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Liza Weisbrod  
*Auburn University*

Juliet T. Rumble  
*Auburn University*

Adelia Grabowsky  
*Auburn University*

Isabel Altamirano  
*Auburn University*

Emily Sahib  
*Auburn University*

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SHARING OUR STORIES

# Hosting an International Graduate Student Orientation

Liza Weisbrod,<sup>1</sup> Juliet T. Rumble,<sup>2</sup> Adelia Grabowsky,<sup>3</sup>  
Isabel Altamirano,<sup>4</sup> and Emily Sahib<sup>5</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In Fall 2022, Auburn University Libraries faculty and staff hosted an orientation event for newly arrived international graduate students. Highlights of the event included tours of major library service points, a shared meal, and a meet and greet for graduate students and subject librarians. A key takeaway for both groups was an increased awareness of the differences that exist between U.S. academic libraries and those in other countries. The authors discuss elements of the library orientation that worked well, and address lessons learned that will be used to improve future events.

**Keywords:** international students, graduate students, library orientations, library outreach programs

<sup>1</sup> Music, Government Information, and Research Support Librarian, Auburn University; [weisbel@auburn.edu](mailto:weisbel@auburn.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Women's Studies Librarian, Auburn University; [rumblyt@auburn.edu](mailto:rumblyt@auburn.edu)

<sup>3</sup> Health Sciences Librarian, Auburn University; [abg0011@auburn.edu](mailto:abg0011@auburn.edu)

<sup>4</sup> Chemistry & Chemical Engineering, Communications & Journalism Librarian, Auburn University; [ima0010@auburn.edu](mailto:ima0010@auburn.edu)

<sup>5</sup> Administrator II, Outreach Programs, Auburn University; [ess0054@auburn.edu](mailto:ess0054@auburn.edu)

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## HOSTING AN INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT ORIENTATION

In 2018, Auburn University Libraries (AUL) faculty formed a working group tasked with assessing the information needs of graduate students and implementing action plans to meet the needs of this user population. For its first project, the working group offered a Savvy Researcher Boot Camp (SRBC), a day-long event that was designed to enhance graduate students' research, information management, and scholarly productivity skills ([https://libguides.auburn.edu/savvy\\_researcher](https://libguides.auburn.edu/savvy_researcher)). Graduate students responded enthusiastically to the Boot Camp, and future Boot Camps were planned for the start of each semester.

From the beginning, library faculty observed that a large percentage of SRBC attendees were international students. Recognizing that the needs of these and other graduate students extended beyond the discipline-specific curricula of their graduate programs, the working group held focus groups to explore participants' experiences with SRBC and, more generally, the students' experiences navigating graduate school. Held in 2019, the focus groups included four international graduate students. These students reported that they found academic libraries in the United States to be very different from libraries in their home countries (Rumble et al., 2021). They also revealed that they felt intimidated by American libraries and often did not know how, or whom, to ask for help. This feedback, together with a departmental brainstorming session focused on student outreach and engagement, was the impetus for developing a library event targeted to new international graduate students.

## IMPLEMENTING THE INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENT LIBRARY ORIENTATION

The inaugural International Graduate Student Library Orientation (IGSLO) was held on August 26, 2022, in Ralph Brown Draughon (RBD) Library, the main branch of AUL. Students were asked to pre-register for the event, using a LibCal online form. The event was advertised through the Libraries, the Graduate School, international student organizations, and the Office of International Programs. Subject librarians were also encouraged to send information about the IGSLO to their colleges and departments. The event was promoted in various ways: newsletters, flyers, social media, direct emails to individuals and departments, and word of mouth. One Chinese graduate student advertised the event to over 200 of her friends in a group chat messaging app. Of 71 students who pre-registered, 31 attended. However, some students attended without registering, so total attendance was approximately 40 students. Attendees represented 14 countries and eight Auburn University colleges.

Upon arriving at the event, students were asked to sign in and were assigned to one of four tour groups. The organizers thought that smaller groups would facilitate more interaction between participants and the tour guides. Each group was led by a librarian and visited key service points throughout the building. The tour covered four floors in RBD Library, including the following tour stops:

- **1<sup>st</sup> Floor:** Circulation Desk and the Innovation & Research Commons
- **2<sup>nd</sup> Floor:** Research Help Desk, Panera Café, Study Essentials (a satellite of the university bookstore), Quiet Study Room, Study Partners (a peer tutoring service), and Miller Writing Center
- **3<sup>rd</sup> Floor:** Office of Information Technology (OIT) Help Desk, Graduate Student Study Area, and a stop at one of the numerous group study rooms that students can reserve
- **4<sup>th</sup> Floor:** Reflection/Prayer Room and individual desktops/work areas on the designated quiet floor

Students were encouraged to ask questions and interact with staff at the various service points. After the tours, students were treated to a pizza lunch where they had an opportunity to socialize and network with their peers and subject librarians. At the conclusion of the lunch period, a librarian provided a short PowerPoint presentation about library services that were not addressed in the physical tour, including information about library hours, the online Ask-a-Librarian help service, library workshops, the Savvy Researcher Boot Camps, interlibrary loan, campus delivery services, printing, and an online guide to library services for graduate students (<https://libguides.auburn.edu/gradservices>).

A number of library faculty, staff, and campus partners were involved in the orientation. A core team of four subject librarians handled most of the planning, preparation, and publicity for the event. This group also gave tours and led the lunch presentation. Two additional subject librarians with skills in multiple languages were enlisted to serve as tour guides, and a total of 11 subject librarians attended the lunch and networking portion of the event. In the Innovation & Research Commons (I&RC), a library staff member was on hand to provide information about the various service points in that area (i.e., MakerSpace, DataSpace, Adobe Creative Space, Extended Reality Space, Audio Studio, Digital Wall, and Technology Lending). Graduate student peers, some of whom were international students themselves, accompanied attendees on the tours to promote student engagement. Graduate students staffing the Research Help Desk were encouraged to interact with attendees and tour guides. Two graduate students at the Writing Center gave a brief presentation about the resources and services provided by their unit.

