

Chapter 9

A Stress-Free Collaboration: The University of Lethbridge Students' Union and the University Library Partner to Deliver a "Stress-Free Zone" to Students during Final Exams

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Many institutions struggle with tight financial resources, and libraries may abandon ideas for student-oriented programs due to budgetary concerns. Student affairs departments typically have funds designated for student-oriented programming and may be able to use those funds to support the work of outside departments. In this article, Eva and Girard describe the creation of a "stress-free zone" to support students during exams and show how libraries and student affairs can pool financial resources in support of innovative programs and services.

The University of Lethbridge Library partnered with the University of Lethbridge Students' Union to provide a "stress-free zone" for students during exam times. The pilot project occurred during the December 2009 final exam period and was a resounding success, leading to its recurrence during the April 2010 final exams. The zone was a room in the library in which students could take a study break, have a coffee and snack, play games, watch movies, and "chill out." It was open from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m. for the duration of the final exam period. The students' union supported the venture with a cash donation towards healthy snacks, which the library used to purchase fruit and granola bars. The zone was well-used by students, and many comments of appreciation were received. Other partnerships across campus were utilized: coffee and tea was donated by food services, the campus massage therapist donated his time on a couple of evenings, and the health, counseling, and writing centers provided stress- and exam-writing-related information. This successful collaboration between the students' union and the library builds on past successes between the two organizations and ensures a continued model of working together in the future.

Background—The University of Lethbridge

The University of Lethbridge (U of L) is located in Lethbridge, Alberta, a city of about eighty thousand people in southwest Alberta, Canada. The U of L is a comprehensive public university of approximately 8,200 students—the smallest of three such institutions in Alberta. As

such, it has a history of being known as a university with a more personalized, individualized touch than larger universities. Traditionally, class sizes have been smaller and students have had easier access to their professors than they might have at bigger institutions. While the university has been growing and expanding into more areas of postgraduate studies, the faculty and staff have tried to maintain an environment of caring and community. This is reflected in the recently adopted 2009–2013 strategic plan, which focuses on five main strategic directions:

- Confirm our place as a comprehensive university
- Enhance the student experience
- Build internal community and enhance relationships with external communities
- Promote access to quality post-secondary education
- Enhance the environmental sustainability of the University¹

The emphasis on student experience and community is evident in both the plan and many of the initiatives undertaken on campus. Every unit on campus, from the president's office to caretaking, is expected to govern itself according to the strategic plan and ensure all activities fall into at least one of the categories.

The university library has recently undergone a leadership transition, with a new University Librarian in July 2008 and two new Associate University Librarians in July 2009. Library units were also restructured, and renewed focus on library outreach and public relations has been emphasized. Librarians are encouraged to try new ideas, and no reasonable proposal focusing on student engagement is turned down.

The University of Lethbridge Students' Union was established with the University of Lethbridge in 1967. The organization is managed by the executive council—consisting of the presidents and vice-presidents—who are annually elected student representatives and also full-time employees of the students' union. The executive council manages the organization on a year-round basis, and internal proposals and external applications for funding are often vetted through this group.

The students' union's purpose is to provide an avenue for the student perspective to be heard wherever needed; so, naturally, the students' union has a history of collaboration with the university. This includes advocating for students to the university, to the city of Lethbridge, to the provincial government, and to the government of Canada. Further, the students' union appoints student members for university governance structures such as the Curriculum Coordinating Committee, the General Faculties Council, the university senate, and the university board of governors. This engagement of students in the governing of their university provides them with valuable opportunities for involvement in strategic planning and decision making as a whole. This often results in more frequent and stronger relationships between members of university administration, faculty, staff, and the students.

In 2005–2006, the students' union and the university worked together to create a funding framework for future collaborations. The Quality Initiatives Proposal (QIP) fund was set up as an account, accessible by both the students' union and the university with the other party's approval, to forward initiatives to benefit students. The university board of governors approved the QIP fund, which was created by apportioning a percentage of tuition increases into the central account. As the students' union is governed by a new general assembly on annual terms, there is a constant influx of new ideas for student outreach initiatives, events, and services which closely reflect student needs. The students' union is thus able to provide many proposals for funding from the QIP fund, on a continuous or one-time basis.

