NO DONUTS, NO DOORS: BUILDING AND HOSTING A VIRTUAL OPEN HOUSE

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WALDEN UNIVERSITY

Walden University is an online university offering bachelor’s through doctoral degrees and certificates in business, health, education, and social science professions. University enrollment is currently at about 50,000 students, most of whom are at the Master’s/Doctoral levels, and so we teach a wide array of skills ranging from general information literacy up to advanced reading and analysis skills required to produce quality doctoral literature reviews.

Walden students are most often adult learners—professionals who may be seeking a career change or to advance in their current careers. Many already work full time, therefore school time is piled on top of job hours and in some cases family time too. Online programs hold strong appeal for these time-starved professionals, offering flexibility and no required commute to a campus. They also appeal to international students, living and learning in a myriad of time zones.

Serving an online university requires a fully online library. Our (virtual) building is our website which houses our databases, research collections, instructional materials, and services. Students most often come to the Library by visiting links from their Student Portal or their course rooms in Blackboard. They can interact with us by email, chat, and by phone or Skype in appointments. We have 22 Library staff, 13 of which are student-facing in their work as subject liaisons and reference librarians.

We teach doctoral students in-person at residencies and offer live webinars in each program area, but even this results in us interacting directly with less than half of Walden students. Reaching out across the student body is an ongoing goal—we’d love everyone to be introduced to the Library as early as possible in their studies. But how to do that?

During the week of September 10-14, 2018 the library hosted its first virtual open house, which took place completely online and consisted of both synchronous and asynchronous events that we discuss in more detail below.

OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS

Outreach and communication at the Walden University Library attempt to meet the same needs as they do at physical libraries. We want to promote our collections and services, we want to drive traffic to us, and we want to show our value in the university. In order to reach all of our students we need to go through our Student Communications department, which is staffed by one person. Through Student Communications we have two options to get information to students: we can send an email or have Student Communications post announcements in students’ portals. We have used both methods and they share the same problem: unlike flyers that can catch the eye, emails and announcements at the top of a web page are easily lost in virtual clutter.

While we do partner with Student Communications, we also try to get our messages out in ways that we have more control over. The Library distributes student and faculty newsletters quarterly. The student newsletter gets around 8,000-12,000 views a month while the faculty newsletter sees around 200 views when a new edition comes out and drops to 30 or less in the months in between.
Like many other libraries, we also use social media. At the time of the open house we had an established Facebook account that had been neglected for over two years and a recently-started Instagram account; the open house inspired one librarian to start a library Twitter account.

**PLANNING**

With library literature having a heavier focus on activities that can take place in physical libraries, we often find ourselves asking, “How can we modify this to work in our library?” This question is what led us to hosting a virtual open house. We wanted to find a way to achieve multiple goals: showcasing the library as a strong resource, sharing the library in a stress-free, fun, and social way, and introducing students to the real people here to help them. We also wanted to welcome potential students, in order to highlight the library as a strong asset of the university.

Library staff were asked to share ideas about the logistics of a virtual open house, but many of the ideas came from brainstorming with an IT partner and former library staff member. Some themes that came up in discussion were length of the event, activities, and marketing. With students all over the world, and a class structure that allows students to log in at any time of the day or night, there isn’t any span of time that is ideal for our students to attend an event. This ruled out an open house that would only run for a couple hours or a day long open house with events occurring throughout the day.

Deciding on open house activities was more difficult. We wanted the open house to be fun while also providing some information about the library, so events needed to encompass both of those needs. Additionally, we wanted students to have an opportunity to meet our librarians. In the past we have tried things like open office hours, or open chat time for students to drop in with any questions during that scheduled time. These events have gotten little to no attendance, so this style did not seem like a good option. To meet the needs of being fun and informative, we determined that a hybrid event would be best. Combining synchronous and asynchronous events would allow those who could not attend live events to participate and it would allow us to compare how successful the different modes of communication were.

There was some disagreement surrounding the synchronous events. Some felt that these events needed to teach something, or students wouldn’t take the time to attend. Others argued that an event that is purely for fun can offer a nice break for students and we already offer webinars that serve the purpose of teaching students library skills. Since the open house was being run as a pilot we decided to take a risk and the liaisons were tasked with coming up synchronous events that would be fun and interactive. The only other requirement they were given was that each liaison was required to participate since the idea was to allow students to interact with each of them in some way.

The goal of the asynchronous events was to showcase the library by highlighting resources and services that students may need most frequently. We wanted the asynchronous events to also act as a possible fun break. We eliminated activities that may hold no meaning for our international students or cause possible offense such as “hangman.” We also eliminated events that would require time of our limited IT staff to create, such as bingo, and ultimately settled on the trusty library scavenger hunt. We decided to also add “Easter eggs” on the site as a second activity intended to encourage students to explore the library website.

