

The Live-In Librarian

Developing Library Outreach to University Residence Halls

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Because of the proliferation of remote resources that allow users to complete research without visiting a library in person, many academic librarians have responded with outreach initiatives that extend library services to a variety of campus locations. Residence halls, however, have received little attention as an outreach venue despite the fact that most universities stress the importance of housing's educational mission. In the three years that University of Oklahoma librarian Karen Antell lived as Faculty-in-Residence, she developed extensive library and educational programming for the students in her residence hall. These experiences formed the basis of a successful continuing outreach program to students in university housing even after Antell was no longer living in the dormitory. This article describes these programs and places them in the context of other institutions' outreach efforts, identifying factors necessary for successful library outreach to residence halls.

Many University of Oklahoma (OU) freshmen and their parents are surprised on move-in day to find tricycles, toys, minivans, pets, and other accoutrements of family life in and around their residence halls. They don't expect to be welcomed to their new neighborhood by a faculty family, let

alone one who actually lives in the dormitory. Many parents are relieved to learn that the building houses some "grown-ups." (Some students are a bit less sanguine, suspicious of a potential encroachment on their territory.)

What's going on here? It's the OU Faculty-in-Residence (FIR) program, which is guided by the university's commitment to supporting a sense of family and community in the residence halls and to promoting lasting intergenerational friendships. To these ends, the housing department places one volunteer faculty family in each of the campus's six housing centers. They reside in spacious apartments, take many of their meals in the student cafeteria, and spend about three years living as neighbors to hundreds of students. In exchange for housing and meals, the FIRs assume two goals: (1) to bring some of the campus's intellectual life into the dormitories, and (2) to help foster a greater sense of community between students and faculty.

OU librarian Karen Antell and her spouse, Associate Professor of Philosophy Wayne Riggs, served as FIRs from 2002 to 2005, along with their two children, who were six and nine years old when the family began its stint in residence. As a new academic librarian with a strong interest in outreach, An-

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tell was eager to incorporate library programming into her FIR responsibilities.

As it turned out, 2002 was a fortuitous time for her to undertake this project, as it coincided with the burgeoning of online library resources that began to reduce the number of visits college students must pay their campus libraries in person. At many colleges and universities, academic librarians have responded to that trend with increased outreach efforts intended to connect with students outside the library building. Librarians have created outposts in student unions and classroom buildings, established themselves in online classes and social networking sites, and offered reference via instant messaging and instruction by podcast. In familiar parlance, these librarians are reaching out to students “where they live” (a phrase that has been in use since the 1960s).¹ However, few academic libraries appear to be providing services where students *actually* live—in the residence halls.

Yet at many colleges and universities the residence halls are an ideal venue for library outreach, as they typically allow one to encounter large numbers of students in comfortable spaces designed for collaborative learning. Unlike most other campus spaces, they also come equipped with a potential partner for academic programming of all sorts: the housing staff. Many modern housing departments emphasize the living environment’s role in ensuring that students thrive academically, believing that beyond simply quartering students, residence halls contribute actively to creating successful college experiences. This commitment to creating a living environment that complements academic pursuits inclines many to be enthusiastic partners for librarians who hope to extend services into their demesne.

During her FIR stint, Antell had an opportunity not available to many librarians—not only to become acquainted with hundreds of undergraduate students in an informal environment, but also to organize a variety of library outreach programs in this underutilized venue. She experimented with a number of scholarly programs for her student neighbors, ranging from fiction discussion groups to library orientations for new residents. Her experience as a “live-in librarian” informed her work later when, in 2006, she accepted a new position as head of reference and outreach services and included the residence halls among outreach targets. Using the framework of her experience with residence hall outreach, this article outlines the important considerations in planning a successful residence hall outreach initiative and offers suggestions for librarians interested in expanding

their outreach horizons to include the relatively uncharted territory of the undergraduate dormitory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Outreach” is an encompassing term referring to any of a great variety of library initiatives, be they virtual or physical, occasional or ongoing.² Westbrook and Waldman define it succinctly as “services designed to reach patrons outside of the library—wherever they are accessing, evaluating, or manipulating information.”³ At academic libraries, that is often taken to mean extending services beyond the university community; however, it also includes targeted efforts to encourage greater library use by students and faculty.⁴ In recent literature, the particular version of academic outreach that has garnered most attention is arguably the simplest: taking librarians out of the library.

