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Creating a Culture of Hospitality That Engages and Retains Gen Z: Library Services



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Introduction

Although limitations exist with regards to generational theory, it has been the experience of many, including these authors, that there are significant lessons to be learned from this research. Observing changes in college students several years ago, I (Julie) recognized that as a result of changing students, a refinement to my courses might be needed as well. By refining some teaching strategies to better align with the knowledge of who this generation is, I feel obedient to the calling God has placed on my life to mentor and guide students while the opportunity exists, thus hopefully creating a hospitable experience. As a Millennial, I (Amber) realized that the college experience is vastly different than what I remembered from my own time in college. The new generation has different needs and by using this research, I hope to provide a library experience for students that reduces anxiety through hospitality.

By embracing the spiritual discipline of hospitality as it relates to the student's classroom experience and their encounters as patrons of library services, we hope to invite invigorating conversations which may lead to best practices when serving Gen Z. First, we will outline some specific characteristics related to Gen Z which impact all areas of higher education, but specifically focusing on those qualities most directly connected to their habits of library usage, and finally, we will examine the academic library through the lens of the spiritual discipline of hospitality.

Who Is Gen Z?

Beginning with defining who Gen Z is, we look to Seemiller and Grace (2019) who refer to Gen Z as "those born from 1995 to 2010. Having their world completely shaped by the Internet, they are often also aptly referred to as digital natives, the Net Generation, or iGeneration" (p. 6). In her book entitled *Is This It*, Rachel Jones (2018) uses the descriptor of "Generation Rent" which applies when one considers

how little ownership this generation has as they rent streaming music and video services; smartphones are “rented” as they pay by the month only to “purchase” a new phone as soon as the previous version is “paid” for; and college students today rent their textbooks. This observation is neither positive nor negative but when specifically combined with characteristics of emerging adulthood, it can provide a framework to understanding their sense of instability and anxiety.

Authors Tim Elmore and Andrew McPeak (2019) provide insight into this generation when they share, “Generation Z, in so many ways, has raced out of the gate—portable device in hand and ready to do something new, something redemptive, and often something lucrative” (p. 26). Through the acronym PARTNER, Elmore and McPeak provide a glimpse into the characteristics of Gen Z: private (preferring to learn alone); anxious (live a life not only bullied at school but on social media as well); restless (fluid generation struggling with shifting identities); tech savvy; nurtured (safety measures); entrepreneurial; and redemptive (inclusive of differences). These characteristics which make their generation approach life differently than previous generations means that services within higher education might vary their approach as well.

Another resource on generational theory is entitled *The Gen Z Effect* where Koulopoulos and Keldsen (2016) provide an option to accepting generational gaps, they write:

Gen Z is a set of behaviors and attitudes about the way the world works. You can be born into it or you can choose to be part of it. The Gen Z Effect is what happens when the simplicity and affordability of technology unites generations more than it divides them (pp. 8–9).

Koulopoulos and Keldsen (2016) express their idea that microgenerations will be developing a new pattern to generational theory and although organizations may be in uncharted territory, when they understand and embrace Gen Z, they can succeed in numerous ways including: (1) managing and working with the broadest possible ranges of ages; (2) enjoying intense collaboration in our work; (3) building professional relationships that leverage the energy of youth and the wisdom of maturity; (4) embarking on a journey of lifelong learning, unlearning, and relearning; (5) enjoying interacting with your kids and grandkids, nieces and nephews, without a technology divide; and (6) embracing the value of disruption and uncertainty.

By choosing to be a part of Gen Z, higher education, and specifically library services, is given an opportunity to address this generation’s insecurity and anxiety through intentional efforts to bridge any generational gaps. Through the implementation of a culture of hospitality, these insecurities are eased which may open doors for Gen Z to succeed.

Library Anxiety

In addition to the overall high anxiety and insecurity levels of Gen Z, there is a concept known as library anxiety which Nunes (2016) describes as “the feeling that one’s research skills are inadequate and that those shortcomings should be hidden. In some students it’s manifested as an outright fear of libraries” (para. 3). In Nunes’ article, he shares information from Sharon Bostick, creator of the Library Anxiety Scale, which can provide information to librarians on how to ease anxiety associated with library situations. Bostick’s recommendations mirror the spiritual discipline of hospitality in that the more inviting the physical space is, such as making it “warm and fuzzy” and “seeing a human there to help you,” the more at ease, or at home, students might feel (para. 13).