Finally, to draw in more attendees we offered prizes attached to certain events. We had twelve small prizes of Walden branded USB drives and a grand prize of an ad-free Kindle.

**DESIGN**

The scavenger hunt was built in LibWizard and consisted of ten required questions designed to lead students to specific places on the website such as their subject research homes or specific subject guides. There was a final optional question of “What is at least one thing (resource, tool, fact, etc.) that you discovered during this scavenger hunt that you think will be useful to you?” that was included to gather some qualitative assessment of the activity.

Multiple library staff did not understand what “Easter eggs” were, so to make the activity clearer and to avoid privileging any holiday, this wording was changed to “treasure hunt.” The treasure hunt was designed to be either a stand-alone activity or to work with the scavenger hunt. Thirteen treasures were hidden throughout the library website as images or links that were clearly not library related.
Michelle Hajder: Director of Library Services

Michelle earned her Master of Library and Information Science degree in sunny Seattle, Washington; however, she fled back home to Minneapolis when she realized there wasn’t nearly enough snow in Puget Sound. She joined the Walden Library in 2007 and has been nerding out about online learning and information literacy ever since. In her free time she enjoys bird watching, distance running, road trips, and ghost stories.

Sir Sheboygan Peppercorn: Manager of Shenanigans and Hijinks

Sir Peppercorn joined the Walden Library to fill a much-needed void in the areas of shenanigans and hijinks. He got his degree in tomfoolery at Forest Canopy University. Sir Peppercorn lives with his parents, siblings, cousins, and aunts and uncles in Embarrass, Minnesota. In his spare time, Sir Peppercorn enjoys researching his family tree and is working on becoming a certified chocolate taster.

Find an exact article

To find an exact article by article title, search Thoreau Multi-Database Search:

Search articles, books, and more by title

Peer Reviewed Scholarly Journals only

Thoreau searches most of the Library’s collection, but not the entire collection. Learn more about Thoreau:

- Guide: Thoreau Search multiple databases

Hungry? Have a cookie!
While each liaison was asked to deliver a synchronous session, a few partnered with other liaisons resulting in not all liaisons presenting. The synchronous events were offered at various days and times during the week to give more options for people to attend.

**Execution**

To communicate about the open house, we used our student and faculty newsletters, social media, the library website, and student communications to share a link to an open house webpage that was created for the event. We approached our Enrollment Advising department to request that advisors add a link for the open house webpage to their email interactions with potential students, but they directed us to the Marketing department. We worked with the Marketing department on the wording and timing of messaging. Two weeks prior to the open house, the library put an announcement on the website notifying visitors that our first open house was approaching. One week before the open house Marketing sent out an email to all students, staff, and faculty and posted to Walden’s social media. We did not get buy-in from Enrollment Advising, so students who had contacted Walden to inquire about our degree programs were not notified of the event.

The open house ran from Monday, September 10th to Friday, September 14th, 2018. Synchronous events included:

- “Library Trivia Game” - an interactive quiz game
- “Stump the Librarian”, participants attempted to stump our librarians with their questions
- “One of These Things is not Like the Other” - participants tried to identify fake resources
- “Talkin’ Traveling Trivia with Taylor” - participants viewed a short video clip to try to identify where it was filmed then they were asked trivia questions about the location

Delivery was left up to each librarian; events were hosted in GoToWebinar, GoToMeeting, and Zoom. The possibility to win the Kindle was attached to multiple activities. For each hidden treasure found, students would be entered into the drawing. USB drives were given to the first twelve people to find hidden treasures. Each student who completed and correct scavenger hunt and winners of the Library Trivia and Traveling Trivia games were also entered into the drawing. The number of times an individual could be entered to win the Kindle was capped at eight.

On the second day the hidden treasure entries were reviewed and the twelve winners of the USB drives were contacted. At the end of the week all entries for the hidden treasure and scavenger hunts were pulled and anything submitted outside the date of the official open house were removed. The answers for the scavenger hunt were reviewed and any that were incorrect were removed. All eligible candidates for the Kindle drawing were entered in an Excel spreadsheet and sorted by name so that multiple entries could be pared down to eight. All eligible names were then entered on a randomizing website, so a random name could be picked for the final prize of the Kindle. All prizes were mailed from Walden’s main office.

**Assessment**

Since we can’t use gate count, we used click traffic as our measure for impact. Here is a sample of the various activities:

**Open House traffic**: Showing clicks on the Open House homepage from the date that marketing initially went out, and through the event itself.
Fabulous Feathered Friends: Hidden treasure link added to a list of navigation items on our Research help page; this saw an 830% increase in traffic over the same time frame in 2017.

