

Erica Lopez and Tina Oswald

# Taking root

## Librarians help new Forestry students create a learning community

Librarians have studied and discussed *library anxiety* ever since Constance Mellon coined the term in 1986.<sup>1</sup> While it may be challenging for librarians to imagine any anxiety about coming into a library and using the available resources, students experience a multitude of stressors as they embark on their college journey. Many are taking college-level courses for the first time. Some might have a roommate they know, or not. (Sometimes the ones you know are a bigger problem than the ones you do not.) Some may be juggling a full course load with work or family responsibilities. Many are on their own for the first time in their lives. The library may be a draw for some as a place to study or explore in this new environment. However, getting up the nerve to step outside of what is known, and inside somewhere new, can be quite intimidating.

Librarians strive to combat this anxiety on college and university campuses. Often, the first step is getting the new students in

the door of the library and helping them to establish a connection with someone in the building. Rachael Muszkiewicz argues that personal interaction with a librarian may alleviate some of the library anxiety that students feel.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, every part of the campus in higher education is urged to assist in recruitment and retention in most strategic plans. Tammy J. Eschedor Voelker asserts that if librarians can become involved in learning communities, they can assist in the student retention piece.<sup>3</sup>

A learning community is defined as “an intentionally developed community that will promote and maximize learning.”<sup>4</sup> This building of community is of the utmost importance to new,



Welcome sign for library portion of the 2018 Root Camp.

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Erica Lopez, formerly of Stephen F. Austin State University, is now Chemical and Biological Sciences librarian at the University of Houston, [erlopez2@central.uh.edu](mailto:erlopez2@central.uh.edu), and Tina Oswald is research librarian IV at Stephen F. Austin State University's Ralph W. Steen Library, email: [toswald@sfasus.edu](mailto:toswald@sfasus.edu)

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incoming freshman and transfer students. There is a very human need to feel a sense of belonging with one's peers. Commonalities among interests and learning goals help to forge relationships among students. Students agree that an atmosphere that fosters community, getting to know others, and offers opportunities for collaborative activities are elements they look for in their college experience.<sup>5</sup> As a result, many in higher education institutions have taken the definition of "learning community" a bit further to include "an interdisciplinary focus with attention paid to students' academic and

and degrees at the bachelor, master's, and Ph.D. levels. While the university has an enrollment of more than 12,000 students, the College of Forestry's enrollment of undergraduate students has steadily grown in the last several years from 205 undergraduates in the 2015 fall semester to 305 undergraduates in the 2018 fall semester.

To lessen library anxiety, and play an active role in promoting the development of new learning communities by connecting with students early in their careers, librarians at SFASU were able to snag a little piece of time during the Forestry freshman orienta-



Library portion of Root Camp, group photo, spring 2018.

social development."<sup>6</sup> The creation of these communities at the freshman level, usually through first-year programs, is a way to make a new place, new people, and new learning opportunities more accessible.<sup>7</sup>

The history of Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) began in Nacogdoches, Texas, as a teachers' college in 1923. Since that time, the campus has grown to more than 400 acres, many of those covered in trees. This created the perfect setting for the Arthur Temple College of Forestry and Agriculture. In 1946, Forestry became a field of study on the SFASU campus. It is now one of the South's top forestry schools with four majors and more than ten areas of emphasis

tion session called Root Camp. Root Camp is a weekend-long orientation for incoming freshman and transfer students in the basic skills that are necessary throughout their college career as Forestry students. These skills include using GPS units, tree measurement, sampling techniques, wildlife identification, climbing techniques, timbersports, and more. In addition to offering a crash course on field techniques, Root Camp also includes social activities and fun for the purposes of building and fostering a learning community. All of these components are important because successful learning communities must use experiences with peers, in the form of activities geared toward educational, social,

and physical elements.<sup>8</sup> Most research on learning communities agrees that the “most powerful source of influence on an undergraduate student’s academic and personal development is the peer group.”<sup>9</sup>

The first core course for an undergraduate degree in the Forestry program is Forestry 111: Careers and Competencies in Forestry, and it has the highest enrollment of any other course in the Forestry program. Prior to September 2015, the library session for this course occurred in the Forestry building in front of a class of approximately 65 students. The librarian delivered a lecture-style introduction to library resources and demonstrated basic search tips and techniques on the library website. The setting was not ideal because students did not have computers in front of them to follow along and perform search activities, and the class was too large for the library computer labs to accommodate. Still, the course professor and librarian felt it important to

offer students an introduction to their liaison librarian and to library research.

