Chapter 5: **Student Engagement**

After designing an information literacy program, collaborating with faculty, and building your assessment strategy, it's fun to switch gears to one of the most exciting aspects of the FYE: student engagement. Cultivating strong relationships with your students is a high-impact practice that can positively affect everything from retention to graduation rates. As a central fixture at most campuses, the library is uniquely positioned to offer engaging experiences and promote student growth and development. In this chapter, we'll cover three themes for building student engagement: **health and wellness, learning engagements, and inclusivity**.

In this section you will find:

- **Fun Times in the Library: Fresh Ideas for Engaging Your Students**
  Engagement themes for nurturing student relationships promoting growth and development and increasing retention and graduation rates.

- **The FYE Student Engagement Calendar**
  A calendar of 10 activities that will keep students active and interested in the library all year long.

- **Once Upon a Library: How a Storytime Collaboration Helped Build FYE Engagement**
  A case study overviewing how one library creatively used a community service project to engage students in the classroom and help them develop a deeper connection with the university.

- **Continue the Conversation**
  See what your peers are saying about Student Engagement! **#LibraryFYE**

- **Additional Resources**
  Further reading materials on student engagement practices, activities, and strategies.

Fun Times in the Library: Fresh Ideas for Engaging Your Students

By Ray Pun, First Year Student Success Librarian, California State University, Fresno

Three Student Engagement Themes

Health and Wellness: From therapy animals, to gentle exercises, to meditation sessions, these activities can help students de-stress and recharge when visiting your library.

Learning Engagements: Opportunities to promote important skills for student success and retention using collaborative learning activities.

Diversity and Inclusion: Practices for creating a helpful, safe, and comfortable environment supporting all activities and experiences.

Health and Wellness

The first year of college is stressful. Students are in a new environment, trying to acclimate to the rigors of higher education, and just when they start to settle in, midterms hit. Offering programs to help students approach these challenges with a calm and focused mindset can help you forge a lasting bond. Below are a few creative ideas for connecting with your students:

Therapy animals: Many libraries today are partnering with local therapy animal groups to organize animal visits to the library. One benefit of this highly-effective, exceedingly popular program is it's often free (other than printing posters).

Note: Sometimes people express concerns about allergies or a fear of dogs. Make sure you have signage to help affected folks know which areas of the library to avoid.

Building mental and physical strength: Meditation sessions, often offered by a trained specialist from your health services program, can teach breathing techniques and basic yoga moves to help students de-stress. These types of activities may improve students' self-esteem and confidence — which is especially helpful during finals week! You can also partner with your physical therapy programs to bring in students trained to provide massages, or rent massage chairs to alleviate students' stress. Don't forget to provide light refreshments like fruits or other healthy snacks.

> **Have you thought of partnering with your Office of Student Health Services?** They may be able to provide you with resources, services and other programs to share.

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Silent discos: Dancing and listening to music is another technique used to reduce academic stress. To help students loosen up during high-stress situations like mid-terms and finals, the library can host a silent disco. Students listen to music through their headphones and can dance in designated parts of the library without disrupting the quiet. Take this activity to the next level by recruiting a DJ or purchasing headphones with built in bluetooth abilities which sync with a computer/tablet so everyone can hear the same song.

If you're still having trouble picturing what this looks like, **watch students at University of Wisconsin-Madison** get down during finals week.

Crafternoons and artistic activities: When students need a break from studying and writing papers, engaging other parts of their brains can provide a healthy and refreshing escape. Paint nights are a popular public library event that can easily be brought into the academic space. If you don't want to commit to painting, coloring or collage/scrapbooking are other art activities to try.

> Check out
> **New York Public Library's** free
> and printable
> coloring books!

Tip: You can either provide art supplies or collaborate with your art department to facilitate the activity.

Reference desk giveaways: Outside of gravity, few forces in the universe are stronger than the attraction between college students and giveaways. During orientation, midterms, and finals, stock your reference desk with items your students will love and can simultaneously promote library services. Some items could be stress balls with the library's logo, pens, pencils, or USBs. Offering postcards to students to write to their families and friends is another way to help build rapport with your users. St. Francis College creatively offered "emergency chocolate", listing the library's email address and phone number on the wrapper.