Academic Library Services Outside Libraries

Academic outreach librarians have established a presence in academic departments, student unions, computer labs, clinics, and residence halls, bringing the library to patrons wherever they are conducting their academic work. The University of Central Florida Librarians on Location project encapsulates the impetus for establishing outposts that many librarians express: “By having librarians go out into the campus and meet students on their own turf, we are seeking to proactively meet the information needs of the campus, increase our visibility to faculty, address the different information-seeking styles of the digital generation as well as decrease student anxiety about the library.”⁵

In 2004, an Association of Research Libraries SPEC Kit reported that forty-one member libraries (of the seventy-five that responded to the survey) “have offered or are offering scheduled, in-person services in academic departments or other institutional spaces outside of the library,” generally including reference and consultation services as a major focus.⁶ Rudin’s 2008 article provides a thorough overview of the current literature on “the embedded librarian, liaison librarian, blended librarian, outreach librarian, diffuse librarian, disembodied librarian, librarians without walls, and librarians on location,” all the incarnations that she charmingly dubs “the troubadour approach to reference.”⁷ Without unnecessarily duplicating her work with a complete survey of the current state of outreach efforts, it is relevant to discuss briefly the benefits of outreach-by-outpost and the consid-

erations necessary to ensuring a service's success.

Benefits of Outreach

Librarians cite “increased visibility for library staff and the libraries,” “user convenience,” and “relationship building” as the major benefits of well-conducted satellite services.⁸ Some judged their outreach initiatives successful if they attracted a satisfactory number or type of questions: a University of Buffalo outreach service to academic departments, for example, was considered a success in part because it generated a “number of quality interactions [that] usually matched a ‘good’ shift at the reference desk,” while Simon Fraser University librarians were pleased that most questions received at outreach locations “involved true reference.”⁹

However, many of the benefits are less easily quantified. Many outreach advocates note that their efforts created goodwill among users, increased the library's visibility, and built positive relationships.¹⁰ Indeed, some librarians even considered those intangible benefits so valuable that they outweighed somewhat disappointing reference statistics.¹¹ Moreover, librarians champion outpost services as allowing for serendipitous or chance encounters in a way that traditional services do not. As Wagner observed, “many of the questions and interactions would never have taken place had so much as an email or phone call been required. The most common opening line ran something like this, ‘I was just passing by and was wondering if . . .’”¹² Outreach settings benefit from their usual informality, as it can encourage users to approach who might be reluctant to seek help “officially” by visiting the library reference desk.¹³ As Rudin reminds us, “The entire foundation of outpost librarianship rests on the supposition that in a digitally dominated environment, there is still inherent value in the personal encounter.”¹⁴

The Importance of Location

The crucial task of identifying an appropriate site pervades the discussion of outreach services. Many of the requirements are fairly self-evident: a good location must have high enough traffic to attract the notice of a large number of potential users while being quiet enough to allow for comfortable consultation. Basic environmental factors are important, such as good lighting and seating. The overriding necessity, of course, is a strong wireless signal.

Perhaps the most challenging requirement to satisfy is an intangible one: the chosen setting must

be one that's likely to capture patrons when they are in “research mode”—if they don't associate the space with academic work, they're less likely to request help. The Rutgers University experience is instructive. Librarians attempted outreach in a campus student center but were ultimately disappointed in the level of participation, which they theorized was low primarily because their users did not expect such services in that location.¹⁵ Students used the campus center to eat and socialize, and so, not having academic work on their minds, did not ask reference questions.

