

Caitlin Tillman

# Library orientation for professors

## Give a pitch, not a tour

**W**hat should a librarian say when addressing faculty? Because our professional literature concentrates more on the librarian's undergraduate constituency than it does on professors, transient patrons at the expense of the permanent, finding answers to this question can be difficult. At the University of Ottawa Library we face this problem every summer when we participate in the university-wide orientation program for new professors. Our library orientation consists of an interactive presentation on the library for incoming professors from several faculties and includes a university-provided breakfast and lunch. The session consistently attracts a large number of professors and is often the most popular event in the entire orientation program, and therefore constitutes a major opportunity to establish a productive relationship between researchers and research resources and services. However, until recently, we inadvertently communicated an outmoded vision of the library's role in the university. We used the presentation to describe collections and instructional services, instead of demonstrating that the library is more than a repository of books. We needed to stress, the more complex range of services we increasingly provide and the expanding research potential of the librarian in the digital age.

### **Library orientation for professors is a marketing opportunity**

Most academics probably do not need to be sold on the importance of a campus library, but many may have to be sold on the usefulness of the campus librarian. This is

hardly surprising; our own literature rarely discusses faculty services or needs, concentrating instead on students—specifically instruction and information literacy. When giving orientation sessions we tend follow the familiar instruction model of highlighting databases and demonstrating search techniques. A catalog tour or explanation of Boolean operators may prove useful to some members of the audience, but it does little to convince faculty members that librarians understand their ambition to write an award-winning book or attract graduate students. So if you find yourself in the fortunate position of addressing a group of professors, tell them what they want to hear: the library defines its success in terms of the success of its faculties' research and teaching. As a result, librarians want to tailor acquisitions and provide services to support specific faculty agendas but can do so only to the extent that the faculty talk to the librarians.

### **So what can you do to market your importance to a group of professors?**

- **Make “talk to us” your most important point. Start with this, end with this, and mention it every chance you get.** The audience should eventually be saying it with you. If your library has assigned librarians to specific groups of faculty, be sure to point this out so that your audience knows that there is a particular librarian dedicated to them. In

---

Caitlin Tillman is acting associate director of Morisset Library at the University of Ottawa, e-mail: [ctillman@uottawa.ca](mailto:ctillman@uottawa.ca)

© 2008 Caitlin Tillman

our session, we ask as many librarians as possible to come for the opening remarks or the lunch so that they can introduce themselves to the faculty. This gives the faculty member a chance to talk to someone who works at the physical library and helps put a human face on an increasingly virtual space. Distribute the business cards of librarians who cannot attend the session.

- **Engage discussion.** We encourage interruptions and solicit questions to try to make the session as informal as possible. Spend some time getting to know the people in the audience. Ask them questions about their research and then, if possible, highlight the library's strengths in their area or suggest a few ways the library can otherwise assist their research.

- **Emphasize the role the library plays in research and teaching.** We do this by informing the faculty members of library services, such as interlibrary loan and acquisition funds for building new collections, and by asking the information literacy librarian briefly to present collaborative library instruction opportunities. If you can afford to buy all requested books, do not miss this opportunity to tell them. If you cannot, sell them on your interlibrary loan system or suggest buying a list of books over several years. When faculty members believe that librarians want to help them win teaching awards and book prizes, they might be more willing to trust us to teach their students, and maybe even them.

- **Stress the fundamentally collaborative aspect of collection building and instruction.** We remind professors that we are not mind readers and that we need regular input from them to integrate our resources to their needs. For example, we point out that gaps in the collection and the omission of specific library workshops—two frequent problems—often exist because faculty members do not keep us informed about their work or new courses. We then stress our willingness to work with them to make their courses successful and provide examples of previous productive faculty-librarian collaborations.

- **Describe the library's strengths and weaknesses honestly.** To benefit from the full potential of the library's resources, faculty need as precise an understanding of the collections' weak spots and limitations as they do of its strengths and capabilities. In addition, speaking with equal candour and precision about weaknesses as well as strengths will help gain the trust of incoming faculty, who will hear first from you what they will subsequently hear from colleagues.

