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Research Tools for Graduate Students: Reflections on Eight Years of Graduate Student Workshops

Lisa Becksford Russell¹

ABSTRACT

This article will describe the author's graduate student outreach efforts over the last eight years, including graduate student orientations, open houses, and workshops. The development of a long-running graduate student workshop series is described in detail, and the author shares lessons learned from her outreach experiences.

Keywords: library instruction, library orientation, graduate students, online learning, research skills

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RESEARCH TOOLS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS: REFLECTIONS ON EIGHT YEARS OF GRADUATE STUDENT WORKSHOPS

When I became an instruction librarian in 2015, my focus was on first-year undergraduate students. Even though my university has a large graduate student population, I didn't think too much about the needs of graduate students until in 2016 I took on the liaison role to the School of Education, which at the time offered only graduate programs. Suddenly, a significant portion of my instruction and consultations were dedicated to graduate students, and I became aware of the ways in which their needs are both different from and similar to those of first-year undergraduates. As I spent more time with graduate students, I realized that while subject liaisons at my university offered consultations and one-shot instruction for graduate students, there were no cross-disciplinary, non-course-integrated library instruction programs for graduate students. Some graduate students had opportunities to acquire library research skills through liaison-led instruction, either in their classes or through participation in enrichment programs, but without this exposure, many other graduate students struggled to conduct library research, manage references, and understand the scholarly publishing landscape. From my conversations with graduate students, I realized that many of them were embarrassed at their lack of knowledge of these topics but were hesitant to ask their advisers or professors for help, believing that they should already know about these things and therefore needed to hide their ignorance. The University Libraries at Virginia Tech offered a wide range of resources and services that could benefit students, but it was difficult to get the word out. In this essay, I'll describe my efforts over the last eight years to provide graduate students with a variety of opportunities to engage with the library and develop their research skills, as well as some lessons I've learned along the way.

GETTING STARTED

In Fall 2016, I began a series of orientation sessions for graduate students to share the ways that the library could support them. These sessions were inspired by a chance conversation with the Graduate School's student services manager, who mentioned that the library had held orientation sessions for graduate students several years in the past. Since the librarian who had coordinated these sessions was no longer at the university, I decided to plan a series of in-person sessions to introduce students to the resources available to them at the library. The Graduate School provided refreshments, and four sessions were held on Friday mornings in September 2016. While only seven or eight students attended each session, the feedback was generally positive, and the Graduate School was appreciative.

Seeking to capitalize on the success of the sessions, we held the orientation series again in Fall 2017 and Fall 2018, this time on Thursday evenings with pizza and drinks provided. Rather than leading all the sessions, I invited colleagues from across the library to share information about their services. Doing so made the series more sustainable for me, and it also gave students the chance to meet additional library faculty and have their questions answered more thoroughly than I could. These sessions were well attended, with an average of 25 students per session, and while feedback was generally positive, several students indicated that it would have been nice not just to learn about the databases or the fact that we offered data management support, but also to learn how to search databases and manage data.

In May 2017, I became the Online and Graduate Engagement Librarian, a position that shifted my focus almost entirely to graduate students, and I realized that I needed to better understand the needs of these students. In Spring 2018, I launched a needs assessment that asked students what they thought was important for success in graduate school as well as what they needed the most help with. It also asked about their preferences for workshop modality. At that time, students indicated a preference for a combination of in-person and online workshops on topics including research skills, data management, scholarly publishing, and citation management. Because of the timing of the needs assessment and data processing, the orientation sessions in Fall 2018 continued to focus on information sharing rather than instruction, though I emphasized ways that students could get personal help with these topics.

