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An Exploration of Academic Librarian Positions Dedicated to Serving First Year College Students

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Abstract

Within library literature there are many articles that describe academic librarians' experiences working with first year college students. For example, teaching information literacy skills, assessing student learning, and serving as a personal librarian. However, there is not much formal research that compiles and investigates the professional responsibilities, campus partnerships, challenges, and successes of librarians in a first year experience (FYE) role. The existence of numerous FYE librarian positions combined with a lack of scholarship exploring this important role necessitated an empirical study surveying these librarians to learn more about their jobs.

Keywords

first year students, freshmen, first year experience, collaboration, academic libraries

From the Field

An Exploration of Academic Librarian Positions Dedicated to Serving First-Year College Students

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Abstract

Within library literature there are many articles that describe academic librarians' experiences working with first-year college students, for example, teaching information literacy skills, assessing student learning, and serving as a personal librarian. While these positions have become common, there is not much formal research that compiles and investigates the professional responsibilities, campus partnerships, challenges, and successes of librarians in a first-year experience role. Interdepartmental collaboration is the primary focus of this exploration, as there are a multitude of campus stakeholders needed to ensure the overall success of first-year students. A survey of first-year librarians describes common themes and challenges across these positions, and can help librarians determine how to structure these jobs.

Keywords: first year students, freshmen, first year experience, collaboration, academic libraries

Introduction

Throughout library and information science literature there are numerous articles detailing academic librarians' experiences serving first-year college students (first-years). These include topics such as teaching and assessing information literacy instruction (ILI), serving as academic advisors, and helping students adjust to college life. However, there is a lack of research describing professional duties, interdepartmental collaborations, challenges, and successful initiatives undertaken by librarians employed in a dedicated first-year experience role.

A cursory Internet search for the phrase "First Year Experience Librarian" identifies many of these positions at college and university libraries. Sometimes the jobs have slightly different titles, such as "First-year Success Librarian" or "First-year Engagement Librarian." In order to help us better understand the range of roles performed by librarians in these positions, the author surveyed librarians in these positions to learn more about their goals and responsibilities.

Literature Review

The creation of the First-year Experience (FYE) librarian position at many institutions dovetails with the rise of campus initiatives designed to better support first-year students. In particular, FYE programs, usually in the form of a one-credit mandatory course, help new college students to gain skills integral to academic and social success. These skills include interpersonal behavior, time management, note-taking, and library research.[1] The development of FYE classes can be viewed as an intervention implemented to curb high attrition rates between the first and second years of college. These classes expanded dramatically in the 1990s, with over 70% of colleges and universities reporting the existence of designated first-year courses at their institutions in a major survey.[2]

Similar to FYE classes, the origin of the First-year Experience (FYE) Librarian position can be traced back to the 1990s. Bowling Green State University was an early pioneer of this position, placing a job advertisement for a FYE Librarian in 1998. The person in this outreach-centered role would be responsible for "creating programs and services that would 'recruit and retain a highly prepared first-year student population.'"[3] Since the inception of the FYE position, this role has expanded to numerous academic libraries and continues to grow. In 2017, *Library Journal* and Credo collaborated on a "First Year Experience Survey." Over 500 colleges and universities responded to the survey which explored topics including level of pre-college research preparation, information evaluation skills, and measurement of first-year student success. The survey also found that nearly one in ten (9%) of the participating academic institutions had an FYE librarian.[4]

The job duties of FYE librarians are not limited to the library. Most engage in intercampus partnerships with others responsible for educating and retaining first-years. In addition to the FYE department, these liaison roles can include summer bridge programs [high school to college transition] and first-year writing programs. For example, at Fresno State University, two librarians developed a fruitful partnership between their library and the career center.[5] Through this partnership, librarians have organized both scheduled career research workshops and drop-in clinics to assist students with locating vital career information.

