Whiteboards, Blanket Forts, and Autonomy: Using Self-Determination Theory to Improve Library De-Stress Programming

ABSTRACT

*Many U.S. academic libraries offer programming during final exams, in an attempt to relieve students’ stress. Despite the reported success of library de-stress programs, students often have little input in planning these activities. For the academic years 2015-16 and 2016-17, the authors allowed students to come up with their own de-stress program ideas. To solicit students’ ideas, the authors used a two-round idea generation and voting process, using whiteboards placed in public spaces in their library. After several semesters of using this user-centered programming model, the authors sought to examine whether students felt a sense of agency in suggesting and voting on programs and whether this agency affected students’ motivation to attend programs. To investigate their questions, the authors conducted two focus groups with undergraduate students. Focus group results suggest that most students are more interested in attending programs that they personally suggested or voted for, deriving intrinsic rewards from the autonomy of having their voices heard. The results suggest, however, that not all students care to be involved in the ideation or voting processes, nor do they necessarily associate library programs with the library services unit. Results also suggest numerous ways to improve upon the user-centered programming model.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many academic libraries in the United States have begun offering programming meant to relieve students’ stress during one of the busiest times of the school year: final exams. “De-stress programs” at the end of the semester are now commonplace in academic libraries of all sizes. These initiatives often feature activities such as therapy dogs, games, crafts, and snacks and are intended to provide students with temporary relief and distraction from their studying and research projects (Meyers-Martin and Borchard 2015). The literature speaks to the success of these de-stress programs, most often measured by students’ positive feedback (Keller 2007; Hall, Ingold, and Hart 2012; Chant 2014; Jalongo and McDevitt 2015). De-stress programs at the end of the semester are clearly a worthwhile experiment for libraries that serve as campus hubs.

Despite the success of library de-stress programs, students often have little input in planning these activities. They are typically initiated from the top down, generated and produced by librarians for students’ benefit. For the academic years 2015-16 and 2016-17, the authors reversed this process and allowed students to come up with their own de-stress program ideas. To solicit students’ ideas, the authors used a two-round idea generation and voting process. First, students were asked to suggest programs that they wanted to see during finals by writing their ideas on whiteboards in the library lobby. Second, after the authors distilled the myriad suggestions down to the most prominent and feasible options, students again used the whiteboards to vote for the top eight programs: four active and four passive. The authors then worked with their administration and campus partners to host as many of the programs as possible during the week before final exams (i.e., the last week of classes).

After several semesters of using this user-centered programming model, the authors sought to investigate students’ perceptions of both the programming and the process. Of specific interest was whether students felt a sense of agency in suggesting and voting on programs and whether this agency affected students’ motivation to attend programs. Working from Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, the authors hypothesized that giving students more input into the types of programs offered would motivate them to attend de-stress programs, because humans find autonomy intrinsically rewarding. To investigate their research questions, the authors conducted two focus groups with undergraduate students in April 2017. Focus group results suggest that most students are more interested in attending programs that they personally suggested or voted for, and that a user-centered programming model serves as a form of marketing by alerting students to upcoming programs. The results suggest, however, that not all students care to be involved in the ideation or voting processes, nor do they necessarily associate library programs with the library services unit. Results also suggest numerous ways to improve upon the user-centered programming model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

*Finals Week De-Stress Programming in Libraries*

Library programming during finals week is nothing new. Meyers-Martin and Borchard (2015) surveyed academic libraries (n = 279) and found that a significant number (39%) collaborated with campus and non-campus partners to provide finals week programming. Describing the need for this programming, the authors cite research documenting how stressful college can be for students. Indeed, the latest data from the American College Health Association (2016) show that a majority of college students (55.6% total, n= 27,723) reported having either “higher than average stress” or “tremendous stress” during the previous 12 months.

