

Christine Rickabaugh

From Swatting to Smiling

The Power of Playful Outreach

It was nearly lunchtime on Monday during the second week of classes for the fall semester. I was chatting with some colleagues when the University community text alert sounded. An active shooter in the library? Wait a minute... I thought the practice drill was scheduled for tomorrow morning. We all looked at each other. Was this real? We were *in* the library.

We immediately began to move. I secured one door to our office suite while my colleagues ushered students in through another. I brought a pregnant graduate assistant into my office, locking the door and rearranging the furniture so we could huddle under my desk.

The rest of the details aren't necessarily relevant. By the end of the day, we learned that our university, like several others across the country, had been "swatted"—a malicious prank by an outside group targeting several universities in the first weeks of the school year. The effects, however, were very real. The images and sounds of that day stuck with us all long after we left campus that day.

That night as I prepared for bed, I was restless. We needed to do something, to respond—not to the group that made the false reports but for our campus community. I considered the culture of our library and the resources available to us within a short time frame. My thoughts landed on Sheldon, our three-foot-tall inflatable yellow duck. Initially bought for a carnival game, Sheldon evolved into our unofficial mascot, both an inside joke among library staff and a familiar, quirky figure for students. Over the past year, we had begun dressing him up for holidays, seasons, and special events, displaying him in the office suite window where students often paused to comment or snap a picture on their phones. He had also become a landmark for those trying to locate our offices.

What if we invited students to decorate Sheldon and create a positive atmosphere in the library? The next morning, I received permission to execute this plan on Thursday and



Sheldon the inflatable duck.

Christine Rickabaugh is open education librarian at the University of Arkansas Libraries, email: cr097@uark.edu.

© 2026 Christine Rickabaugh

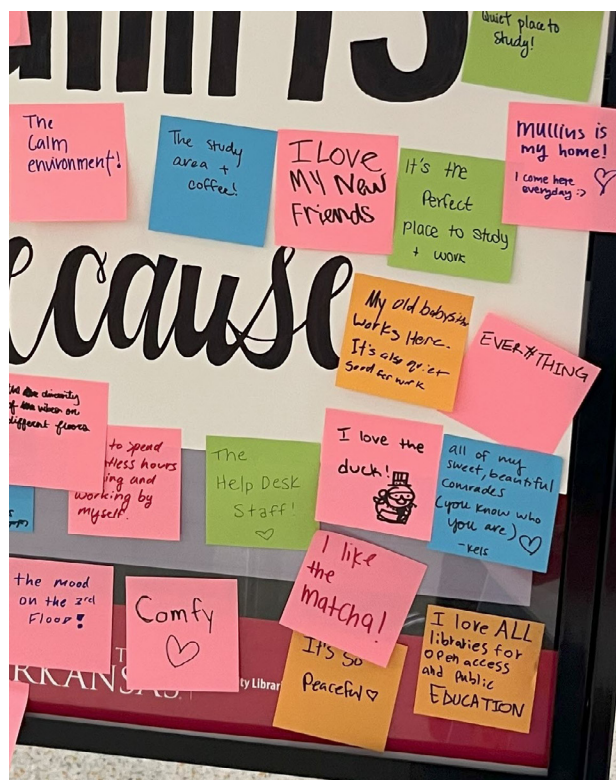
Friday, when memories were still fresh but not too close to the actual event. Together with colleagues and a graduate assistant studying clinical mental health, we expanded the idea to include craft supplies, a hashtag, and a poster for students to finish the phrase, “I ♥ Mullins because...” with Post-it notes. I collected photos of Sheldon’s best looks for a social media post and flyers, printed off the campus mental health pop-up schedule, rallied volunteers, and printed simple instructions (“Just don’t let him pop!”).

By Thursday morning, we had transformed a spot near the information desk. Sheldon was set up, visible from both entrances, surrounded by tables bearing costumes, craft supplies, stickers, bookmarks, and a colorful poster awaiting student input. We had posted on social media, hoping to catch the attention of students who might be nervous about returning to the library. #MullinsQuackPack was selected with intention. We wanted to convey that the library team was still here, ready to help and to have a little fun.

Student reactions ranged from bemusement to enthusiasm. Some walked by without stopping, but many smiled, asked questions, or lingered to add their creative touches. A few tested the limits of Sheldon’s fashion sense, stacking hats, taping on “scars” and “tattoos” drawn on packaging tape, and comparing costume mixes. Again and again we heard, “Thanks for doing this.” Students filled out Post-its, grabbed stickers, and told us how often they visit the library.

Throughout the event, campus tours made their way through the library. I noticed parents pausing to chuckle and snap photos of Sheldon. A few tour guides incorporated our unofficial mascot into their pitch, introducing Sheldon to potential students as a quirky hallmark of our library culture. It seemed clear that, for many first-time visitors, Sheldon left an immediate mark, planting the idea of him in the minds of future students.

Did this simple event erase all the anxiety or heal the entire campus? No. But for many



Poster where students shared what they love about the library.



Sheldon with a student.

students who felt nervous about returning to the building, the event sent a clear message: The library is here for you, we want you to feel welcome, and we're willing to get silly to make that happen.

The real secret? We built on what we already had. Our established culture of playfulness, our tradition of engaging students through accessible outreach, and our pile of duck decorations all paved the way for something quick yet meaningful. When unexpected challenges hit, these shared cultural artifacts became valuable assets.

And ours isn't the only campus with a beloved mascot. Over the years, I've heard stories from colleagues at other libraries who have adopted oversized skeletons, whimsical statues, and all manner of unofficial icons. These mascots, in all their forms, seem to serve as anchors for community and shared memory, both in everyday life and in more challenging moments.

Reflecting on the event, I am reminded that nurturing a lively, approachable library environment isn't just for fun; it's preparation for real-life moments of crisis. Our community returned not because of the scale of our response but because of its authenticity. Our outreach activities, like the Sheldon event, are not just "extras" but rather fundamental ways the library advances the ACRL goal of demonstrating the Value of Academic Libraries as inclusive, student-centered spaces that contribute to resilience and belonging. Relying on who we are allows us to do what the moment demands and helps students feel at home in the library again. And when they do, Sheldon and the rest of our library team are waiting for them. ♪