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## What about the books?

Valuing students' past library experiences

In 2019, the Utah State University Libraries' first-year student orientation took an unexpected blow when it was made optional in the new student orientation program after being required for more than a decade. We want to make sure that students know about the resources available to them through their library at the beginning of their college careers, and this change felt devastating.

In a strong push to prove our worth and gain some much-needed validation, we held focus groups with our first-year students to hear what they thought of their library and how the library orientation impacted them. Our secret motive was to reinstate the library workshop as a requirement for all first-year students. After doing our IRB diligence, we successfully recruited 48 students to participate and held four focus groups, two sessions with library orientation participants and two with nonparticipants.

The dominating topic of conversation for our students surprised and maybe even frustrated us. What was the topic on everyone's tongue? Books, books, and books! Sure, the focus groups of participants—students who took the library orientation—had a more nuanced and broader idea of what the library does. But about 30% of the responses in all groups to “what does the library do?” mentioned books, and 20% of total comments discussed books. It seemed like the only people who didn't want to talk about books were us librarians.

When planning our library orientations, we must be strategic and creative when we decide which library services to include. How do we decide what are the most essential library services to tell our students about in our first interactions with them? Personal experience? Statistics? Assessment? Do our egos come in to play at any point? As librarians, we can get offended when people assume we are “just books” or that we spend all our time reading and shelving. One way we fight against this stereotype is by exploring the library's other valuable services and resources with students, often leaving books by the wayside or mentioning them as an afterthought. But our focus groups consistently wanted to talk about books, often lamenting that they hadn't checked out books in the library and, indeed, didn't even know how to do it. So, not only did first-year students bring up books as if books are the essence of the library, they also said they had no idea how books worked in the library. This exacerbated the students' confusion; they seemed concerned that if they didn't know how to find books in the library, they really didn't understand the library at all.

Hearing from our students made us question if our quick dismissal of books was doing our students (and ourselves) a great disservice. Of course, we should continue to promote

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that our services go far beyond books. How to find books is often not the most relevant information for students to know right out of the gate, but what we want to do more than anything is lower our students' anxiety about the library. And our research showed that by ignoring books during orientations we may have been working against that ultimate goal.

Orientations shouldn't only focus on the services valued by librarians, and they shouldn't ignore what our students already know; we should connect to what they already know to ease their anxiety. During first-year orientation, students are introduced to so many new and unfamiliar things, but many first-year students probably went into the library orientation feeling comfortably confident, thinking, "Oh yes I know libraries, I've been going to libraries since I was a kid; I'm going to learn how to get books." But then the orientation starts, and we throw everything else at them: course reserves, open educational resources, study room reservations, research support. They leave feeling overwhelmed about all these new additional services while realizing they also don't know how to do the one thing they expected to learn: how to check out the books at their new library. We completely ignored an area of the library that may have been one of connection and familiarity. We managed to overwhelm our new students with extraneous information and make their one area of comfort an additional area of confusion. Ignoring student's past experiences and expectations is beneficial to no one.

Why do we fight misconceptions of the academic library rather than lean into them? If the library is a playful, creative space—and not just a book repository—why not be playful and creative about this rather than telling students they are wrong at one of their most vulnerable times in college? We should connect with students' experiences by embracing books rather than neglecting them. Even as professionals we can sometimes let our emotions take control of our work. We admittedly began a research study craving validation after we felt our work had been devalued. But we cannot let our feelings get in the way of hearing our students, and we should not let our frustrations about the misconceptions of our profession influence how we introduce our students to our work. It is possible to be both authentic to ourselves and our students' experiences, and books may actually be the perfect opportunity for us to connect. After all, aren't books what originally drew many of us to the field? *zz*