

Snacks in the Stacks

One Event—Multiple Opportunities

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How and when does an academic library first make incoming students aware of the library as a resource for their academic success? Given the nature of today's "helicopter" parents, is there a way to include them so that they may better understand the educational mission of the library and in turn reinforce it as a place of learning for their students? Auburn University Libraries considered these questions and created a parental orientation program that may serve as a model for other college and university libraries.

A review of relevant literature on college orientation programs finds little written about including parents in library orientation. The majority of published references refer to parental involvement at the elementary and middle school level. The most recent discussions of the topic may be found on the Association of College and Research Libraries' Instruction Sections' Information Literacy Discussion List archive (ILI-L).¹ Two 2008 queries asking for examples of such programs garnered few responses. Most of the respondents reported that their libraries were both preparing and distributing special handouts for parents or providing traditional overview sessions, ranging from fifteen minutes to an hour.²

Camp War Eagle Freshmen Orientation and Library Involvement

It would be rare today to find a college or university that does not offer some form of student orientation. Programs may range from a few hours to a week, all with the purpose of acclimating students, introducing them to the campus environment and educational mission, and providing an overview of the school's resources and services. At Auburn University, all incoming freshmen, along with their parents, are required to attend a three-day Camp War Eagle (CWE) orientation session, named in honor of one of the university's long-standing traditions and symbols.³ Eight such sessions are offered throughout the summer to accommodate the nearly four thousand new students and their accompanying parents (sixty-five hundred on average). The schedule for each session provides separate tracks for students and parents. Students, lodged in campus dorms, attend information sessions, participate in discussion groups, take

part in social activities, and meet with academic advisors. Parents, who are housed in area hotels, also attend information sessions, browse through a resource and services fair, and participate in optional activities, tours, and FAQ sessions. CWE culminates in student registration for fall classes. It falls under the auspices of the Provost's Office for Undergraduate Education's Freshmen Year Experience and Students in Transition (i.e., transfer students).⁴ The libraries have been a part of CWE since its inception in 1994, beginning their involvement by offering a building tour as an optional session within the CWE student track. In 1998, the libraries portion of the program expanded into a required visit for students, during which incoming freshman received a building tour and viewed a brief, student-produced video describing library resources and services. In addition, students responded to a short survey on their use of libraries in high school and their expectations for use of the library in college. The results from these surveys were used by the Libraries to improve and inform reference and instruction services.

In 2000, Auburn's transition from a quarter-based to a semester-based academic calendar, as well as accompanying curriculum changes, resulted in a need for more advising time during CWE. The required library tour reverted to being an option for students, while several of the CWE sessions offered by support units such as the libraries were converted into a resource fair for both students and parents. These Tiger Tables, set up on the ground floor of the university's main undergraduate classroom building, Haley Center, allowed attendees to browse approximately twenty-five different information tables representing various student resources and services (e.g., Information Technology, Housing, Campus Transit, Health Services, and so on). During these sessions, librarians were on hand to answer questions, distribute library information (a library services brochure targeted to the undergraduate population and a subject liaison directory), and to encourage students to attend the optional library tours.

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Evolution of Snacks in the Stacks

In 2005, the libraries conducted an informal assessment of its participation in Tiger Tables. Were students and parents interested in the promotional material? How many attendees actually stopped by the tables to ask questions? What were the most frequently asked questions? Librarians noted that students often walked past the library table without taking information or asking questions. When librarians did press information into student hands, those handouts were often either quickly discarded into nearby waste receptacles or left on nearby tables.

Librarians staffing Tiger Tables commented that parents were usually the ones to actively seek out brochures and handouts, indicating that they were going to pass along the material to their students. Parents were also the ones who would pose questions. Those frequently asked involved student access to university computing, library work-study, hours of operation, and, with electronic access, whether their student would ever need to physically visit the library. Interestingly enough, many left the table with one last insightful, and rather humorous, comment. Parents hoped their sons and daughters would make use of the library much more than they themselves had while attending college!

Given this feedback, the library began to consider different ways to engage both parents and students at Tiger Tables. For CWE sessions during summer of 2006, the Reference and Instruction Department created a brochure for parents answering their most frequently asked questions. In addition, librarians discussed ways in which they could more effectively convey the nature of current library resources and services. Parents needed to understand that while many resources were indeed electronic, many more were not. In addition, librarians realized that they needed to do a better job marketing the personal, one-on-one reference and learning services that the libraries alone could provide. During one of departmental meetings, reference and instruction librarians agreed that these would be the talking points during Tiger Tables.

How then, could the libraries provide information to students? The libraries administration and reference and instruction faculty quickly came to realize that Tiger Tables was not the proper venue for providing a general student library orientation. Instead, the libraries decided to sponsor a fall open house for students—Tailgate @ the Libraries—the Friday before Auburn’s first home football game.⁵ During Tailgate, students would visit library services points and receive information. In addition, there would be games, giveaways, free food and special guests such as the marching band and the university mascot to encourage attendance and engage students during the event. During Tiger Tables, librarians would offer students candy and personally invite them to attend Tailgate.

