
Reframing Reference as Outreach

Expanding Engagement and Inclusion Through Reference Services

Jade Albuero and Nicollette Brant

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A reference team of librarians and MLIS students from the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA embarked on a reference services awareness campaign designed to reach out to marginalized populations in their student body. This column was initially scheduled to be published in spring 2020, but was delayed due to the pandemic.—*Editors*

What do you do when your library's reference desk is not getting as much traffic as you would like? How would you approach marketing your reference services? How can you adapt your services to changing student needs? How can you make these efforts align with your goal of creating an inclusive and safe space for underserved student communities? This article describes work that a reference team, composed of librarians and MLIS students, undertook over an eighteen-month period specifically to raise awareness of the reference service at their library, one of several in a large university. Their endeavors were rooted in their belief in the radical potential of reference services to serve as a vehicle for equity and inclusion, a means for reaching out to marginalized populations who face barriers in fully utilizing library services. The authors will also share the lessons they learned from the process, as well as provide practical steps for creating an outreach strategy.

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is a large, public university with more than 45,000 students. To serve these students, as well as faculty, staff, and the public, the UCLA Library includes many physical locations. The Charles E. Young Research Library (YRL) is the library for the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) and International Area Studies (IAS). It contains research-level collections in various formats and languages. It is also home to two other "libraries" with their own help desks, as well as library administration and a number of library-wide departments. The YRL Research Help Desk (Desk) is the main reference desk in the building; it is staffed by the HSS and IAS departments and graduate student research assistants (GSRAs), who provide semi-extensive reference help. It is located in the shared HSS/IS office suite, a rather hidden location on YRL's A-level, the floor below the entrance level.

In August 2017, co-author Jade Albuero was appointed Interim Reference Coordinator (RC) for the YRL Research Help Desk and remained in that role through June 2019. The

RC is primarily in charge of hiring, training, and supervising four GSRAs and ensuring coverage of the reference desk during scheduled hours, but Albuero expanded the position's scope during her tenure. Co-author Nicollette Brant, then an entering MLIS student, was one of two GSRAs hired in September 2017 and was in that position until she graduated in June 2019. Albuero and Brant, along with co-coordinator Marisa Méndez-Brady (April–December 2018) and the other GSRAs, comprised the Advanced Research and Engagement (ARE) Team. Depending on when they were on the team, they worked in different capacities and combinations to formulate and execute various aspects of the outreach strategy that will be discussed in this column.

ASSESSING THE SITUATION

When she became RC, Albuero had been at the UCLA Library for nine years, and she believed that the Desk, which had been in its current location for about four years, was too hidden, thus inhibiting its ability to support the research needs of students and other users. To test her hypothesis, as well as to promote the service, the ARE Team set up a pop-up desk in a more visible location on YRL's main floor in late winter quarter 2018; this is in addition to the regular Desk. Though this had been done a couple of years earlier for a few hours over two weeks, Albuero thought that it would be better, for statistical comparison, to have the pop-up desk open during the same hours as the Desk for two weeks.¹ Data showed that, compared to the same time period the previous year, there was a 112 percent increase in the number of transactions. Anecdotal evidence also revealed that people did not know about the service and wished they had known about it earlier.

To corroborate the anecdotes with quantitative data, the team incorporated a quick survey when they did the pop-up desk again for two weeks in mid-spring quarter 2018. When asked if they knew about YRL's reference service, 73 percent of the people who came to the pop-up desk for help indicated that they did not (figure 1).² Of those who did know about the service, only two-thirds had previously used it. This demonstrated emphatically that the service was indeed invisible and in great need of promotion.

CHOOSING A FRAMEWORK: REFRAMING REFERENCE

These findings gave the ARE Team the data-informed impetus to create a marketing plan for the Desk. However, before moving forward, we took the opportunity to think about the importance of reference services, what we wished to accomplish with a marketing plan, and what else we wanted to achieve as a team.

