

## **Customer Service and the First Year Student**

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## **Customer Service and the First Year Student**

### **Abstract:**

In 2004, Vanderbilt University announced that it would change the way its first year students live on campus. A major capital campaign was launched to create ten new or refurbished college halls on Peabody College campus to house all first year students as of fall 2008. As the University prepares for its first class of students to live together on campus, the Jean and Alexander Heard Library has been working to address the needs of this group. How do residence and proximity affect library usage? Will user needs change within the eight campus libraries? This article explores the service recommendations prepared by the library's system-wide project team tasked with exploring how the creation of a new living space can offer new opportunities and challenges in the provision of quality services. Recommendations were based on a literature review, focus groups, and interviews with stakeholders on campus.

### **Residential Changes on Vanderbilt Campus Lead to New Service Delivery Options**

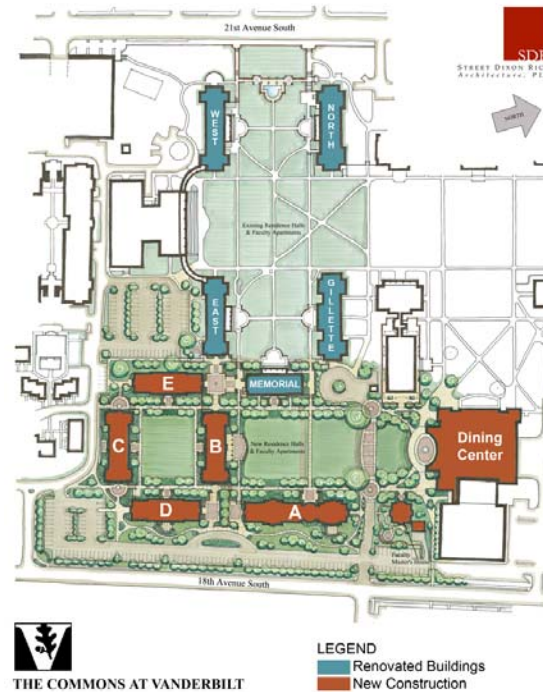
Vanderbilt University is a private research university of approximately 6,500 undergraduates and 5,300 graduate and professional students. Located in Nashville, Tennessee, the university dates its founding to 1873, when Cornelius Vanderbilt donated one million dollars for the creation of the first buildings on campus. In academic year 2007/2008, Vanderbilt awarded 1,468 baccalaureate degrees in the areas of the liberal arts and sciences, engineering, music, education and human development, and 1,674 masters, M.D. or other doctoral degrees in a full range of academic and medical fields.

The Jean and Alexander Heard Library dates from the University's beginnings, when approximately 2,000 volumes were housed in a room on the second floor of what is now Kirkland Hall administration building. Today, the Library holds over 3.3 million volumes, 36,000 journals and serials, of which some 17,000 are electronic, and more than 3 million microforms in eight campus libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, and in the library Annex. The Library is named in honor of Chancellor Emeritus Alexander Heard and his wife Jean, founder of the Friends of the Library organization. Each campus library is run by a director who reports to the Deputy University Librarian; department administrators report to the University Librarian. Each campus library director works closely with his or her school dean to build a program of services and resources that address each school's unique mission.

Each year, over 1500 new first year students are accepted at Vanderbilt. Prior to the coming school year, first year students were housed in three residential dormitories that were distributed across the campus. This year for the first time, all first year students will be concentrated in one area of the campus.

Beginning in fall 2008, all first year students will be housed on Vanderbilt's Peabody College campus in a living learning complex designed specifically for first year students called The Commons. The Commons consists of a central dining/student activity building and ten houses constructed around four quadrangles, and is the first phase of College Halls at Vanderbilt, a residential college living and learning environment. Designed to bring students, faculty, and staff together in small, community-based settings within the larger university, College Halls at Vanderbilt was created with the understanding that each new class entering Vanderbilt contains students with increasingly diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. The residential program is based on social and academic programs designed specifically for the students in each of the ten College Houses, drawing residents together to encourage them to become engaged in the intellectual and cultural life of the university. [1]

Faculty have been chosen to live in each of the Houses to serve as Heads of House. Together with approximately 150 non-residential faculty and staff, they are responsible for crafting programming to engage students and to mentor them through their first critical year of university life--in essence, to build the life of the house. Additional Commons staff are in place to support all of the other aspects of student life--from dining and exercise to mail services and Internet access. Construction of the Commons began in spring 2005 and was completed in summer 2008. Chancellor Nicholas S. Zeppos noted, "We are not just building a new campus. We are building a new first-year undergraduate experience that complements and enriches the mission of discovery at the core of our research university." [2] In the coming years, Vanderbilt plans to build up to seven College Halls for upperclassmen.



