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Get ready for a long night

Collaborating with the writing center to combat student procrastination

It's March 13, 2013, at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), the week before midterms. The ground floor of the NYUAD library is a colorful potpourri: tables full of sticky notes, highlighters and pens, a large and colorful dartboard, book carts filled with handouts, a signup sheet for tutorials and workshops, and, last but not least, a huge table full of refreshments ranging from the healthy (bananas and granola) to the unhealthy (cupcakes and pizza). The night's program is dangling from the central staircase. Everything is prepared, and we are ready. Ready for more than seven hours of students working and rushing around us, coming to workshops and tutorials, asking questions about writing and citations, and enjoying desk yoga and brief (but lively) dance parties.

The clock strikes 8 p.m. Showtime. A handful of Global Academic Fellows (GAFs),¹ librarians, and staff from First Year Programming welcome the first students to the second Long Night Against Procrastination or *Die Lange Nacht der aufgeschobenen Hausarbeiten*.²

The fact that students procrastinate is common knowledge among colleges and universities today. Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg, in their ground-breaking Project Information Literacy study of student research habits, found that "80% of students interviewed procrastinated on more than 80% of

their course-related research assignments."³ In addition, more than 85% of all students across the disciplines experience writing difficulties at some point during their university career.⁴

In an effort to curb procrastination and to provide students with research and writing help, the NYUAD Library and Writing Center began collaborating in the fall of 2012 to organize a Long Night Against Procrastination, an event initiated in 2010 by the European University Viadrina (EUV) in Frankfurt/Oder, Germany. Our two Long Nights at NYUAD have been quite successful, which is why we encourage other libraries and writing centers to give it a try.

The long night

The original Long Night, initiated by students and peer tutors at EUV, was an 11-hour, overnight event. Students had been asking incessantly for longer opening hours at the EUV Writing Center and for more tutorial support—these two demands were realized with the first Long Night. Luise, a student and frequent tutee at EUV (and now a GAF at NYUAD), was one of the participants.

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Peer tutors supported writers and learners throughout the night, and refreshments, as well as exercises, kept students active and productive. There were roughly 30 students in attendance, and although it was a relatively small event, it had a major impact. Media coverage was immense. Soon after, other German universities adopted the event and started to connect with each other through social media platforms (such as Skype and Twitter) during the Long Nights. By 2013, more than 30 universities and writing centers worldwide had held their own Long Nights.

When the authors met in the fall of 2012 to discuss a collaboration between the library and the Writing Center, Herkner suggested organizing a Long Night. This seemed like a good idea for a number of reasons. First, it had never been tried before at our institution. Secondly, procrastination is linked to library anxiety,⁵ and this type of event directly targets library anxiety by turning the library into a welcoming, fun environment. Third, as a global university with students from more than 65 different countries, we liked the idea of participating in an international event. Finally, we wanted to promote the Writing Center and the amazing support that it provides to students.

We held our first Long Night December 6, 2012, the week before finals. Since we had never done such an event, and weren't sure if students would attend, we planned the event on a small scale. We started the event during the library's regular hours, at 6 p.m., and finished at midnight. Despite our worries, this first Long Night turned out to be a great success. We had 17 students working on essays, lab reports, presentations, short stories, and other class assignments. Five students made use of a 30-minute GAF consultation (in either writing or the sciences), and many students took the opportunity to loosen up with desk yoga after hours of working. We offered workshops on citation management software, the writing process, and developing thesis statements.

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Student feedback was very positive, with the only complaint being that they wanted more Long Nights and later hours. We agreed and set to work developing a Long Night for the following semester.

The second Long Night in March ran from 8 p.m. until 3 a.m. and was bigger and better than the first. Due to the popularity of the initial event, we received even more support from the university and were thankful to get the Office of First Year Programming and the Digital Studio⁶ involved. Additionally, the provost's office held a panel on GAFs' capstone experiences,⁷ which was recorded and made available for all study abroad students. We offered a broader spectrum of workshops, including a session on time management (a session that fit well with our theme of preventing procrastination).

In terms of attendance, we counted 56 students working through the night—a success we did not anticipate. When we ended the night, we still had 15 highly concentrated students working on their course assignments.

Lessons learned

Now that we have held two events, we feel confident giving advice to other libraries thinking about running a Long Night. Here are some of the essential things we have learned:

- *Collaborate.* This event requires a lot of person-power and wouldn't be possible without collaboration between departments. Also, involving younger people (or at least people who like to stay up late and have a lot of energy) is highly recommended. Our situation is unique at NYUAD be-

cause we have the GAF program, but other possibilities might include library student workers, teaching assistants, fellows, peer tutors, or library student advisory groups. There is a special energy that young people bring to those late hours, and it helps add to the festive, yet still scholarly, atmosphere.