Currently, academic departments appear to be the most popular site for outreach initiatives, followed by hospitals and other clinical settings and computer labs. Only eleven ARL SPEC Kit respondents reported offering scheduled, in-person services to residence halls, the great majority of those services having been initiated within the two years immediately prior to the survey.¹⁶

Outreach to Residence Halls

Few articles have described library outreach efforts to residence halls specifically, and they have indicated mixed success. Nims describes an unsuccessful experiment in extending reference services to the residence hall computer labs at Bowling Green State University. Its failure likely had mostly to do with the bibliographic realities of 1995: only a small fraction of resources were then available online, so students did not yet expect to be able to complete research remotely and were not using those computer labs for library work.¹⁷ Since then, of course, remote access to resources has exploded, and student expectations have shifted accordingly.

At the University of Michigan, librarians have partnered with the campus's Residence Hall Library System on several outreach efforts, including a multiple-day information fair and a remote reference program that connected users with librarians by two-way videoconferencing.¹⁸ Oakland University librarians' outreach programs included a book club for students living in residence halls.¹⁹ Other efforts have identified residence halls as a valuable opportunity to market library services to new users, though they didn't include moving the provision of services into that venue.²⁰ Of course, an antecedent to residence hall outreach long predates the current concerns about virtual competition and dwindling gate counts: contemporary residence hall outreach may be viewed as a sort of philosophical heir to the long tradition of dormitory libraries, whose goal of extending the students' scholarly life into their homes should resonate with outreach librarians exploring the venue.²¹

The paucity of outreach efforts to residence halls may be explained partly by a fastidious reluctance on the part of librarians to intrude. As Rudin cautions, “For outpost librarians reconnoitering the residence hall, this most personal of campus spaces requires a very delicate intervention. Promoting information literacy in the lobby of a public university building like the student union is one thing, but proselytizing on the students’ very doorstep is another.”²² Alternatively, the explanation may simply be that librarians hope to reach a larger segment of the university community than residence halls allow: with limited staff time available for outreach, they may be choosing to concentrate their efforts on campus spaces where they will encounter faculty and graduate students as well as undergraduates. Those considerations being acknowledged, however, the residence halls of many colleges and universities have the potential to be not just another campus space, but a fitting partner in the outreach enterprise because of their particular educational mission.

Educational Mission of Residence Halls

An extensive body of research indicates that students benefit both personally and academically from on-campus living.²³ Thus many colleges and universities have developed on-campus housing with the specific goal of supporting the educational mission. This approach to residence hall design accepts the two assumptions that Riker and DeCoster articulated in 1971: (1) environment influences behavior, and (2) learning is a total process.²⁴ From that foundation, the implementation varies considerably between universities. Some develop housing units known as living–learning centers that integrate academic and residence life and encourage student–faculty interaction outside the classroom.²⁵ Some organize students into cohorts that live and take several classes together (sometimes in the residence halls themselves).²⁶ Some offer living–learning communities that focus on specific disciplines or student interests.²⁷

Other less formal arrangements concentrate on promoting students’ interaction with faculty outside the classroom, a factor recognized as valuable in encouraging student success.²⁸ Faculty-in-Residence programs, in which faculty and their families reside in the dormitories, have this goal. However, they are not particularly common, probably because they require a substantial investment of space and funds.²⁹ A more frequent approach is to organize academic facilities, such as faculty offices, classrooms, or labs, into the same buildings as student living quarters to encourage greater

integration of academic activities.³⁰ Finally, even at colleges and universities that do not have formal living–learning communities, the housing administration usually works to integrate some educational components into residence life.

Promoting scholarship being central to the mission of college and university housing programs, residence hall administrators are “always open to partnerships with other campus units that will build up academic programming within the context of student housing”—natural teammates, it would seem, for librarians who are likewise interested in creating a more academically thriving student body.³¹ Yet in the professional literature of campus housing—which at least since the 1960s has included discussions of how best to satisfy the educational mission—libraries are mentioned only infrequently as a source of educational programming. The few allusions to libraries are generally cursory and in conjunction with other campus services, such as academic advising and tutoring.³² Just as the library literature provides few examples of outreach to students in residence halls, outreach in the opposite direction has been similarly slim. Antell’s three years in the dormitory provide some insight into building partnerships with housing staff and making the residence halls a viable venue for library outreach.

