
Throwing a Research Party, Deconstructing the Reference Desk

Bringing a Social Component to Research

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In an era of declining reference statistics it is refreshing to read about creative ways libraries are encouraging students to use their services. Librarians at Penn State University's Abington campus provide an example of a low-cost, high-impact event they piloted.—*Editors*

As the traditional reference desk model evolves, and in some cases disappears,¹ librarians continue to seek new ways to engage students with the library's services and resources beyond the physical space of the building. Academic librarians are innovating ways to get students comfortable using the human, physical, and digital resources in the library with events such as Open House Tailgate Parties,² FYE Scavenger Hunts,³ and even overnight anti-procrastination events.⁴ At Penn State Abington, we are no different in our efforts to forge connections. Our Research Party events have been successful in engaging students with research assistance while also encouraging them to see themselves as members of a community of scholars.

Penn State Abington is an undergraduate commuter campus in the Philadelphia suburbs with roughly four thousand students. The library is often bustling and crowded with students working individually and collaboratively, or gathering with friends—a good problem to have. At the same time, our reference desk model, like that at many other universities, is undergoing reevaluation due to a decline in use, leaving librarians less visible in the library. In addition, the majority of our research consultations take place in individual librarian offices and instruction mainly occurs outside the library, which has prompted us to look for additional ways to engage students with library resources and introduce them to the services that librarians provide. Moreover, we want to capitalize on the social aspects of the library and steer students toward a more academic context in which they would come to view each other not only as peers, but also as a community of scholars.

From this desire to connect, the Research Party was born. Based on an idea started at the University of Pennsylvania,⁵ we sought to combine the social nature of our library with the research assistance provided at the reference desk. In this context we hoped to tap into the increasing move toward collaborative working styles and bring students together in the spirit of the social nature of research—one in which professional academic colleagues consult each other, bounce ideas off each other, and seek each other's thoughts and opinions. At the same time, by providing librarian assistance and moving away from the one-patron-at-a-time service point,

we hoped to deconstruct and recontextualize the reference desk and the model for providing research consultations.

Conversations with faculty indicated that final paper and project assignments would be handed out just after spring break. With that in mind we planned a three-hour mid-day party staffed with two librarians for the middle of March, and a second party a few weeks later in April, hoping the events would be strategically timed to match students' points of need. Attendance for the two parties totaled sixteen students. Although some initially came just for the party perks or to support a friend, we ended up helping fifteen of the sixteen with various aspects of their projects or research process. For a party, those attendance numbers are not high, but considering our goal was to create a relaxed social context for research assistance, fifteen involved reference transactions over the course of six hours tells a different story.

Though organizing a Research Party does not require a great deal of time, it will be successful when it combines well-coordinated logistics, marketing to key stakeholders, and having a host mindset during the event. It has the added benefit of requiring a relatively small budget and can be done with as few as two librarians.

LOGISTICS

Space. Because our primary means of interacting with students through campus instruction often doesn't happen in the library, we felt it was crucial to host the party in our library classroom and to make it research friendly by borrowing campus laptops and having them fired up and ready to go. Using the library as the party venue also afforded some additional benefits: it gave students access to printing and to our physical materials in addition to the digital resources they can access online anywhere. Keeping it in a classroom, rather than in a higher-traffic area, allowed those who attended to talk a little louder than normal without disturbing students who might be studying.

Food. As with most college events, food is a must. Our budget was small for this event; therefore, we kept it simple with chips, granola bars, cookies, water, and iced tea. We also used some paper goods such as plates and napkins from the general library supply that we keep on hand.

Decorations. We advertised a party and so we wanted it to look like a party. We decorated the space with a tablecloth and one of our librarians made a reusable "Research Party" banner (figure 1). For the second research party we also added a few balloons near the library entrance and event space to highlight our directional signage.

Music. We played music through an iPad at both parties using Penn State's streaming music service. The music was soft and instrumental so as not to be distracting.

Timing. In addition to selecting strategic dates for the party, we also chose a three-hour block of time during the day when the library is busiest. We held both parties mid-week from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., and made sure that at least two



Figure 1. Set up of the food and giveaway table.

librarians were available to staff the events so we could juggle multiple research consultations at once.

Party Favors. At both parties we handed out water bottles with the libraries' web address on them. For future parties, we plan to turn our giveaways into a meaningful party favor that will also include our business card and hours, and promote future programming along with the library-themed swag.

Research Supplies. In addition to providing any technology that students might need to do research, we had a notepad with which we could gather some informal data on which classes students were coming from, what their assignments were, and what kind of assistance they required. We also kept notepads and pens handy if students needed to jot down some notes. For future parties, we are working on a mobile ready reference collection that we can easily make available after realizing that some of the students, in addition to needing help with research, also needed help with citations.

MARKETING

To Students. A library full of students does not guarantee a turnout. To market our event directly to students we used Canva to create flyers (figure 2) with playful, student-centered language, told students about it and passed out flyers at the circulation desk, promoted the event through digital signage throughout campus, and posted it to our library's Facebook page.