In Fall 2019, in consultation with the Graduate School, I began the Research Skills for Graduate Students Workshop series, which has been held every semester since. This nine-workshop series began with an early-semester open house held in the library's multi-purpose room, where students could come and talk to representatives from various library departments about the services offered for graduate students. Free food and library swag were offered, and around 40 students attended. The workshop series began in mid-September, with sessions offered on database searching and literature reviews in multiple disciplines; data management; citation managers (EndNote, Mendeley, and Zotero); and scholarly publishing. I taught the citation manager sessions as well as a session on literature reviews and database searching in the social and behavioral sciences, and library colleagues taught the remaining five sessions: Introduction to Research Data Management; Literature Reviews and Database Searching for the Animal and Life Sciences; Literature Reviews and Database Searching for Engineering; Developing Your Online Scholarly Presence; and Promoting Your Scholarly Work Online. Each session was hybrid, with both a classroom and a Zoom option offered. The recordings of the Zoom sessions were hosted on a LibGuide for

later viewing. The six sessions attracted a combined 83 attendees, and the videos received 77 views by the end of the fall semester. The series was held again in Spring 2020, including the open house, with all workshops held before spring break and the transition to online learning due to Covid-19. Attendance was nearly the same as in the fall, with 84 students attending. Student feedback indicated that they appreciated the chance to dive into these topics rather than just learning that the library supported them.

With Virginia Tech doing a significant amount of online teaching in Fall 2020, and with many in the library, including myself, working fully remotely, I decided to continue the sessions in Fall 2020, only this time held completely over Zoom. Since then, the workshops have been offered entirely over Zoom. The number of workshops offered per semester has ranged from eight to 13. I teach four or five of them, and other library faculty teach the rest. The number of attendees per semester has varied from 72 in Fall 2020 to an unexpected peak of 221 in Fall 2022. A full breakdown of attendance numbers can be seen in Figure 1. In total, there have been over 1,200 workshop attendees since Fall 2019, and the recordings of the sessions have been viewed over 700 times.

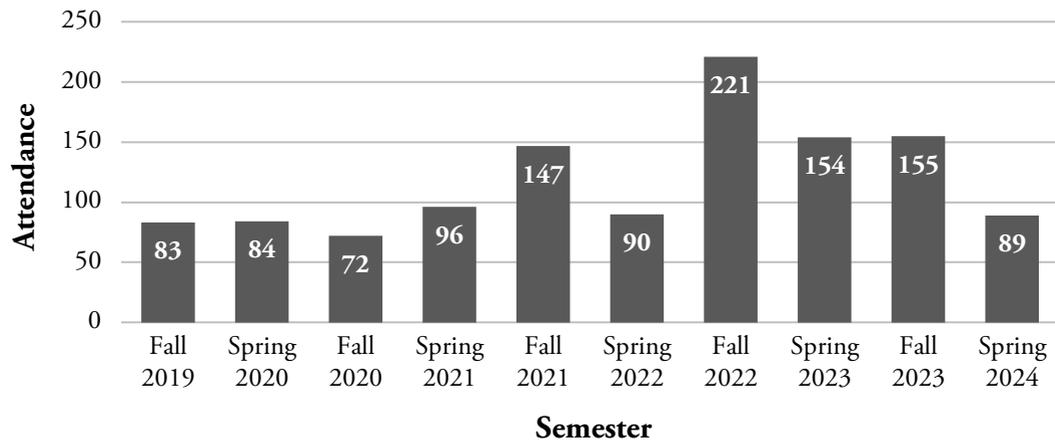
LESSONS LEARNED

Here are some things I've learned through these various outreach efforts, and the workshop series in particular, that may be helpful to others:

Partnerships Are Key

The Graduate School has been a key partner in my outreach efforts. The original orientation sessions were inspired by a conversation with the student services manager in the Graduate School, and they provided refreshments before I had a budget for them. The Graduate School has promoted the workshops in their orientation materials every semester, and they've also put them on the Graduate School calendar. I also promote the workshops through their weekly newsletter. In addition, the workshops have been an entry point to other outreach opportunities; I have been invited to speak at orientations and staff booths at student resource fairs because of the ongoing relationship I've built with the Graduate School through the workshop series.

