

VANDERBILT VISIONS: AN EXERCISE IN COLLABORATION

MELINDA BROWN, LEE ANN LANNOM AND AMY STEWART-MAILHIOT

INTRODUCTION

Five months before the Fall 2007 semester, the Committee on Undergraduate Information Literacy (CUIL) and Vanderbilt Libraries were notified their proposal to present one of the weekly sessions for Vanderbilt Visions, the university's first-year orientation program, was accepted. Through a collaborative effort, over 30 staff from five libraries, the Center for Teaching, the Writing Studio, and the Learning Resource Center worked together to design and present a session that focused on intellectual engagement at Vanderbilt and explored the differences between college and high school research. This was the first opportunity for the Libraries to work with our campus partners on such a large-scale project.

Key challenges that the planning and development group faced included:

- Developing a multi-media program that would meet cross-disciplinary needs for students enrolled in four undergraduate schools
- Ensuring that the diversity of the Vanderbilt community was reflected in the presentation
- Determining the best way to present this session to 1,700 students utilizing available staff resources
- Introducing staff with differing levels of technical expertise to new technologies

Brown (Acting Head of Reference & Instruction Coordinator Women's & Gender Studies Librarian), *Lannom* (Librarian & Collections Team Leader) and *Stewart-Mailhiot* (Sociology & Psychology Librarian)
Vanderbilt University [Nashville, TN]

- Asking staff to take on a new, large-scale project scheduled for the 3rd week of fall semester - a time that is traditionally very busy

This paper will focus on how these challenges were met, what was learned from working with campus partners, what would be done differently next time, and the unexpected benefits of the experience.

BACKGROUND

Vanderbilt is a private research university with 11,000 students. There are four colleges with undergraduate programs – the College of Arts & Science, Blair School of Music, Peabody College of Education and Human and the School of Engineering. Four libraries on campus serve these colleges.

Vanderbilt Visions is a semester long orientation program for first-year students to assist them as they “confront the social, academic, cognitive, and cultural transitions of leaving high school and entering the complex environment of a private research university” (Vanderbilt University, 2008, ¶ 1). The incoming class of 2011 was made up of 1,700 first-year students. Students were assigned to one of 100 Visions groups made up of a mix of students from all four schools. Each group was facilitated by one faculty member and one upperclass undergraduate peer mentor (these facilitation leaders are called VUceptors), and met weekly for one hour sessions.

THE PROCESS

When the Vanderbilt Visions Advisory Board conducted follow-up sessions with students who attended the 2006 Visions program, they were surprised to hear students ask for an introduction to library resources. Since one of CUIL's members was also a member of the Vanderbilt Visions Advisory Board, CUIL was made aware of this opportunity and submitted a

proposal for a library oriented Visions presentation.

While some first-year level classes at Vanderbilt include a library component, none of the colleges at Vanderbilt have a required entry-level composition course which normally provides a basic introduction to library resources. Therefore, librarians saw a Visions presentation as an opportunity to give all students a consistent base-line introduction to the Library that could be built upon in later instruction sessions.

CUIL proposed introducing first-year students to the virtual and physical services and resources of the Library System and to the differences between high school and college level research through a multimedia, interactive presentation. Because the Library did not have the staff needed to meet with each of the groups individually, meeting with several groups at a time in large lecture halls was proposed.

After much discussion about whether or not a campus partner could be allotted one full Visions session, the Advisory Board accepted the proposal. The Visions presentation was scheduled for the third week in Vanderbilt's Fall 2007 semester. This was the first time that the Vanderbilt Visions Advisory Board had worked with any campus partner. Since they were reworking their previous curriculum, no lesson plan or other model was available to follow.

The CUIL Coordinator, a librarian, took on the role of Project Coordinator for the development and implementation of this Vanderbilt Visions presentation. Participation by CUIL members from the Writing Studio and the Center for Teaching was expected from the beginning. There were three components that needed to be developed – an entry in the Vanderbilt Visions Reader, video interviews, and the presentation itself.