We all agreed that reference services are essential. These services—whether in-person or through phone, email, or chat—are ways in which library staff can assist users with

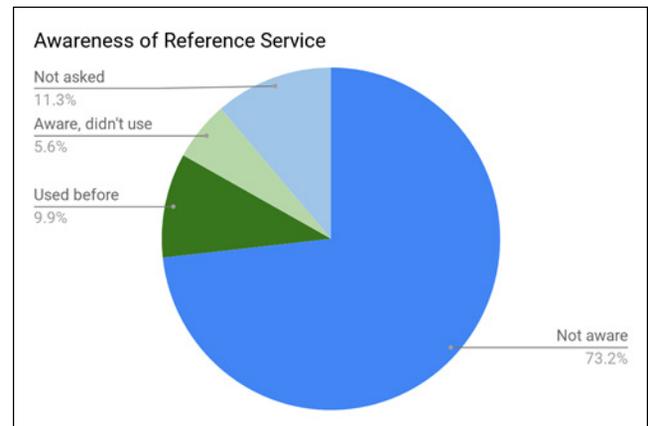


Figure 1. Results of survey on awareness of YRL Research Help Desk

their information needs and connect with them directly. The proximity afforded by reference desks, in particular, allows providers to get to know their patrons, learn more about their needs, and gauge the effectiveness of interactions. Reference services are flexible, not just in terms of delivery mode, but also in location; reference can be roving, within the library building or across campus, or embedded in specific classes or departments. We hoped that a marketing plan would increase awareness and patronage of YRL's Desk so that the library can strengthen the information literacy of more users.

Moreover, we adamantly believed that providing reference services is an equity and inclusion issue. People have different ways of learning, and reference provides a mechanism for supporting users who prefer individual attention or who come from backgrounds that emphasize face-to-face interactions. It can also serve as a means of alleviating library anxiety, especially if providers are seen as approachable and empathetic. We recognized the radical potential of reference services to break down barriers to inclusion, which can be particularly overwhelming for marginalized groups in academia. By providing a space for safe and meaningful interactions, we felt that we could support these students' academic success and make a significant difference.

The team members' positionalities as people of color heavily informed our decision to center equity, inclusion, and social justice in the creation of our outreach plan. However, choosing this as our underlying framework was also based on hard data. Statistics show that, unlike most universities, UCLA's undergraduate student population is majority non-White, with 28 percent Asian American and 22 percent Hispanic/Latino.³ It also has a sizeable (11 percent) international student population, the majority of whom are from Asian countries.⁴ In addition, less than half of undergraduates have English only as their first language, nearly a third are first-generation students, and more than a third receive Pell Grants for low-income families.⁵ With this kind of diversity in the student body, it is imperative for the UCLA Library to be cognizant of and responsive to their needs.

DEVELOPING OUR STRATEGY

Armed with a shared vision of equity-focused outreach, the team proceeded with the work of creating an outreach plan. Although we already had some ideas about what we wanted to do, we still had to go through several steps before we could finalize our strategy.

Conduct Environmental Scan

Our first task was to conduct a quick and informal environmental scan. As the undergraduate library, Powell Library is the location that has the most potential overlap with YRL in terms of subjects and audience. In order to gain insight into Powell's outreach activities, including target audience, and to ensure that there is no duplication in our efforts, we met with their Outreach Coordinator. We learned that, though they did consider all undergraduates to be their audience, they did have a slight focus on new students, both freshmen and transfers, especially since many of their activities involved participating in campus outreach events.

Since our tentative plans included social media, we also met with the library's new social media manager. At the time this article was written, different locations and departments had their own social media accounts, so we needed to know what his role was going to be; we learned that he would oversee the general UCLA Library accounts. In addition, he gave us much-needed guidance on developing and implementing a social media campaign.