Many libraries, including Union University, are integrating instructional sessions into academic classrooms, partnering with faculty to properly demonstrate how to conduct academic research on specific class assignments. For example, in the nutrition course at Union, students are asked to conduct research on specific diets in order to complete a comparison activity towards the end of the semester. Coaching students during a class session early in the semester allows the librarians opportunities to answer student questions and recommend practical how-to techniques; therefore, reducing the research anxiety. Between video recordings on discipline-specific research provided in the course’s learning management system, hands-on time in a lab with instructional librarians, and the personal touch of a face-to-face encounter, students are hopefully invited into the library through a sense of hospitality rather than one of dread and fear.

Library anxiety is not exclusive to research for academic assignments either. Dewan (2019) describes students also have anxiety with finding library books:

Most students do not have the time or the knowledge of how to find a book for pleasure in an academic library, but if they saw an interesting book that caught their attention, they would borrow it... Research has shown that library customers only find what they are looking for 60 percent of the time (p. 181).

What a great opportunity to provide extraordinary hospitality through assisting students not only in completing academic work, but in coaching them through the process of locating pleasure reading materials to inspire a habit of lifelong reading. The Union library jumped at this opportunity for hospitality by incorporating locating a book during instruction sessions. Student workers and circulation staff are also trained in the best ways to assist patrons with finding books, in hopes that we reduce student anxiety.

Gen Z's Preferred Environment

In an attempt to describe optimal learning environments for Gen Z, Seemiller and Grace (2019) offer this insight, specifically addressing library space:

And libraries are more than just repositories for printed or archived publications. They are information centers where students have access to the internet, collaborative workspaces, and tinkering labs and can use computers populated with software critical for their academic programs. And while they are there, they can lounge in comfortable and modern seating and perhaps even have a coffee. These learning environments have emerged both out of technological innovation, making it possible to incorporate more digital learning tools into learning spaces, and a desire of educators to create more opportunities for engagement and interactions in regard to learning (pp. 45–46).

In their examination of modern academic libraries, Johnson and Kazmer (2011) describe how the physical space has changed in addition to the modifications made related to developments in technology. These changes to the physical environment “affect the user’s sense of the library’s hospitality. New and recently renovated academic libraries, for instance, often have spaces dedicated . . . quiet reading, group work in overstuffed chairs, computer work, getting food and drink, and so on” (p. 396). Today’s modern libraries, including the recently built Union Library, offer space more akin to a community center, a hub of activities for a wide range of patrons. Union’s library provides space for patrons to work independently in quiet reading rooms or with groups in open seating areas or private study rooms. The Union library also includes a small coffee shop with seating, vending machines, and multiple computer labs. The library is the hot study place for students and provides a safe welcoming place for community members as well. These additions to libraries create “[a] new kind of library environment” for “researching to taking classes to participating in social events” (p. 396).

A Culture of Hospitality

Understanding that the mindset of hospitality for most individuals centers around the travel or service industry, possibly stretching out to considering how to scripturally love one’s neighbor, here academic libraries will be asked to consider blending the biblical concept of hospitality with the retail world of customer service. Just as loyalty from customers does not just happen by chance, neither does reading.

In *The Come Back Effect*, Young and Malm (2018) inspire readers through ten ways to foster a hospitable culture and one of those ways is to “focus on feeling as much as function” (p. 23). Although their focus is on having guests return to the church, parallels can be made to many other types of organizations including library services and higher education:

Hospitality is about caring for the emotions of the guest just as much as it is about serving them, if not even more. That means knowing when it's time to go above and beyond the call of duty or when it's time to walk away. Hospitality is about merging the function – the tasks – and the feeling (p. 20).

When people enter the doors of your library, do they feel welcomed? One of the characteristics that has emerged in research is that thriving leaders know how to express empathy which can be defined as “understanding and acknowledging what the guest is feeling” (Young & Malm, 2018, p. 23). When a person feels understood and acknowledged, they feel cared for which creates a desire to return for more. Sharing the story of how the phrase “bumping the lamp” became a metaphor in the Disney culture any time the company wants to go the extra mile to make something excellent, Young and Malm (2018) explain it stems from the 1988 animated film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* where the challenge was to blend animation with live action and a scene where the lighting and shadows were an important detail. It is in these small details that a heart of hospitality or a core value of being people-focused creates an opportunity to “bump the lamp.” When a flourishing organization “bumps the lamp,” progressing to going above and beyond, it is demonstrating empathy towards the people they serve.