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Learning Engagements

When developing engagement programs, look for student collaboration and innovation opportunities. If you refer back to previous chapters of this guide (Collaboration and Information Literacy in particular), you'll find most activities discussed aim for student engagement in addition to desired academic outcomes. This is largely due to our efforts to align with the Association of American Colleges & Universities' high-impact practices (HIPs); teaching and learning practices fostering student retention, engagement, and success. Some examples of HIPs include first year seminars, collaborative assignments and projects, and service learning. These specific activities are often designed and implemented by teaching faculty, however, plenty of opportunities exist for librarians to get involved. In this section, we'll focus on two examples of innovative learning engagement activities linking several HIPs: **hackathons and edible book fairs**.

Hackathons
Hackathons (sometimes called hackfests) are a popular and growing trend on campuses around the world. Students come together to share common goals, visions, and interests in creating devices, tools, or products with tremendous potential for creating social change. From computer science, to business marketing, to art and design, to education, to health and human services, hackathons are marathon events bringing together different people to create usable software, apps, or systems.

These events encourage and foster entrepreneurship, experiential learning, engagement, and risk-taking. The library can participate in a number of ways, hosting and organizing events with different campus partners and student groups and providing programming languages and design skills resources for participants to apply within their products.

> **Disclaimer:** One doesn't need to be a programmer to organize or participate in these events. The interdisciplinary nature of hackathons makes them open to everyone!

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Steps for organizing a successful hackathon

1. **Choose a theme**

   Potential themes include:
   - Education
   - Health and wellness
   - Accessibility
   - Environmentalism and sustainability
   - The social good
   - And more!

   Once you have a theme, identify which library resources will best complement participants' work.

2. **Identify a space** - where students can work in teams and access technology and library resources needed to complete projects.

3. **Pick your partners** - this is a collaborative undertaking, involving both outside parties and students. Reach out to relevant departments, student life, and any local businesses who may want to act as sponsors. Include student groups to give them the opportunity to gain real-world experience organizing events.

4. **Promote to students** - the better the turnout, the better the experience. Market to your student groups/clubs who might be interested in your theme. Different themes may appeal to different groups. For example, the forestry department may not traditionally participate in a hackathon, but if the theme is environmentalism, they may like to join.

5. **Don't forget the first years!** - this is a great way to show newbies the interconnectedness of the institution, and get them to connect the dots from the classroom to the real world. Give them some extra support if needed so they don't get lost in the shuffle.

6. **Provide food and research help** - make sure students know you're available on the day of the event to assist with the project and food will be provided.

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Edible Book Fairs

Edible book fairs are fun events where participants create and transform food into a favorite book or book title. These activities can increase students' engagement with reading materials and the library, allowing them to creatively showcase a theme in their book through baking. Your staff can participate as well, building a sense of camaraderie and competition, and showcasing the library's services and creativity. Offer prizes and refreshment to encourage participation, excitement, and promotion for future events.

Tip: This is a good opportunity to collaborate with your literature faculty, combining the fair with existing FYE shared reading experiences.

Eastern Illinois University's Booth Library has organized a series of edible book fairs over the years and featured some creative designs.

Diversity and Inclusion

Whether you choose to host a hackathon, edible book fair, or some other collaborative event, HIPs can help you maximize shared resources and strengths to provide unique opportunities for your students.

Students who feel safe and included are more likely to form a deeper relationship with their academic institution. The library plays a crucial role in fostering this relationship and creating a positive experience for them. Make sure your services include these student groups: first generation, non-traditional, student parents, undocumented immigrants, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and historically marginalized/underrepresented populations. Diversity and inclusion are important themes to consider when thinking about HIPs and building relationships with your students.

Rethinking Library Spaces

The library space is often viewed as a center for activities and engagements, open to any and all groups across campus. Reorganizing physical aspects of the library to provide better and more inclusive services can help you include your entire population's needs and perspectives.

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Some examples of how academic libraries can update their space include:

- Lactation/family/daycare rooms for student-parents
- Prayer and meditation rooms
- Gender-neutral restrooms
- Food security pantries
- Meeting spaces where civil rights groups can provide legal clinics and services for undocumented students

Updating your library spaces is a way to support your students facing various barriers and setbacks, and help them with their needs and challenges. Including all student groups can help keep students engaged and directly address and alleviate their issues.