### The Commons at Vanderbilt [3]

Living learning communities are not new to college campuses. An early advocate, Indiana University's Collins Living Learning Center in Bloomington, Indiana, has offered thematic programming for campus residents since 1972. C.M. Zhao and G.D. Kuh date academia's identification of the need for a humanizing element on American campuses as far back as the 1920s, but identified significant milestones in efforts to refine a living learning concept in the 1960s with momentum gained on campuses beginning in the late 1980s. [4] For first year students, the living learning experience can provide a ready-made community and has been shown to support academic success. [5]

The new living arrangement and its associated programmatic component provide opportunities and challenges for the Heard Library. The library's recent surveys support the theory that residential proximity is one variable that affects library choice [6]; students tend to make use of facilities near where they live and work. Based on the assumption that first year students will be grouped together on the Peabody campus, what new services and resources need to be put in place to address their needs? How can the library reach out to these students and to the faculty who are serving as Heads of House? How does this university initiative offer opportunities for the library?

### Existing library orientation programming for first years

We have long understood the importance of targeting first year students. As Betsy Barefoot noted, "the first year is the period in which students develop long-lasting patterns of behavior, attitudes, and make momentous decisions about majors and careers as well as friendships and social allies." [7]. Undergraduate library orientation for new Vanderbilt students has been conducted independently by the four libraries serving undergraduate students: Central (Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences), Peabody (Education and Human Organizational Development), the Wilson Music Library and the Stevenson Science & Engineering Library. The College of Arts & Sciences has offered First Year Writing Seminars for several years, and for the past two years seminar instructors have been strongly encouraged to include a library instruction session that covers locating and evaluating library resources. Sessions are 50-75 minutes and are provided by staff in the Central and Science & Engineering Libraries. The Music Library has worked collaboratively with the Blair School of Music to integrate information literacy throughout the curriculum, beginning with core courses aimed at first year students. The Peabody Library conducts sessions for first year students in Peabody's Human and Organizational Development program, in Psychology and Human Development, and in Special Education.

Following Vanderbilt's 2007 SACS accreditation review, the University approved a Quality Enhancement Program to further develop its experimental "Vanderbilt Visions" program addressing the acculturation of first year students within the university and to integrate it into the new residential environment. Vanderbilt Visions provides small groupings for students who meet in weekly seminars focusing on four areas of student acculturation: academic, cognitive, social and values [8]. The library was invited to create a program last year that provided a basic introduction. Incorporating feedback received by the Vanderbilt Visions Executive Committee, this year the library will offer highly interactive modules from which the faculty and student leaders (VUceptors) for each group can choose. These activities promote group discussion, problem-solving and active learning about library resources and services, the Vanderbilt campus, and new technologies.



Trial run of the GPS Vanderbilt Visions module

Photo credit: Jacob Thornton

This fall, first year students in Vanderbilt Visions groups may choose one or more of the library's modules to (a) engage with images of artifacts from Special Collections & University Archives to explore what life on campus was like for the Class of 1912 when they entered a century ago; (b) race across campus in small groups using a variety of geographic methods (written walking directions, outdoor map stands, GPS units), learning about campus libraries and resources along the way; (c) learn to evaluate information using Wikipedia as a case study; and (d) explore campaign ads for Election 2008 guided by a set of questions designed to encourage students to think critically and draw their own conclusions. Staff involved in the development of these modules include: Sue Erickson (leader), Brian Boling, Sue Davis, Steve Dunning, Lee Ann Lannom, Stacy Owens, Larry Romans, Ramona Romero, Amy Stewart-Mailhiot and Jacob Thornton.

Many, but not all, of the first year students will learn about the library in a fun and interactive Vanderbilt Visions session, or through their First Year Writing Seminars where the focus is on developing basic information literacy skills; outreach to The Commons will provide a third avenue to reaching these students. Through this three-pronged approach students will have the opportunity to see the library as a resource for academic work, a place for fun leisure activities, and as an organization of friendly people reaching out to where they live and work.