Finally, we looked into YRL's previous outreach efforts. We saw that, though YRL had social media accounts, posts were either infrequent or had ceased. We also learned from staff that there had been sporadic attempts at events, such as research clinics, open houses, and writing nights. However, as YRL did not have an Outreach Coordinator, these tended to be rare occurrences.

Determine Primary Audience

As the research library, YRL traditionally defined its primary users as faculty, graduate students, and upper-level undergraduates in HSS and IAS. In actuality, it supports all users, regardless of university status, affiliation, or subject discipline. For the purpose of developing this outreach plan, though, we had to clearly define our target audience. This is in keeping with the business strategy of market segmentation where customers are divided into smaller groupings with similar characteristics or needs to optimize product development and marketing.⁶

We started by holding a design jam (figure 2) to discuss what unique attributes our specific Desk and library offered our users. The session affirmed that our Desk's specialty is providing advanced research help, including finding and using specialized resources such as area studies materials, primary sources, maps, statistics, etc. As faculty, graduate

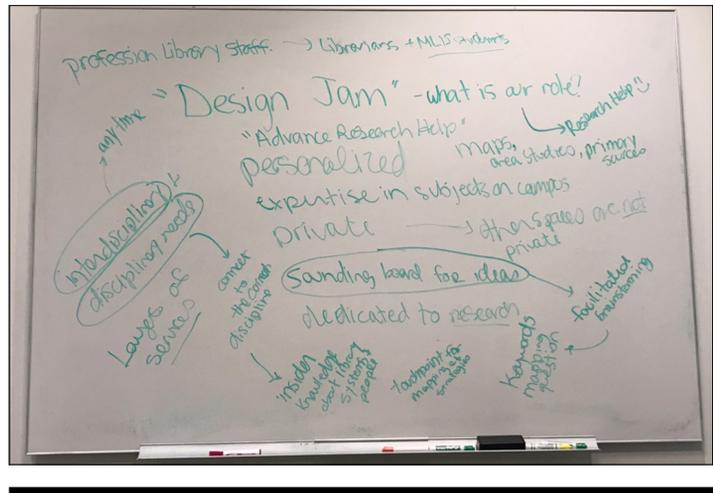


Figure 2. Design jam notes

students, and upper-level undergraduates are the users most in need of this kind help, this confirmed that they remain our primary audience. As our environmental scan showed that these are not Powell's target audience, our work would complement theirs. However, as faculty tend to work directly with subject librarians, we chose to focus on graduate students and upper-level undergraduates.

Define Brand Personality and Identity

The next step was to create a brand identity specifically for the YRL Research Help Desk—this proved to be our biggest challenge. Usually, when developing an outreach strategy, you are doing it for the whole library system or for a specific location. However, the ARE Team only represented the Desk but not other departments in YRL and certainly not the entire UCLA Library. At the same time, our service's very name and our social media accounts do include the library's name, so we had to find a balance between mostly needing to promote the Desk and sometimes having to speak for YRL.

In addition, we felt it was necessary to create brand positioning and messaging for the Desk because studies have shown that students, particularly students of color, do not know the role of the reference desk. According to Dallas Long's study of Latino college students, "they understood that library staff seated at reference desks were available but only vaguely understood when to request assistance or how such assistance could strengthen the quality of their school-work."⁷ If our outreach strategy was going to center the needs of students from marginalized backgrounds, then we needed to make our role as reference providers clear and separate from the identity of the library as a whole.

