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## Welcoming First Year Students in Style

*By Abby Kasowitz-Scheer*

This "back to school" edition of College Connection features ideas and success stories from academic libraries that have welcomed first-year students in creative ways. Many libraries participate in campus orientation initiatives in order to introduce new students to the library as a welcoming place with helpful staff. These events can set a positive tone for students to begin to develop their information literacy skills at the college level. Through games, activities and special events, academic libraries present themselves as comfortable (instead of intimidating) environments, so that students will return to the library for research help when they need it later on.

### Let's Party!

**Penn State University's Park Campus** holds a theme-based library open house each fall to welcome new students. The open house occurs over a two-day period during fall semester and features a festive theme such as sports, tropical luau, and winter carnival. The event includes a self-guided tour, games, decorations, giveaways, and special prizes (e.g., iPod nano) (Cahoy and Bichel, 2004). Penn State's open house draws crowds of 4,000 students due primarily to collaborations with faculty who require attendance as part of a first-year course. Student feedback is very positive; in 2005, 94% of students who attended indicated that because of their participation in the Open House, they feel more comfortable using the library for research assignments. (For more information, see <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/openhouse>).



**The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Library** hosts a Library Fall Festival in the library and on the quad. The event showcases Library resources and services through creative games and activities such as a "Bind the Book" sewing table. Students participate in prize drawings and receive frisbees as giveaways. A highlight of the event is "Bob the Book", a staff member who dresses in a book costume; students rush across the quad to have their pictures taken with this library celebrity.

*Bob the Book is pictured to the left with Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe. (From Hinchliffe's public gallery on Picasa)*

## Self-Guided Tours

Some libraries offer self-paced activities facilitated by library staff in which students participate as part of a course or orientation program. At the **University of Calgary**, students in the first-year orientation class participate in a simulation to encourage them to explore library services and resources such as course reserves, article databases, and reference. Similarly, the James H. Thomason Library at **Presbyterian College** offers a self-guided tour requiring students to visit different areas of the library including the instruction classroom, where they attend a brief introduction to the library. With the theme, "Under



Construction: A Blueprint for Academic Success" (in honor of current library renovations), students follow construction boot prints, signs, and arrows to their destinations throughout the library.

## Reality Inspired by TV

Some libraries model their orientation activities after popular television shows. In September 2006, almost 500 students at **Lynn University** got "Lost at the Lynn University Library." Students [see photo at right] participated in this contest, inspired by ABC's "Lost," as part of their Freshman Year Experience course. Classes competed as groups to determine who would be rescued first. (Previous Lynn University Library orientations were based on CBS's "Survivor". Click [HERE](#) to learn more about Lynn University's Freshman Year Library Experience 2006-2007.)

First year students at **Benedictine University** participated in "The Amazing Race: Benedictine Edition" (based on CBS's "The Amazing Race"). Students were given passports and maps of each floor of the library showing where clues were hidden. "Pit stops" on each floor offered areas for staff to answer student questions and hand out prizes as well as stamp passports. Once students complete the race, they were given certificates to enter into the grand prize drawing (prizes include gift certificates to the bookstore and local restaurants and photocopy cards) and were invited to enjoy refreshments, play games, and watch a humorous video with library tips. Through this activity, students learned some basic skills that are useful early on in their college experience such as locating the library web site, purchasing photocopy cards, and locating reserve materials. Approximately 1/3 of the first-year class completed the "race" this year and many students shared positive feedback on the post-event survey. (See a movie of the event at: <http://www.ben.edu/resources/librarytour/AmazingRace/AmazingRace.wmv>)

## Welcoming International Students

Many libraries offer special orientation programs for international students, recognizing the unique needs of this population. **Syracuse University Library** has created a web page (<http://library.syr.edu/instruction/international/welcome.htm>) to help international students locate library materials and use library services. It includes research tips as well as links to definitions of library terms and translation tools. Syracuse University Library also offers a set of workshops exclusively for

international students on using the library and its resources, evaluating sources, avoiding plagiarism, and using RefWorks (a citation management tool).

**Jacksonville State University's** Houston Cole Library offers a library session to international students the day before classes start. The session includes a tour of the library, demonstrations of online databases and the catalog, and hands-on practice.

## Conclusion

The events and services offered by the libraries in this article serve to make a positive first impression of the library for new students. During a time when most first-year students are overwhelmed by the stresses of living in a new place (for some, a new country), navigating the college campus, and tackling intense academic pressures, these libraries provide comfortable, fun and informative activities to help relieve anxiety. These events do not replace planned, instructional activities focused on specific information literacy skills, but rather they serve to encourage students to return to the library and to connect with library staff when they have academic or personal information needs.

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## References

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## About the Author



Abby Kasowitz-Scheer is Head of Instructional Services at the [Syracuse University Library](#). She also leads the effort to expand the *S.O.S. for Information Literacy* project to higher

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