FYE librarians can also play a pivotal role in determining an institution's first-year common read. The librarian can serve on committees charged with identifying an appropriate book and organize events related to the common read. Megwalu and colleagues describe their library's support for their institution's Common

Reader program.[6] Librarians are deeply involved in this program, including the selection process, creating exhibits pertaining to the book and its themes, and outreach to teaching faculty.

Some institutions have attempted to better connect with first-years by starting personal librarian programs. These programs designate specific librarians to serve specific groups of incoming students. Academic institutions with established personal librarian programs include Barnard College and Reed College.[7] In general, a personal librarian reaches out to students on their list periodically and encourages them to get in touch with library-related queries.

There are also many non-academic ways that librarians can support first-years. Libraries can organize social events for students where they can gather to relax and meet peers and librarians. Events can include a mix of free snacks, coffee, massages, and even therapy dogs. The Library Public Relations Committee at the author's workplace organizes periodic snack giveaways to students. During these events librarians sit outside of the building entrance, some wearing "Ask a Librarian" t-shirts, as a means of welcoming students and forging connections. A particularly creative event was organized by Walsh University Library, in which students were invited to paint a temporary wall built while the library was under construction.[8] The organizers hoped that not only would students enjoy the event, but also that it would help lessen library anxiety.

Librarians can also encourage students to ask for help with information queries unrelated to the library but important to college adjustment. These include directions to campus offices, locating course schedules, help understanding financial aid, and basic technology troubleshooting. Grallo, Chalmers, and Baker make a strong argument for librarians playing a key role in assisting students with these matters.[9] Librarians, in turn, can communicate popular questions to

relevant campus departments and programs. By helping to lower information barriers as much as possible librarians can, in conjunction with other departments, improve the student experience, hopefully leading to increased persistence and retention.

Materials and Methods

The author created a survey for this project using Google Forms to learn more about the professional responsibilities and collaborative activities of librarians working primarily with first-year students. In addition to asking participants to indicate their job title, institution size, and whether they are the first person to hold a first-year position at their library, the author also asked four open-ended questions:

1. Please briefly describe what you consider your three primary job responsibilities.
2. Which department(s) outside of the library do you most frequently collaborate with?
3. Please describe your most successful initiative involving serving first-year library patrons.
4. What do you consider to be the biggest challenge in serving the needs of first-year students?

Prior to conducting the study, the author secured permission from Long Island University Brooklyn's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The author recruited participants from two listservs affiliated with the American Library Association (ALA): the Information Literacy Instruction Discussion List (ILI-L) and the ACRL First-year Experience Discussion Group. People were directed to participate in the study only if they worked in a position dedicated to serving first-year college students (freshmen). Before beginning the survey, participants received a letter of consent to complete and were informed that their participation was both voluntary and anonymous. Participants were encouraged to

share the survey with other librarians in the same line of work. There were 38 participants in the study and all indicated that they work in a role primarily serving first-years at an academic library. It is important to note that participants were encouraged to give multiple responses to the questions about job responsibilities and departmental collaboration.

While all of the librarians in this sample work mainly with first-years, their job titles vary widely, with 22 different titles reported by only 38 librarians. The most frequent title is "First Year Experience Librarian" (11 participants, or 29% of the sample). The second most popular titles are "Teaching and Learning Librarian" and "Librarian for First Year Programs" (three participants each). Due to the popularity of the title, "First Year Experience (FYE) Librarian," this title is used as the default in this article. Over two-thirds of participants (68%) reported that they are the first person at their library to hold a position dedicated to serving first-years.

Results

The results of the study are divided into four sections that correspond with each of the four open-ended questions: primary job responsibilities, interdepartmental collaborations, successful initiatives, and challenges.

Primary Job Responsibilities

Overall, teaching ILI sessions for first-years was the most prevalent job duty (74%). Collaborating with departments and programs that serve first-years was the second most commonly cited primary responsibility (34%), and coordinating ILI for first-years was third (29%). Table 2 summarizes all answers to this key question.