We employed user experience design methods to define our brand personality. We brainstormed keywords that reflected the emotional qualities we wanted our brand to convey, which in turn would guide what forms our outreach would take (figure 3). The words we selected were: welcoming, inclusive, safe, and supportive. These values conformed

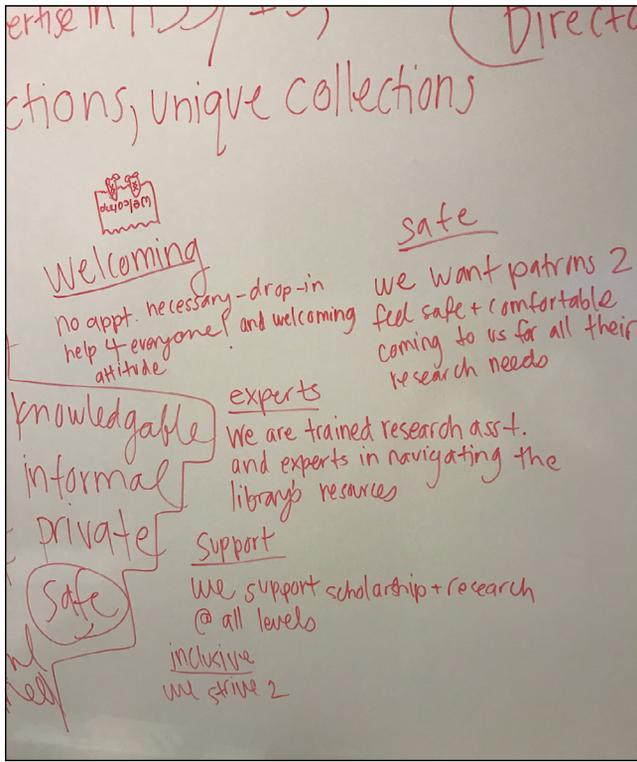


Figure 3. Brand personality brainstorming notes

to our equity-centered framework. We formulated our mission thus: To support student success and inclusion through advanced research help and access to diverse collections in a welcoming and safe environment.

We also decided to strictly label ourselves the “Research Help Desk,” instead of using the term reference, to strengthen the identity of our service, eliminate possible confusion (from not knowing what that means), and differentiate our service from other forms of reference services (e.g., digital reference). When we eventually created promotional materials, like the two-sided postcard in figures 4 and 5, the visual image of a desk helped to reinforce our brand identity.

Brainstorm Ideas and Identify Partners

Once we had defined our audience and brand identity, we could conceive of ways to do marketing and outreach accordingly. Since we wanted to foster greater awareness of the Desk, we thought about what kind of promotional materials we wanted to have; we decided that we wanted these to be both informational and utilitarian. For instance, we settled on the postcards because we felt that flyers and bookmarks are easily tossed. While these could also be thrown out, they at least serve multiple purposes—in addition to providing information about where the Desk is and what kind of help we offer, the message section could be used to jot down the contact information for or send a message to their subject librarian, as well as to write comments about the service. For swag in particular, we wanted things that students would

