Quick, To the Reference Cave!

Gain New Librarian Superpowers to Rescue College Students from Library Anxiety!

What Is Library Anxiety?
Library anxiety is defined as a feeling “characterized by tension, fear, feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, negative and self-defeating thoughts and mental disorganization that appear only when students are in or contemplating a visit to the library” (McPherson 317).

If you have never encountered the term library anxiety, then you probably are not aware that research has shown that nearly half of students experience library anxiety, particularly during their first semester (McPherson 319).

The Origin Story
Constance Mellon’s article “Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development” was the first to explore the theory of library anxiety in college students in 1986. Her qualitative study “explored the feelings of students using the library for research” (160). Students wrote about the search process and their feelings about it in a composition course (161). When analyzed for common themes, Mellon found that students “became so anxious that they were unable to approach the problem logically or effectively” when conducting research in the library for the first time. They felt inadequate compared to their peers and did not ask questions because of their fear of revealing their ignorance (163).

This study was instrumental in raising awareness of the anxiety students feel and the theory behind it. As a result, it gave librarians an opportunity to promote the importance of programs to help combat library anxiety.

Method of Data Collection
The scope of our literature review spans the past 10 years. Exceptions were made for the most groundbreaking studies including Mellon (1986), Bostick (1992), and Jiao et al. (1996). We searched using Library Information Science & Technology Abstracts, and Education Research Complete. Article bibliographies were also consulted to search further.

BAM!
Best Practices to Build Your Arsenal

If Library Anxiety Threatens to Strike Through Your Staff...

- Don the Cape of Approachability
  1. Be warm, friendly, and smile
  2. Acknowledge students when they enter the library
  3. Dress informally (especially when greeting students for the first time, such as during orientations)

- Activate your Soft Skill Superpowers
  1. Show empathy, be honest, let them know they are not the only one experiencing this issue
  2. Demonstrate your commitment to service

- Show them your Alter Ego
  1. Use humor
  2. Post informal pictures on your LibGuides or social media
  3. The goal is to help students see you as a person

- Don’t Reveal All of the Weapons in your Arsenal
  1. Help students meet their current information need; avoid overwhelming them by including more information than they need right now

- Leave the Library Cave
  1. Become recognizable to students by joining in campus events and conducting information literacy instruction sessions

If the Library Cave is the Source of Anxiety...

- Create a League of Library Services
  1. Consolidate service points, such as writing, tutoring, research help, and technology troubleshooting

- Banish Library Jargon
  1. Remove library jargon from library instruction, website and signage

- Display Bat Signals for Navigation
  1. Provide signage for easy navigation
  2. Provide instructions for library machinery, such as printers

Strategies to Help You Alert Your Campus to this Lurking Phantom...

- Reveal the Arch nemesis
  1. Inform teaching faculty about library anxiety

- Call on the Fantastic Faculty
  1. Ask faculty to send their students to the library for research assistance

Our Experiences with the Arch nemesis

Despite so many libraries reporting a drop in traffic at their reference desks or losing their reference desks completely, our library continues to do a bustling reference business. However, even though many students are willing to ask for our help, we have continued to hear things like the graphic shown.

Students have stated that their question must be “stupid” or “they should already know the answer.” Many have voiced that they think we are “too busy to help them” when we are sitting at the reference desk. Students have also reported that they did not ask a question previously because they didn’t know a librarian could help with that.”

Our Battle Plan to Defeat Library Anxiety

Our library has been reaching out to students, encouraging questions, and trying to make them feel more welcome in the library in recent years. Here are some of the efforts we have made this year to add to and/or build on previous efforts:

- Use library instruction program to address resources & research needs
- Library Open House - redesigned in 2019 with library anxiety in mind
- Make appearances at campus events for current & prospective students
- Seek involvement in campus programs & groups
- Use campus facilities, such as the gym and dining halls
- Incorporate customer service training in student worker training
- Don’t be afraid to create fun, eye catching promotional materials

For more information & to see our reference list visit https://hbl.gcc.libguides.com/libraryanxiety

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