DEVELOPMENT OF VISIONS READER ENTRY

The libraries were invited to contribute to the Visions Reader, which is a collection of essays about college life at Vanderbilt, given to all first-year students. Most of the entries were first-person essays, but this did not seem to fit for the libraries. It was decided to survey current students to see what they thought first-year students should know about the library. An advertisement was posted in Facebook asking for participation in the library survey and student assistants from the library were also asked to participate. All respondents were entered in a drawing for a \$25 gift card to a local merchant. As part of the survey, respondents were asked for permission to use their comments.

The survey asked, "If you could go back and tell your 'starting college' self the top 10 most helpful things to know about the library, what would you include?" After analyzing the 51 responses, CUIL presented a top 10 list as the library's contribution to the handbook.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE VIDEO CLIPS

The proposal for the Visions presentation included

video clips of interviews with undergraduates, graduates and faculty. The video production group sought out interviewees from each of the four undergraduate colleges and from a variety of cultural backgrounds, to reflect the diverse population of Vanderbilt. Because the videotaping of the interviews did not begin until June, this late date in the academic year impacted the number of available interviewees.

Production began with the development of interview questions. The CUIL group developed questions surrounding the research process, tools and advice for first-year students. The Library liaison from the Center for Teaching conducted the interviews, allowing for the perspective from a library user, not a librarian. Through the early summer months, the Project Coordinator watched three hours of video interviews to select the best clips for the Visions presentation.

With the best interviews selected to coordinate with the instructional session, it was time to put the clips into a format compatible with PowerPoint. The video editor began with the rough version of the video interviews and Camtasia software to create video clips to embed in the PowerPoint presentation. The Camtasia clips proved to be massive and not the best quality. After researching campus facilities, the video editor discovered the Learning Resources Center had a film editing lab. The video editor produced final versions of the four video clips using Final Cut Pro software on a Mac computer and then rendered each of the two to ten minute clips into QuickTime movies.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LESSON PLAN

While the video was in production phase, a planning group began to craft the lesson plan for the Visions presentation. This planning group began by discussing and deciding what the students should know when the presentation was over; what was realistic to teach in the 45 minute presentation to groups of 100 or more students; and how to meet the needs and interests of students from four different colleges. With the list of interview questions used for the video and a plan of what to cover in the presentation, a first draft was created.

With a draft of the presentation, the group began to work in earnest on the details – interactive learning points, where video clips would be placed, demos of databases and scripting the entire Visions presentation. Finding images that reflected diverse individuals to use in the slideshow proved to be more difficult than was expected.

This planning group consisted of two librarians from the Central Library, one from the Peabody Library and one Writing Studio staff member. With varying experiences of working with students, each member of this small group brought their own perspective to the process. The many hours the group met, designed, rehearsed, and finally finished the lesson plan proved to be a gratifying experience. The Writing Studio staff member provided the all-important "outside of the library" thought process that librarians sometimes forget.

Scripting the Visions presentation was a painstaking task. Individually, each of the librarians might not have spent so much time on a script, but the group was attempting to write a script that many other librarians could take and adapt for themselves. The intent was to ensure all first-year students had a shared experience. Instructors were not required to use the script verbatim, which allowed each individual to put their own personality into the presentation.

As the presentation script and PowerPoint slide show was coming together, this group began creating a “fun facts” slide show to play as first-year students entered the lecture halls. The slide show highlighted facts about the Vanderbilt Library System, fun and necessary things to know, and it also served the purpose as facts for the clicker questions during the presentation.

STAFF TRAINING

In late August, sessions were set up to train librarians and other library staff who would be conducting the Visions presentation. To train library staff, members from the planning group “taught” the Visions presentation to the library instructors. At the end of each training session, the “class” discussed the presentation, clarified points and made suggestions for tweaking the presentation or PowerPoint slides. Recent library school graduates were more proficient with technology like PowerPoint and videos. They stepped forward to assist the other instructors and share their expertise.