Meyers-Martin and Borchard (2015) found that the most common programs offered at academic libraries as part of finals stress relief included therapy animals, games and crafts. The literature supports the efficacy of such programming. Bell (2013) discusses animal-assisted therapy, which has been used in hospital, rehabilitation and even elementary educational settings, and is shown to have the positive health effects of decreasing blood pressure and anxiety. Her library implemented a therapy dog program during final exams; student evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. Reynolds and Rabschutz (2011) and Jalongo and McDevitt (2015) report similar positive results with offering therapy dogs. Research abounds in support of other types of de-stress activities in the library. Hall, Ingold and Hart (2012) report on the success of organizing a coffee break in the library during finals week at Penn State Erie. Chant (2014) describes the success with offering a virtual reality labyrinth during finals week at the University of Oklahoma and the University of Massachusetts. Flynn (2017) reports on the Michigan State University’s trial and error method of choosing finals de-stress programming, including the popularity of therapy dogs, baby goats, carnival night, coloring, and free doughnuts and pizza.

*Choices, Motivation, and Self-Determination Theory*

Despite the abundance of libraries experimenting with de-stress programming, the literature is silent on the idea of allowing students to generate their own ideas. The programs seem to be imposed on students by librarians using a top-down approach, rather than stemming from grassroots support among users. Common sense would suggest that students are more likely to engage with, and participate in, activities whenever they have more choices and input in the planning process. Psychological research on motivation supports this idea. Self-determination theory holds that people are intrinsically motivated by activities that they find enjoyable or interesting, whereas they are extrinsically motivated by incentives, such as food or money (Ryan and Deci 2000). More specifically, humans have intrinsic needs for feelings of autonomy, relatedness (social interaction), and competence, and they will pursue these feelings even without the potential for external reward. It follows that, unless library programs offer extrinsic rewards such as snacks or prizes, they otherwise will need to appeal to users’ feelings of autonomy, relatedness or competence in order to motivate students to attend.

Self-determination theory has been used to study and to improve other aspects of education. Various researchers have found that, when high school students were given more freedom in the books they read, they performed better on reading assignments and had higher levels of engagement and enjoyment with the reading (Cohen and Spencer 2012; Morgan and Wagner 2013). Troisi (2015) successfully used self-determination theory in the college classroom, giving a group of students more control in designing and executing a social psychology class, achieving the desired outcome of increasing students’ sense of autonomy.

Some researchers have used self-determination theory to examine library services and resources. Kaarsted (2017) interviewed 43 Danish researchers to investigate their reactions to public universities’ recent adoption of the performance management system Bibliometric Research Indicator, which measures scholars’ output in terms of publication numbers and journal prestige. In Denmark these systems are typically facilitated by academic libraries, with library staff performing the data analysis. Kaarsted found that this system and its accompanying bureaucratic requirements had a demotivating effect on scholars, as it dampened their feelings of self-determination and self-esteem (p. 81). Arnone, Reynolds, and Marshall (2009) examined the role that school librarians play in shaping eighth-graders’ confidence with regard to conducting research and their intrinsic motivations to do so. Survey responses from 1,272 students from 47 schools indicated that school librarians are key in building students’ confidence and motivation, by supporting these young people’s feelings of autonomy and competence in the research process (130). Crow (2011) similarly used self-determination theory to explore upper-elementary students’ intrinsic motivations in seeking information, concluding that school librarians can foster this motivation by giving students an age-appropriate amount of freedom and choice in directing their own learning.

BACKGROUND

[University name] is a private, comprehensive, master’s degree-granting university in the Midwest with approximately 4,300 full-time equivalent students. Undergraduate and master’s students on the campus are served primarily by the [Library Building] ([Library Building Acronym]), which in addition to the [Library Organization] ([Library Organization Acronym]) unit, also houses several student support services, such as the Writing Center and the Access and Accommodations Resource Center. The [Library Building Acronym] is open on average 115 hours a week, with extended hours during finals. Since 2014, the authors have provided de-stress programming in the library during final exams, initially only in December but later expanding to include May finals. In the second year of offering this de-stress programming (the 2015-16 academic year), librarians pivoted to the aforementioned user-centered programming model, to allow students to suggest and to vote on their own programs. The fall and spring de-stress initiatives now include more than a week of programs, both active and passive, to help students combat stress. Active programs take place at a specific place and time (e.g., therapy dogs, Yoga in the Library), while passive programs are available any time the building is open and do not require dynamic participation (e.g., coloring, punching bags).