## TAKEAWAYS

International students are often surprised to find out that U.S. academic libraries are very different from those in their home countries. Library rules, policies, and services can vary greatly. One tour guide asked attendees to share with the group how RBD Library differed from the libraries at their home universities. Attendees were surprised to learn that they could:

- borrow a laptop and specialized equipment (e.g., digital cameras)
- reserve rooms for individual or collaborative study
- eat and drink in the library building
- talk, not whisper
- check out books
- print posters and journal articles
- take library workshops (e.g., on data management, citation managers, Adobe Creative Cloud applications, etc.)
- receive free assistance from subject librarians
- visit the library after 5 p.m.
- have unlimited time for database searching
- take advantage of academic support services (e.g., Writing Center) located in the library building

Perhaps just as important, the librarians participating in this event were reminded that library services and practices, which may seem routine to those working in libraries, are anything but routine for many library users. Librarians cannot simply acquire resources and design services. Users will need assistance navigating the library environments in which these are offered.

## WHAT WORKED WELL

Following the orientation, feedback from attendees was collected via a Qualtrics survey. Student responses were overwhelmingly positive. Students felt that they learned a great deal and indicated that the tour had been helpful to them. In addition, most students responded that they would like to be notified about future library workshops and Savvy Researcher Boot Camps. Tour guides reported that students were very engaged—asking multiple questions and even taking photos with their phones. One guide noted that it was

easier to navigate language issues when students were physically present (a lot could be explained simply by pointing).

Perhaps most important, the experience provided librarians and attendees alike with an opportunity to become better acquainted. There was a lot of discussion and laughter during the lunch/networking portion of the event. Students learned about subject librarians and the research support services they provide; in some instances, attendees were able to meet the librarian for their specific college or department. Following the event, several librarians reported encountering students in other contexts (e.g., helping an attendee find a book, running into a student who was a member of the same university advisory group, or being greeted by a student who remembered them from the orientation). Participants also seemed to enjoy socializing with the graduate students who work at the library. Some of these graduate student employees were able to attend the lunch, where they offered their own graduate school survival tips.

## **PLANNED IMPROVEMENTS**

Issues around timing are one aspect of the IGSLO that organizers plan to revisit. The IGSLO was offered from 11:00 am to 1:30 pm and included lunch. Feedback from attendees as to preferred days and times for this type of event was mixed. There was no clear preference for weekday or weekend, nor for morning or afternoon time slots. However, anecdotally, the organizers observed many students arriving late because they were coming from, or leaving early to attend, a class or lab. In the future, a weekday afternoon event from 3:00 to 5:30 pm is planned, in hopes that this time slot will decrease scheduling conflicts while also being early enough in the afternoon for library colleagues and partners to participate.

Changes will also be made to the order of the various activities. Previously, the orientation began with tours, proceeded to lunch and the PowerPoint presentation, and concluded with a meet and greet with subject librarians. Students who arrived late had to join tours already in progress, thus missing out on key information. Also, since the lunch presentation and the subject librarian meet and greet came towards the end of the event, students who had to leave early for classes or other appointments missed those parts of the orientation. The next event will begin with a meet and greet period, which can better accommodate staggered arrivals. The PowerPoint presentation will also be incorporated into the library tour. Viewing the presentation in a smaller group, as part of the tour, will provide more opportunities for students to ask questions. The tour of the Innovation & Research Commons area will incorporate more hands-on activities (e.g., opportunities for students

to handle the I&RC's cameras, ring lights, and other technology that are available for check out). The orientation will conclude with pizza and peer networking, so that students can spend as much time together as they like before departing. By making these adjustments to the schedule and incorporating more interactive elements into the tours, librarians hope to increase the likelihood that students will retain the information shared with them.

The organizers also plan to rework how they handle registration for the event. Previously, they asked students to pre-register using the Libraries' LibCal system because this facilitated a head count for the pizza order. LibCal also has a convenient email reminder feature. As part of pre-registration, the organizers collected information about attendees' home countries and languages so that the students could be assigned to tour groups accordingly. However, predefined tour groups did not work well in practice. Some students showed up for the event without registering. A few commented that they hadn't heard about the event until a friend said they were going. Making adjustments to tour groups in real time proved to be awkward. Students wanted the flexibility of joining a group with their friends or joining a group departing at a time that suited them. Going forward, the organizers will plan a more flexible system, including one that allows attendees to self-select their tour group. While the orientation will still accommodate attendees who have not pre-registered, organizers will continue to encourage pre-registration to assist with meal planning, demographics reporting, and email reminders.

## **CONCLUSION**

A library orientation session offered early in the semester has the potential to be a game changer for international students who have just arrived on campus. Academic libraries such as AUL provide graduate students with more than just books and databases. However, too often, students do not take advantage of the resources and services available to them simply because they are unaware of their existence. Orientation sessions such as this one can help to increase the visibility of what academic libraries have to offer graduate students.

For international students, for whom so much is new, orientations with small group tours and a shared meal can be especially meaningful. Events targeted to international students include the underlying message that "we see you," and "you are welcome here." AUL librarians hope that, by providing international graduate students with an opportunity to meet subject librarians face to face, students will feel more comfortable approaching library faculty and staff when they need help. AUL will offer its second IGSLO in Fall 2023 and will build upon the lessons learned from the inaugural event.

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