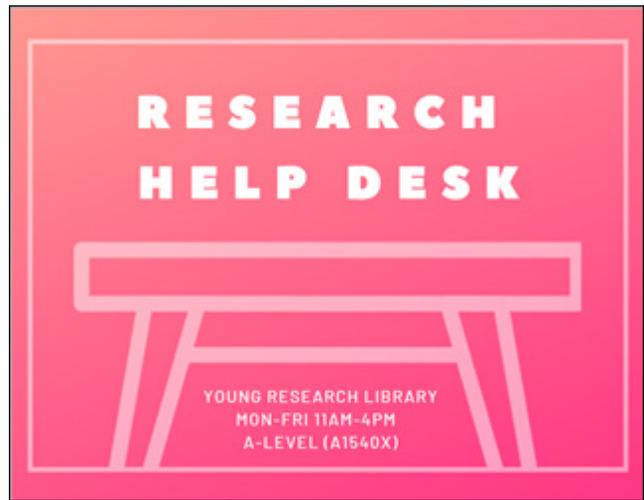


Figure 4. Promotional postcard, front

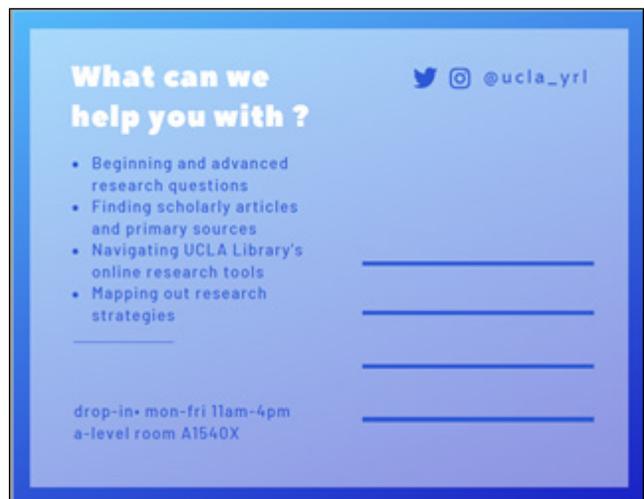


Figure 5. Promotional postcard, back

actually use so that they could serve as advertising. We settled on phone wallets (figure 6) and water bottles, though we only ended up producing the first.

As users indicated that they wished they had previously known about our service, we discussed ways of reaching out to them earlier. We definitely knew we wanted to make use of social media to reach a wider audience. In order to serve our target groups, we came up with ideas for potential programming that would provide these students with opportunities to learn about our services beyond the confines of the Desk. Throughout this entire process, we identified relevant entities across campus with whom we could partner on existing and new initiatives.

Create Aspirational Calendar and Budget

We took all of our ideas and put them on an aspirational calendar. This allowed us to see all of the ideas in one place,

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indicate when the activities would ideally take place, enumerate the general steps involved, and gauge how much time and work they would require. This helped us decide what was realistic for us to do with the time and people we had. The calendar was also a place where we could put notes, such as potential partners, necessary supplies, and estimated costs for said supplies. As we did not actually have any funds, this helped us summarize our prospective activities and calculate total costs so that we could submit a budget proposal to the appropriate people.

IMPLEMENTING OUR STRATEGY



Figure 6. Promotional phone wallet

After doing a great deal of preliminary work in spring and summer 2018, the ARE Team formulated a three-pronged outreach strategy that outlined our objectives and target audience, as well as specified timing/frequency and format of activities (figure 7). We implemented the strategy from fall 2018 to summer 2019.

Outreach Events

Outreach events were intended to address the feedback that students wished they had known about our reference service

earlier in the school year or in their academic careers. As there are numerous campus fairs that introduce students to various units and services on campus, we wanted to take advantage of those. YRL, represented by HSS and IAS, participates regularly in the annual Graduate Student Orientation and Fair, so we continued that. Powell Library is active in tabling and representing the UCLA Library at major campus events, so we joined them in some of those; this included participating in True Bruin Welcome (library tours) in fall 2018 and Bruin Day and Transfer Bruin Day (tabling) for newly-admitted students in spring 2019. Because we identified graduate students as one of our target groups and inclusion as one of our goals, we also ensured that we took part in the Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity Graduate Student Welcome Day in fall 2018.

Because it is easy to get lost in the crowd during campus fairs and we wanted to let YRL visitors know our reference service exist, we also decided to do “Welcome Week,” when we, along with HSS/IAS staff, tabled outside of YRL (11 a.m.–2 p.m.) during the first week of fall 2018 (figure 8). We envisioned it to be something festive, with balloons and a prize wheel, but we actually had no budget at that point. We had to get creative and worked with Lux Lab, the library’s emerging technologies unit, to come up with prizes; we offered posters of selected vintage photos from our *Los Angeles Times* Photographic Archives or an etching on their phone, laptop, or other item. (While some people actually liked the poster, no one wanted to risk getting their phones or laptop etched.)