In January 2008, the Library Directors Council, the library's operational administration unit, formed a project team to explore library service for The Commons. The Commons Service Exploration Team (CSET) examined options and avenues to provide library services for first year students at The Commons for fall 2008. We concentrated on mission-driven services that would be relevant to the first year students. The team divided into groups of 1 to 4 members who (a) gathered information about existing library services to first year students at Vanderbilt University; (b) reviewed the literature discussing library services for first year students; (c) performed reviews of peer institutions, including interviews with library staff; (d) interviewed those already engaged directly in The Commons operations, including Faculty Heads of House, the Dean of The Commons, and Commons staff; and (e) conducted focus groups with current first year students, sophomores currently living in the Commons Houses, and library student assistants. Members of the Commons Service Exploration Team were: Sue Erickson (leader), Melinda Brown, Sara Byrd, Peg Earheart, Jodie Gambill, Rahn Huber, Ramona Romero, Carlin Sappenfield, Jacob Thornton and Celia Walker.

With the Vanderbilt Visions and C-SET groups being underway at the same time and with some of the same staff, it became clear that the lessons learned in each project could be useful for the other. This paper attempts to provide a holistic view of the development of a growing set of services and programs for first year students at Vanderbilt.

The CSET project team came up with a long list of creative ideas, but before going further with any of the ideas, we examined each one in light of the feedback we received in focus groups, through our interviews with stakeholders, and through publications and best practices of comparable institutions to determine the appeal and feasibility of each. For example, while we initially thought that developing a presence in Facebook, where students spend much of their time, would be a great way to reach the students, we reconsidered and later dismissed this after our interviews with students indicated that they wanted Facebook to remain a social space. It's where they connect with their friends, but they made it very clear that it is not the place they want to connect with librarians or their professors. Some of the recent literature we consulted (see "Studying Students") confirmed that this view is not unique to our campus.

The literature review allowed us to identify critical elements of first year programs and to learn from other libraries that are currently engaged in a program of service focused on a first year audience.

### **Lesson 1: When Creating A New Instruction Program, Make Use of Existing Resources and Expand Upon Current Programs**

It became clear from the literature that funding for first year information literacy programs is rarely allocated at the outset of a new program. Creative planning can allow a library to re-use parts of an existing program to meet the instructional

needs of a living learning community. Nancy Frazier, Senior Assistant Librarian and Coordinator of Library Outreach at Buffalo State University's E. H. Butler Library, describes how the library became involved with the university's first year learning communities in 2003. [9] With no additional staff funding, the library integrated an existing one-credit course, Library 100: Introduction to Library Research and Methods, into the first year learning community program as a one hour/week instruction session. Research guides and course related materials were redesigned to address faculty theme-based instruction. Librarians also attended events and field trips conducted for the learning communities, graded assignments, and served on the community faculty team. The library program continues to expand and is viewed as a success by all participants.

### **Program: Promote and conduct existing course-related instruction in The Commons**

Prior to 2007, the Vanderbilt campus undergraduate libraries have provided course-related instruction, on-demand workshops in software programs such as Excel and EndNote, and online tutorials and subject guides. These existing services could be marketed to first year students or even held in spaces at The Commons. Some of this current programming could be integrated into residential programming in the houses. Since The Commons has its own website [<http://commonplace.vanderbilt.edu/>] for the first year students, the library online offerings (tutorials, subject guides) could be linked from it. Our attendance statistics compared with those of previous years, along with pre and post tests will be used for assessment. We will also count and compare Web site statistics for online tutorials and subject guides for 2008/2009 and earlier years.

### **Lesson 2: Connect with Faculty and University Staff to Integrate Programs into the Curriculum**

A second lesson learned from the literature review was the need to connect instruction programs to the academic curriculum. Trudi Jacobson and Beth Mark note that without the direct connection of instruction to school assignments, students rarely make the connection between the library's program and their other courses. [10] Buffalo State found that the addition of a student affairs representative to the faculty curriculum committee enriched the program and the librarians' insight into their relationships with the students. [11] Judith Faust, at California State University, Hayworth, describes the library's 50 minutes/week Fundamentals of Information Literacy course which first year students complete to fulfill a General Education requirement. Faust writes, "...creating an environment where library faculty are respected players on campus (Radar, 1995) and making external circumstances work to your benefit are key." [12]

This summer, the library forged a new relationship with the staff at the Stratton Foster Academic Center in the McGugin Center, Vanderbilt's facility supporting student athletes. The students taking summer courses received instruction in using library resources and services. Many of these students have returned to



our libraries for further assistance and some of the academic tutors have sent other students for help. We look forward to expanding on the success of this new outreach program over the coming years.

The Vanderbilt Visions programs that are being developed for fall 2008 have been done so with early and ongoing input from faculty administrators and student representatives. This has been invaluable and will insure that our modules will meet the needs of the program. We are more confident that the first year students in the program will be receptive to the activities because we have worked in an iterative process with periodic review.