A History of Collaboration

The university library has a history of collaboration with the students' union, which provides a great opportunity for both the involvement of the library in student affairs and the involvement of students in their library.

One of the first major projects between the two groups was the Library Laptop Program. The students' union's 2007–2008 general assembly, under the recommendation of past students' union Vice-President Administration, Adam Vossepoel, had the opportunity to support library services in a substantial way by using money from the Quality Initiatives Proposal (QIP) fund to provide the library with an increased number of laptops which would be available to lend out to students. It was recognized at the general assembly meeting where approval was granted that the circulation statistics for the laptops purchased by the library in 2006–2007 indicated many students were utilizing this service. Further, it was reported at the meeting that a lack of computer availability was a perennial student issue. As a result, the Library Laptop Program was created to enhance the academic lives and experience of the students at the University of Lethbridge, which was in line with the mission of the students' union.

Along with increasing student quality of life, the increased visibility of the students' union through this program was seen as an effective promotional tool. One of the authors spoke with Kelly Kennedy, 2007–2008 president of the students' union, who observed that while students could have lobbied the library and administration for the laptops, QIP allowed the students' union to expedite the process of providing tangible improvements to the service offerings of the university library. With the executive council recommendation to use QIP fund monies to support the program, the general assembly voted unanimously to provide \$7,312 to purchase additional laptops for the Library Laptop Program.

The Fines Amnesty program—also known as Food for Fines—was started by the library's Public Relations and Promotions committee in November 2007. For every donation of a nonperishable food item, the library will waive five dollars of the patron's fines—as long as the overdue books are returned in good condition and the entire fine is paid, either with food items or a combination of food and money at the time of the donation. This campaign benefits students in two ways; not only does it offer immediate financial relief from library fines, but all food donated is then given to the food bank on campus, which is run by the students' union. This approach is eagerly welcomed by students, and often additional food items are donated even where fines have not been incurred. The program has run for the past three academic years, always at random times so that patrons cannot anticipate its arrival and thus “save up” their fines for the event. Over the past three years, the project has benefited the students' union's food bank substantially, as it has a significant portion of its stock provided by donation from within the university.

The students' union and the university library had created a great platform of collaboration, and this continued when librarian Nicole Eva proposed a new, exciting collaboration in the academic year of 2009–2010.

The Project

The librarian-author of this article, Nicole Eva, started at the university library at the same time as the library was undergoing a leadership transition, and student engagement and outreach activities were welcomed and encouraged. A recent MLIS graduate with a background in marketing, she was interested in new ways of bringing students into the library and was quickly

recruited to the library's Public Relations and Promotions team, of which she was shortly thereafter appointed cochair. Being an enthusiastic "newbie" librarian, she often read the library literature on a variety of topics, including marketing and public relations as it relates to libraries. One such article caught her attention: about the creation of a "stress-free zone" for students during final exams.² This type of event fits nicely into two areas of the university's newly adopted strategic plan: to enhance the student experience and to build internal community and enhance relationships with external communities. Eva asked library administration if she could organize a pilot project for the December 2009 final exam period; her request was met with an enthusiastic approval and a small budget to help cover costs.

Once given the go-ahead from library administration, Eva began contacting other units in the university she thought might make good partners in this project. She was able to get coffee, tea, and water donated by campus food services, as well as information on stress relief, study tips, and exam-writing skills from counseling services, the health center, and the writing center. She also secured giveaways from counseling services and the campus bookstore, a time donation from one of the campus massage therapists, and, most importantly, a financial donation from the University of Lethbridge Students' Union.

The article had mentioned having video games, such as a Wii, available for students in the room as one of the activities to do while "decompressing," and a colleague on the library's Public Relations and Promotions committee suggested the students' union might have such a gaming console which the library could borrow for this event. Eva contacted Jeremy Girard, then the president of the students' union, to see if they could use the console.