Table 1. Primary Job Duties of First-year Experience Librarians

Duty	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Information literacy instruction (ILI) for first-year students	28	74%
Collaboration with FYS departments	13	34%
ILI coordination for first-year students	11	29%
Outreach	7	18%
Orientations/scavenger hunts	7	18%
Event planning	5	13%
Assessment	3	8%
Research consultations	3	8%
Curriculum planning and development	3	8%
Committee work	2	5%
Reference	2	5%
Training graduate assistants	1	3%
Coordinating personal librarian program	1	3%
Teaching high school students	1	3%
Teaching a one credit course	1	3%

Interdepartmental Collaborations

Participants reported collaborations with eighteen departments and programs outside of the library (see Table 3). Departments serving first-year and new students were the most frequent collaborators (53%), followed by a variety of academic disciplines (29%). All academic disciplines reported as collaborators were filed under "Academic Departments" with the exception of English and Writing, due to their nearly universal partnerships with academic libraries. Nearly half of campus partners on the list were reported by only one or two librarians, including Honors, Campus Life, and Career Services. This question is the focal point of this study.

Table 2. Campus Partners of First-year Experience Librarians

Department/Program	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
First-year Programs/New Student Experiences/Student Success	20	53%
Academic disciplines	11	29%
English Department	10	26%
Undergraduate Studies	6	16%
Writing Center	4	11%
Writing/Composition Department	4	11%
University College	3	8%
Student Affairs	3	8%
Enrollment Services/Office of Admissions	3	8%
International Education	3	8%
Tutoring Center	2	5%
Honors	2	5%
Counseling	2	5%
Career Services	2	5%
Residence/Housing	2	5%
Academic Advising	2	5%
Campus Life	2	5%
Student Government	1	3%

Successful Initiatives

The librarians in this sample shared a wide array of their most successful projects or programs involving first-years (see Table 4). Many, but not all, initiatives pertained to ILI instruction. One participant was proud that their library taught ILI sessions for 100% of the first-year class; another reinvigorated a murder mystery orientation. Several librarians combined outreach and

promotion of the library's resources with support for student recreational (film series), professional development (library essay contest), or emotional wants and needs (de-stressing activities during exam week).

Table 3. Successful Programs

Initiative
Library-sponsored essay contest
Socially Conscious Film Series for FYS
Implementing a library scavenger hunt for FYE classes
Created a standardized library assignment that can be adapted for all the sections of FYE course
Developing a transfer student info panel with New Student Services
Designated [Personal] Librarian program
Outreach programming during exam week ("de-stressing" activities and events, such as crafts, therapy pets, etc).
Taught library sessions for 100% of first-year students
Long Night Against Procrastination (provides a sense of community for new students on a commuter campus)
Outreach to Early College program
Assigning a literature review on course-related topics that correlated with campus common read
Revamped a Library Murder Mystery instruction program
Provided instruction to Education Opportunity Program students
Created a standardized library assignment that can be adapted for all the sections of FYE course
Coordinating a practicum for students needing extra research, writing, and reading assistance with a student mentor
Integrated information literacy into the General Education curriculum
Give 20-minute library tours for all incoming new students during orientation

Challenges

Librarians reported a wide variety of challenges facing their work with first-year students. The most common issue was librarian to student ratio, with nearly one quarter (21%) of respondents providing this answer. Participants felt

there were too many students and too few librarians at their workplace for the former to be provided with ideal support. The second most frequent challenge was obtaining teaching faculty buy-in in terms of scheduling IL sessions for first-years (11%). Table 5 provides the full list of challenges.