Safe Zones

Does your campus provide training for The Safe Zone Project? Safe Zone educates and supports members of the university about LGBTQ+ issues to create a network of allies who, together with members of the LGBTQ+ community, work to create a community of safety and inclusion. Many universities provide trainings for this program where participants can earn a certificate, and place a label on their office door or library space for students to recognize as designated safe zones.

Diversity Committee

Does your institution have a diversity committee, and if so, does a member of your library participate? For larger campuses, does your library have its own diversity committee? These groups can participate in everything from hiring practices, to collection development, to speaker series, and more. It's a great way to facilitate important conversations and share different perspectives for the whole campus' benefit.

Diversity Space or Lounge

Creating a designated diversity space or lounge in the library can highlight your library's commitment to fostering an inclusive learning environment. Consider partnering with teaching faculty and student groups to create these spaces, and integrate with courses and curricula. Areas can even showcase students' poems, artwork, curation, and visual merchandising skills. These types of exhibits are an easy way to further engage students in a dialogue about important topics while promoting cultural awareness and engagement.

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Book Discussions

Organize book discussions on diversity-related topics. Many colleges and universities already have FYE students read a common book (this falls under the *common intellectual experiences* HIP). Whether or not this is the case for your institution, your library can promote a reading and host a discussion event with faculty or guest speakers. Book genres can include classic works of literature, or more recent titles. Keep the discussion going year round by creating a list of readings and resources on display and sharing them in a library guide or handout.

Boost Engagement Through Social Media Channels

Don't forget to promote your engagement activities, events, and spaces on social media to spread the word across campus. When you go "live" on these tools, be sure to ask if students have questions about upcoming events and activities, and offer general library support as well. This is a good way to stay connected to students while supporting their academic needs.

If you have many international students in your school, consider specific social media tools and mobile apps such as*:

WeChat

This popular app among students from China is a great app for sharing information with students. Create a group and ask students to join it.

KaKao

A frequently used mobile app for connecting with students from Korea.

Line

A mobile app for students from Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and other parts of Asia.

WhatsApp

An internationally used app to connect with students from around the world.

*This is only a partial list; be sure to research different groups of students and the apps they use.

Student engagement doesn't have to rely on giant events or costly giveaways. The most important factor is students feel welcomed and supported at their institution. Diversity, inclusion, and a culture of collaboration all help accomplish this. While it is certainly more difficult to assess the impact of engagement initiatives than, say, information literacy, the impact of cultivating strong student relationships with the library and institution can be seen in increased retention and GPAs and is worth the time and effort.

The FYE Student Engagement Calendar

10 activities
to keep students active and interested in the library all year long

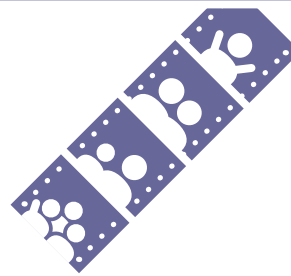## ☂ Summer Vacation

Diversity Committee

Meet to identify any diversity initiatives that might impact the library in the coming year

Physical Space

Look for opportunities to make the library a more inclusive building, such as lactation rooms or gender-neutral restrooms

📖 Orientation

Welcome Week activities like library photo booths

Tours

International tours to engage students still learning the nuances of Western-style libraries. Library Poker or other fun takes on traditional library tours

👥 Anytime Engagement

Blind date with a book or movie display

Team up with student groups to offer events like a game or poetry night or create exhibits with resources important to them

Midterms

Host a crafternoon
with painting, coloring, or collage-making

Silent Disco night
to loosen students up with music and dancing

Finals

Therapy dogs in the library

Let the local media know you're hosting this event for some free press!

Massages or yoga

Get students' minds and bodies in the right place for exam success

Once Upon a Library: How a Storytime Collaboration Helped Build FYE Engagement

Student engagement activities are often thought of as fun, one-off events, but there are also long-term projects your library can initiate to deepen your relationship with students. In this case study, we examine how a librarian at a mid-size public university teamed up with an FYE faculty member and the campus daycare provider to improve student engagement, teach valuable information literacy skills, and help students meet their service-learning requirements.

Increasing Engagement through Collaboration and Service Learning

To help students get excited about their academic future, the librarian and FYE professor created a semester-long service-based project. Community and service-based learning is defined by the AAC&U as a high-impact practice within the first year experience, so they collaborated with the university's daycare center to get their students involved in the daycare's children's storytime. This project encouraged students to engage with the campus community and reflect on various communication concepts—all while learning library and research skills at every step.