While not a "curriculum" per se, the overarching goal of The Commons is to provide a more holistic experience for first year students, integrating their academic and social lives. It is this integration that we need to tap into and of course it fits well with our mission as an academic library because we are not interested in their development as college students, but as lifelong learners. Our team also identified three programs that would support faculty at The Commons and strengthen the relationship between faculty and library staff:

**Program: Create a guide for faculty Heads of House**

A number of faculty needs were identified through discussions with Faculty Heads at The Commons. These faculty members have unique needs since they actually live on campus. They were expected to be a resource for students who might have questions about the library. One faculty member had found that in moving to her new apartment she was in need of space for her own research materials. She was unaware that the library provides storage for faculty at the Library Annex. This also gave us a good opportunity to tell the faculty member about Special Collections and University Archives and the potential for donating infrequently accessed files and documents to the Library. The team determined that a guide should be created for the Heads of House that would summarize the services that the library offers as well as contact information for subject librarians. The guide was distributed via email in the summer when faculty were moving into their residences.

**Program: Expand faculty delivery of Vanderbilt and ILL books to faculty residences**

A request for faculty delivery to The Commons (faculty delivery is already available to faculty offices on campus) provided the impetus to expand faculty delivery to campus residences. At the end of the school year, our delivery statistics should tell us if this was a useful addition.

**Program: Add a book drop to The Commons**

One faculty member mentioned that it would very convenient to be able to return his books closer to his home. While there is a book drop at the nearby Peabody Library, we may want to place a new drop at The Commons to accommodate the faculty, students, and staff who live and work in this area. If this proves to be

feasible, we could assess the success by tracking the number of returns to this drop. This project raises the issue of whether we should consider adding more book drops to areas of the campus with a high concentration of residences. Based on the popularity of the one book drop we currently have located in a high rise dormitory, we think this would be a desirable expansion of service.

### **Lesson 3: Enjoyable Activities May Be More Meaningful to Students**

The importance of making activities fun and of addressing clearly-defined learning objectives is seen in Niagara University Library's first year orientation program. [13] Like many other academic libraries, New York's Niagara University Library redesigned their first year information literacy program in 2001 after the American Library Association's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education were released in 2000. Kristine Kasbohm and her colleagues wanted to add information literacy instruction to their existing orientation tour of the library in a way that was interactive and fun. They also wanted to add goals and learning objectives to the program and integrate the instruction within the students' four year experience. In 2004, they unveiled the Library Mystery Tour, which allowed students to tour the library in teams while searching for clues to a literature-based mystery. Pre and post test assessments suggest that the program is well-liked and is meeting their learning objectives.

### **Program: Work with residential assistants to develop short outreach programs**

Faculty were also looking for programming that would enrich their residents' experiences. The team felt that this was an opportunity for the library to provide suggestions for short programs that could take place in the Houses. As we consider developing short sessions for the residential programming, we should keep the "fun" in mind. We have a wonderful opportunity to meet the students where they live and we need to carefully consider the impression we want to leave with them. Input from residential assistants will be critical to ensuring that our programming meets the needs and interests of the students. We will track attendance and the number of programs over the year.

### **Program: Develop fun and interactive programs to engage first year students**

Our Vanderbilt Visions modules will engage students in a race across campus, an exploration of what it was like to be a student at Vanderbilt 100 years ago, or a hot debate about political spin in Election 2008. These fun activities offer a different kind of learning than what will be experienced in a classroom.

### **Lesson 4: Use the channels that students already frequent to communicate our message**

One of the questions that we hoped to answer in team activities concerned best practices for reaching out to first year students. We interviewed 34 first year and sophomore students, asking them what social networking tools they were using. While 91 percent were accessing Facebook every day (MySpace came in at a

distant second at six percent daily usage), the respondents also told us that they did not want to receive messages from the library through Facebook. The preferred method for learning about the library: one-on-one help with a librarian.

Our library's project team members also reviewed the Web sites of the nineteen other academic institutions in the 2008 top twenty national universities cited by U.S. News and World Report [14]. Sixty-eight percent of the other institutions described special services for first year students. Most common were orientation programs, open houses, and tours, often accompanied by give-aways and/or food. Team members took particular note of Harvard University's Lamont Library, which holds a theme-based open house called "You@Lamont" and gives away USB drives to all attendees

[[http://hcl.harvard.edu/news/2007/lamont\\_open\\_house.html](http://hcl.harvard.edu/news/2007/lamont_open_house.html)]. MIT holds a number of events for first years, clustered during their first few weeks on campus, among them a theme-based tour for first years in August entitled "Hitchhikers' Guide Library Tour" with special prizes for the first ten attendees, an ice cream social, and an academic expo, which emphasizes discipline-based questions [<http://libraries.mit.edu/orientation/2007/#undergraduate>]. Again, these programs emphasize fun activities during the orientation period for first years.