To Faculty. Our most successful advertising came from marketing directly to faculty via the faculty listserv. The immediate responses to our email from faculty, and even the chancellor, were enthusiastic, and through informal conversations with students at the parties, we learned that most

AMPLIFY YOUR IMPACT

were there because of a professor's prompting. One faculty member used it as a makeup session for students who had missed the librarian's one-shot instruction earlier in the semester. Another professor offered extra credit for students who came. A third professor even asked if she could bring her whole class to the party. Ultimately, the language and medium of our direct student marketing mattered less than the marketing that came through the faculty who had bought in to the idea and encouraged their students to attend.

HOSTING THE PARTY

It was a party and we were hosts. Just like any party, there was some anxiety around being adequately prepared. Since we did not request RSVPs and we had advertised it to faculty, we were uncertain about how many students would show up. We felt like hosts throughout the party, encouraging students to get comfortable, help themselves to some snacks, and get settled to chat with us about what they were working on.

Just like at the reference desk, we were ready for the unknown nature of the consultations. Similar to the hands-on portion of information literacy instruction we were working with multiple students at once, listening to their needs, getting them started on a path, and then floating to the next student.

Of the sixteen students who attended, we helped fifteen with their various research questions. Some already had chosen their topics for their papers and needed to learn more about the issues about which they'd chosen to write. One student wanted to know more about integrating secondary sources into her writing. Another needed assistance turning a topic into a research question. Some of our help was in the form of academic support, particularly for those students whose motivation was extra credit but who didn't necessarily need help with their assignment for that class. With these students we had conversations about their majors and general resources Penn State offers that can support them in their academic pursuits. Three students were "repeat customers" who had already interacted with us at various stages of their research during the academic year, which demonstrated to us that the first interaction we had was of a high enough quality that they wanted to seek out another useful interaction.

OUTCOMES AND OBSERVATIONS

While we anticipated that the atmosphere of our Research Parties would be more party-like, they actually took on quite an academic air. Students didn't come to party; they came because they had a genuine need for research help. While we had music and food, the moniker "Research Party" turned out to be a bit of clever naming to draw students in and provide faculty with a different way of communicating library services and resources to their students.



Figure 2. Design for the flyer and digital sign for the first Research Party

That being said, the parties did indeed hit on the social aspects of research as we had hoped. Whereas the reference desk is a one-patron-at-a-time model, the Research Party serves many students at once. Though some students arrived alone, others brought friends, and at times there were upwards of seven students in the room at once. While this model may diminish the privacy of the consultations, the close quarters and small group table arrangements allowed for more serendipitous interdisciplinary connections between student scholars who did not know each other, but who offered richer context to each other's scholarly conversations. Librarians did not facilitate the cross talk. Rather, the students, in overhearing each other's ideas and challenges, began to interact as a community of scholars, drawing each other into their scholarly inquiry and research processes. For example, one student who brought two friends wanted to talk through her research and writing process. After describing her challenges, her friends and the librarian shared their own. From this discussion the students decided to form a group in support of each other's academic and creative writing.

Using a library classroom as a Research Party venue carried a few important advantages. The small, separate space away from the reference desk allowed the students to ask questions, do librarian-by-side searching, and then work independently or with a friend while we assisted other students. The three-hour period allowed greater flexibility in the nature, depth, and frequency of student-librarian interactions, and there was less pressure to encapsulate the research-help process into the tidy transactional structure so common at many reference desks: Ask question, get answer, leave. It also seemed to relax perceived stress that students might feel from being in "our space" at the reference desk. Perhaps just as importantly, giving students an opportunity to work apart from the professors and classmates who would be present in a more typical instruction session removed class-time restraints and potential professor pressure.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our first iterations of the Research Party were done with an entrepreneurial spirit, where we had an idea and made it happen quickly. Now that we have had more time to reflect, we are planning the dates further in advance, which will allow us to dial up our promotion to faculty, and propose the Research Party as the second shot of library instruction. We are placing less emphasis on direct-to-student marketing through print materials, and instead are promoting the parties to students more heavily during our instruction sessions as another opportunity to consult with a librarian in a fun and social context.

As librarians, we recognize that students need our research assistance, and as professionals, we know that scholarship is social. Though we are aware that students can drop in anytime to work with a librarian, students, for a variety of reasons, may not realize that we are a resource available to them. With minimal budget and librarian power

the Research Party deconstructed the reference desk model, creating an approachable, student-centered consultation environment rich with the collaborative interdisciplinary social conversations that enrich scholars and scholarship.

References and Note

1. Dennis B. Miles, "Shall We Get Rid of the Reference Desk?" *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2013): 320–33.
2. Nancy Noe, "Party with a Purpose," *College & Research Libraries News* 77, no. 4 (April 2016): 184–87.
3. Kylie Bailin, "From 'The Research Games' to Tours," *College & Research Libraries News* 76, no. 11 (December 2015) 586–89.
4. Ilka Datig and Luise Herkner, "Get Ready for a Long Night," *College & Research Libraries News* 75, no. 3 (March 2014): 128–31.
5. Librarians in Research and Instructional Services at the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library conceived of the idea for the Research Party in Spring 2013. When they held the party, one of the co-authors of this article was an intern there, and had since asked if the event could be replicated at her new institution.