THE LIVE-IN LIBRARIAN: RESIDENCE HALL PROGRAMMING

Academic reference librarians interact with students every day in the course of their jobs, but a librarian who also lives with hundreds of students forms a unique relationship. He or she hears about their daily triumphs and tribulations: the interview for that coveted study abroad slot, the exam aced (or flunked), the drama (or comedy) of a long-distance love affair, the financial worries, the acceptance into medical school. It is not a one-way street, however. The students hear not only about the librarian’s work, but also about their children, their exercise class, and their parents’ visits. Missing their younger siblings, some students even volunteer as babysitters. Clearly, this is a neighborly relationship.

But it is also a working relationship. The primary responsibility of FIRs at OU is to plan and host regular programs for the students living in their residence hall, of which a typical FIR family will offer three or four per month. Some events are academic—guest lecturers from various university departments, study skills sessions, career preparation programs, and so forth. Other events are purely recreational, such as movies, football

viewing parties, cookie baking, and late-night pancake breakfasts. Some programs, such as a discussion series on philosophical films, combine the academic with the recreational. Antell incorporated a substantial amount of library programming into her FIR events, which provided her with insight into developing library outreach to residence halls.

Research Rescue

The most basic and most frequently offered program that Antell initiated, Research Rescue, was actually a reworking of an outreach effort that OU librarians had previously attempted unsuccessfully. Like the satellite reference efforts at many other universities, Research Rescue was essentially reference desk work without the desk. Librarians hoped that by highlighting and naming the service, they would make students more aware that such help was available. Research Rescue sessions had previously been held in the library instruction room and the student union during the weeks before final exams. However, participation was low in both very different venues, causing it to be cancelled after only a few semesters. Low traffic was, in retrospect, to be expected in the hard-to-find library instruction room. But in the student union's main hallway, the Research Rescue tables were visible to the hundreds of students who passed by every hour—yet very few stopped to ask questions.

When Research Rescue moved into the dormitory, the dynamic changed. First, the physical environment of the dormitory social lounge was much more conducive to the program's success, both more comfortably furnished and much less crowded than the student union. The new setting allowed Antell to offer refreshments, which contributed to a more relaxed and welcoming feeling. Of course, her existing relationship with the residents helped: any anxiety students may have felt over asking for library assistance under more formal circumstances did not seem to extend to a chat with their neighbor and her librarian colleagues. The venue gave Antell a new ally that the previous locations had lacked, the Resident Assistants (RAs), who helped her to market the event. Finally, upon moving into the dormitories, Research Rescue sessions began to be held in the evenings rather than the afternoons, as Antell suspected (correctly) that this would be a better time to find students in their dormitories and in "homework mode." Cumulatively, those differences made the program both considerably better attended than it had been in its original

locations and more enjoyable for students and librarians alike.

Banned Books Discussion

For the first academic lecture Antell and Riggs hosted as FIRs, Antell invited Connie Van Fleet, OU professor of library and information studies, to give a lecture and lead a discussion about banned books. To accompany the discussion, Antell created a display of about one hundred books and wrote annotations explaining why each had been banned or challenged. Before the lecture began, students were encouraged to peruse the display. Many students were surprised to see some of their favorite books included, which led to a lively and passionate discussion.

The program owed its success mainly to Van Fleet's engaging presentation style and to the students' interest in the topic, but planning and organizational decisions, such as setting and promotion, also were important. Antell judged that, while a drop-in program like Research Rescue was well suited to the social lounge, the FIR apartment would be more appropriate for a formal lecture. A large group could be accommodated in the living room, and the door could be closed against distractions. Eager to ensure a good turnout for their first program, Antell and Riggs invested heavily in publicity: they purchased advertisements in the student newspaper, plastered each floor of the building with fliers, and engaged the help of each RA in doing word-of-mouth publicity. Their efforts attracted more than thirty students to the event. Antell and Riggs judged this program to be successful in meeting one of their main goals as FIRs: helping students to engage on a personal level with intellectual issues and with scholars from the academic departments.

Library Tour

Every semester, Antell led a brief tour of the library building and its services and an even briefer demonstration of the library website for her residents, followed by refreshments in the FIR apartment. Designed to counteract library anxiety, this program impressed on Antell that participation statistics should not be the only metric used to measure outreach success. Though the tour was never exceptionally well attended—usually about five students participated—those who took part were consistently enthusiastic about how much they had learned. Antell continued to offer the tour every semester because of the overwhelmingly positive feedback, even though she would have

liked to have more participants.