The project had 4 primary steps for students to complete during the semester:

✔ **Introduction to the library:** Visit the library and check out 17-20 children's books, then create an annotated bibliography for the list.

✔ **Community participation:** Sign up as a reading volunteer at the university daycare (optional and applicable to service-learning requirements).

✔ **Familiarization with library services:** Tour the library, learn about their services, and receive instruction on creating an annotated bibliography.

✔ **Connection and understanding:** Complete a reflective assignment to better understanding learned communication concepts.

Reading to the daycare children helped the students gain real-world experience, both in terms of the communication concepts they were learning in class, and in understanding the role of books in lifelong learning. Visiting the library and meeting its helpful staff during the project opened their eyes to the many services provided by the library.

Happily Ever After: Long-lasting Program Benefits

By the end of the semester, students had formed a stronger relationship with the institution as a whole, and the library specifically through their participation. Many commented about how meaningful they found the project. In addition to becoming more invested in the college, they cultivated valuable academic skills, both of which are considered strong factors in retention and graduation rates. Because students' introduction to the library was such a positive experience early in their academic career, they are now more likely to use its service as they advance.

Continue the Conversation

Interested in learning more about student engagement strategies and how others are linking HIPs to activities?

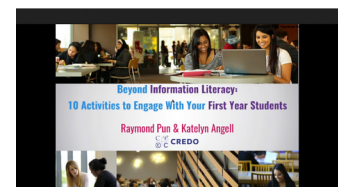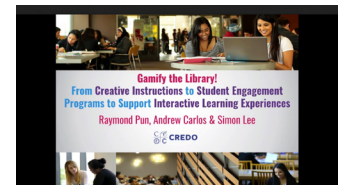🐦 **Keep the conversation going using the Twitter hashtag #LibraryFYE**

Additional Resources

Third-party articles

- **Therapy Dogs in Academic Libraries: A Way to Foster Student Engagement and Mitigate Self-Reported Stress during Finals** by Mary Renck Jalongo and Theresa McDevitt: *An academic article supporting the library's use of therapy dogs as a means to increase student engage and relieve stress*

- **Higher Education Promotes the Student Experience** by Steven Bell: *A Library Journal article discussing the value of investing in the student experience and the library's role in creating a pathway for learning and discovery*

- **How Student Engagement is Important for Libraries** by Laura Pitts: *A YALSA blog post reviewing a survey conducted discussing students' engagement in their studies and how understanding student engagement can give insights to educators and librarians about challenges affecting learning*

Webinars

- **Beyond Information Literacy: 10 Ways to Engage With Your First Year Students** by Ray Pun and Katelyn Angell: *A webinar recording presenting creative ways to promote library services and resources to first year students*

- **Gamify the Library: From Creative Instructions to Student Engagement Programs to Support Interactive Learning Experiences** by Ray Pun, Andrew Carlos, and Simon Lee: *An exploration of gaming and gamification activities to provide librarians with interactive ways to engage with students*

Blog Posts

- **Celebrate Money $mart Week in Your Library** by Hiromi Kubo and Ray Pun: *Examples of activities to do during different months of the year, focusing on important student topics*

- **5 Activities to Support National Poetry Month** by Ray Pun: *5 activities to increase your students' awareness in annual observances and cultivate interactive relationships*

Additional Resources

Blog Posts (continued)

- [HIP In Action: Service- and Community-based Learning in Academic Libraries](#) by Ray Pun: *An interview conducted by Ray Pun with several academic librarians discussing their approaches with integrating high-impact practices (HIPs) into their work*

- [Helping Transfer Students Succeed: General Tips & Strategies for Academic Librarians](#) by Ray Pun: *Ideas and activities to include and motivate transfer students while familiarizing them with library services*

- [Celebrate International Education Week in Your Library!](#) by Ray Pun and Hiromi Kubo: *Different ways to foster engagement with your international student groups and encourage all students to take advantage of global opportunities at your institution*

- [Celebrating the FYE: Ideas for Recognizing First Year Students](#) by Ray Pun: *Creative activities and contests to acknowledge and reward first year students for completing their first year and encourage further student engagement throughout their academic careers*