After a visit to the University of Rochester in the fall of 2006, made for the purpose of meeting with the authors of the student-centered Rochester ethnography study, library administrators returned to Auburn and began to consider

new ways of reenvisioning the library for student use.⁶ The study also led to a renewed focus on “helicopter” parents, and the question of how frequent contact between parent and student might impact students’ information-seeking behavior.⁷ Auburn’s libraries administrators decided to explore the possibility of introducing information literacy education early in students’ academic careers through their parents. They began working with the Office of Undergraduate Education’s Freshmen Year Experience (FYE) on the initial planning stages of the libraries’ learning commons and academic support services collaboration within the libraries. These conversations also prompted the FYE staff to offer the libraries a dedicated time slot in the CWE parents’ program. These early evening sessions, during which light refreshments were served, became Snacks in the Stacks.

If You Feed Them, They Will Come

When the libraries began to discuss the logistics of the late afternoon timing of the Snacks in the Stacks event within the CWE parents’ schedule, a small working group of faculty and staff began to work out the details. The libraries’ food and drink policies had been liberal since the opening of the first coffee shop in the building nearly a decade before, so serving snacks was a given. The group thus was able to focus on larger concerns, such as where to hold the event, how to budget for the food, what to serve, and where to get the food. They quickly settled on holding the event in the Newspaper Reading Room, a multipurpose space often used for receptions and other library events. The group decided on minimal table decorations such as helium balloons, tablecloths, and paper goods in school colors to make the refreshments table attractive. The Dean’s Office student staff was tapped to do the setup and cleanup with help from faculty and staff in attendance each week. Campus facilities provided additional waste receptacles and recycling containers. The group decided to serve bottled water, a popular beverage among participants who had been walking outside all day in Alabama’s summer heat. Ice was donated through the generosity of the nearby Auburn University Hotel and Conference Center.

Food has been sponsored for the past three years by a local vendor that specializes in gift and care baskets for students. Fortuitously, just as the libraries undertook the expanded CWE involvement, the owners of the shop, who also happen to be Auburn alums and parents of current Auburn students, were just starting their business. They were anxious to market directly to students and their parents in as many ways as possible. The store owners were approached by a library administrator, who leveraged an already established friendship and knowledge of their fledgling enterprise into a win-win arrangement for the store and for the libraries. The store continues to be acknowledged during the Snacks in the Stacks presentation, and flyers from the shop are included in the parents’

information packet. Large thank-you signs with the store logo are also prominently displayed in the Newspaper Reading Room during the sessions. The shop donates all the snack items, which consist of easy-to-serve bulk items such as M&M's, mini pretzels, chocolate popcorn, spicy flavored bar mix, mixed nuts, and mini chocolate chip cookies. Before the first session each summer, several library staff pick up a generous amount of each snack item from the shop and, as supplies run low after several sessions, a phone call to the shop and another quick trip keeps the items replenished. The libraries provides large plastic serving bowls in school colors and metal scoops for the items, and parents help themselves—often more than once.

Parents have several opportunities to find out about the Snacks sessions before and during CWE. The FYE Office has listed the Snacks sessions in the CWE schedule, which is made available to parents prior to their arrival and is available online as well. The CWE parent counselors, a group of specially selected and trained Auburn students who serve as hosts and hostesses for the participants, are great ambassadors for Snacks, reminding parents of the sessions, encouraging them to attend, and even including a segment about the libraries in their informational skits. Librarians hand out printed invitations to Snacks at Tiger Tables and personally encourage parents to take an optional afternoon library tour and join them at Snacks in the Stacks for refreshments and library information just before dinner.

Each session starts at 5:30 as parents gather in the libraries' newspaper reading room, where they are first welcomed by librarians and library partners. Upon entering the room, attendees pass along a buffet table with the donated snack food. At the ends of the tables are large containers filled with ice and bottled water. Once parents help themselves to snacks, they are seated auditorium-style facing a screen and lectern. Until the official program begins, a slideshow of library events and library quick facts plays on the screen.

Greeted by libraries administrators, most often the dean of libraries, parents receive a brief orientation to basic library resources and services including hours of operation, information about collections, electronic database and journal subscriptions, computer and wireless access, work-study, and security. In addition, the dean introduces the instruction coordinator (IC) and library subject liaisons, as well as representatives for various library partners: the Office of Information Technology, Academic Success/Study Partners, and the Miller Writing Center. The IC emphasizes that students will be receiving the same kind of information about the libraries and its partners at the libraries' fall open house. She also introduces parents to the concept of information literacy and outlines how students will learn to use the library through the libraries' scaffolded information literacy and library instruction program, starting with the Freshman Year Experience and English Composition classes, and progressing to more advanced instruction provided by subject specialists in

upper-level undergraduate classes. The dean asks all CWE counselors to share ways they use the library to allow parents to hear real-life examples of how their students will use the library.