African American Book Club

Antell's most disappointing FIR program was an African American Book Club, which she attempted twice without success. On the first attempt, about a dozen students signed up to participate, and six actually picked up a copy of the book, but only one appeared for the first discussion. The next day, several of the students apologized and told Antell that while they were interested, they simply hadn't had time to finish reading or were unavailable that particular evening. Antell rescheduled the discussion to no avail. The second semester, Antell redesigned the program to allow more student control but had similar results. This program's failure did have at least one silver lining, however, in that it taught Antell at least as much as the successful programs had about why library outreach efforts to residence halls fare well or badly.

SPACE, TIME, AND OREOS: KEYS TO ENGAGING STUDENTS IN RESIDENCE HALL PROGRAMMING

During their three years of designing and evaluating academic residence hall programming, Antell and Riggs observed several student behaviors that shaped their efforts to engage their students. Most striking was the significance of space—not just choosing an appropriate setting for the planned events, though that was important—but space for reconnaissance. Before committing to any event, students seemed to need a chance to scrutinize it from a safe distance. This pattern was most noticeable during events that took place in the social lounge, a large area adjacent to the elevator lobby. Students walking through the building automatically noticed programs in progress and often stopped to observe. From ten or fifteen feet away, they could read the posters that promoted the event, watch other students participate, perhaps inspect the refreshments. It seemed that this felt like a safe, noncommittal distance to the students who paused: they were close enough to watch for a few minutes to decide if they were interested, but not so close that they might be trapped into joining.

The generally lower rate of participation in events that took place in locations besides the social lounge supported the conclusion that space for observation was essential. The library tour, for instance, gave students no opportunity for advance observation and no graceful exit strategy should they lose interest. Events held in the FIR apartment

likewise afforded students no space for preliminary surveillance—they either had to enter the apartment and thus the event or else linger conspicuously at the threshold without a good view of the activities. Students were forced to make a snap decision and so were more likely to decide against participating than risk having their time wasted.

Time was the second important consideration. As with space, this includes an obvious component: scheduling the events thoughtfully. Through their own observations and through conversations with the RAs, Antell and Riggs learned the scheduling patterns of their students—that evening events worked better than daytime, that certain evenings of the week were already taken by other activities, even that large groups of students would be busy on particular dates. They also learned to think of time in terms of the time commitment event participation would require, largely from the failure of the African American Book Club. It demanded a major time investment (the five to ten hours needed to read each novel) in addition to the hour spent at each book discussion—much more than any other FIR program. Though the students who initially joined were sincere in their enthusiasm for the idea, they, and Antell, soon discovered that the beginning of freshman year was probably not the best time to commit to additional reading beyond what was necessary for their classes. In hindsight, it seems it was unrealistic to expect students to prioritize a time-consuming intellectual endeavor not required for class.

Students guard their free hours closely and are unwilling to give them up unless persuaded that an event would be worth their while. However, Antell and Riggs found that extensive advance publicity efforts could convince students to decide in favor of their programming. Of the many scholarly discussions they hosted, two had truly outstanding participation levels: the Banned Books discussion and a (nonlibrary-related) Alternative Families discussion. Both were prefaced with extensive promotion, including newspaper advertising, many dozens of fliers, and a concerted word-of-mouth and e-mail campaign with a great deal of RA participation. It seemed that giving students plenty of information in advance—to say nothing of finding topics they would find engrossing—served as the mental equivalent of neutral observational space. If students knew in advance exactly what to expect, how much time would be entailed, and what would be required of them as participants, they were more likely to agree to attend. At the same time, they tended automatically to reject events that required them to register in advance—preferring to keep their options open.

However, such extensive advertising does require a considerable exertion from the event organizer, and Antell lacked the budget to duplicate it for every event she hosted.

