

Fuel for finals

Improving the end of semester experience

It's the end of the semester. Students are frazzled, tired, and low on money. By finals week there's only so much librarians can do to help. Or is there? Obviously these closing days of the semester bring lots of students into the library just to use it as a study space. Most of us appreciate this use of "library as place."

In recent years the Penn State Erie, The Behrend College Lilley Library has been doing the traditional things to make the building more inviting to students: adding more comfortable furniture, more group study space, more technology, and more appealing décor, including plants and artwork. Aside from these physical changes, it turns out that there are other things that can improve the "library as place" experience. It seems that sugar and caffeine are items high on the student end-of-semester wish list. In response, we instituted our Finals Coffee Break.

Origins

The idea for the finals week coffee break originated in our campus library advisory committee. Though a pre-Starbucks-era vending machine dispenses passable coffee in a nearby hallway, the sole student member of the committee suggested that a coffee shop be added to the library. The committee's consultation with the head of Food Services resulted in the realization that space and profitability constraints would make the idea untenable. Instead, he floated the idea that we support our students with a finals week coffee break.

Partnering with other groups on campus

Running a free coffee bar turns out to be an expensive proposition. In these trying budgetary times, this was not an operation we could afford to do directly out of the discretionary

library budget. Luckily, the idea won support from two other campus office—the Student Government and Food Services. With the cost of supplies divided three ways and with the library providing all of the labor, it became an affordable project. Most semesters, Student Government provides about half of the funds for this project.

Serving up the java

The coffee bar runs on the Sunday through Thursday of finals week from 7 p.m. until midnight (or until supplies run out). This corresponds to the nights prior to exam days. Food Services delivers supplies on a daily basis, replenishing items as needed. These include: ground coffee, tea bags, cocoa mix, creamer, sugar and sugar-substitutes, stirrers, cups, lids, and cardboard sleeves for the cups. Hot water and coffee are provided by rented electric urns or percolators, which have a total capacity of nearly 350 cups (6 oz.). The largest one, dubbed "Big Bertha," has a 100-cup capacity, "Big Urn" holds 55, and "Little Urn" maxes out at about 40. Most importantly, bakery-fresh cookies arrive daily.

To control costs, librarians and other library staff provide all of the necessary labor. Though "librarian-as-barista" might have a future, demand from our students is so high that it is all we can do just to keep the coffee, hot water, and cookies coming, so self-service is a necessity. The scale of the project requires that the first rounds of heated water and brewed coffee are started by 5 p.m., two hours ahead

Russell A. Hall is reference librarian, e-mail: rah29@psu.edu, Jane Ingold is reference librarian, e-mail: jli4@psu.edu, Richard Hart is director, e-mail: rqh8psu.edu, at Penn State Erie, The Behrend College's John M. Lilley Library

© 2012 Russell A. Hall, Jane Ingold, and Richard Hart

of opening. Once they are transferred to “air pot” carafes for storage and serving, new pots are brewed. Cookies, which arrive on one or two large trays, are transferred to more manageable serving plates. All supplies, including cups, lids, napkins, tea bags, and cocoa mix, are stocked on a book truck just out of sight and ready to be quickly placed on two large, decorated tables. Trash cans are strategically placed at the end of both serving tables.

At 7 p.m., the coffee and cookie chaos begins. As soon as we put the first coffee out, there is immediately a line of 15 to 20 students. The cookies are swiftly obliterated, so we replace them on the half-hour, rather

half coffee. Last semester we added assorted herbal and decaf teas after noticing how often students brought their own. Last fall we added packaged cookies from the local bakery, but this spring we bought all the cookies from the bakery department at our local Sam’s Club to stretch our dollars.

Student response

The students have had only praise for the coffee bar. They often exhibit a sense of disbelief: “Wow, I can’t believe the library staff is doing this.” It’s quite nice to see our students texting their friends to come to the library, while they’re standing in line waiting



Penn State Erie, The Behrend College students enjoying the Finals Coffee Break.

than restocking as soon as they’re gone. It’s all a game of keeping up with the demand as staff is continually replenishing the coffee condiments and refilling air pots from urns that have been standing by. As soon as the urns are emptied, they are refilled and set to brew more coffee and hot water. With a bit of luck we are able to meet demand with little or no delays in service, though when delays occurred, our student customers have been understanding and patient.

Surprisingly, we go through a lot of hot water. Not so much for tea, but rather for hot cocoa. Many students seem to do a “make-your-own” mocha by doing half cocoa and

for coffee. The most common comment is, “Thank you very much” or “This is great.” Another classic comment is, “This is so great. I’m going to be here all night and need the energy.” But an even higher compliment is getting some students into the library for the first time. One student was observed to be the target of some good-natured ribbing from some friends, who kidded him for coming to the library for the first time, and only because of the coffee bar. One of our favorite comments is, “You are lovely people.” Some students are so happy to be getting free coffee that, unbidden, they start helping us set up the tables.

Lessons learned

Want to try this at home? Here are some tips. When an urn is marked for 100 cups, it means 6-ounce tea cups. If you give away free refillable, library-approved 16-ounce mugs (as we did on our very first night), you will run out of coffee very quickly. Know that powdered cocoa mix can and will make a mess of your linens, and large quantities of piping-hot coffee grounds are hard to clean up. You can't have enough cookies and hot water. Urns may not fit under your faucet. Our first night we filled a punch bowl with water and asked a tall student to pour it in. We now own two one-gallon pitchers and they are filled and waiting to be poured into the next empty urn.

