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Faculty Writing Retreats in the Library: Creative Approaches to Relationship Building

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Lisa Nickel and Tami Back

Faculty writing retreats in the library

Creative approaches to relationship building

Have you ever thought, “If I had some uninterrupted time to write, I could get so much done?”

At William & Mary (W&M) Libraries, we often feel this way, and we hear from our teaching faculty colleagues that they feel the same. But can this common challenge present a unique opportunity? Can we, as a library, fill this need and accomplish our goals of building relationships and connections with faculty? We determined that we can. As we consider time-intensive library events, partnerships, and outreach, we have learned that focusing on high-impact relationship-building opportunities is the best way to spend our time.

Every university campus has its own unique culture. At W&M, our culture centers around academic rigor and high achievement. Although our students are highly engaged in student clubs and campus activities, their studies always come first, and the place they like to study is the library. Our main library, Swem Library, is revered by students—a claim supported by the high usage of our facility. Last year, Swem Library had more than 1 million visits, an impressive number for a library at a small-sized university.

While we see students in our building every day, we have less interaction with faculty in our space. We have made it so convenient for faculty to *not* visit the library—with office delivery and online services—that faculty don’t have a reason to come in person. However, we have learned that faculty are much more likely to partner with librarians on instruction, curriculum development, and research

assignments if they have a relationship with their library liaison. Although we can (and do) communicate with faculty through email and print, relationship-building requires a more personalized approach.

At W&M Libraries, we strategically plan opportunities for librarians and archivists to have face-to-face interactions with faculty. We accomplish this in ways most academic libraries do: information literacy classes, collection development, and research consultations. Additionally, we have created a number of annual signature faculty outreach events:

1. New Faculty Library Orientation and Luncheon,
2. Faculty Scholarship Exhibit and Reception,
3. Library of Congress Research Trip, and
4. Faculty Writers Retreat.

In this article we will focus on the Faculty Writers Retreat, a relatively low effort-high impact outreach opportunity that is adaptable to the needs and budgets of any academic library. Planning documents, sample invitations, and related materials are available in the W&M institutional repository, and we invite you to use or adapt them.¹

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Faculty writers retreat

The primary purpose of the W&M Faculty Writers Retreat is to give faculty members a week of uninterrupted time to work on a specific writing project, complete research, edit a manuscript, or prepare a grant proposal. The retreat provides assigned quiet space in Swem Library, along with food, beverages, and (perhaps most importantly) *structure*.

Our library offers two writing retreats each year, scheduled for the week after spring commencement and the week before classes begin in January. We send out a call for applications¹ two months before the retreat, and ask each applicant to identify the specific project they plan to work on while at the retreat. After acceptance, we assign each writer to an individual study room. For the week of the retreat, we provide participants with daily healthy meals (breakfast and lunch) and an afternoon coffee/tea break. The week is not overly programmed—outside of meals and breaks, faculty write. We offer full- and part-time scheduling options to accommodate a variety of needs. And, to spoil everyone, we give each participant a SWAG bag containing a W&M-branded moleskin journal and water bottle.

The retreat provides opportunities for library liaisons to connect face-to-face with faculty members from across campus. As part of the application, writers opt in to be contacted by liaison librarians for consultation on topics like:

- research,
- copyright and fair use,
- publishing and contracts, and
- multimedia and technology.

Librarians and archivists attend the breakfast, lunch, and afternoon coffee breaks, and engage with faculty, discussing their areas of research, trends in teaching, course materials, and other topics, as well as having general “getting to know you” conversations.

With faculty development activities distributed throughout departments/schools, the writing retreat creates a shared experience for faculty across disciplines to come together, share, net-

work, and collaborate. Over the week of the retreat, we are able to build relationships, forge connections, and create community.

We also capitalize on having a captive lunch audience to share information on library initiatives, services, and resources relevant to the attendees. Some examples are open educational resources and textbook affordability, digital humanities support, GIS and data mining, incorporating primary sources into curriculum, and crafting multimedia course assignments.

We send daily emails to attendees, sharing tips or suggestions of things they can do to enhance their experience, such as visiting our makerspace, engaging in ecotherapy, or using our meditation room.

Key partnerships

In our experience, outreach efforts are much more successful when we partner with other campus departments with similar priorities and goals. For the retreat, we reached out to the provost’s office, and specifically to the associate provost for faculty and academic affairs, to explore partnership possibilities and were happy to find a willing partner.

Having the provost’s office as a partner and cosponsor added significance to the event, signaling the importance of the retreat and highlighting the library’s role as a partner in research and scholarship. While the provost’s office is a partner, the majority of the work is managed by library staff, with the associate dean of research and public services coordinating planning, communications, application process, logistics, and assessment.