Like many of its peers, [Library Organization Acronym] has experienced budgetary constraints in recent years, and as belts continue to tighten, the pinch is felt substantially in programming areas. Due to these constraints, the authors have needed to flex their creativity muscles in order to provide the de-stress activities that undergraduate students desire. While the library’s programming budget has been reduced, alternative approaches have actually increased the number of de-stress activities provided. For example, coloring sheets can be printed and copied on regular office supplies. One semester, the authors covered a wall with encouraging memes, and students were encouraged to create their own notes of encouragement on sticky notes. One-time low cost spending on Play-Doh, markers, punching bags, and bubble wrap has provided many semesters’ worth of de-stress. Shortage of funding can lead to unusual creative thinking.

It is a source of pride that many of the de-stress programs offered are unique to [University Nickname]. Some de-stress activities that the authors have pioneered include:

* Group Scream: Students (and librarians) gather just outside the library building at a specific date and time, and proceed to scream for approximately 30 seconds. This combats stress and is followed by some form of comfort food, such as hot chocolate. The group scream does require a notification to campus police in advance.
* Build Your Own Blanket Fort: In one library lounge, blankets and clothes pins are provided for students to build a continually evolving blanket fort. Into that lounge, the librarians move specific furniture that features easily removable cushions, to optimize students’ creativity. Signage encourages students to move furniture to build forts as desired.
* Punching Bags: Low-cost children's inflatable punching bags were purchased and made available on the lowest level of the library, which is designated as a “loud” floor. As these bags are self-explanatory, no signage was provided, but labels were attached to the bags to inspire punches. During the end of Fall 2016 semester, students could “punch” finals, their roommate, politics, or the year 2016 itself.

METHODOLOGY

This project sought to explore how [Library Organization Acronym]’ user-centered programming model might be affecting students’ motivation to engage in the programs, and also how this programming could be improved. The authors posed three research questions:

* When college students are given a direct voice in choosing their library’s de-stress programming, are they more committed to attending the programming?
* When college students are given a direct voice in choosing their library’s de-stress programming, do their perceptions of the library change? Are they more likely to expect this level of input in all programming going forward and to be disappointed if it were to stop?
* What model of de-stress programming would best meet students’ interests and the library’s limited resources?

To investigate these questions, the authors conducted two focus groups in the spring semester of 2017. Focus groups were determined to be the most appropriate method, as they would allow the authors to gather a wide variety of student opinions and input, across differing groups of students (Krueger and Casey 2015, 21). After receiving institutional review board approval, the authors recruited undergraduate participants first by starting with a list of officers of student organizations, and then using a snowballing technique to ask confirmed participants to invite their friends. The authors offered pizza from an off-campus location as an incentive.

In order to maximize participants’ comfort levels and to encourage frank conversation (Krueger and Casey, 81), the authors designed each group to be somewhat homogenous by holding one focus group for first-year and sophomore students and a second focus group for juniors and seniors. 5 students participated in the first focus group: 1 first-year student and 4 sophomores. 9 students participated in the second focus group: 3 juniors and 6 seniors. Both focus groups were held in a private group meeting room in the [Library Name], with the authors alternately posing the questions and taking notes. The authors also used an audio recorder to record the interactions, which they later transcribed.

The authors designed the questioning route to establish a level of comfort using introductory questions before delving into more substantive key questions (Krueger and Casey 2015, 44-45). (See Appendix for the focus group questions.) Introductory questions asked students about their past participation in the library’s de-stress activities and whether they had used the whiteboards to suggest and/or vote on programs. Key questions asked participants whether they thought voting or suggesting increased students’ motivation to attend programs, as well as how this programming affected their perceptions of the library. The focus groups closed by asking how the library might improve the logistics of the programming model.

