

Crystal Renfro and Elisabeth Shields

# Transforming libraries to serve graduate students

Trends and issues from a new conference

**R**ather than a day fraught with tricks, April Fool's Day 2016 turned into a day of delights for the 89 participants attending the first Transforming Libraries for Graduate Students: Services, Instruction, Spaces Conference (TLGSC) at Kennesaw State University (KSU) in Kennesaw, Georgia. Seventeen presentations were available via three concurrent session tracks with discussions covering the gamut of graduate student-focused topics from tailored services and targeted instruction programs to graduate-only spaces. While participants from the Southeastern region of the United States were well represented, participants from 19 states plus the District of Columbia attended.<sup>1</sup>

## Planning the conference

The conference was created by librarians in the newly formed Graduate Library at Kennesaw State University,<sup>2</sup> born of their desire to sit down with peers and exchange experiences of serving graduate students. An initial concept for a day of discussion among people within driving distance of Atlanta turned into a national conference, which in turn has generated a strong desire to create a framework for continued exchange.

While graduate student bodies may be far smaller in number than that of their undergraduate counterparts, graduate students are nonetheless critical stakeholders for librar-

ies. They use scholarly resources intensely,<sup>3</sup> and universities are judged in part on the quality of future faculty they train, as well as graduates of master's programs. While there is a considerable amount of literature on serving graduate students, and there are a sprinkling of panels at major conferences on the topic, meetings for the purpose of sharing experience and networking are rare, apart from the 2007 Association of Research Libraries-sponsored conference "Enhancing Graduate Education: A Fresh Look at Library Engagement."<sup>4</sup>

The birth of a new conference is not a trivial endeavor. A core team of four graduate librarians, two graduate assistants and the Digital Commons managing editor worked countless hours for the better part of a year to bring the conference to reality. An off-site retreat served as the catalyst for brainstorming the conference title, scope, structure, location, timelines, and other implementation tasks. The conference website and marketing logos were created by our Digital Commons managing editor, and, building off the striking harlequin logo/banner for the conference he created, our graduate research

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assistant (GRA) created bookmarks, conference programs, name tags, and conference directories. The GRA also handled mass emails to conference participants and maintained the conference participant database. Our GRAs also attended the conference, experiencing firsthand exactly what librarians are attempting to do to support them and their school colleagues in their scholarly endeavors. Their support and insight proved to be invaluable at every step along the way.

One early question the committee faced was whether there was sufficient interest among the library community on the topic of graduate student services and spaces to warrant a full-day conference.

If a call for proposals was opened, would anyone respond? While we expected interest from Georgia institutions and other southeastern states, as soon as we started receiving proposals, we realized we were receiving high-quality proposals from around the country.

### **Conference participants: Functions, structures, and institution type**

Conference attendance also proved to be national with 45 institutions represented. While over half of the participants (49) were from Georgia and another 13% came from adjacent states, a full 32% traveled from varied locations spread across the nation.

Carnegie research institutions (R1, R2, R3) were heavily represented (82%), while masters-granting institutions added an additional 14.6% to the mix. There were even representatives from four predominantly undergraduate institutions.

Looking at the titles of participants, it seems that having units or even dedicated librarians for graduate services is the exception: only eight participants had titles such as graduate services librarian and another three headed specialized graduate services units. Overwhelmingly, services to graduate students are performed by people who are not dedicated full time to such activities. Rather than a dedicated unit, several

institutions have appointed coordinators of graduate services.

Most commonly, it appears, research and instruction librarians work together as needed to provide services.

### **Cross-cutting issues**

Ways to discover student needs and mechanisms of assessing services were popular topics. Methods include surveys of faculty as well as graduate students; focus groups of students and of faculty; and various observation and participatory methods. It was relevant to identify the needs of different types of graduate students: full- or part-time; in academically oriented or professional programs; single pre-career students fresh from undergraduate programs or older students juggling career, family, and study; distance or campus-based. Understanding the unique needs of individual academic departments and programs is also essential.

Points were raised about the gap between common assumptions about graduate students and their actual skills and experience. For example, faculty may overestimate incoming graduate students' skill at library research. Mid-career students who are accustomed to professional reading and writing may need to readjust their habits for graduate school. Graduate students may not be as grounded in disciplinary or theoretical knowledge as faculty expect. This is especially true for students returning to school after a gap, but other reasons include the rise of interdisciplinary programs and new fields of study. When faculty have little time to work with students on these issues, libraries may find new ways to help students transition into the graduate student role.

We also discussed meeting students' needs in different phases of the graduate lifecycle:

- in the coursework phase of doctoral programs, assistance with searching and managing citations;
- in the middle (writing) phase, help with using technology, data management,

and communication with different kinds of audiences; and

- as they finish, help with publication (publishing, determining impact of one's scholarly work, writing for impact) and job searches.

While students aiming for academic teaching or research positions need to understand scholarly communication issues, libraries might best assist students in professional programs by identifying industry-critical skills. In addition to traditional library instruction focusing on academic literature, students will appreciate learning about sources they will be able to use outside of academic environments.