Antell tried to provide space for observation and enough information so that students could make informed decisions before committing their time to outreach programs. However, she also generously deployed the bait universally known to attract college students: free food. Student standing in the space for observation waver between staying to get help with a term paper and leaving to go to the gym or watch television. The bowl of Oreos sitting on the table behind the librarian can suffice to nudge the student toward staying.

ONGOING OUTREACH

In 2005, Antell and Riggs and their children moved out of the FIR apartment and, after a brief period of adjustment to everyday realities like preparing their own meals, their lives returned to normal. But in Antell's outreach work at the library, it was a "new normal." The knowledge she had gained and relationships she had built continued to help her and her reference colleagues connect with the students and staff in campus housing—a place that, before Antell's FIR stint, had seemed alien and completely separate from the academic life of the university.

In the post-FIR years, the residence halls became part of Antell's regular outreach rounds. Every semester, she contacts the current FIRs, offering to organize library programs for their residents, and is usually met with enthusiastic assent. While some of the ongoing outreach programs are new, others are continuations of the events Antell implemented as an FIR.

Research Rescue

OU librarians continue to offer regular Research Rescue sessions in the dormitories, with the buildings' current FIRs providing space and refreshments and recruiting RAs to help with publicity and organization. The program continues to grow in popularity, with both the number of Research Rescue sessions offered and the number of librarians and graduate assistants contributing to them having increased since Antell left the dormitory in 2005.

In an incidental bonus, librarians often provide extensive research assistance to the current FIRs themselves during these sessions, as well as to the RAs staffing them. When hosting librarians in outreach sessions, FIRs often ask questions

prefaced by "while you're here"—questions they likely would not bother to ask otherwise. Though this outreach initiative was designed primarily to target freshmen residents, it has also increased librarians' visibility and regard among these groups of upperclassmen and faculty who are happy to take advantage of the serendipitous encounter.

Lectures and Discussions

OU librarians are now regularly invited to give presentations in the residence halls. Some sessions have been as simple as a basic thirty-minute library orientation. Others have addressed more sophisticated information literacy topics, such as avoiding plagiarism or using Wikipedia responsibly. Librarians find these discussions extremely valuable, not only because they educate students, but also because such conversations provide insight into students' attitudes and perspectives. For example, OU librarians have learned that, contrary to popular belief, many students have a healthy skepticism of Wikipedia—yet they often fail to extend this skepticism to other Internet sources. In the comfortable environment of their social lounge, students are active participants in these programs, sharing their thoughts about how they approach research and how they view the information universe more freely than is often the case during more formal sessions in the library instruction room.

FIR participation in these kinds of discussions is especially valuable. When another professor corroborates something that a librarian says, it impresses the students more deeply. Likewise, when a FIR asks a question of a librarian, it demonstrates to the students that even experienced researchers sometimes need assistance—and that the person to ask for such assistance is the librarian.

The Librarian on Day One

On the day before fall classes begin, OU holds an annual outdoor information fair at which student organizations, university departments, and other campus groups can distribute information and answer new students' questions. OU librarians have had a booth at this event for the last ten years and find that it is a good way to meet some of the new students and introduce them to their new library.

Informed by Antell's FIR experience, OU librarians have recently added another way to provide a similar service to incoming students. New students may move in four days before classes start. As at most large universities, move-in day can be chaotic, as residence halls and parking lots teem with far more people and vehicles than they

are intended to hold, and families struggle to help students cram their possessions into limited space.

During their first year as FIRs, Antell and Riggs greeted hundreds of families on move-in day and provided water bottles and popsicles as relief against the Oklahoma weather. As they chatted, numerous questions arose repeatedly: “How do we get from here to the financial aid office?” “How can I apply for jobs on campus?” “The closet door in my room is broken—how can I get it fixed?”

Antell found herself returning to her apartment multiple times for campus and city maps, her laptop and cell phone, pencils, paper, telephone directories—and before she knew it she had established a miniature reference desk that also happened to provide refreshments. From then on, she set up this “concierge desk” deliberately each move-in day of her FIR stint. Since then, OU librarians have continued the service in at least one residence hall each year in cooperation with current FIRs. In addition to providing a great deal of necessary information to students and parents at a hectic time, the service ensures that meeting a helpful, knowledgeable librarian is among students’ very first experiences on campus.