The authors used the Classic Analysis Strategy to analyze the results, as described by Krueger and Casey (2015, 152). After preparing full transcripts of the two focus groups, the authors printed copies of the transcripts and used scissors to cut out each individual response. Sitting around a large table, the authors went through the responses to each question and sorted the comments, determining whether the response was relevant to the question, as focus group participants do not always stay on topic. Responses were then grouped by category, with similar responses being added to the same pile and new piles being created for unique responses. Once the comments had been sorted by category, the authors analyzed them for frequency of comments, as well as for the following themes: motivation; agency; perceptions of the library; active versus passive programs; program popularity; and timing of programs.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

When asked about the effectiveness and popularity of previous de-stress programming, participants indicated that the therapy dogs were their clear favorite, with more than half mentioning them. One of the programs more unique to [University Nickname], the group scream, was the second-most mentioned. Other students in the focus groups spoke favorably of the passive programming: blanket forts, coloring, and bubble wrap popping. All participants in both focus groups agreed that the programs helped them to relax, with many mentioning specific aspects they enjoyed. Overall, feedback about previous programming was positive, with one student stating, “It makes me forget that I’m doing an assignment, so it’s just a really nice break from reality, and then when you go back, you go with a fresh mind and it makes me work better.”

When asked whether they had taken part in the idea generation or voting phases using the whiteboards, the majority of participants had done so. More participants had voted than made suggestions. Some reported that they had approached the whiteboards with ideas, but after seeing that someone else had already written that suggestion, the participants would reinforce that idea by circling it, putting a star by it, or writing “rt” (“retweet”) beside the initial suggestion. Sometimes ideas would spur further ones, as illustrated by one participant’s comment: “I personally found the whiteboards really fun, and helpful. Kinda seeing all the options laid out.”

Both focus groups agreed that suggesting or voting on programs made them more interested in attending. Some participants stated that suggesting and voting put the event on their “mental radar,” and others expressed their excitement for knowing which programs were coming. The majority of participants agreed that giving students a say in choosing the library’s programs makes them more likely to show up. Involving students in this way makes them feel that they are a part of the process. As one participant stated, “I think also if [students] vote for a certain option and then it actually happens, they can be, like, ‘Hey...I was the mind behind that. Like, I made that happen.’” Another added that being asked to suggest and vote “makes [students] feel a lot more involved.”

Even those who were not as enthusiastic about the process spoke positively about the library taking suggestions from students: “I thought it was pretty nice that there were suggestions being taken.” One student did note that, after suggesting or voting on a program, the interest in attending can be fleeting: “I think maybe I was interested in that moment, like when I was there with the whiteboard, but then after that, the interest died away before anything actually happened.”

Most participants liked the approach of using whiteboards to gather suggestions and to vote on de-stress programming. The discussion developed into one about group dynamics and how participants felt their fellow students might be more apt to vote than to suggest and that, like in many aspects of culture, peer pressure may be at play: “I was going to say, like psychology wise, [if] students, our peers, are into something, we’re more likely to be into it, too. So that’s one thing that kind of conflicts with whiteboards, I guess, you don’t want to vote for something that has no votes.”

The majority of participants stated that the library’s approach to letting them suggest and vote improved their perception of the library. Most interestingly, students felt that it made the library a friendlier place, with friendlier people. As one student put it, “[The library] seems more like a group of people rather than just, like, a place that you go to. There’s people actually talking to you about the library that work here.” While the comments about the programming were consistently positive, some students failed to associate the programs with the library: “I feel like I distinguish the two things as separate. The library itself is the building and coming here and studying, and then there are programs that happen in the building sometimes, but I don’t necessarily put them in as one entity.” A few other students agreed with this comment.

Most participants agreed that, if the library were to stop offering de-stress programming, it would cause them to think negatively of the library. None of them would be devastated, but they had come to expect this kind of programming from the library during the most stressful times of the year. Participants were divided when asked if they would be less interested in attending programming if the library no longer asked for their input, that is, if the user-centered programming model were abandoned. Some stated that student interest would not be affected, so long as the programs were still good. More specifically, some participants were firm that, so long as the library kept offering therapy dogs, they would not mind if the programming model were to change.

When asked how the library could improve its finals de-stress programming, most students mentioned that they would like more active programming. This finding goes against the authors’ personal observations, that students seem more likely to participate in passive programs.