- *Consider the timing.* For our second Long Night we would have loved to participate with the people at EUV and other international sites. However, the official Long Night fell on a Thursday, which is a non-starter for us because our class week runs from Sunday to Thursday, making Thursdays our de facto “Friday nights.” We

knew we wouldn’t get much participation holding the event at the beginning of the weekend. We’ve also tried to schedule the events to take place directly before exam time, either finals or midterms. This way we know the students are more likely to be focused on their assignments.

- *Be ready to wear different hats.* Although we may think of ourselves as librarians or teachers first and foremost, we need to be highly adaptable in a Long Night situation. At various points you may find yourself acting as a life coach to a stressed student, a party starter during a dance-off (nothing inspires laughter more than a librarian dancing), and part of a clean-up crew at the end of the night. All in a night’s work!

- *Communication is key.* It’s very important that other, relevant departments on campus know about your event. For us in

particular, we needed to communicate with campus security in order to let them know that there would be students on campus much later than usual. We also had to work with transportation to make sure that we would have shuttle buses to transport students to their dormitories in the early hours of the morning.

- *Advertising doesn’t stop when the event starts.* We kept up our social media marketing even after starting time. By updating Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, we were able to remind students to come to the event and show them what to expect. It also gives us material for our advertising push the next time we have the



A motivation dartboard helps keep students at the Long Night event active and productive.

event.

- *Be flexible.* Students who attend your event may come up with requests you haven’t prepared for. For example, we had ordered pizza for the event and thought we were covering our bases by having vegetarian options. Then some vegans asked for pizza, and we realized we had forgotten something. When we ordered pizza later in the night we made sure to ask for a pie without cheese. The students were very appreciative, and our willingness to change things up created an even more welcoming atmosphere.

- *Keep it fun.* We added a number of little touches to the event that we think makes it extra special. One of the best features of our Long Nights has been the “motivation dartboard.” At the beginning of the night students make a goal and stick it on the board. As they make progress, they move

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their notes closer to the center. It serves as a visual motivator for them, and we get helpful information on what students are working on. Some other little touches that have been successful are free “productivity supplies” (such as highlighters, index cards, and pens) and homemade “I survived the Lange Nacht der aufgeschobenen Hausarbeiten” stickers, which were given away to all the students who made it to the end of the night.

Future plans

At both of our Long Nights we have asked students to fill out an exit survey with their class year and major, what they participated in, what they liked, and what suggestions they have for future Long Nights. From these surveys, and from our own impressions, we have come up with a number of plans for future Long Night events.

First, we plan on continuing to have them once a semester. Students have actually asked for even more academic events in the library, so we will continue to brainstorm different ideas to meet that request. Some students have also requested that the Long Night be a true overnight event, which seems a very scary idea, but is not impossible.

Many students have asked for extended library hours on a more regular basis, which is something the administration of the library continues to consider. The biggest change we plan on enacting is the space that we use. Due to the success of the event, it was very hard to enforce the “quiet study area” on the upper floor of the library because we have an open floor plan and noise from the ground floor carries upward far too easily.

It was bittersweet for us to hear some students say that although they had fun, they had to leave to get actual work done. Our plan next year is to expand the event to the Writing Center office in an adjacent building, so that students can go there if the library is too loud. They'll still be able to attend workshops and take advantage of snacks and desk yoga, but will also have access to a quiet study space. And then we can be as rowdy as we want (which is quite rowdy) in the library.

Overall, we are looking forward to expanding the event and coming up with new and creative ways to inspire our students to get work done and stop procrastinating.

Notes

1. Global Academic Fellows are recent college graduates who work as tutors and teachers' assistants. They are fully integrated in the university's campus life projects and play an integral part in supporting all NYUAD students.

2. Original translation from German: Long Night of Postponed Papers.

3. Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg, “What Today's College Students Say about Conducting Research in the Digital Age,” *Project Information Literacy Progress Report 4* (2009): 7.

4. Lutz von Werder, “Lehrbuch des kreativen Schreibens,” *Berlin: Schibri-Verlag*, 2nd ed., (1993): 13.

5. A. J. Onwuegbuzie and Q. C. Jiao, “I'll Go to the Library Later: The Relationship between Academic Procrastination and Library Anxiety,” *College & Research Libraries* 61, no. 1 (2000).

6. The Digital Studio provides academic technology services to students, faculty, and staff at NYUAD.

7. Like many universities, senior students at NYUAD are required to complete capstone projects. However, since NYUAD is a relatively new institution, our rising seniors didn't have any upperclassmen to consult with on their senior projects. *ZZ*