- **Pick one interesting product, event, or promotion to discuss.** The abundance of electronic information makes it difficult for researchers to keep abreast of new products, even within their own fields. Let faculty members know that the library will do this for them. Emphasize this point with a short demonstration. We invite faculty members to contact us for one-on-one assistance and alert them to our calendar of instructional workshops. In your demonstration, remember that it is not an instruction session—in this context the research tool is the librarian, not the database.

- **Ensure a working, stable, and fast connection.** Because the virtual aspect of the academic library is a large component of the services offered, a mediocre connection to your own services will reflect poorly on the competence of the library. Take responsibility for a good connection. Even if the event is not held in the library building, involve your own IT staff to ensure a reliable connection. Library IT staff know the products and the importance of the event to the library.

- **Involve those responsible for marketing and promotion in the library.** We distribute goodie bags prepared by our marketing committee that include library-branded items and gifts from vendors. Some may object that handing out vendors' gifts implies library endorsement of a particular product or group of products, rather than promoting the library itself. In our case, we think the distribution of branded items and vendors' gifts is worth the risk, since our goal is to promote faculty awareness of library

*(continues on page 475)*

group, not just students. We need to include, reach out, and encourage faculty, as well.

### Compelled to get started?

Here are some ways to start acting on your own campus:

1. Share your and your fellow librarians' successes and interests. Given the pace of change in both libraries and technology, does your faculty know what today's libraries are really about?

2. Get out there! Librarians are educators, teachers, and colleagues too. Go to a faculty event. Create a faculty event. Mingle, even if it is difficult for you.

3. Present, publish, and share among faculty, not just your library peers. Librarians are amazing at sharing ideas, thoughts, and applications with each other. But as I have tried to point out here, faculty need to be reached as well. Take a chance: submit a conference proposal for an nonlibrary conference about what you're doing to bring 2.0 to students.

2.0 technology has changed the landscape of computing, information sharing, and content creation. With it comes changes to how we collaborate, learn, and teach. That change needs to be shared with all of our patrons, and particularly our faculties. Faculty play many roles at our institutions. They are gateways to our students, partners in the educational process, and educators, but they are also patrons and learners themselves.

Librarians must use their skills as instructors and act as partners in the academic environment. 2.0 offers many opportunities for sharing, learning, and communicating. Let's use them to engage our faculty, both virtually and face-to-face.

### Notes

1. Mark Edmundson, "Dwelling in Possibilities," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 54.27 (14 Mar. 2008): B7.

2. Gloria J. Leckie "Desperately Seeking Citations: Undercovering Faculty Assumptions about the Undergraduate Research Process," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 22.3 (May 1996): 201–8.

3. "Observations—What Does This Mean?" ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2007, Sept. 2007, [www.educause/ecar](http://www.educause/ecar)

4. "Explanations In Plain English," [www.commoncraft.com/show](http://www.commoncraft.com/show).

5. "Wikis in Plain English," [www.commoncraft.com/video-wikis-plain-english](http://www.commoncraft.com/video-wikis-plain-english).

6. Melissa Mallon, "My thoughts on ACRL's Springboard Event." Weblog post. ACRLLog. 2 April 2008, [acrlog.org/2008/04/02/my-thoughts-on-acrls-springboard-event/](http://acrlog.org/2008/04/02/my-thoughts-on-acrls-springboard-event/). ❧

---

*("Library orientation..." continues from p. 471)*

services. A visible presence among faculty of library pens, tote bags, and similar products may not illuminate the real strengths of your library, but it will implicitly reinforce the library's presence on campus.

• **Always finish by offering a tour of the library.** There may be people in the audience who signed up in the expectation of one.

### Conclusion

Librarians can play a catalytic role in the process of persuading faculty that we are one of the library's best resources, capable of bringing a wide range of specialized knowledge to help solve any problem and advance any research agenda. To communicate that vision, librarians need to speak effectively and persuasively to faculty. We need to recognize that faculty constitute a fundamentally different audience than undergraduate and graduate students, with fundamentally different needs and outlooks. We have recently begun to address this issue in our orientation program for new professors. In the absence of formal literature on the subject, we have proceeded through trial and error. We modify both content and style of the presentation every year, trying always to improve the presentation on the basis of past experience. We have found the points outlined above consistently effective, and offer them as a useful first step in a relatively unexplored but important subject. ❧