Targeted Programs

Since outreach events are more general, we wanted to create programming specifically for our target audience of graduate students and upper-level undergraduates. These activities

Outreach Events	Targeted Programs	Social Media
<p>Objective: Early outreach to entire UCLA community, before point of need</p> <p>Target: UCLA community</p> <p>Timing: quarterly, but mostly Fall and Spring Quarters</p> <p>Format: Welcome Week, EID Day, True Bruin Welcome, Graduate Orientation, Bruin Day, Transfer Day</p>	<p>Objective: Provide support for specific users</p> <p>Target: graduate students, transfer students, veterans</p> <p>Timing: quarterly</p> <p>Format: pop-up reference desk, study/write nights, whole person/new adult programs</p>	<p>Objective: Virtual outreach to promote research help services and collections</p> <p>Target: UCLA community</p> <p>Timing: continuous</p> <p>Format: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook</p>

Figure 7. Quick visual of our three-pronged outreach strategy



Figure 8. Library staff and GSRA welcoming students during Welcome Week

required a great deal more time and effort for planning and implementation.

Pop-Up Research Help Desk

Trying to isolate upper-level undergraduates for outreach purposes is rather difficult, but it was easy for us to reach out to a segment of this population: transfer students. There are so many reasons for working with this group. Transfer students are heavily of color, low-income, and/or nontraditional. They are at a disadvantage because they missed the first two years to learn about what the campus has to offer, but they are also immediately going into higher-level courses for which they might not be as prepared to do the research papers.

We communicated with the Transfer Student Center's (TSC's) Program Director. When we found out that TSC holds a study hall on Wednesdays 5–9 p.m., we viewed this as an opportunity to explore embedded reference with a pop-up research help desk (figure 9). Since the partition that separates TSC from the Veteran Resource Center (VRC) is removed during study halls, this allowed us to reach out to another underserved group. We felt that these two groups are most likely to need reference help outside of our Desk's regular hours (M–F, 11 a.m.–4 p.m.). By going into their space, we made the service accessible and safe. In addition, the desk was staffed by GSRA's, all of whom were students of color and one had been a transfer student and another a veteran, which we hoped created an even greater sense of welcome and approachability. We held our pop-up desk at TSC/VRC in winter and spring quarters 2019. Due to staffing considerations, we were only there 5–7 p.m. during weeks 3–10.

Grad Study Nights

Though YRL is supposed to be a library for graduate students, the more numerous undergraduates have mostly taken

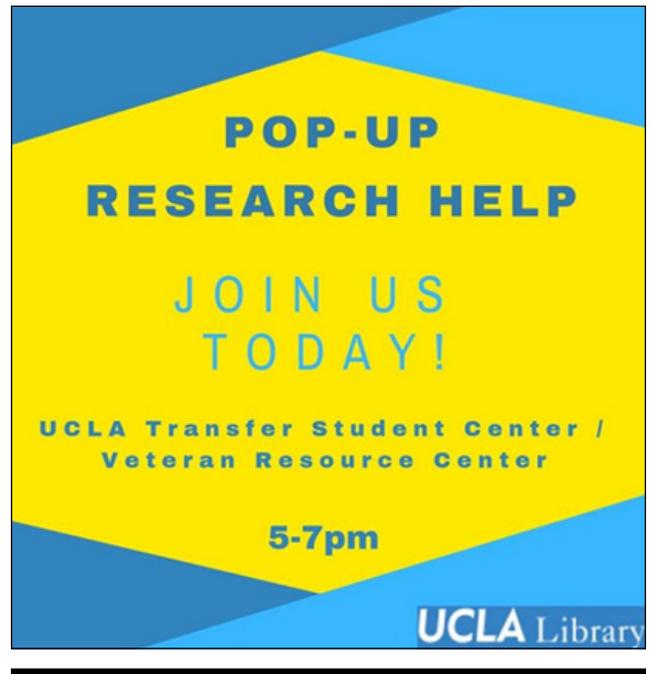


Figure 9. Instagram graphic for TSC/VRC pop-up research help

over the space, especially after its renovation ten years ago. As graduate students do not have a dedicated space in YRL, we wanted to support them by providing them with a special space and time to study while also offering reference help, stressbuster activities, and snacks. We conducted four study nights at the end of winter quarter 2019 (figure 10), but it was not feasible for our small team to do it again in spring.

