Megan York and Anna Clymer

"It's Just Like . . . a Lot."

Gen Z, New Student Orientations, and Information Overload

Information overload (IO) has become a pervasive concept in both librarianship and the broader media landscape of the 2020s. While there has been a depth of research regarding IO, there is no formally agreed-upon definition. One definition used in numerous publications by David Bawden, Clive Holtham, and Nigel Courtney is "information overload occurs when information received becomes a hindrance rather than a help when the information is potentially useful."[1] The newest generation arriving on campus, Gen Z, is a product of their socioeconomic and political environment. Although Gen Z's age range varies depending on the source, like other generations, Pew Research Center defines them as those born between 1997 and 2012.[2] This means that this generation will continue to be incoming first-year students for the next five-plus years. They have the lived experience of having information at their fingertips, where they constantly absorb information from various platforms and modalities. This new generation does not want to be given information; they want to actively participate in their learning and the information given to be relevant to their daily lives.[3] It is with this definition and Gen Z's participation in information seeking, plus their unique needs, that we decided to redesign the University of Arkansas University Libraries' approach to the campus-wide New Student Orientation (NSO).

Making excessive choices or having too much information can confuse and overwhelm people, ultimately leading to inadequate or no decisions. In addition, young people have difficulty dealing with large quantities of information,[4] something that is rampant during NSO and certainly during a mass tabling session for students and their families, which can translate into communication overload and information anxiety. Mohamed A. Belabbes, Ian Ruthven, Yashar Moshfeghi, and Diane R. Pennington discuss how increasing information makes it more difficult to decide which information is relevant and which can be discarded, leading to poor decision-making.[5] In addition, Josephine B. Schmitt, Christina A. Debbelt, and Frank M. Schneider mention how, for IO to occur, the person must suffer the adverse effects of having too much information, leading to stress and feeling overwhelmed.[6] Gen Z students know it can be overwhelming to keep looking for information, but they cannot help themselves from going down the rabbit hole of all available information.[7,8] Many have determined that more information equals better information; this might be attributed to the younger generation not being as likely to trust the quality of information they find online.[9] Thus they continue to seek out the "correct" information but are unsure when they have arrived at a defining answer.

Megan York is education librarian at the University of Arkansas, email: mayork@uark.edu. Anna Clymer is business and entrepreneurship librarian at the University of Arkansas, email: clymer@uark.edu.

To minimize the impact of IO on our incoming students, the Outreach Working Group at decided to take a whole-person approach when revamping the information and swag provided at the tabling session for NSO to better engage with students and their families, with emphasis on the incoming student. When conceptualizing their needs, the whole-person approach focuses on the whole person, sociocultural and socioeconomic factors, and people's deep and multilayered identities.[10] Many in the library have started adopting this approach regarding outreach, engagement, and organizational development. The whole-

Families/Parents LibGuide QR code, examples of 3D printed items, "Choose Your Own Adventure" game, and bookmarks with Freshman LibGuide QR code. Photo Courtesy of Megan York.

person approach was particularly influential for NSO because, considering the uniqueness of the new generation, their needs and wants informed our decision-making process.

Supporting Students During NSO

The Outreach Working Group prioritized less information push and more connection with students and their families. To accomplish this, we devised a plan to reframe the library's involvement as outreach with less focus on instruction. Borrowing from management philosophy, we opted for a "just in time" model for information. This model focused on only providing the information needed at a specific moment in time. For NSO, this meant delivering only what information new students need to successfully transition to college.[11] The working group felt it was essential to maintain a presence at NSO but wanted to refocus the library's message. NSO creates a unique space for librarians to reach new students less formally in a way that may also be less intimidating.[12] We discussed priority information and how to communicate it to students best while considering IO and the potential for communication overload. Previously, library messaging included research resources and information about individual subject librarians. In the planning sessions for NSO, the working group decided that this approach provided too much information that was irrelevant to students at that time.