While the unit was not available, Girard was excited by the event and thought the students' union could be involved in some way. He vetted the proposal through the executive council, and a \$50 donation was offered towards the purchase of healthy snacks, as the students' union tries to promote healthy lifestyle choices to students and saw this as an opportunity to enable them to eat nutritiously during long studying sessions for finals. Eva readily agreed and used the money provided, along with the budget provided by library administration, to purchase apples, oranges, and granola bars, along with cookies. Other supplies purchased out of the library budget included board games, cards, puzzle books, Play-Doh, and jelly beans for a "jelly bean guess" game (the winner received the candy for guessing closest to the correct number of jelly beans). Jigsaw puzzles were brought in from the stock in the library staff room.

The stress-free zone was scheduled to run for the entire duration of final exams: December 12–21, 2009, from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m. each night. All of the partners provided useful information and supplies for the event, including essay-exam-writing tips from the writing center, information brochures from the health center, and pamphlets advertising the students' union food bank from the students' union. Counseling services sent over a variety of items, including fun and serious stress-relief tips and exercises, as well as information on how to obtain counseling if needed, and puzzles and stress balls with the counseling services logo as giveaways. The bookstore donated a t-shirt with the school's athletic team's logo as a drawing prize. The campus massage therapist agreed to come for two of the ten evenings and donate fifteen-minute chair massages to stressed students. Campus food services delivered the coffee, tea, and water at 7:00 p.m. each night and came to pick up the empty carafes the next morning.

A room in the corner of the top floor of the library, not a silent study floor, was reserved for the entire period. It was desirable to have a room in which some of the supplies and posters could be left for the ten days of final exams so as to minimize set-up and tear-down times each day. This room is normally used as a small classroom and meeting room, but during exam times it is

mainly used as a study space by students. While not especially large, it is big enough to set up tables for the refreshments and games along one wall and has enough additional tables and chairs to seat approximately twenty people. The room is equipped with an overhead projector, DVD player, and projection screen; a wide variety of movies were selected from the library's collection and left in the room for students to enjoy as they wished. Students were still welcome to study in the room during the day, but signs were posted to let them know that as of 7:00 p.m., they might be joined by others seeking relaxation and refreshments.

Student assistants working evenings in the library regularly monitored the room to ensure there were no noise or messiness issues. Remarkably, no problems were reported. For the most part, students were observed coming into the room for a brief time, sometimes just to get a coffee and snack and take it back to their study area (food and drink—in covered containers—is allowed throughout the library). Some sat and chatted quietly with friends, and others took a more extended break to play a board game or work on a jigsaw puzzle or crossword. Overall, students were extremely respectful of the space and showed their appreciation by abiding by the rules posted regarding noise and tidiness. Caretaking staff had also been notified ahead of time, and they were very supportive of the event, cleaning up any additional mess and placing larger bins for garbage inside and outside the room. Their only request was to discontinue the use of Play-Doh in subsequent years as it got stuck in the carpet—a request with which the program readily complied.

One possible downside of the choice of room was its out-of-the-way location in the corner of the top floor of the library; however, it was the largest meeting room in the library that was available to book for the duration of the event. Staff on the library's Public Relations and Promotions committee posted signage throughout the library directing patrons to the room. One unforeseen benefit of the location was that the room was directly outside the library offices, which made it extremely convenient for set-up and tear-down of the room each evening.

Promotion

Avenues used by the library's Public Relations and Promotions committee to promote this event were the same vehicles used to promote most library notices and events. These include screensavers on all public computers in the library;³ signage beside public access terminals as well as posters throughout the library and in campus dormitories; a notice on the library's website in the What's New section, which also feeds into the library's Facebook page and Twitter account; and additional Facebook and Twitter posts by staff. The student newspaper was notified, and Eva was interviewed for a story which ran in this publication just prior to the event.