Ask your maintenance department for advice on where to plug things in so you don't blow a fuse. Also, check that any surge protectors you plan to use actually work. Always check that the spigot on the empty urn is closed before pouring in new water. Cloth kitchen towels are more useful than paper. Although our student

workers help replenish supplies, we refrain from asking them to handle hot pots and urns.

Assessment

Spring 2012 marked our fourth Finals Coffee Break. It's difficult to find a metric to use to mark how much "business" we do, since we don't have time to count the number of students going through the line because we're so busy keeping the coffee bar stocked. We settled on counting the number of cups used. While this is an imperfect measure, at least it gives us a benchmark to compare from semester to semester. It's difficult to say whether we're moving more coffee because our building head counts are up, or if our head-counts are up because we're giving away refreshments. What's undoubted though is that we've seen an increase in the popularity of the event over these last four semesters. In the end, the success of the Finals Coffee Break is best measured by the grateful and happy expressions on the faces of our students. *~*

("BLASTing the zombies," cont. from page 543)

Overall, the pet therapy was an incredibly successful activity and was a key angle in promoting all of our finals break room offerings. One student tweeted, "[t]here are dogs in the library right now. Atkins, are you trying to make me fail my comm theory exam?"

One other consideration is the university's policy on "non-service dogs" in a building. We ended up scrambling the day before their arrival to get express permission from the chancellor for the dogs to enter the building.

Although we asked students to post their comments about the BLAST room on our Facebook page or to tweet about it, they seemed to have preferred writing their comments on a white board. Perhaps it is better to catch them in the moment, before their minds stray back to more pressing issues. We plan to place more white boards near the entrance to the room as well as inside it. The comments they wrote were very positive ("this break room is amazing!") as were the comments they made to the staff who restocked and tidied the room.

Conclusion

Atkins Library has all types of spaces (i.e., quiet zones, group study rooms, collaborative work tables) to accommodate the different ways today's students study. We have a large commuting population that occupies the library between classes and is accustomed to the services we provide. We also have students who never use the library until exams are upon them. Trying to reach all of them can be like attempting to nail JELL-O to a tree—some of them slip away from us despite our best efforts. Friends, family, instructors, and student organizations are vying for the attention of the average student—getting their attention is the first step. Once you have it, the message must be clear: the library is genuinely invested in student success, and offers the personnel, spaces, technology, and services to achieve it. . . . and we definitely don't want them to eat our brains.

(continues on page 569)

college librarian at Wheaton College in Massachusetts for 17 years before joining Bowdoin. In recognition of her dedication to the college, the Bowdoin College Alumni Council presented Bergman with the 2012 Alumni Service Award for Faculty and Staff. Under Bergman's leadership, Bowdoin's Hawthorne-Longfellow Library underwent a \$6.4 million



Sherrie Bergman

renovation (completed in 2005); collections grew to more than 1 million volumes; the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, and the Bowdoin Digital Commons were established; and the scope of the library's offerings was expanded through shared library catalogs with Colby and Bates colleges, and the Maine InfoNet and NExpress consortia. Active professionally, Bergman's ALA involvement included service as chairperson of ACRL's College Libraries Section; president of ACRL-New England; ALA Councilor; cofounder of the LLAMA Women Administrators Discussion Group;

membership on the Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship; planning committees for several ACRL conferences; and active participation in the College Library Directors Mentoring Program and the Dr. E. J. Josey Spectrum Scholar Mentor Program.

Cathy Miesse, assistant dean for technical services and outreach, has retired after 27 years of service to the Loyola University-Chicago Libraries. Miesse went to Loyola from Governors State University in July 1985, where she had been reference coordinator. At Loyola she was head of circulation and head of access services before assuming the position of assistant dean in 2006. Miesse is very active in ALA, especially with LLAMA, where she has held prominent positions on several committees. At Loyola she was responsible for the Friends of the Libraries Speaker Series, a mentoring program for new library faculty and staff, and the libraries' annual celebration of faculty scholarship.

Joe L. Storey, associate director and head of Collections Support Services at the St. Mary's College of Maryland Library, has retired after 33 years of service. *~*

("Digital Humanities" cont. from page 539)

of Maryland-College Park. *Access:* <http://dhsi.org/> and <http://mith.umd.edu/dhwi/>.

• **THATCamp.** The Humanities and Technology Camps, described as "unconferences" with no formal agenda or presentations, have exploded across the country and worldwide in the last couple of years. All participants contribute, in a collegial setting, to creating tools, problem-solving, discussing issues, etc.

Camps are usually small, with an average of 75 participants. *Access:* <http://thatcamp.org/>.

Notes

1. For further resources, see our research guide "Digital Humanities" at <http://guides.lib.cua.edu/digitalhumanities>.
2. Visit <http://codeyear.com> for more information about the Code Year Web site. *~*

("BLASTing the zombies," cont. from page 546)

Notes

1. Special thanks to the BLAST Committee: Marc Bess, Edna Dash, Betty Ladner, Donna Lanclos, Stephanie Otis, Beth Scarborough, and Shoko Tokoro.

2. The Paws for Exam Therapy video is located at <http://youtu.be/xOPoNF7ZMnc> *~*