DISCUSSION: WHAT IF YOU DON’T HAPPEN TO LIVE IN A DORMITORY?

Of course, not every librarian has the opportunity—or the desire—to live in university housing. However, Antell’s FIR stint provides some lessons that can be applied by any academic librarian interested in residence hall outreach.

The Right Place: The Reconnaissance Visit

The first step (and, for some librarians, perhaps the most difficult) is to visit the residence halls. It might sound a bit silly, but a librarian’s first visit to student housing can be as intimidating as a student’s first visit to the university library. At the least, a librarian who has never entered the residence halls is likely to have many questions. Residence halls are a unique mixture of public and private spaces, so visitors may well wonder whether they will be invading students’ privacy by looking around the building.

One might begin by learning something about the nature of the public space. In a very small residence hall, it might feel more like a family’s living room than a public lounge area. On the other hand, in a large hall with hundreds of residents, students are probably used to seeing strangers in their social lounges. Other questions that librar-

ians might want to investigate before the first visit include the following:

- How is housing structured at my university? Do students live in high-rises with communal living space or more private apartments? Do the halls primarily house freshmen, or are upperclassmen living there too?
- Can I visit the dormitory on my own, or are visitors required to be escorted by a resident or housing staff member?
- When are the entrance doors locked?
- Where am I allowed to park?

For that first visit, librarians might find it beneficial to ask a dormitory resident such as a student employee to accompany them. The visit should occur at the same time of day that the library programming is likely to be held. At many universities, a weekday evening, when students are most likely to be at home and thinking about their homework, is best. During the visit, it will be useful to consider several questions:

- How many people use the public areas? Are they buzzing with activity, nearly empty, or somewhere in between?
- What are the building’s traffic patterns? Is any space both visible enough to attract attention and quiet enough for holding consultations?
- What activities take place in the public areas—studying, billiards, television viewing?
- Is there an area that would allow the students space for observation of the library program before committing their time to it?
- Is wireless Internet service available? Does it require a password, and if so, how can it be obtained?

The Right Purpose: Matching Housing’s Goals with the Library’s Goals

After doing initial reconnaissance, the outreach librarian’s next step is to learn something about the housing philosophy and structure at his or her institution to determine how to collaborate with the residence hall staff. It can be difficult to determine whom to contact because housing governance frequently distributes responsibilities among student employees such as RAs, professional employees, and elected and volunteer student governance groups. Naturally, each university will have its own housing organizational chart and its own structure of paid, elected, and volunteer leaders who are responsible for programming; however, one should generally expect that multiple and overlapping

layers of responsibility are the norm.

In learning to work effectively with housing, librarians might consider these questions:

- Is there a written mission statement or policy about the educational aspects of housing?
- Are any academic facilities or programs located in the residence halls?
- Is an organizational chart for housing personnel available? Who should be contacted with what issues?
- Is the housing staff responsible for organizing educational programming? Are those programs typically arranged by the RAs, the full-time staff, the student leadership, or some combination of these groups? Is the staff required to fulfill any programming quotas?
- What educational programs have been held recently? How successful were they?
- Do the residence halls have any formal or informal relationships with faculty members, such as a faculty-in-residence or adopt-a-faculty program?
- What kind of budget is available for educational programming? Do any of the housing staff members have a budget that would cover advertising and refreshments for a library program? If not, what costs can the library cover?

The Right People, the Right Programs, the Right Publicity

Having acquired that information, librarians will be prepared to approach the right people—those whose job it is to arrange educational programming in housing—with an offer of library events or services. The next step is to decide what sort of outreach to attempt. Many options for library programs are possible; which ones are most likely to succeed depends on the individual housing environment. The best way to figure this out is to offer a variety of possibilities and then to *listen*. Although the librarian is the expert on the library and its services, the contact person in housing probably knows quite well what kinds of programs will work best. The RAs or other staff members have done this before, and they will share what they have learned, such as “No one will come on a Monday night because that’s when all the sorority meetings are scheduled,” “Students won’t come to programs that require them to sign up in advance,” and “Everyone on my hall seems to be taking History of England, so a session on doing research in history would probably go over well.”