Participants agreed that the week before final exams was the more appropriate time to hold these programs. Some suggested that the library extend certain programs, mostly the passive ones, over into finals week but taper them off as the week goes on and as students begin leaving campus. Regarding the time of day that programs should be offered, students were divided; some mentioned that they would like a break during their long night of studying, such as at 10:00 pm, while others remarked that this was when they really buckled down and needed to focus: “I feel [the programs should happen] earlier, because the later it gets, the more people are trying to cram. I’m cramming too much, can’t come!” Still other participants suggested that programs could be repeated throughout the evening: “I feel like you could do two rounds of things sometimes… you can start studying between that 6:00 and 8:00 time or whatever. And usually by 10:00, if you’re still here studying, that’s about the point you need a break.”

Participants did agree that the passive programming might work better during the later hours of the night. Students perceived these programs as being a low-effort way to distract themselves from their studying, if only briefly.

When asked whether whiteboards were the best forum for soliciting students’ input, participants generally approved of the idea but also suggested that the library should complement the process through some digital platform, such as social media. All stated that the library should not abandon the analog way of communication. Most suggested that the library use Facebook to gather students’ input, but many were not aware that the library had its own Facebook page.

The focus groups ended with a discussion about which new programs the library should add to its repertoire. Some more outlandish suggestions would require more funding than the library currently has, such as a ball pit or transforming the staircase into a giant slide, but were not out of the realm of possibility. In suggesting new programs, participants raised the issue of passive versus active programming. Many suggestions were for active programming, such as giant chess, dodgeball, yoga or Zumba, and creating a “dunk tank,” where professors could be plunged into a tub of water. However, most participants admitted that they were more likely to take part in passive programming, or, at the very least, that they would more likely participate in programs that did not have a specific time. One student characterized this dilemma: “I guess the main thing that I look for is that I don’t want to be more stressed out when I leave [the library] because of the time that I spent there… It has to be something that was really, like, worthwhile… that’s why the drop-in stations are really helpful, because even if it’s like a mindless thing, you don’t feel bad for spending 5 minutes there. But if it is one of those, like, life-sized game things or something at a scheduled time, I’d feel when I left that, like, ‘Oh, I just wasted half an hour.”

DISCUSSION

This study investigated whether giving students more control over library de-stress programming impacts their engagement with those activities. Specifically, it used self-determination theory as a framework for examining whether students are more likely to attend programs that they have suggested or helped to choose, and whether giving students control over de-stress programming affects their perception of the library. The results suggest that involving students in the process of choosing de-stress programs does indeed increase their interest in attending. This result was doubly confirmed, as participants commented both on their own feelings (they personally would be more likely to attend) and on their expectations of their peers (they believed other students would be more likely to attend). Many participants found the process of choosing the library’s de-stress programs exciting, which suggests that they receive intrinsic rewards from having their voices heard and respected, as self-determination theory would predict. The results indicate, however, that not all students are equally motivated by these extrinsic rewards. Some participants reported that their level of interest would not be affected if suggesting and voting were to cease. These students were already generally pleased with the programs that the library regularly offers and did not see the need to have their voices heard. This finding suggests that, while a model of user-centered programming will engage some students but not others, it will nonetheless result in programs that are more likely to appeal to the overall student body.

Focus group findings also reveal that having students suggest and vote for programs serves as a form of marketing, as students become aware that de-stress programs will happen at the end of the semester. This explanation could further explain the success of the user-centered model in driving attendance.

The results also suggest that a user-centered programming model gives students a positive view of the library. Participants consistently reported that they appreciated the efforts to help students relax. This sentiment was expressed even by those participants who admitted that they personally had never contributed to the suggesting or voting. However, some students acknowledged that they did not identify the de-stress programming with the library unit itself. Just because an event was happening within the library building did not mean that they associated it with the library’s personnel, collections or services. While librarians might assume this connection will be apparent to students, this finding reveals a miscommunication between the two constituencies. This disconnect is likely a result of the fact that many other student services are offered within the [Library Building Acronym] besides just library services.

