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Staying at the heart of the institution

The small college library as an event space

Libraries at small colleges, especially colleges with a nontraditional student population, face an uphill struggle to remain relevant in the life of the institution. Students at colleges like these tend to be adults who are already in the workforce and have many responsibilities and demands on their time outside of school. These students will usually either come to campus for their classes and leave or take online classes and rarely set foot on campus.

This is challenging for the small college library. Three of the major functions of any academic library are providing in-person assistance, study space, and access to physical materials. These functions will necessarily decline as students spend less time on campus or migrate entirely online. This can have budgetary implications, especially considering that funding for libraries is trending downward across higher education.

Small college libraries also face a space crunch. Community colleges and other small, nonresidential colleges may not have a separate building for the library, housing it instead alongside quite a few other resources and spaces. As the college grows and space becomes tight, a library that sometimes looks empty might be a tempting target for administrators trying to maximize the use of space on their campuses. Even libraries at large universities are falling prey to this trend. Unfortunately, the robust online services that academic libraries develop, while vital and necessary, don't help the library justify the use of physical space.

Therefore, small academic libraries have to get creative.

The Hoffman Family Library at Goodwin College in East Hartford, Connecticut, has faced many of these issues. Goodwin College is a small, private, nonprofit, career-focused institution that caters primarily to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The student body is 80% female and roughly half are people of color. The average age of a Goodwin student is 29, most students are part-time, and nearly all do not live on campus. The college's full-time equivalent varies from semester to semester but is usually in the neighborhood of 3,500.

The library is situated in the college's main building, where it is split between parts of the first and second floors. There are roughly 8,000 print volumes in the collection, complemented by online holdings comparable to those of other colleges of Goodwin's size. The library's physical space is devoted mainly to study, computer use, and the use of reserve materials.

Library staff have worked over the past year to make its space a destination for both academic and fun events. We'd been wanting to use our space more creatively for some time, especially after a remodel-

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ing of the first floor in 2016. During the fall 2018 semester, the library hosted two academic events in a newly developed event space and ran an escape room activity with classes and members of the college community.

Academic events

The most distinctive and memorable feature of the library is the two-story glass windows overlooking the Connecticut River.

The space by these windows, which is often illuminated by a soft and inviting natural light, is occupied by a few shelves, comfortable seating, and tables and chairs for individual and group study. We decided to create our event space in this location. The

tables are quite easy to move to the side, allowing us to arrange the chairs and other seating in a horseshoe facing the windows.

The first event we held in this space was in October 2018 for Indigenous Peoples Day, which the college had recently instituted to replace Columbus Day. The event was set up by Assistant Director Susan Bigelow, who was also the cochair of the college's Intercultural Inclusivity Committee, as a question-and-answer session with History Professor Brittney Yancy on the issues surrounding the day.

Several faculty members brought their classes to the event at the committee's invitation, but other faculty and staff attended, as well. There were approximately

40 attendees, not counting students who observed from the library's second-floor balcony. Our IT department brought microphones and speakers, but the excellent acoustics of the space made them all but unnecessary. The library received a great deal of very positive comments about the space and the potential to hold these kinds of events in the future.

The second event took place in late November 2018. A group of Vietnam veterans

was scheduled to speak with a class about their experiences, and the professor decided that the library event space would be a great venue. The professor was Brittney Yancy from the Indigenous Peoples Day event, and her experience had been so positive that she



Professor Brittney Yancy (left) and Assistant Library Director Susan Bigelow (right) present at the Indigenous Peoples Day event, October 11, 2018. Photo credit Susan Hansen.

wanted to return.

This was the first time the event space had been requested by someone outside the library, and we had less than a week's notice to make it happen. However, since we'd already set the space up once, it was easy to replicate. It took library staff and student workers only about 20 minutes to clear the space and set up the chairs. This event was attended by Yancy's class and additional students, faculty, and staff. Participants and attendees were both pleased with the venue.

For each event, we took pictures to be added to the college's weekly newsletter to faculty and staff. These pictures were also shared on the college's Facebook page.

Escape room

After attending a library conference in 2016 where a public library hosted an escape room, two library staff members decided to design one to be held in the library. An escape room is a reality entertainment game, where teams must work together to solve a series of puzzles, riddles, and other challenges to complete a specific goal within a set amount of time.

After careful planning, a team led by Reference Librarian Danielle Berube designed an escape room event for after hours on a Friday in August 2018. Unfortunately, due to both the time slot and the time of year, no one signed up for the event. The team didn't want to waste the months we had spent creating various puzzles and clues to be placed around the library, however, so we decided to take the concept and repurpose it as an introduction to the library. This would be aimed at courses for incoming students.

The purpose of our escape room is to prevent the "Mad Librarian," played by Library Director Susan Hansen, from stealing a rare book from the library's collection. Participants could defeat her by unlocking a padlock with a four-digit key code on her office door and retrieving the book before time runs out. We designed four portable stations throughout the library, with a variety of puzzles ranging in difficulty at each one. After completing each station, a student received one of the numbers needed to unlock the door.



A group successfully completes the escape room activity. Director Susan Hansen as the "Mad Librarian" is in the background shaking her fist. Photo credit: Danielle Berube.

We incorporated several key library resources into the activities, such as the library's catalog and discovery tool and clues hidden in a box of bones used by our anatomy and physiology students. We wanted students to be able to become familiar with the library and all of its resources while having a fun and engaging experience.

So far, the five foundational English classes to complete the activity seemed to enjoy themselves. We asked the students to fill out a Google Form for feedback. The results were

positive: 75 percent said they would consider coming back to complete another escape room outside of class.

We plan to create another library orientation escape room next summer and also to create a more elaborate escape room to be completed outside of library hours.¹

Conclusion

Both the academic events and the escape room allowed students, faculty, and administration to see the library space in a new light. We hope that these events and others like them in the future will be a long-lasting and important contribution to the life of the college and a reminder to everyone about the value not just of library services but of library space.

Note

1. There is more information on the escape room on our website: <https://goodwin.libguides.com/Madlibrarianescaperoom>. 