#ThrivingThursdays

Though not exactly related to reference services, another program that we did that was intended to support graduate students was the #ThrivingThursdays series (figure 11). The idea behind it was to help the students thrive not just in their studies, but as a whole person. Based on new adult programming that public libraries are doing, this was designed to provide graduate students with additional skills that can help them be more successful while in school and after they graduate (e.g., time management, budgeting or financial literacy, creating resumes or CVs, presentation skills), as well as provide them with a break from their studies, using some of our collections. We did four events during spring quarter 2019.

Social Media

The third aspect of our strategy was social media. While there are some users who prefer face-to-face services and programming, there are others who do not; social media could help us reach that wider audience. We wanted to use it as a way to promote our reference services, as well as showcase our diverse collections and provide additional research- or library-related tips.

AMPLIFY YOUR IMPACT



Figure 10. Flyer for GRAD Study Night

We decided that we would focus on Instagram (figure 12) because at the time, that is where most students were (other than Snapchat) but would also use Twitter and Facebook sporadically. We created social media guidelines that specified the use and tone for each platform. We decided on which hashtags to use, such as #databaseoftheweek (featuring a different database each week) and #tiptuesday (tips on using the library or doing research). We also used hashtags #writerwednesday and #fridayreads, as well as international celebrations, national holidays for other countries, author birthdays, etc., to showcase our area studies collections and other diverse holdings.

Because several individuals were involved in creating and reviewing posts, we created a content calendar on Google Docs, which mapped out our posts a week or two in advance. We would then transfer the content to Hootsuite, which automatically published posts to our accounts, as scheduled. We relaunched our dormant accounts in January 2019 and posted on Instagram three or more times a week through August 2019.

LEARNING FROM OUR EFFORTS

Although we only had a very short time to do it, the ARE Team accomplished, or at least laid the groundwork for, what it set out to do. We fostered awareness of the Desk and



Figure 11. Flyer for #ThrivingThursdays

inclusion for our target audience, which included marginalized populations. We also all learned some great lessons about doing outreach:

- Be intentional.
 - Decide who your audience is, what activities would work best for them, and what time of the school year is the best time to reach them.
- Don't try to do too much all at once!
 - Pick one target group or mode of outreach and do that well before adding on more groups or activities. Focusing on too many things with little time and resources will result in things not being done as well as they could be.
- Be okay with slow growth towards a future goal.
 - It takes a while to make connections and for programs to take root and for people to know about them.
- Start marketing early.
 - Get in contact with those who can post to listservs, etc., well before the event.

Unfortunately, because the ARE Team is no more—Albu stepped down as RC and the GSRAs either graduated or moved to a different location, these specific initiatives are no longer in place.

Much has changed since this article was written. The Library's locations and departments now have a combined