Because the lecture halls reserved for the Visions presentations were unfamiliar territory to library staff, a field trip to view the rooms and experiment with the lighting and other technology was scheduled. The Library System purchased the TurningPoint clicker system for the Visions presentations as well as other future library instructional sessions. The clicker system was a new technology component for library staff. Therefore, separate training sessions were set up for library staff to experiment with and learn how to use the clicker system.

SHOWTIME

The Visions week arrived and 29 Library staff were poised to conduct 20 presentations to Visions groups with a total of 96–114 people. The Government Information/Media Services area in the Central Library was set up as a staging area for the pickup of handouts, laptops and clickers. Three staff members in addition to the Project Coordinator were designated as technical assistants. They were available, in addition to staff from the Learning Resource Center, to troubleshoot when things were not going smoothly. This was a good decision since it turned out that additional help was often needed to make sure the handouts and clickers were distributed in the rooms.

Student response during the program was mixed. In some sessions, they seemed engaged in the process. In others

they talked noisily amongst themselves or used cell phones and computers for texting; this seemed to occur more in the sessions held later in the evening. There was limited policing of student behavior by the VUceptors for the groups, and in some cases, it appeared that the faculty VUceptor was not in attendance. In most sessions at least one Visions group was absent.

DEBRIEFING

As with any project, there was a need for the library participants to come together to evaluate the experience. To meet this need, the Project Coordinator scheduled three debriefing sessions to allow everyone an opportunity to take part. The sessions were structured around a set of eight questions related to different aspects of the experience – ranging from technical and lighting issues to the overall audience response.

The Visions presenters had a wide range of experiences with the project, but the overall opinion of the participants was positive. Primary areas of concern or frustration focused on a lack of assistance from the VUceptors, difficulty mastering the new clicker technology, and other technical difficulties related to the rooms.

On a positive note, many librarians reported that they wish they had conducted more than one presentation. This was in contrast to the initial difficulty the Project Coordinator had getting to volunteers to conduct more than one presentation. This change in opinion can likely be attributed to the amount of time the presenters spent training and preparing and a sense that conducting more presentations would have been a larger return on their investment.

UNEXPECTED BENEFITS

Pulling together staff from five libraries and the Office of the University Librarian to work on a project of this size had two unexpected benefits. First, the multimedia nature of the presentation allowed the development team to tap the unique talents of library staff members. It was discovered that there were three staff with radio announcing background and a graphic artist interested in film editing.

Second, perhaps the most important benefit was the emergence of a broader sense of collaboration across the Library system. Just as the Vanderbilt Visions program was designed as a community building exercise providing a shared experience for first-year students, the Visions presentation pulled many library staff members together and provided an opportunity for librarians to work with colleagues across campus. A number of participants have commented that they are more likely to take part in system-wide projects after Visions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into consideration the feedback and suggestions of both library presenters and Vanderbilt Visions staff, the

following are recommendations for other libraries interested in conducting a similar library session.

- If you are invited to participate in a program conducted by another campus department, ask about your level of autonomy up front. This will help to determine how regularly you need to check in for feedback on the status of the project.
- Involve students in all stages of the process, from development to implementation. This feedback will help ensure that the final project meets the needs of the students, not just the librarians.
- Invite faculty and campus partners like the Writing Center and Center for Teaching to serve as advisors or team members to provide a unique perspective in the development of the program.
- Consider your technology needs early in the process. Conduct a survey of campus services to determine which resources or expertise can be utilized.
- Explore the hidden talents of your coworkers. What untapped skills might they contribute to the project?
- Determine which task/components of the project you could outsource. This may take the form of contracting with a professional film company or working with the Film Studies department to use student assistants.
- Extend the invitation to participate to everyone in your library, from student workers to library administration.

REFERENCES

Vanderbilt University. (2008). Vanderbilt Visions. Retrieved April 25, 2008, from <http://commons.vanderbilt.edu/visions/>