Sir Sheboygan Peppercorn: This new staff member was a hidden treasure designed to drive traffic to our staff page. Finding him led to a 459% increase in traffic.

Unicorns: Another hidden treasure link added to our webinars listings, which brought 64% more traffic to that page.
Cookies: This hidden treasure was a graphic added to our citation search page. Interestingly, this page saw a decrease in traffic—likely due to the availability of a new search box on the homepage.

Fake News: A scavenger hunt question drove traffic to the Fake News guide. This also saw a very small decrease. In 2017, we did a publicity campaign for this new guide when it was released, and so a decrease in hits may not be unexpected.

Synchronous Events: For the various webinar events, regardless of their time slots and content, there were never more than ten attendees.

Lessons Learned

While many librarians moan when library scavenger hunts come up, this activity worked very well in the online environment. Since it was available during the whole week, it gave our students time to work through it as their schedules allowed
and got very positive feedback such as, “Yay, and I thought the virtual scavenger hunt was a really cool idea!” “Awesome, that was a fun scavenger hunt!”, and, “I've been sitting here laughing at my desk for several minutes because I found your newest staff member, Sir Peppercorn. Brilliant - and such a refreshing break in my day on this dreary Wednesday morning. :)” With a couple exceptions noted in the previous section, this activity did drive traffic to specific places on our website. Individual hidden treasures were clicked between five and 44 times, which does not show a clear connection of the scavenger hunt helping drive people to the treasures.

The synchronous events we held at specific, limited times, were not as successful. Since many of our webinars, which are also held at specific and limited times, are well attended we assume that our students did not attend the open house events because there was not a specific skill or benefit they could take away from them. Since we did not offer both fun and educational synchronous events it isn’t clear whether events with a clear take away would have seen better attendance.

Prizes, for the most part, went smoothly. Wording surrounding prizes is important and must be clear. Any event that mentioned prizes and the drawing contained fine print as seen in Appendix A. Despite attempts to be very clear about prizes and the drawing, there was still one person who won a USB drive who misunderstood and thought they won the Kindle. Adding wording to the emails stating that they will be entered in the drawing could help avoid this. One USB drive package was mis-addressed and had to be mailed again, and one was lost and eventually an Amazon gift card was purchased in its place. The cost of shipping, while small, had been overlooked.

The Walden Library will be running a virtual open house again during a week in September 2019. Notable changes that will be made are the elimination of synchronous events. We will likely keep the scavenger hunt since people enjoyed it and it clearly brought traffic to our site. To highlight the liaisons, we may include very short videos as part of the scavenger hunt. While the hidden treasures were fun, it was not clear if this event brought more traffic to our site. If hidden treasures are used in 2019, the number will be reduced. Finally, prizes will be emailable gift cards to reduce the possibility of being lost and to eliminate shipping fees.
APPENDIX A

Scavenger Hunt Questions

Welcome to the Walden Library Open House Scavenger Hunt!

This is designed to guide you through a self-paced exploration of the Walden University Library.

As you explore the website keep an eye out for treasures (images or links that are clearly not related to the Library)! When you find a treasure, you can win one of 12 small prizes* and be entered into a drawing for a Kindle**.

Correctly completing and submitting the scavenger hunt will also enter you in the Kindle drawing.

*The first 12 people to find a treasure will win a prize, limit one prize per person. Hidden treasures entries will continue to be accepted after all prizes have been awarded and will be entered into the grand prize Kindle** drawing. Limit to eight entries per person.

**There will be a drawing for the grand prize of a Kindle. One Kindle drawing entry per person for each event or activity completed, limit to eight entries per person.

1. Find course guide “PPPA 8830 Current Issues in Homeland Security” What is the last reading in the Required Course Readings?

2. What are the four ways you can ask a librarian a question?

3. What is the name of the library director?

4. Find the webinar, “Evidence Based Practice for NURS 6052”. What date was it recorded?

5. What are the three ways you can find an exact article?

6. What is the maximum number of Document Delivery Service (DDS) articles or book chapters a person can receive?

7. Go to the Human Services subject area, what is the third database listed under Human Service Databases?

8. Find the library skills guide titled “Fact v. Fiction – Fake News”. What are the four types of fake news?

9. Is the Library open on Martin Luther King Jr. Day?

10. Go to the Library’s Twitter feed. What is the animal that was tweeted today?

11. What is at least one thing (resource, tool, fact, etc.) that you discovered during this scavenger hunt that you think will be useful to you?

12. Name

13. Email address