### **Program: Host a reception for first year students during Family Weekend**

One idea we learned from our literature review is that we need to market to parents because they are a strong influence in their children's lives. If the parents are aware of library resources and services, they will be more likely to recommend these to their students. Our development officer is already planning a general library reception for Family Weekend, and we can work with staff at The Commons to make sure that this event is effectively marketed to first year students and their parents. We will assess the effectiveness of this event by tracking attendance.

A number of surveyed libraries created Web pages designed specifically for first year students, including the University of Notre Dame, Dartmouth, and Princeton. Particularly attractive is Brown University's undergraduate blog including general library resources, IM chat, and news of interest to undergraduates

[<http://blogs.brown.edu/project/ug/>]. Princeton's First Year of Studies Web site [<http://fys.nd.edu/current.html>] contains links to library and academic resources and to the university's "First Year Experience Librarian" who works with first year "Peer Information Consultants". The site contains monthly "NewsNotes" with information for first years that takes them from orientation to information to prepare them as they move up to sophomore year. We found it especially interesting that the content for the site comes from first year students. The site also contains a First Year of Studies Research Guide and Research Strategy Worksheet, among other resources geared to first year needs. University of Chicago provides Class Librarians for each undergraduate class [<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/classlibrarians/>].

**Program: Enhance our Web page for first year students**

As part of last year's Vanderbilt Visions programming, a Web page was developed to serve as a follow-up starting point for students to begin exploring the library after their session. This Web page has the potential to become a portal for first year student research. We will work with the new webmaster at The Commons to develop this page and integrate it into The CommonPlace portal. The number of hits to this page will help determine whether we're successful.

**Lesson 5: Listen to your community**

Other things on the wish lists of our interviewees: a Commons Library open 24/7; quiet space, possibly a quiet floor, in the library; workshops in The Commons; access to leisure reading and films. The team also recognized that supporting such a large new venture on campus warranted the addition of new staff. The following final recommendation was put forward.

**Program: Recruit a Commons Librarian who will serve as liaison to this constituency**

While it is not currently in our budget to hire a full-time librarian to be devoted to this population, funds were made available for half of a full-time Outreach Librarian to serve as a liaison to The Commons. We are now in the process of drafting the job description for this position. Watch our job listings for further developments: <http://staffweb.library.vanderbilt.edu/libjobs/libjobs.html>.

**Lesson 6: Assessment can occur before, after and long after the instruction**

Vickery Kaye Lebbin, at the University of Hawaii at Manoa Library in Honolulu, Hawaii, has studied students' perception of the long term value of information literacy instruction within a learning community. [15] The library's three-credit course has been offered since 1999. She points out that student learning may be assessed through pre and post tests, assignments, surveys and course evaluations, but little work has been done on students' perspectives through a learning community. Long term effectiveness can be assessed by a questionnaire to upperclassmen, by comparing grade point average, retention, and graduation rates for attendees and non participants, or through focus groups, as Lebbin chose to do.

Peabody College's first years will be assessed through the Collegiate Learning Assessment instrument and the iSkills assessment. The College began assessing computer literacy and critical thinking skill development between first and senior year in 2006 with the ETS iSkills assessment. The Peabody Library coordinates and administers the assessments and uses the results to improve library instruction and workshops. In 2008 we will administer the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) which assesses critical thinking, reasoning, problem-solving and written communication abilities. The data from these two assessments will be reviewed for ongoing assessment of our library services.

We also plan to do another round of LibQUAL+ assessment in spring 2009. Other plans for assessment were generated using the CRL guidelines for undergraduate services. [16]

We will continue to develop and assess these programs and services to determine whether we are meeting the changing needs of our campus. We will continue to hold focus groups of first year students and will use the key needs identified in recommendations and determine if they were addressed. We will also ask for ways to improve our services. Success will also be determined by the degree to which the library's and/or university's mission is incorporated into the services and resources. We expect to see the benefits we will gain through our outreach to faculty and students in this first year environment rippling across the campus as these students become upperclassmen and the faculty members finish their contracts as Faculty Heads of House, returning to their lives as "regular" faculty members. How will their experiences have changed the way they think about life on a college campus? How will they view the library as part of this life?

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*(Thanks to Robbi de Peri who contributed to this list)*

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