Table 4. Job-related Challenges

Challenge	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Librarian to student ratio (scale)	8	21%
Getting teaching faculty to schedule library instruction sessions (faculty buy-in)	4	11%
Lack of administrative support	3	8%
Maintaining student interest during library sessions	3	8%
Student research skill levels	3	8%
Lack of a research component in FYE classes	2	5%
Campus lacks cohesive first-year program/office	1	3%
Build on initial introduction in orientation class to develop an engaging and meaningful experience with library services for student	1	3%
Difficulty reaching adjunct faculty	1	3%
Promotion of library to students by FYE instructors	1	3%
Library session scheduled too early in student's college careers	1	3%
One-shot instruction model	1	3%

Helping all faculty and staff understand the unique needs of first-year students	1	3%
Library fatigue among students	1	3%
Encouraging students to return to library for additional help	1	3%
Library anxiety among students	1	3%
Lack of consistency in assignments across the various sections across FYE classes	1	3%
Connecting with students who primarily use the other units of the library	1	3%
Identifying how best to reach students outside of the first-year courses	1	3%
Library budget shortage	1	3%
Treatment of students by some teaching faculty	1	3%
Finding the right balance between educational events/programs and fun ones	1	3%
Staff turnover in partner department	1	3%
Assessing student learning outcomes	1	3%
Initiating contact with FYS Department	1	3%
Getting library involved in planning process	1	3%

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that there is great diversity among experiences of FYE librarians. In terms of main job responsibilities, the most common was teaching ILI sessions, with nearly three-quarters of the librarians reporting it as one of their top responsibilities. This was an unexpected finding for the author,

who informally hypothesized that all participants would be heavily involved in library instruction for first-years. Partnership with the institution's first-year experience/services/programs department was second on the list, demonstrating the extremely collaborative nature of this particular position. Over 50% of participants listed this department as their most frequent partner. A future research project could examine these relationships in depth, surveying FYE librarians and FYE departments alike to learn more about their experiences and objectives.

There are a several job responsibilities mentioned by one participant each that are worth describing, as they can all play a major role in both recruiting prospective students and supporting new college students. These duties are training graduate assistants, directing a personal librarian program, and providing ILI for high school students. Graduate assistants can be taught skills vital to assisting lower level undergraduates, such as directional and research help at the reference desk. For example, the author's library hires one or two graduate students enrolled in the university's MLIS program every semester. These students are embedded within the Reference and Instruction Department, and receive rich hands-on public services experience.

A personal librarian program can be a major help to students in acclimating and learning about the library's resources, facilities, and staff. Additionally, partnerships between college and high school libraries can play a role in not only preparing students for college-level research, but also serving as a means of encouraging high school students to attend the higher education institution in question. Angell and Tewell describe a partnership between the Sarah Lawrence College Library, a local public library, and a local high school.[10] Librarians from both libraries take turns hosting high school students, providing them with basic research instruction

and access to college-level information resources.

There were many collaborations between the library and campus departments reported, each with untapped potential to enrich the academic and social experiences of first-years. First, one librarian reported working with student government. Students involved in campus government could be excellent partners, due to both their connections with fellow students and their familiarity with organizational processes. There is not much research on intersections between libraries and student government, but one study details a successful initiative between student government members and librarians to install nap stations in a University of Michigan library to prevent sleep deprivation and promote healthy habits.[11] These two parties joined forces with a faculty member specializing in sleep research to promote the project to administrators. This broad union of campus stakeholders demonstrates the success that multiple channels of advocacy can have in creating and enhancing student support structures and programs.

Librarians can also forge meaningful relationships with residential life employees. Two participants reported working with this department, but there could be many more opportunities. For instance, librarians could partner with resident advisors (RAs) assigned to dormitories of first-years; RAs could help promote the library to new students or possibly even offer basic research assistance. Librarians could also obtain permission to set up a pop-up reference desk in the lobby of a dormitory. By working with residential life and getting to students in their dorms, FYE librarians could offer help in spaces that might feel more comfortable or secure, at least initially, to students than the library.

