

CREATIVITY & PERSONALIZATION: FRESHMAN ORIENTATION FOR THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

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INTRODUCTION

The Millennial Generation presents new challenges for today's librarians. Born between 1982 and 2002, this is the largest generation in U.S. history and will be entering college in record numbers over the next ten years. Library literature identifies the Millennials as a specific user group with distinguishing characteristics; they are self-assured, optimistic, well-educated, collaborative, and open-minded. They rely on friendships, and can share their opinions instantaneously with a vast social network via new technologies. Millennials expect customization in their learning environments and have high expectations for today's academic libraries.

Freshman orientation is the first impression of the academic library for most of these students. It is often viewed by staff as a "make it or break it" moment, especially in schools where there is no formal information literacy program. To better understand library freshman orientations at liberal arts colleges, we conducted a study of library orientation programs at Oberlin Group colleges.

In 2005, Swarthmore College developed a winning freshman orientation program-- the most successful orientation to date-- that meets the learning preferences of this generation by incorporating technology, structure and leadership by library staff, fun, silliness, experiential activities, exposure to positive people, personal interactions, and rewards. In this paper we discuss our process of goal-setting, program development, and assessment for freshman orientation, and conclude with best practices for developing dynamic freshman orientation programs that provide Millennials with a positive first impression of the academic library.

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THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION: WHO ARE THEY?

Millennials now make up the bulk of undergraduate students in liberal arts colleges; in 2002, 6.9 million Millennials were enrolled in college, and by 2012, they are expected to increase to 13.3 million (Coomes & DeBard, 12). For librarians, understanding Millennials' characteristics and learning styles is crucial in order to provide effective service and learning opportunities for this new generation of college library users.

As a group, Millennials have characteristics that distinguish them from previous generations (see DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000; DiGilio, Lynn-Nelson, & Reis, 2004; Gardner & Eng, 2005). Millennials are pragmatic, achievement-oriented, and hardworking. They are self-assured and optimistic about their futures. They are highly collaborative and team-oriented, as opposed to the "loner" stereotype of Generation X. They are respectful of others' ideas, both adults and their peers, and they expect their ideas to be welcomed and valued. The most ethnically diverse generation, they are open-minded and socially-conscious.

This generation makes a strong departure from earlier generations in their communication and technology skills. Millennials are constantly using new modes of communication including blogs, My Space, cell phones, and text messaging. They expect the ability to customize their technological environments, from creating iPod play lists, to designing their own web pages, to choosing their ring tones.

Millennials are engaged, ambitious students with distinct learning styles (for literature on Millennials learning styles, see DiGilio, Lynn-Nelson, & Reis, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Manuel, 2002; Weiler, 2005). As visual learners, Millennials are image oriented rather than text oriented. With a low threshold for boredom or memorization, they need interactive, customized learning experiences that are practical and fun. They welcome active learning opportunities, such as kinesthetic and hands-on experiences.

LIBRARY ORIENTATION FOR THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

To address the needs of our changing student profile, Swarthmore College Library has experimented with library freshman orientation over the past few years. Without a formalized information literacy program, orientation is the one time all incoming students are a captive audience. Last year we struck upon a winning formula: clearly defined goals, staff guided tours, emphasis on personalization, and activities that play to Millennial learning styles. The use of a simple assessment tool indicated that our orientation was a success.

Over the summer, the library orientation coordinator collaborated with the student orientation committee and library staff to determine what the freshman should learn from the library's orientation. Students highlighted "how to get help," the reference librarians, and the reference desk as the most important things for freshman to learn, while librarians said using reserves and the library OPAC were most important. With this input, the library orientation committee decided to focus on the following clear, achievable goals to inform our orientation activities.

Goal 1: Show the personal face of the library

We wanted students to have a positive, warm, friendly first impression of the library. We decided that a staff-guided tour was the best way to introduce students to our friendly staff. Although we provided a general script, we encouraged staff to let their personalities show during the tour. For example, we encouraged them to share "library lore" or to talk about their favorite part of the library.

Goal 2: "We're here to help!"

Rather than overwhelm students with vast amounts of information, we decided to focus on how to get help, so that when they do have an information need, they'll know how to ask. Tour guides took students to the reference desk and lead a discussion of the role of a reference librarian. We handed out bookmarks with images of people helping each other, examples of questions students can ask at the reference desk, contact information, and the slogan "We're here to help!"

Goal 3: Location, location, location

We wanted students to get an idea of library locations, from different libraries on campus to finding a book in the stacks. We hung a giant, full-color map of campus in the lobby and labeled our multiple libraries; it was such a hit, we left it up and campus tours have started pointing it out! We organized an exhibit in the main lobby of the library, in which each branch library created its own display. We included the library's computer classroom as a tour stop, where we demonstrated how to find a book in Tripod (our OPAC), how to read a Library of Congress call number, and then we went to find the book in the stacks. We visited the Reserves desk, Reference desk, and DVD and video collection, an all important location for students.