After having selected a program, date, and time, the next step is publicity. It is useful to en-

gage the help of an RA or another student who will know which information channels are most effective. Perhaps the residence hall has a Facebook group, discussion list, or newsletter. Sometimes low-tech options are the most effective, such as table tents in the cafeteria or paper fliers posted throughout the building—inexpensive, and if well designed, likely to be noticed. Posting fliers throughout a large building is time consuming, but the RAs will likely be willing to help.

Clearly, librarians need not actually live in the residence halls to perform effective outreach services in this venue. What is needed most is a strong working relationship with the people in housing who are responsible for programming.

ASSESSING RESIDENCE HALL OUTREACH

If the outreach efforts to the residence halls conducted at OU have had one major shortcoming, it is that they have received very little formal assessment, either quantitative or qualitative. Instead, librarians have depended on the verbal feedback of participants and their own informal impressions in deciding which programs to continue, cancel, or modify. That weakness stems in part from conscious priorities: preserving the relaxed, informal setting and atmosphere being so essential, librarians found it difficult to integrate official-seeming assessment tools like user surveys. When Antell was living in the residence hall especially, it seemed churlish to invite students into her home as guests, have a coffee and a neighborly chat, and then hand them an evaluation form to describe the experience.

However, librarians designing outreach programs will often prefer to have more solid metrics. In deciding how to assess their efforts, outreach librarians may find it useful to consider the following questions:

- What quantitative data can be collected? How many students attended? How many questions did they ask? Will a tally sheet to count and categorize questions suffice, or is more detail needed?
- Is there a quantitative threshold for a successful event? Does the number of questions need to equal that of a busy reference desk shift for an event to have been worthwhile, or is a smaller number acceptable, especially while the service is new?
- How will quality of interaction be assessed? On several occasions, Research Rescue sessions were attended by only a small number

of students, but a lengthy research consultation was conducted with each, more like an appointment with a subject specialist than a two-minute question at the reference desk.

- How will participant satisfaction be assessed? Is a formal evaluation necessary, and if so, how can it be integrated into the program? Can informal conversations achieve the same goal? For example, Antell made a point of asking students who attended academic discussions if they had other topics in mind that they would like to discuss in the future.
- What cost–benefit analysis will assessment entail? Antell found that extensive advertising and attractive refreshments are key to high attendance, but also expensive. What will be necessary to justify the financial outlay?

CONCLUSION

Residence halls are an ideal and underutilized venue for library outreach services. For decades, college and university housing personnel have recognized the benefits of enriching students' dormitory experiences with academic opportunities. Likewise, librarians have long known that, to support student learning, they must sometimes step out of the library and provide their services in other places where learning occurs.

However, though the student residence hall is a natural setting for providing library outreach services, few librarians seem to have yet discovered it. Something akin to students' library anxiety may be to blame: just as students sometimes nervously avoid the unfamiliar academic library, librarians may feel vaguely insecure about intruding on the "inner sanctum" of student life. Alternatively, their hesitation may indicate concerns about reaching as many users as possible—with limited time and staff available for outreach, some librarians may find it more practical to locate their satellite services in locations where they will encounter more faculty and graduate students as well as undergraduates.

But for librarians whose outreach mission prioritizes undergraduates, it is a mistake to neglect the residence halls. Students spend a great deal of their time and do much of their academic work in their dormitories. In addition, residence halls often offer ideal conditions for library outreach: comfortable collaborative learning spaces, suitable technology (including wireless Internet access), and, perhaps most important, a network of staff members and student leaders whose job it is to bring academic opportunities to the dormitories and who generally are delighted to join forces with

librarians in their outreach efforts.

Some trial and error may be necessary before a librarian discovers the magic combination of the right dormitory location, the right time of day, the right kinds of library services to offer, and the right kind of publicity that will lead to a thriving residence outreach program at his or her institution. Every campus has its own unique culture; there is no prescription for a universally correct location or description of services that will ensure successful outreach everywhere. But outreach success awaits the librarian who is willing to take that literal first step over the threshold, to observe and explore, and, most importantly, to listen to the students and staff in the place where they live.

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