The partnerships with other library faculty have been important as well. While I personally teach several sessions every semester, at least half of the sessions are taught by others within the library. I promise the other instructors that all they have to do is show up and teach, and I'll handle scheduling, marketing, session captioning, and recording. They always seem

Figure 1*Workshop Attendance by Semester*

to appreciate the chance to teach with fewer logistical hurdles. Having them as partners helps me as well; while I still need to be present for all workshops, which takes up time in my day during already-busy instruction times, having to teach only five or so of the sessions every semester helps prevent burnout.

Expect Far Lower Attendance Than Registration

When I was developing the orientation sessions, the Graduate School told me that for their events, they estimated that only about 30% of those who registered would attend, and that number was consistent with my experience: Overall, about 28% percent of those who registered attended, with the percentage fluctuating and generally declining as the semester progressed. While it can be frustrating to have 18 people register for a session and then have only two attend, I can't blame them, since I explicitly allow students to register in order to receive the recording, even if they can't attend. (Who among us hasn't signed up for a free webinar only to realize that what sounded like a good idea at the time no longer seems like something we want to do?)

Be Responsive to Student Needs

Every semester, I reevaluate my approach to these workshops. It's all too easy to just recycle materials from semester to semester without considering whether the approaches that

worked in the past would still work. At the time I'm writing this, the original needs assessment is six years old, and it may be time for a new one to see what students need now. As we've moved out of the pandemic, I've also considered whether or not the all-online format is best. Students will occasionally provide feedback that they would like an in-person opportunity, but online is so much easier to schedule and seems to work with the majority of students' schedules. It also allows us to reach local students, extended campus students, and online students. Since the extended campus and online populations can sometimes feel neglected by those on the main campus, being able to reach them easily is important. In addition, after conducting both fully online and hybrid instruction, I've found that fully online teaching is far easier logistically, and my sense is that students prefer the uniform experience of fully online learning rather than a subpar hybrid experience.

Use Scheduling Tools Available to You

At my library, we use LibCal to schedule workshops and other events, and I've found it to be invaluable for easy scheduling. I'm able to quickly generate Zoom links, and students can easily register for the sessions. I also set up automated reminders and follow-up emails, which decrease the amount of administrative work required for the sessions. I'm also able to copy event descriptions from semester to semester and simply make minor changes such as the date, time, and feedback survey link.

Create a Central Place to House Registration Links and Course Materials

I created a LibGuide (<https://guides.lib.vt.edu/gradworkshops>) to hold all registration information and course materials, including recordings. Having this central link means that I can share just that link in all marketing materials and communications rather than individual links for each session. Many students register for multiple sessions, and my sense is that seeing the whole list of possibilities encourages them to sign up for more than one session.

Each semester, I market the workshops in several ways. The Graduate School puts them on their calendars and orientation materials; I send announcements out on the weekly Graduate School newsletter; I ask liaison librarians to share the materials with their departments; and the individual sessions are promoted through the library's calendar page, including on screens throughout the library. Despite this wide range of marketing approaches, I will sometimes still hear from students that they wish they'd had more advance notice or receive a request for a recording from someone who didn't find out about a workshop until after it was over. Even if I get a fairly large number of students to register, few who sign up will

actually attend. In my regular assessments of the workshop series, I evaluate my marketing efforts and consider whether there are any additional avenues I could explore. However, I also recognize that even the best marketing efforts have limitations; I can't make anyone sign up for the sessions, and I can't control whether they actually attend.

CONCLUSION

Looking back over eight years of outreach, I'm pleased with the direction the workshop series has taken, particularly over the last five years, and the number of students it has reached. After 10 semesters of workshops, I'm planning to thoroughly evaluate the series and decide if any radical changes are needed, and I'm considering conducting another needs assessment. I look forward to continuing to find ways to help graduate students connect with the library.