Goal 4: Make it interactive and fun

To connect with Millennial students, we wanted to provide an interactive, fun learning environment. We encouraged student group leaders to share their experiences about the library. We chose quirky and fun reference books from the collection and passed them around when we visited the Reference Desk. In the computer classroom, we drew a silly quiz on the board called "What is Tripod?" with three choices; a picture of a camera on a tripod, "The name of our combined library catalog," and a picture of a three-legged alien. Before demonstrating a search in Tripod, we asked the students take the quiz.

We used a raffle for five iPod shuffles as an incentive to complete the tour as well as a way to assess what the students learned and get attendance statistics. At the end of the tour, we asked students to fill out a raffle ticket with their name, email, and the answer to the question, "What is the most important thing you learned about the library today?" We had the highest ever attendance, with a total of 392 raffle tickets completed out of a class of 386 (we let student group leaders complete raffles as well). All but one student indicated what they learned. Common answers included how to use Tripod, knowledge of the reference desk and reference librarians, where to ask for help, the Library of Congress classification system, and that librarians are friendly and helpful.

OBERLIN GROUP COLLEGES: WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL ORIENTATION?

To assess best practices for library orientations in other institutions, we surveyed instruction librarians at our 75 peer institutions in the Oberlin Group, an association of the liberal arts college libraries in the U.S. We used Survey Monkey [www.surveymonkey.com] to create a 22-question online survey. The response rate was 58%. Approximately half of the respondents said they do not conduct a freshman library orientation, although the vast majority of libraries surveyed have an information literacy program of some kind. Of those with an orientation program, four rated their orientation programs as "very successful." The common factors among these programs included the following.

- They described themselves as "revisionist" in their orientation planning, taking into account last year's success and failures and making adjustments to their program.
- The library orientation was mandatory.
- They coordinated with campus groups such as the college's orientation planning committee, the First Year Program directors, and student groups.
- Many types of staff were involved in the orientations including public services staff, technical services staff, support staff, special collections staff, and students.
- They had clear, attainable goals (see Table 1).
- They used multiple assessment tools to evaluate success including attendance statistics, student evaluations, anecdotal evidence, and staff responses to the program.

Table 1

Goal Statements of Oberlin College Libraries with “Very Successful” Orientations
Have fun, meet some new people, and learn a little about the library.
Spend a fun hour meeting our staff, enjoying delicious refreshments, and learning your way around the IS sites on campus.
Introduce the first-years to the building, the people, and let them have fun.
Introduce all First Year students to the physical space, to show the library homepage and catalog access, and teach how to locate a book with LC classification.

BEST PRACTICES FOR LIBRARY FRESHMAN ORIENTATIONS

Based on our understanding of Millennials, our own experiences here at Swarthmore, and our research into Oberlin College library freshman orientations, we’ve identified the following best practices for developing a successful freshman orientation.

Plan Ahead

- Get in touch with the campus orientation committee over the summer to coordinate times and possible themes.
- Ask staff and students what they think are the most important things freshman should learn.
- Request funding from campus orientation committee.
- Work to make the library orientation a mandatory part of the freshman experience.
- Contact student group leaders right before the orientation. Let them know what you’re planning and encourage them to participate by sharing their experiences during the tour.

Get Staff Involved

- Invite all types of library staff to participate - not just public services. The more staff you have on board, the easier it will be to pull off a successful orientation.
- Clearly communicate your goals to staff.
- Have a dress rehearsal with staff beforehand, and encourage questions and feedback.
- If you do a library tour, create a script, but encourage staff to personalize it.
- Hold a debriefing with staff afterwards to get their feedback, observations, and suggestions for future orientations.
- Communicate your success to staff; for example, an email with highlights of the nice things the students said about the experience.
- Thank everyone involved; they’ll be more likely to help out next year!

Set Clear Goals

- Don’t try to cover everything. Identify what they have to know now, and focus on that.
- Get input from students and staff when setting goals.
- Communicate your goals to the orientation committee and any faculty, students, and staff that are involved.

Address Millennial Learning Styles

- Personalize the tour by telling them your name and something about yourself.
- Smile! Be welcoming. Make eye contact. Be positive.
- Create opportunities for visual learning, such as illustrations, displays, and exhibits.
- Create opportunities for kinesthetic learning, such as passing around reference books, asking students to find and pull a book from the shelves, and inviting students to check out the materials that they find.
- When teaching the catalog, don’t use a canned search. Instead, make it interactive and ask “What’s your favorite novel?” If you don’t have that novel in the catalog, show them interlibrary loan. Explain what you’re doing and seeing as you navigate the catalog.
- Ask students for feedback and encourage questions during the tour. Be receptive and open to their questions.

Evaluate Your Program

- Use multiple assessment tools such as attendance statistics, staff evaluations, student feedback, and focus groups.
- If you have a raffle, why not get some feedback at the same time? Combine your raffle ticket with a simple question like, “What did you learn about the library today?”
- Contact student group leaders after the orientation to get their feedback.

CONCLUSION

We will be seeing Millennials in the library through the year 2020. Although we can't predict exactly how our users will evolve, we can prepare ourselves by being flexible, keeping an open mind, and embracing this new generation. By thinking about and working with Millennial preferences and learning styles, we can forge lasting relationships between students and the library, and have a little fun along the way.

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