Partnerships outside the library are critical. We work with faculty, graduate colleges, centers for teaching and learning, offices of research, writing centers, counseling services, technology departments, and international student units. Several institutions have established advisory groups including graduate students and, sometimes, graduate faculty.

## **Instruction**

Instruction programs for graduate students include extensions of typical library instruction, such as complex searching, searching using discipline-based subject terms, practical literature review classes, and citation management. Such classes may be either discipline-specific or offered generally.

Some librarians offer instruction in areas not traditionally considered the purview of libraries. Examples include managing academic work flow, illustrating information visually, formal presentation skills, and designing and exhibiting posters.

Librarians also have become involved in dissertation and thesis "boot camps." Others participate in writing instruction through partnerships with writing centers. These have included campus-wide writing initiatives and special topics like writing for the job market.

Techniques developed for reaching graduate students include offering instruction

both on Saturdays and weekdays; scheduling classes in the evening; and offering classes on federal holidays, when many full-time workers have time available. Online modules serve campus-based students as well as distance students, though librarians may have difficulty finding time to script, record, and edit self-help video clips. Once created, however, these modules can be embedded in courseware and research guides, or offered more publicly through YouTube. When such modules are available, they can lead to more requests for instruction and for individual consultations.

## **Services**

Individual consultation with graduate students is a standard service with consultations occurring via email, chat, and online screen sharing programs as well as face-to-face.

A few institutions or programs have made consultation mandatory. When mandatory programs represent a major shift in use of librarian time, they can prove disruptive to the librarians' workflow.

Additional services offered by libraries include offering internships in digital humanities in which students gain and use mastery of visual and digital publishing tools, electronic theses and dissertations templates, digital repositories, poster competitions, and student conferences.

Some institutions provide either separate space for graduate students or scholars or research commons suitable for graduate students. Because graduate students may spend long hours in their study/research space, comfort is a key element.

Methods for including student participation in the design process include surveys for initial needs assessment and soliciting students' comments on early versions of designs. Sample results of such feedback indicated that graduate students most wanted quiet; ample electrical outlets; space that is both adequate and appropriate for reading and writing; storage for materials; comfortable seating (such as height adjustable

chairs); and natural light with a separate, but nearby break space. While dedicated graduate student space is likely to be oriented to individual work, a scholars' commons may consciously attempt to create community by crossing disciplinary boundaries and incorporating visualization and presentation technology. While creating flexible spaces with movable furniture and whiteboards seems ideal, such features may disrupt the primary goal of silent space.

### Conference follow-up

A concluding conference wrap-up session involved lively group table discussions regarding key takeaways and follow-up goals for individuals. Follow-up goals ranged from investigating new software to developing new graduate programming to developing new partnerships with campus offices and carrying the messages learned back to library administration for further discussion.

The conference evaluation provided significant positive feedback and marked enthusiasm for continuing the conversation online and via another conference. The Graduate Library at Kennesaw State is looking into options for building a community online and holding a follow-up conference in 2018. Participant suggestions for that conference include forming a multi-institution planning group and including an evening of networking time, more interactive session formats, and more sessions oriented toward professional and master's degree programs.

A number of common themes emerged throughout the TLGSC. We learned that librarians around the country are thinking about their graduate students, looking for ways to meet their graduate students with the right information at just the right time in their educational paths. We recognize that graduate students are very different from undergraduate students, and, often, very different from one another when students from diverse graduate curricula are compared. Establishing relationships with university partners external to the library, as well as working with our librarian peers, is essential, and tak-

ing advantage of university activities where graduate students will congregate is a great way to reach our target audience. We learned that many graduate students feel isolated, or even forgotten, and most appreciate study spaces and programs designed to help make their journey easier. We learned to try new things, and not be afraid of piloting creative ideas that may not work out as we hoped, because the only true failure is not trying at all. Most of all, we learned we are not alone in our work. We met new friends, gathered new ideas, and left re-energized to take up our work again.<sup>5</sup>

### Notes

1. Slides from most presentations are available on the conference website, <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/gradlibconf/>. Choose the link to the full program.

2. Kennesaw State is one of the larger Georgia public universities. Started as a junior college in 1963, KSU became a four-year college in fall 1978 and instituted its first masters programs in business administration and elementary education in 1985. The number of new graduate programs grew modestly in the 1990s and faster in the 2000s. The first doctoral program was added in 2006, and a PhD program in international conflict management in 2010. Reflecting KSU's increasing importance in graduate education in Georgia, KSU was classified as a comprehensive university within the University System of Georgia in 2013, and as a Carnegie R3 institution in 2015

3. Betsy Wilson, University Libraries, University of Washington, quoted in "Enhancing Graduate Education: A Fresh Look at Library Engagement," ARL 256 (February 2008), p. 1, accessed June 24, 2016. <https://www.cni.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/ar1-br-256.pdf>

4. Ibid.

5. For more information on the Transforming Libraries for Graduate Students: Services, Instruction, Spaces Conference, please visit the conference website at <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/gradlibconf/>. 