The university libraries are uniquely positioned to provide both social and academic support. To highlight this support, the new messaging focused less on content and more on connection, which is essential as most incoming first-year students have had disrupted learning experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nicknamed "Gen P," these students are reportedly undersocialized, academically unprepared, and worried about being unprepared for college more than in previous classes.[13] Students who began high school during the pandemic face unique challenges and require tailored services considering their education experience. The national average ACT score is the lowest in 30 years at 19.5, while average high school GPAs have risen, leaving many questioning if students are ready for college and how universities can gauge the additional support needed to ensure student success.[14] According to ACT survey results published in 2023, many students entering college are experiencing self-doubts about whether they are prepared for college, and survey respondents indicated

their concern about motivation, readiness, and success.[15] Colleen Flaherty describes these new students as needing "a less-is-more approach, one in which connection and community norms and values are stressed over quantities of information that could easily overwhelm."[16]

Thus the Outreach Working Group condensed the new messaging to the top five resources that freshmen need to know and will likely use in their first year regarding the libraries. Taking into consideration that Mullins Library is undergoing a significant renovation, we highlighted our variety of study spaces on our currently open floors,

Kim Larsen, undergraduate engagement librarian, and Bekah Olson, engagement and instruction graduate assistant, at an example of the NSO table. Photo Courtesy of Megan York.

both for solo or group study; virtual chat help with real people; stress-relief activities during finals such as therapy dogs, friendship bracelets, zine-making, coloring, and button-making; Razorback Researcher workshops; and the addition of new innovative spaces and technologies once our renovation is complete with a few examples for them to look at, such as 3D-printed Greek letters and a campus map. Anecdotally, we noticed in previous years that families would be the most attracted to our table, as they liked to reminisce about their time on campus or that they used the library a lot while they were students at their respective universities. To ensure that family members still felt included, we created a QR code that led families to the new LibGuide "Libraries Information for Families."[17] The LibGuide compiled pertinent information from the most frequently asked questions we received from families during previous orientations, helping family members better support their students.

Another approach the Outreach Working Group took to minimize IO at NSO was reducing library swag. At previous NSO sessions, it was noted that swag mainly went to family members and not students. Our previous swag included pens, pencils, notepads, brochures, pamphlets, handouts, highlighters, and sometimes stickers. There were many options; they either went home with family members or were in students' bags and never seen again. To limit waste and prioritize connection, our group designed bookmarks with relevant information for new students and a QR code to a freshly updated "Freshman Resources" LibGuide.[18] The information we wanted students to know was irrelevant at the time of NSO, so we made it passively accessible rather than throwing it all at students as they visited our table. By posting—not pushing—information, students can choose when to access it.

Recognizing that students at NSO value choices and autonomy over a rigidly structured experience,[19] the Outreach Working Group made additional changes to the university libraries' participation in NSO. To prioritize engagement and independence, the university libraries' table consisted of a large screen with rotating images of library staff and events to provide a human connection, a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book recommendation activity to promote the student-led book club supported by the university libraries, which would give students a recommendation based on a series of "this or that"-type questions for a book that had been read previously in Razorbook Club. Additionally, there were examples

of 3D-printed objects to build excitement for the makerspace opening in the fall, as well as flyers with the QR codes for our LibGuides for new students and families. The working group also conducted a short volunteer training session for library employees staffing the table to ensure everyone was aware of the new messaging for our participation in NSO, talking points for them to use to engage people, as well as instructions on how to report the counts, what would be at the table, and a mechanism for reaching out to the Outreach Working Group if problems should arise, such as inability to make their shift or technical issues. This revamped approach ensured that the libraries' presence at NSO was meaningful, engaging, and less overwhelming, fostering a positive first impression and establishing a supportive connection with new students and their families.

Assessment

Another change for this NSO was an intentional effort to assess our reach and determine whether our participation in the event met our stated goals and provided a satisfactory return on the investment of our time. As mentioned, the main goal was to connect with students and introduce them to the library without overwhelming them with information. To measure our impact, we assessed both the number of people reached during the event and library volunteers' feedback on the changes to the approach. To count table visitors, we purchased a clicker to track the number of "participants," defined during our volunteer training as "any person who engages with us or our table by talking, listening, taking something with our logo or QR code, or completing our activity." Establishing this definition was necessary to ensure volunteers were tracking meaningful engagements.

We also held a debrief meeting with volunteers to gather feedback about the new approach. In general, feedback about the table and new approach was positive. Volunteers appreciated having two pitches to give students: the "Choose Your Own Adventure" PowerPoint activity and the discussion about the 3D-printed objects. One volunteer noted that the bookmarks were easy to hand to students even if they did not want to stop by the table to chat. The volunteers also offered valuable feedback and suggestions to improve our participation in NSO next year, such as using a tablet instead of a laptop or adding a QR code to complete the activity on a personal device. Another idea proposed was to add open-ended prompts to the slide show, such as "Ask us about . . ." with suggestions like 3D printers, sewing machines, or other library resources. We felt the feedback from the volunteer session was incredibly valuable. In the future, we will continue to track engagements by counting table visitors and debriefing with volunteers to ensure our participation in NSO is meaningful and worthwhile.