Communications

In our experience, getting the attention of busy colleagues is always a challenge. However, when our provost sends an email, people pay attention. We asked the provost to email our announcement to the faculty listserv approximately two months before the event. The associate dean of the library emailed personalized acceptances one month prior to the retreat, and followed up with a logistics email detailing the start and end times, room assignments, and other pertinent information.¹

Programming

For the first two years of the retreat, we organized lunchtime speakers each day. We held organized classes led by tenured faculty members on writing-related topics. Based on participant feedback, which indicated that participants wanted time to chat and socialize during lunch, we have minimized presentations. Our new model is less formal, but allows librarians to share information

on topics of interest like collection development, open access, and special collections.

Results

The results of the writing retreat have been stellar. Feedback from post-event participant surveys have been overwhelmingly positive, and attendance has steadily grown from 27 participants in January 2017 to 42 in May 2019.

Writing retreat timeline and logistics

2 months before

- Create online application.
- Send out the invitation to apply with direct link to the application.

1 month before

- Review and select participants.
- Send acceptance email to allow participants to plan their schedules.
- Place catering order. Provide healthy breakfast and lunch meals, as well as a coffee/tea break in the afternoon in a central gathering space. We used our on-campus caterer to ensure meals were within per diem rates, accommodated dietary restrictions, and had wide appeal.

Budget tip: If your budget will not accommodate meals for participants, organize a brown-bag lunch time. Don't skimp on the time, though. An hour felt like a nice break from writing.

Tip: Attendees ranked the availability of caffeine as a high priority, to both kick start the day and defeat the afternoon lull, so plan to have coffee, tea, and/or sodas available at different points throughout the day.

2 weeks before

- Assign each writer to a study space, and notify them of their assignment. Reserve the spaces in booking system.

Tip: Put a welcome sign with the participant's name on the door of their assigned room. Faculty feedback revealed

that this simple touch made participants feel special.

Tip: Offer diverse space options. We have found that some faculty want "open" spaces—a table, carrel, or computer workstation.

1 week before

- Liaison librarians email faculty members in the departments they work with and arrange meetings, if requested.
- Create name tags for participants to facilitate introductions. Include department/program.
- Assemble welcome bags for participants

Tip: Include useful items in the gift bags. Think about sustainability. We chose water bottles because participants can use them at bottle filling stations in the library, and selected refillable notebooks.

Budget tip: You can scale down or up based on your individual budget. Participants were happy to have something. Consider items related to writing or research—highlighters, sticky notes, pens—most of which are cost-effective.

Day of event

- Welcome/check-in participants at breakfast. Library dean and provost share brief remarks to begin the week.

Tip: Have a list of room assignments available because most participants will need to review it.

In a vote of support, multiple faculty have taken the initiative to write to the provost and the library dean to share successful results of the retreat, such as work being published. They make mention of how instrumental the writing retreat was for them.

I learned today that the paper I started at the W&M Faculty Writers' Retreat in May 2017 has been accepted for publication by *Chemistry: A European Journal*, a well-regarded international journal for multidisciplinary chemistry. This paper was challenging to write since it combined the work of five W&M students who had collectively produced several research reports, one M.S. thesis, and two undergraduate honors theses—one of which 288 pages long! The herculean task of distilling all of the data into a compelling and cohesive story was made so much easier by the support and structure of the Writers' Retreat. I hope this becomes an annual tradition!—*Elizabeth J. Harbron, associate chair and professor of chemistry, August 2017*

Evolution and opportunities

All recurring events evolve, and the writing retreat is no different. We have seen a shift in attendance from pre-tenure faculty to tenured faculty. Space needs have changed as well, with more requests for areas conducive to collaborative work. We strive to adapt to these changes to ensure the retreats are meeting the needs of faculty participants.

The writing retreat has become a well-attended, recurring faculty event on campus, and several campus departments have partnered with us to capitalize on its success, offering complimentary seminars or workshops to coincide with the event. We have organized shared meals—and shared costs. These partnerships have served to broaden the sense of community for faculty, librarians, and others who support faculty scholarship.

Impact

We have seen significant positive impact on our ability to build relationships with faculty members, which leads to the following results:

- Librarians are more informed about faculty research areas and projects, and can better respond to requests for support and suggest library services and/or resources.
- There are higher levels of engagement from faculty attendees at other library events and programs.
- We have a growing group of faculty who are library champions. Writing retreat alumni faculty are more informed about library services, resources, and initiatives.
- We are able to engage faculty in new ways, such as inviting them to serve on our advisory committee and attending focus groups for upcoming library projects.
- The library writing retreats have become a model across campus, and have been replicated in two other libraries in Virginia. Virginia Wesleyan University and Hollins University both held faculty writing retreats after learning about our event during a presentation at the Virginia Library Association in 2017. Both were successful.
- Undergraduate honors students have approached the associate dean about offering an “Honors Writing Retreat” in the spring. This may be our next adventure.

Conclusion

Offering a faculty writing retreat hosted by your library is a relatively low-effort, high-impact opportunity to build relationships across campus. Design a week that works for your campus, and use the face-to-face time to get to know the research and publication trends and habits of your teaching faculty.

Note

1. Planning documents, sample invitations, and related materials are openly accessible in W&M's institutional repository: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/librariespub/2/>. 