The floor is then opened for questions, and discussion is wholly driven by parental interest. Questions from parents are wide-ranging; one group may be concerned with copying and printing issues, another with details of electronic access, and another with opportunities for library instruction. Throughout the presentation and discussion, library personnel emphasize to parents that they can *best* support their daughters' and sons' academic success by encouraging them to take the initiative in contacting those who can assist them, especially the subject specialists who are experts in their daughters' and sons' chosen academic fields. At the end of the hour-long session, parents are encouraged to remain and talk with library faculty and library partners who circulate throughout the room. The CWE parent counselors also offer library tours to parents who may have missed the optional afternoon tour.

Parents also receive an information folder at the session that has been developed specifically for Snacks, with many of the materials relating directly to the kinds of questions librarians were receiving at Tiger Tables. Each item included in the folder has a particular purpose related to resources and services, information literacy, the libraries partners, marketing and public relations, and development. At the front of the folder is a welcome letter from the dean of the libraries. It sets the tone for the libraries as a welcoming place, staffed by library faculty with a genuine interest in the academic achievement of students. In addition, the letter highlights collections and resources, summarizes the libraries' efforts of the past few years to work with the Library Student Advisory Council to meet the expressed needs of the student body, and indicates a desire for future and continued contact with parents. Several brochures covering general library information, circulation and document delivery policies, community information, and gifts and development programs serve to educate parents about available services and resources. They also outline student responsibilities related to use of the library and its collections and highlight opportunities for financial support of the libraries in areas of direct benefit to students (for example, facilities and technology).

Parents receive a special invitation to Tailgate @ the Library, emphasizing that they are welcome to attend the fall open house with their child should they happen to be on campus that day. A copy of the libraries *TP Times* (a marketing and public relations newsletter periodically posted in the restrooms throughout the main library) includes additional information about the Library Student Advisory Council, Tailgate @ the Library, and security for the libraries' 24/5 schedule. A refrigerator magnet with the libraries' phone number, Web address, and ask-a-librarian e-mail is also provided, so that parents can have the libraries' contact information close at hand for those occasions when their sons and daughters may contact

them about research assignments. A promotional flyer and coupon from the Snacks food sponsor completes the informational materials.

Also included in the parents' packets are contact cards, which parents are asked to complete. These contact cards ask for name, mailing address, phone number, and e-mail address and are used to develop a directory for staying in touch with parents once CWE is over. Snacks attendees receive e-mail messages and electronic newsletters describing library events throughout the academic year. In 2007, 275 parents provided contact information; in 2008, 524 parents completed the cards, and in 2009, 298 did so.⁸ The libraries contact parents through electronic parent newsletters in September, November, and April. In addition, two or three more casual information e-mails are sent around the time of fall midterms (October) and just before spring break (March).

Assessing Snacks in the Stacks

Feedback from parents has been positive. At the end of Camp War Eagle, parents are asked to provide an evaluation of their session. On average, 93 percent of parent participants rated Snacks as "good" or "very good." The majority of open-ended responses indicate that sessions were "helpful" and "enjoyable." Another frequent comment expressed the hope that students would be receiving the same orientation to the library. In addition, parents communicated their thanks to the library for hosting the session.

Evidence of the effectiveness of Snacks in the Stacks on student library use is anecdotal at this point. It is not unusual for students, who stop by the reference desk, to refer to the fact that they had initially contacted their parents, and in turn were directed to the library. "I called my dad and asked him what a scholarly journal was," one student said during a recent in-person reference transaction. "He told me to come here and ask you." Another student commented: "My mom—she'd kill me if I didn't come and ask you guys!"

Certainly, the sessions allow the libraries to communicate directly and immediately with parents about library and campus-wide issues. After an unfortunate incident of violence involving an Auburn student in 2008, a parent who attended a Snacks session expressed concern in an e-mail to the associate dean for public services about safety related to 24-hour access to the Ralph Brown Draughon Main Library. The libraries used the contact information gathered during Snacks sessions to assure parents who attended the sessions that the university was responding to their concerns by creating a new, permanent security escort service to accompany students to their parked cars in two lots adjacent to the library.

Looking Ahead

Attendance to Snacks remains consistent, with an average of one hundred parents attending each of the eight

summer sessions for the past three years. The libraries is considering further evaluation of the event and will solicit additional participant feedback this summer by e-mailing parents within a week of their visit, thanking them for their participation and asking them to fill out a survey specific to Snacks. In an effort to improve the sessions, parents will be asked to evaluate the format and timing of the sessions, as well as the usefulness and desirability of printed information distributed.

The libraries will continue to host Snacks in an effort to help parents understand the role that the libraries play in Auburn students' academic life and success. By informing parents about library resources and services, library faculty members hope to lead parents to a broader understanding of the libraries' educational mission, and in turn, enlist parents as advocates for the library.

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