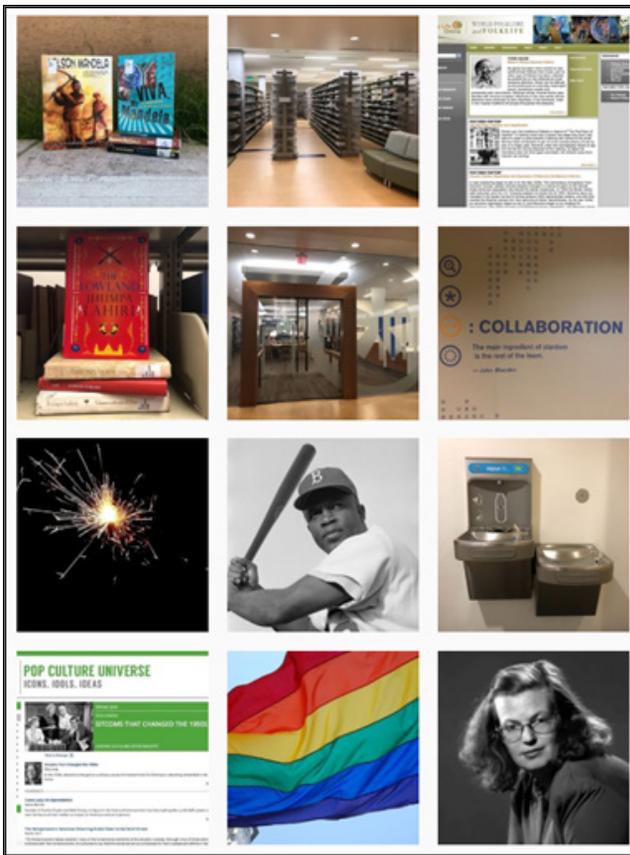


Figure 12. Wall of Instagram posts

social media presence; there are no longer #databas-
eoftheweek posts, pop-up desks, or grad study nights,
but the Library-wide User Engagement team has adapted
#ThrivingThursdays into Adulting 101 programs, and
Library Communications has sponsored Welcome Week
tabling at YRL. As always, things are continually evolving
for new times and new ideas.

CREATING YOUR OWN OUTREACH STRATEGY

In this article, we have delineated the steps our team took in creating an outreach strategy for the YRL Research Help Desk. While we have purposefully used our headings to serve as guidelines and our experiences as examples, here are specific questions you can ask yourselves as you work towards developing your own outreach strategy.

- Assess the situation: What is the problem? How do you quantify the problem?
- Choose a framework: How do you want to approach the problem? Is there a specific take that you prefer or for which you are better qualified?

- Develop your strategy
 - Conduct an environmental scan: What are others already doing? What have you already done? What resources are available?
 - Determine primary audience: Which specific group(s) are you targeting?
 - Define brand personality and identity: What qualities or values do you want to convey? How do you want your audience to remember you?
 - Brainstorm ideas and identify partners: What are potential activities you can engage in? When is the best time to do them? With whom can you collaborate?
 - Create aspirational calendar and budget: How many activities can you realistically do with the people and time you have? Will there be costs associated with these activities?
- Implement your strategy: What are the steps you need to take to implement each aspect of your strategy? How are you collaborating with partners? Do you need promotional materials or other supplies? How are you promoting your efforts? Do you need to create a social media calendar? Are you doing any assessment?
- Learn from your efforts: How are you measuring the success of your efforts? What lessons have you learned, and how will you incorporate them into future efforts?

References

1. To minimize disruption on the regular Desk, the team decided to have the pop-up desk only when GSRAs were available to staff it. The GSRAs have librarian or staff back-ups when they are on the Desk, so this meant that these folks would not be back-ups for those weeks. As no GSRAs were available on Wednesdays, the pop-up desk was actually only open for four days during each of the two weeks.
2. As a few users were not surveyed when the desk got busy, this figure could actually be as high as 80%.
3. The figures for Black and Native students are miniscule, though. The rest of the student make up is: 26.0% non-Hispanic/Latino White, 3.0% non-Hispanic/Latino Black/African American 0.2% Native American/ Alaskan Native, 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 6.0% two or more races/ethnicities, and 2.5% unknown. University of California, Los Angeles, *Common Data Set* (Fall 2019), <https://www.apb.ucla.edu/campus-statistics/common-data-set>, 2.
4. University of California, Los Angeles, *Common Data Set*, 2.
5. University of California, Los Angeles, *Common Data Set*, 2, 4, 3.
6. Charles Doyle, "Market Segmentation," in *A Dictionary of Marketing* (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198736424.001.0001/acref-9780198736424-e-1104>.
7. Dallas Long, "Latino Students' Perceptions of the Academic Library," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 37, no. 6 (December 2011): 504–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2011.07.007>, 19.