When a new Forestry faculty member took over Forestry 111, she instituted the required weekend-long Root Camp orientation for Forestry majors as an expansion of the course. Forestry 111 and its component Root Camp would become an introduction not only to fields of study in the area of Forestry, but an introduction to the learning community with which students would be a part of throughout their undergraduate careers. The new faculty member wrote

about her plans for the first Root Camp for the Arthur Temple College of Forestry and Agriculture newsfeed. An avid reader of the newsfeed, the librarian reached out to the Root Camp organizer to inquire about getting involved. As luck would have it, the organizer had been looking for an activity to fill the Sunday afternoon time slot.

The librarian began creating a library orientation for Root Camp participants. The students would already be divided into smaller groups throughout the weekend, so the librarian developed a schedule that would have the existing groups rotate throughout the library for different activities. Groups were small enough that a productive library information literacy session could be offered in library computer labs, and the time slot was generous enough that students could be introduced to additional services within the library. The librarian was aware, as David V. Loertscher and Blanche Woolls note, that information-seekers are quite comfortable conducting re-

search on their own, often using Google and overlooking the resources available through the library website.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this occasion to meet with a group of new students at the beginning of their college career was seen as an opportunity to supplement students’ existing information seeking habits with information and digital literacy concepts, and an introduction to library resources.

Librarians need to be recognized by students as information professionals who can offer assistance to them in the research process, and this was the perfect chance for



Linda Reynolds, director of ETRC, and a Root Camp student, during the 2019 library portion of Root Camp.

the librarian to carve out a position as a coteacher with the class instructor and increase library visibility. As noted by Sue F. Phelps and Nicole Campbell, when faculty and librarians work together, the relationship they forge has a positive effect on the learning process for the students.<sup>11</sup> The Librarian and Forestry faculty member decided to build this relationship and produce positive outcomes for the students.

On Sunday, September 13, 2015, Ralph W. Steen Library welcomed 62 students, divided into four groups, from the Arthur Temple College of Forestry and Agriculture to the library portion of Root Camp. Students rotated in their groups through an information literacy session in a computer lab with a hands-on searching assignment, an information session with the Academic Assistance and Resource Center, an archives show-and-tell with the East Texas Research Center, and a library scavenger hunt.

The scavenger hunt required students to print a document they would need for their next lab assignment from the Forestry 111 online LibGuide, locate the Forestry librarian's office, visit the Forestry and Agriculture area of the stacks, and retrieve USDA materials from the Government Documents Collection. Upon completion of the scavenger hunt, Root Camp participants were sent to a computer lab in the library that they had not seen during their library activities in order to pick up goody bags. The bags included a photo business card for their librarian, promotional materials for additional library services, snacks, locally grown kiwis, and bottles of water.

The librarian scheduled a follow-up visit to the Forestry 111 class to deliver a brief survey regarding the event. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Students especially appreciated the kiwis, which were grown on campus, included in their snack bags. The majority of students felt that their time in the archives area looking at old forestry photographs, documents, and artifacts was the most enjoyable. Prior to Root Camp, the vast majority of students may never have

been exposed to the archival materials in their subject areas.

The library portion of Root Camp now takes the place of the in-class lecture-style library session previously offered to the Forestry 111 class. This benefits the students by offering them a more productive introduction to library services, getting them into the library building, and giving back a day of course lecture time. One change implemented since the first Root Camp is the inclusion of the library feedback questions in the Root Camp survey distributed by the instructor for the entire weekend of activities. This prevents students from having to complete multiple surveys related to the event. The forestry faculty member shares the feedback from students with the organizing librarian once the survey is complete, and the librarian shares the feedback with participating library departments as they plan future iterations of the library Root Camp activities.

For each iteration of Root Camp, librarians and staff from different departments in the library meet to plan the event. The event offers library departments, who do not typically interact with students, an opportunity to work with them. Interested representatives from departments who do not have their own library Root Camp session also offer assistance in the planning and delivery of library activities. Catalogers and others are provided the opportunity to be a part of a large student orientation event. The library's inclusion in the Root Camp orientation event speaks to how Ralph W. Steen Library is viewed as an essential resource with which students in the Arthur Temple College of Forestry must be acquainted at the beginning of and throughout their academic careers.

## Notes

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3. Tammy J. Eschedor Voelker, “The Library and My Learning Community: First Year Students’ Impressions of Library Services,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2006): 72–80.

4. Oscar T. Lenning and Larry H. Ebbers, “The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future,” ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report 26, no. 6 (1999): 8.

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8. Nancy E. Frazier, “In the Loop,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 13, no. 1 (2006): 23.

9. Alexander W. Astin, “What Matters in College?” *Liberal Education* 79, no. 4 (1993): 7.

10. David V. Loertscher and Blanche Wools, “Librarians—Moving from Being ‘the elephant in the Room’ to Becoming Central to the Learning Process,” in *The Road to Information Literacy: Librarians As Facilitators of Learning*, ed. Roisin Gwyer, Ruth Stubbings, and Graham Walton (De Gruyter Saur, 2012).

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