Conclusion

After tallying the participant total, we ended with more interactions than the previous year. In 2023, the library recorded 1,014 visits to the table at NSO, and in 2024, the library recorded 1,428 people. This evidence proves that the pared-down approach to providing information did not negatively impact our engagement. We believe that the attempt at paring down swag and information to focus on creating meaningful connections with students and their families was worthwhile. We continued this approach with other outreach events on campus throughout the fall semester, such as A-week (a week-long university program held before classes start designed to help incoming first-year students transition to campus)

and other college-specific events.[20] Thus we will continue to provide intentional information that meets the needs of our students in the moment, especially in campus-wide outreach events. ✄

Notes

1. David Bawden, Clive Holtham, and Nigel Courtney, "Perspectives on information overload," *Aslib Proceedings* (1999): 249–55.

2. Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millneials-end-and-generation-z-begins/.

3. Louie Giray, "Meet the Centennials: Understanding the Generation Z Students," *International Journal of Sociologies and Anthropologies Science Reviews* 2 (2022): 9–18.

4. Jennifer C. Benselin and Gillian Ragsdell, "Information Overload: The Differences That Age Makes," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 48, no. 3 (2016): 284–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000614566341.

5. Mohamed A. Belabbes, Ian Ruthven, Yashar Moshfeghi, and Diane R. Pennington, "Information Overload: A Concept Analysis," *Journal of Documentation* 79, no. 1 (May 2022): 144–59, https://doi.org/10.1108/jd-06-2021-0118.

6. Josephine B. Schmitt, Christina A. Debbelt, and Frank M. Schneider, "Too Much Information? Predictors of Information Overload in the Context of Online News Exposure," *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 8 (April 2017): 1151–67, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2017.1305427.

7. Ashley Cole and Brad Marcum, "Generation Z: Facts and Fictions," in *Not Just Where to Click: Teaching Students How to Think About Information*, edited by Trenia Napier, 107–37 (American Libraries Association, 2015).

8. Katie Blocksidge and Hanna Primeau, "Adapting and Evolving: Generation Z's Information Beliefs," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 49, no. 3 (May 2023): article 102686, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2023.102686.

9. Jennifer C. Benselin and Gillian Ragsdell, "Information Overload: The Differences That Age Makes," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 48, no. 3 (2016): 284–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000614566341.

10. Sara K. Zettervall and Mary J. Neinow, *Whole Person Librarianship: A Social Work Approach to Patron Services* (Libraries Unlimited, 2019), 11.

11. Colleen Flaherty, "Orientation for 'Gen P'," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 7, 2023, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2023/09/07/why-colleges-are-paring-down-new-student.

12. James G. Rhoades Jr. and Arianne Hartsell, "Marketing First Impressions: Academic Libraries Creating Partnerships and Connections at New Student Orientations," *Library Philosophy and Practice* (2008): 1–11, https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/libraries_fac_pubs/13.

13. Flaherty, "Orientation for 'Gen P'."

14. Liam Knox, "Is 'Gen P' Ready for College?," *Inside Higher Ed,* October 23, 2023, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/traditional-age/2023/10/23/assessing-college-readiness-pandemic-generation.

15. Becky Bobeck and Joyce Schnieders, "Influence of the Coronavirus Pandemic on High School Seniors College and Career Views," *ACT Research,* June 2023, https://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/pdfs/Covid-Influence-on-College-and-Career-Choices.html.

16. Flaherty, "Orientation for 'Gen P'."

17. "Libraries Information for Families," University of Arkansas University Libraries Research Guides, last updated February 6, 2025, https://uark.libguides.com/families.

18. "Freshman Resources," University of Arkansas University Libraries Research Guides, last updated March 10, 2025, https://uark.libguides.com/c.php?g=1262733.

19. Colleen Flaherty, "Students' Insights on Orientation," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 31, 2023, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2023/08/31/survey-what-college-students-want-orientation.

20. Transition Programs & Initiatives Office, "A-Week," University of Arkansas, accessed December 10, 2024, https://aweek.uark.edu.