Interestingly, three participants indicated collaborations with the campus admissions office. This unusual but promising partnership, one in

which admissions personnel could connect new students to librarians, could ostensibly benefit both first-year and transfer students. R.B. House Undergraduate Library at UNC Chapel Hill successfully works with the campus admissions department to promote library resources and services to transfer students.[12]

Additionally, two participants listed Academic Advising as primary partners. Because academic librarians both teach students and generally hold at least one subject specialty, and often advanced degrees in a subject area, they are well-prepared to serve as academic advisors. Shannon and Inglis describe their experiences serving as advisors for twenty students enrolled in a semester-long first year inquiry course. Working in this role provided them with insight into the holistic student experience. They reflected, "We became more fully immersed in the lives of the students in our classes and gained a greater awareness of their priorities."[13]

The results section lists many fruitful projects of FYE librarians, many whose success hinges on collaboration both within and outside of the library. One innovative initiative is an assignment created by a participant asking first-years to create a literature review based upon topics pertaining to the campus common read. Writing a literature review is an important skill for students to develop early on in college. Librarians can play a supportive role by reaching out to teaching faculty to offer help in teaching students critical information literacy skills, including evaluating and applying research sources. Scholarship detailing the involvement of academic libraries within common read selection and programming is greatly needed, given the high number of colleges requiring a common read for first-years. Librarians can assist by providing instruction tailored to topics related to the chosen book, creating targeted LibGuides, and planning events with the English Department related to the author and/or the book's

themes. FYE librarians should take an active outreach role in order to ensure their inclusion in the common read planning and implementation process.

Finally, participants related an array of challenges that hindered them from providing optimal service to first-years. A challenge only mentioned by one participant but well documented within the literature is library anxiety. First-years often feel nervous about the library as place and/or about conducting college-level research. Librarians have devised several methods for assuaging this anxiety, such as organizing student volunteers to assist at library orientation events and to create library materials. Describing the advantages of employing student volunteers, Anders, Graves, and German note that, "When student volunteers are involved in outreach events, other students can see them navigating library services and spaces. By using student volunteers in this way, libraries can draw upon the wealth of benefits that come from peer-assisted learning."[14] Valparaiso University developed a comprehensive Get to Know Your Librarian Program to better support students.[15] Relatedly, the library can house a peer-learning leader program, possibly in conjunction with the campus tutoring center. Trained upper-division undergraduate and/or graduate students could provide students with basic research instruction.

There were several limitations within this study. First, it lacked focus groups or individual interviews, which would be a future means of gathering richer qualitative data, with the added bonus of interpersonal interaction that is lacking in online surveys. In addition, participants were not required to detail their response for their primary campus partnership. Specific intercampus collaborations would surely be of use to readers of this paper, as participants could attempt to replicate such partnerships at their own institution. However, the list of campus partners provided by participants in this study can serve

as a useful bridge for librarians looking to begin or expand on initiatives with departments integral to the first-year experience. This topic could easily produce a full empirical research article within itself.

The overall objective of this study was to initiate a small, but hopefully developing, body of literature for and by librarians serving first-year college students. It is clear from both the literature review and survey that there is a rich variety of partnerships dedicated to improving the educational and social student experience. However, the author would like to offer a few recommendations for future research. First, while there is evidence of assessment of ILI for first-year students, there is a lack of information on evaluation of first-year programming and events in the literature. This is important, as assessment can help identify weaknesses that can be rectified to better serve students. Additionally, evidence of favorable assessment metrics can justify requests for additional personnel or financial support from campus administrators.

Second, librarians and their partner departments should ensure that support strategies carry over into students' second year of college. Wang and Kennedy-Phillips speak of the "sophomore slump," in which some second-year students experience strife as they attempt to navigate their academic and social lives, sometimes struggling to identify their goals.[16] One specific way libraries can help is to reach out to faculty who teach classes predominantly comprised of sophomores and encourage them to bring their classes in for information literacy sessions. Alternatively, academic libraries can have at least one personal librarian dedicated to sophomores.[17]

Hopefully, this article provides a useful introduction to the FYE position for researchers and practitioners committed to learning and developing skills and ideas critical to assisting this population. In order for first-year students to be provided with the high-quality resources and support that they deserve, it is essential that a diverse group of campus stakeholders come together to identify how each can play a unique role in reaching this goal.

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