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Brewing tranquili-tea

Supporting student wellness at an academic library

Depression, anxiety, and other forms of mental health disorders have been widely documented in college students. Graduate students have been shown to be six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than the general population.¹ Mental health challenges are prevalent for veterinary medical students. A staggering 49 to 69% of veterinary students exhibit signs of clinical depression.² Such statistics underscore the importance of supporting wellness for graduate students in all contexts.

As colleges and universities grapple with this growing student mental health crisis,³ some academic libraries are implementing their own intervention strategies to support student wellness.⁴ Among other reasons, academic libraries are addressing student wellness to align their goals to those of the institutions that they support,⁵ or because a link between wellness and academic success has been realized.⁶ Wellness supports in academic libraries tend to focus on stress reduction⁷ and include providing meditation spaces⁸ or yoga,⁹ adding leisure and/or wellness reading collections to library stacks,¹⁰ and bringing in therapy animals to help students de-stress.¹¹

One simple wellness support in academic libraries that has garnered little attention is tea. Tea has a long list of health benefits¹² and some varieties have been shown to reduce anxiety.¹³ Along with the physiological health benefits that it brings, drinking tea, or any warm beverage (particularly in cold climates) can contribute to a sense of coziness.¹⁴ Many libraries have done away with a ban on beverages in their spaces, and with that comes an opportunity to invite library users to enjoy tea as they occupy a library space. We embraced this idea at the Flower-Sprecher Veterinary Library at Cornell University. In 2019, we piloted a program to provide hot water and tea bags at our library to promote wellness.

Case study

The Flower-Sprecher Veterinary Library (FSVL) supports Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine (CVM), which houses both the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and Master of Public Health programs. In all, CVM hosts 199 faculty, 582 nonacademic staff members, 399 veterinary students, 120 graduate students, and 173 post-docs, interns, and residents for a total of 1,473 individuals.¹⁵ FSVL has 115 seats, and gate counts logged approximately 90,000 annual visits prior to 2020, though operation since COVID-19 shut-downs has impacted visitation rates. The library is staffed by two academic librarians and two sup-

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port staff, as well as 12 student assistants who staff the circulation desk. During the academic year, FSVL is open Monday through Thursday from 7:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., with reduced hours over the summer and academic breaks.

Many of the student assistants who staff our circulation desk are also our library supports (i.e., members of the veterinary or public health programs). As our student workers get to know the library and the benefits that it can bring, they often contribute their ideas and feedback for programming and changes that FSVL could consider to improve our services.

In 2018, one student assistant suggested we provide hot water and tea as a way to bring calm to library users and build community at FSVL. We decided to pilot this idea by purchasing an inexpensive hot water urn and to set out pre-packaged tea bags. The hot water and tea bags were placed on a library book cart adjacent to the circulation desk, so we referred to this pilot as the “tea cart.” To avoid waste generation, we did not provide any disposable cups but required users to bring their own mugs. Tea bags were made freely available and were replenished when used up. We did not market or advertise the tea cart.

FSVL community members quickly took to the tea. We started by purchasing boxes of tea bags at the grocery store, but the necessity to resupply soon turned too frequent to keep this up. We switched to buying multiple boxes of 100 tea bags each from online vendors with a need to reorder every one-to-two months, depending on the timing of the academic year.

To understand the financial implications of this program, we provided the tea and hot water for one calendar year and tracked costs. In 2019, we purchased a hot water urn for \$45 and spent \$1,291 on providing tea bags. Near the end of the year, we purchased a new hot water urn for \$65, as the hard water deposits had rendered the original urn useless and led to a broken dispenser valve. We learned that we must clean the hot water urn weekly with vinegar to keep the minerals from building up, and spent \$15 on vinegar to maintain the new urn. In summary, we spent \$1,416 in 2019 on tea, hot water urns, and vinegar, and we dispensed 7,131 tea bags over the calendar year. This summary does not include the electricity used to power the hot water urn, a measure which we did not track.