The focus groups generated many suggestions as to how the library might improve its de-stress finals programming. Suggestions for specific programs included active events, such as dodgeball, Zumba or yoga in the library. Other suggestions were for passive programs, including dartboards, a ball pit, and ongoing group card games, such as a walk-by Apples to Apples. These specific suggestions are useful, as the authors can include them on future voting, to be deemed worthwhile by their peers. More beneficial than these specific program suggestions were the participants’ feedback about the logistics of the programming model itself. The results confirmed the authors’ suspicion that students would prefer de-stress programming to take place during the week before final exams, a week of studying and writing that students consider more stressful than final exams themselves. The results challenged the authors’ previous assumptions that students would not take part in late-night programming. Rather, several participants indicated that they would have greater need for a study break at a later hour, such as 10:00 p.m., instead of in the early evening. This feedback can be used to improve the programming by diversifying the programming options and times.

Both active and passive programming are needed during de-stress. Some students will want both types, while others may prefer one to the other. Without both active and passive programming, some stressed students may be overlooked. However, the results raise important questions about the ratio of passive to active programming. On the one hand, participants became visibly excited when discussing possible active programs in the library, such as turning the staircase into a slide or holding yoga in the library. On the other hand, they acknowledged that they personally would be hesitant to commit to attending a certain program at a certain time, especially during a week already busy with academic commitments. Furthermore, active programs are generally more expensive and require more commitment on the part of the librarians, whereas many of the passive programs (such as coloring sheets, Build Your Own Blanket Fort, and bubble wrap) are low-cost and low-effort. It might be mutually beneficial both to students and to the library to pursue more passive programs and limit active programs to only the most high-demand offerings. Libraries interested in starting finals de-stress programming might consider passive programming as an easy outreach experiment.

The findings might also help improve the process of soliciting programming ideas from students. Participants were overwhelmingly in favor of keeping the whiteboards as the primary forum for suggesting and voting on programs. Although asking students questions on public whiteboards may seem naively quaint in our digitally connected world, these results confirm what the authors have found previously, that at [University Nickname], this method simply works better than trying to reach students online. Nevertheless, focus group results indicate that additional, complementary methods of data gathering might be worthwhile. Participants suggested replicating the whiteboard suggesting/voting process in other campus buildings besides just the library. In fact, the authors have since adopted this suggestion and stationed a whiteboard in the student union in October 2017, where many students suggested de-stress programs.

Participants also suggested replicating the suggesting and voting processes online, possibly via social media. Previous experience with social media casts doubt upon this suggestion. In the recent past, when students have been asked to interact with [Library Organization Acronym] via online platforms (primarily Facebook), few responses have been gathered. When this approach is compared to the whiteboards or other analog ways of gathering information, there is no contest. One author documented this preference for analog student-library interaction, rather than digital, at Valparaiso University in a previous study (Muszkiewicz 2015). Further investigation is needed to determine whether replicating the processes online is necessary and, if so, on which platforms.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The focus group findings have already helped improve the [Library Name Shortened]’s de-stress programming. Based on student comments regarding the timing of the suggestion process, the authors set up a booth in the student union around midterms during the Fall 2017 semester. Students were invited to give programming ideas for the upcoming finals, and also had the opportunity to make a balloon stress ball to help take their minds off the exams they were currently taking.

The authors plan to implement additional changes to the upcoming round of de-stress programming based on focus group feedback. While even highly unconventional ideas (e.g., ball pit, dunk tank) were taken into consideration, lack of funding continues to rule many of them out. Several logistical suggestions will be put into effect, such as staggering the timing of active programs so that different student audiences might be reached. The authors also will extend certain passive programs beyond the normal period, into the week of final exams. Based on the present study and on their own observed experience, the authors see a need to continue experimenting with the ratio of active to passive programs. Some active programs are often more resource-intensive but yet continously fail to hit their target attendance numbers to justify the expense.

While de-stress programs are popular among students, some impediments remain. Budgetary issues will continue to be restrictive, as programming funding may be a lower priority for library administration, especially as compared to print and electronic resources. Thus, librarians interested in offering such programming will need to remain creative. When turning the idea generation and voting over to students, librarians must be willing to give up a certain amount of control. While librarians can certainly “stack the deck” in favor of programs that are more easily implemented, they cannot be certain this will be the case. Often, what students think librarians can provide can differ greatly from the reality. Additionally, librarians should be receptive to providing programs at times of day that are beyond their normal work schedules. Undergraduates often study at late hours, which might be the most appropriate time to offer certain activities. Overall, with creative thinking, some sort of budget, and the willingness to be silly, librarians can provide students with the stress relief they need during finals.

