from each other because they feel safe in this type of environment. These students enter into their first semester feeling less overwhelmed as they are now familiar with expectations around the research process.

We would like to develop more targeted questions for the assessment of the "Getting Started with Research" session. For example, "Do you feel more comfortable about the research process after this session," "List two Sheridan search engines you can use in September", and including open ended questions such as "I can use the library for...". We also plan on developing a short exit survey to assess student learning directly after the

session. In addition to making improvements to our evaluations, we also intend to implement a better tracking system to identify students who attended STEPS and use the Library services throughout the school year.

Conclusion

There is little research in the literature describing partnerships between Libraries and Accessible Learning Services. Based on our findings these sessions are successful and are beneficial to this specific student population. The Library's participation in STEPS encourages students to engage with research skills early, in a safe space and with peers facing similar challenges to themselves. Meeting the Librarian in-person makes it easier to seek help during the school year to continue working on these skills. We hope other institutions collaborate and implement similar orientation sessions for students with disabilities to strengthen student confidence and academic success.

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