Benefits and challenges

After one year of piloting the tea cart, we saw benefits to our core library functions. We wanted to communicate to our library users that our space is a safe and inviting place for them and that we care about them as people. Though we don't have quantitative measures to share regarding the impact of the tea cart on library usage, we do have anecdotal evidence that it had a positive impact. Several students who used our library shared sentiments of gratitude for its existence. “I appreciate the free tea to help with stress, and it really feels



Promotional signage for the FSVL tea cart.

like the school cares about the wellbeing of its students with this small act of appreciation,” said Darby. Mura noted, “I love love love free tea in our library.” Shuai said, “It is a really nice pick-me-up, especially when you only have to walk a few feet to get it, and it’s free.” These and similar sentiments were frequently shared with library staff while the tea cart was running.

From the library staff perspective, the tea cart opened opportunities to connect with our library users. Since the cart was adjacent to our library desk, individuals would frequently share a few words with those staffing the desk when they came to fill their cups. It was typically a simple “Good Morning” or comment on the frigid winter weather. Frequently, though, such interactions would lead to questions that library users had, such as where to find a resource or to make us aware of a broken fixture. The ability to open a conversation without a direct “Excuse me” or “Can I ask something?” may have made users comfortable to interact with us, combatting the hesitance that some exhibit so as not to “bother” the librarian.¹⁶

In addition, during times of communal relief (e.g., after a test) or celebration (e.g., on Halloween), groups of people would often informally gather at the tea cart and chat, just as they would around a water cooler in a business setting. Such impromptu events opened the opportunity to engage in conversation and to do informal outreach, enabling us to connect with some that we may not be able to otherwise. The tea cart also led to direct benefits to the library. For example, as FSVL was wrestling with questions on how to improve our furniture, we easily recruited library users for focus groups when they stopped by for a cup of tea.

Further, once it became widely known that the library was giving away tea, some would come into the library just to fill up before leaving again. Several noted that they had never stepped foot in the library before coming for tea. While many would be seen enjoying their tea in a cozy nook of the library, others never stayed for longer than it took to full their cups and move on.

Despite its successes, this program included some challenges. The most obvious challenge was the cost of providing free tea. While \$1,416 is a relatively small cost for some, it could be a steep financial barrier for other libraries that are scraping by, particularly for the relatively intangible benefits that free tea might bring. However, when compared to hiring an outreach employee, for instance, such an expense might be a small price to pay.

Keeping up with the consumable tea bags was sometimes difficult, particularly during times of high use. Maintaining the tea cart was not a specific part of any person’s job description, and on occasion its upkeep was at odds with other high-priority tasks. Once we learned to soak the hot water urn with vinegar water, we would remove the tea cart on Friday evenings so it could have a full soak before Saturday started. Though this was the time that our library was typically least used, a minority of library users found the absence of the hot water to be an inconvenience.

An additional challenge of the tea cart revolved around the shifting baseline of library user perceptions and needs. The phrase “if you give an inch, they’ll take a mile” was sometimes conjured as some individuals lobbied for different types of tea or complained of the choices that were offered. Others were seen taking advantage of the free stash of tea by taking handfuls of teabags that they stashed in their pockets or backpacks. Such behavior was seldom seen, and we decided to let these individuals take the handfuls without comment, as they might be challenged with food insecurity, crippling debt, or any number of issues. After all, perhaps the tea would still work its magic, no matter where they enjoyed their cup.

Conclusion

The tea cart pilot was ended when we shuttered our doors during the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. Though we had decided to continue the program, pandemic restrictions have kept us from reinstating the tea cart. We do hope to reinstate this wildly popular offering at FSVL and look forward to the benefits that it will return when we are able to. Until then, the hot water urn remains clean and quiet in our store closet.

Other libraries can consider implementing a similar nontraditional service to build community between library staff and users. Though this would likely be much too expensive and cumbersome to implement at a large library with more users, it is recommended as an easy outreach program for small libraries that allow drinks to be consumed in their spaces and who have the flexibility in their budget to provide free tea.

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