Eva also contacted University Communications, which publicized the event on the digital signage running throughout the university; they also posted a notice on the campus electronic notice board and included the message in the weekly e-mail update to faculty and staff sent by the communications office. The university's Communications Officer also thought the story merited a press release, which he wrote and sent to local media outlets. The story generated quite a bit of interest; Eva was interviewed by two local television stations as well as the city's newspaper, and the release was picked up by other regional papers and radio stations. University Communications estimated that the story generated approximately \$13,000 worth of publicity for the university and reached up to 435,000 people in the region. This is always good news for the university, which tries to get its name out in the larger southern Alberta community as much as possible—especially with such “good news” stories such as this one.

The Outcome

Besides the positive promotion the event generated for the library and the university as a whole, the stress-free zone was really meant to benefit the students. And it would appear to have been a success in that respect, as well. Students repeatedly commented to staff how much they appreciated the refreshments and the space; remarks sent to the Comments and Suggestions section of the library's website included

I LOVE THE STRESS FREE ROOM! Seriously. Who ever [sic] came up with this idea should win a prize. It helped with the stress of studying . . . right when i [sic] got to the point of wanting to throw things, I would go up to this great little room, get some coffee, eat a snack, watch a little bit of a movie . . . and feel great about my life again. THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!!"

Keep it going . . . nice to have during finals

The stress-free zone is an awesome idea! I often find myself needing a break from studying but I don't want to aimlessly walk around the library or the school. This provides a nice place to go and regain my sanity!!

Staff reported students waiting in the room at 7:00 p.m. for the refreshments to arrive, and many employees fielded questions about the time and place of the event.

Library administration took notice of all the positive feedback, and readily agreed to run the event again for the spring 2010 exam period, this time with an increased budget. Eva contacted the same partners, and all agreed to participate again with the exception of the massage therapist, who had other commitments. The students' union was so pleased with the outcome of the pilot project that it increased its donation from \$50 to \$150, again towards the purchase of healthy snacks. Once again, the event ran smoothly and garnered positive comments, and the zone was eagerly anticipated by students; before the first night, several library staff members were asked if the library was going to have a repeat of the stress-free zone for exams.

The Future

The stress-free zone is expected to be a regular event during exam periods. For a relatively small budget, the event generates a large amount of goodwill with students and is seen very positively throughout the university and the community. The continued support of sponsors such as the students' union is key to generating the positive perception.

In today's age of increasing electronic access and decreasing circulation, finding new and innovative ways to bring students into the library is vital. The increasing trend of the emphasis on library-as-place is evidence of that—catering to other student needs besides access to physical information resources. This means providing comfortable spaces for study and collaboration as well as access to food and beverages, new media and technology, and other campus resources such as writing centers, tutoring, and career services. This move towards a learning commons model is becoming the norm in universities and is one way for academic libraries to remain a vital hub of the campus. The University of Lethbridge Library has been working toward addressing more of these needs by creating more group study rooms and spaces for collaborative work, relaxing food and beverage rules, and creating different noise-level tolerance areas. The stress-free zone is another way to address student needs other than those which are purely academic—needs such as space, sustenance, and sanity. The library will continue to strive to

improve all areas of student service, and it is through collaboration with other campus groups such as the students' union that it expects its biggest gains to be made.

Through their collaboration on the Library Laptop Program, the Fines Amnesty event, and the stress-free zone, the University of Lethbridge Students' Union and the University Library have seen mutually beneficial results. Student service is improved, and the library is positioned more firmly as a positive, welcoming space which has products and services that students want. The two groups will continue to look for projects which can utilize the expertise and experience of both parties to improve student life at the University of Lethbridge.

Notes

1. University of Lethbridge, *Strategic Plan 2009–13*, (Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada: University of Lethbridge, 2009), 12–16, http://www.uleth.ca/strategicplan/sites/all/files/strategicplan_09-13_web.pdf.
2. Elizabeth M. Karle, "Invigorating the Academic Library Experience: Creative Programming Ideas," *College & Research Libraries News* 69, no. 3 (2008): 141–44.
3. Nicole Eva and Donna Seyed-Mahmoud, "Screensavers as a PR Medium: A Simple Idea with a Lot of Power," *Feliciter* 56, no. 2 (2010): 72–73.