This article makes headway into examining the motivational dimensions of students’ engagement with de-stress programming. However, it has only scratched the surface of using self-determination theory to examine library programming, during finals or at any time. Future research is needed to explore to what extent feelings of autonomy truly motivate attendance at library events. The current study took place at a mid-sized comprehensive university. Future research at larger institutions might reveal that students engage differently with library programs, especially when a campus has multiple branch locations or more campus entities and organizations providing programs. On the other hand, larger university libraries might be able to secure more funding to bring students a wider variety of expensive de-stress programs.

CONCLUSION

In their short history, de-stress programs have proven highly popular and reportedly effective at reducing students’ stress. De-stress activities have helped to put [University Nickname]’s library in the undergraduate student’s consciousness when it comes to feeling fully supported, both mentally and physically, during the frantic time of semester’s end. Library de-stress programming has been mentioned in the student newspaper, praised by students on social media, and become a talking point of the Office of Admissions’ tours to prospective students. Recently, a student made an unsolicited comment to one of the authors about how she associates the library with “de-stress.”

The present study provides valuable insight into how students engage with finals de-stress programming and how it affects their perceptions of the library. The study findings suggest that students gain intrinsic rewards from suggesting and voting on programs, likely due to feelings of autonomy. Also, students view the library in a positive light because of this programming; however, due to the multitude of services housed in many academic libraries, students might not always associate these efforts with the librarians themselves. Also, once this programming is offered, this study suggests that students will come to expect it on an ongoing basis. As one participant put it: “Take away the de-stress function [and it would] probably negatively impact students.” While further research is needed to confirm the motivational psychology at work, this study provides valuable insight into how final de-stress programming might be improved at [University Name]. Librarians interested in offering de-stress programming at their own institutions should involve students in the planning process, listen to their ideas, and find the courage to turn their libraries over to students.

Rachael Muszkiewicz is a research services librarian at Valparaiso University. Her liaison areas include foreign languages, international studies, classics and sociology. She also is the liaison librarian with INTERLINK, the Intensive English Program, where she provides information literacy instruction to international students. The core of her research is on displays, library marketing and how silliness works in outreach to students.

Mark Robison is first-year experience librarian at Valparaiso University. He designs and implements IL instruction for first-year students and students in many social science fields. Because of his work with incoming students, his research focuses on how libraries impact the student experience, including libraries’ work with transfer students.

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Appendix: Focus Group Questions

1. During the last week of classes, the library puts on a few different programs to help students relax. Things like having therapy dogs, cookie decorating, bubble wrap popping, and coloring. Have you ever attended any of the library’s de-stress programming around the end of the semester?
2. What did you think about these programs? Did they help you relax? De-Stress?
3. For the past few years, the library has put out whiteboards, asking for students’ suggestions about what programs we should have during finals and then letting you vote on your favorite programs. Did you contribute to suggesting programs or voting on them?
4. If you did help suggest or vote on programs, did this make you more interested in attending the programs? Why or why not?
5. Do you think that giving students a say in what program the library puts on makes them more likely to show up?
6. What do you think about the library’s approach: letting students suggest & vote on programs? Is this a good approach?
7. Does the library’s approach to letting you suggest & vote affect how you feel about the library?
8. Would you like this level of input/say/voice in more library programming? In all of it?
9. Have you come to expect this kind of de-stress programming from the library? What if it were to stop, how would that affect your view of the library?
10. What if the library kept the de-stress programming, but stopped asking for student opinions? Would you be less interested in attending?
11. What could the library do to improve its de-stress programming?
12. Is the de-stress programming timed well? Or should it be earlier or later in the semester?
13. Are whiteboards the best way to gather students’ ideas and let them vote? If not, what other method or venue would you suggest?
14. Are there any programs you’d like the library to start offering during its week of de-stress events?