The biblical context for going the extra mile comes from Matthew 5 where in the ancient world as Hawkins (2016) describes:

A Roman soldier or citizen could compel a subject from one of the conquered lands to carry his backpack, or load, for him for one mile only. As Jesus was preaching His Sermon on the Mount, I have often wondered if He inserted the reference about the second mile when He saw an object lesson unfolding before Him and His hearers. He said, Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two (para. 2).

As Christ followers, we are asked not only to do what is expected of us but to provide more. By going the second mile, we are lightening the load of those around us just as Jesus did on the cross for us. Taking service to the second mile demonstrates a spirit of hospitality.

Extending this concept of extra-mile customer service in the form of hospitality, library services should “consider the multiple threats to reading today” and should do “whatever [they] can to motivate students to read. We need to promote books so that students will pursue reading as a favorite activity and become increasingly skilled at it” (Dewan, 2019, p. 180). By taking applications from shopping and customer service experiences, libraries can create a hospitable atmosphere that:

tempts customers to enter the building, remain in it, and do business. Smart retailers pay considerable attention to the store itself...to increase the shopper

conversion rate—the percentage of consumers who become buyers. Libraries, too, should think in terms of conversion rates—about ways to increase both gate count and circulation statistics (p. 181).

Each day is an opportunity to “bump the lamp” in some way, increasing a sense of belonging and hospitality in all areas of campus, including the academic library.

Recognizing that everyone may not track with the philosophy that one should view an academic library as an opportunity to demonstrate hospitality, the hope is that even those who disagree will be able to connect with the concept of a hospitable culture. Author Terry A. Smith (2018) invites us to ponder this issue as:

A way of approaching everything ... people are longing for more hospitable leaders who create a climate of invitation and welcome that allows all kinds of people to work together in unity to heal the brokenness that is all around us (Invitation).

How can the academic library create a hospitable culture? By utilizing techniques from the retail and service industries that engage new patrons and retain existing ones.

Characteristics of Hospitable Places

If one is to consider how to create a hospitable culture in areas such as library services, it is important to comprehend the ingredients necessary to define a place as hospitable. Pohl (2002) explains the impact of our limited knowledge of hospitality:

For many people today, understandings of hospitality have been reduced to Martha Stewart’s latest ideas for entertaining family and friends and to the services of the hotel and restaurant industry. As a result, even Christians miss the significance of hospitality and view it as a mildly pleasant activity if sufficient time is available (p. 34).

Since “the Bible is rich with accounts of hospitality and with encouragement towards its practice” perhaps an academic library can use Scripture as a guide for viewing hospitality “not so much a task as it is a way of living our lives and sharing ourselves” (p. 37).

Pohl (2002) continues to share with readers the characteristics that create hospitable places such as the fact that:

Welcoming places are comfortable and lived in ... cared for ... provide the people that inhabit them with shelter and sanctuary in the deepest sense of the words, not only with the shelter of physical buildings but also with the shelter of relationships (p. 39).

In her examination, Pohl provides guidance that two areas of specific importance are the physical space and gestures that communicate welcome. When considering the lens of hospitality, “Inviting entrances, accessible facilities, comfortable furnishings, and adequate lighting communicate a sense of welcome” (p. 40). While offering attention to the physical space is important, Pohl outlines that “the most important practice of welcome is giving a person our full attention. It is impossible to overstate the significance of paying attention, listening to people’s stories, and taking time to talk with them” (p. 40). When an organization demonstrates the importance of hospitality through listening, they are modeling for Gen Z methods to combat continuous partial attention, or the idea that “when you switch from Task A to another Task B, your attention doesn’t immediately follow – a residue of your attention remains stuck thinking about the original task” (Newport, 2019, p. 41).

Elements of Library Hospitality

Transitioning the application of the characteristics of hospitable places specifically to library services, one can look to Johnson and Kazmer (2011) who define library hospitality as “the provision of library resources by a genuinely motivated employee to fulfill the library need of a patron in an environment conducive to the provision of those resources” (p. 383). In their efforts to expand research beyond the traits that “make up a hospitable library – public service, customer service, signage, furnishings, and so on” to a deeper “synthesis of the notion of the library as a place of hospitality,” Johnson and Kazmer (2011) identified six elements which created their definition: library resources, genuinely motivated employees, library employee, library need, patron, and environment. Using the comparison of restaurant, Johnson and Kazmer offer that not all the elements have to be present simultaneously every time, but the occurrence of these elements can move a simple information transaction into something more transformational, more hospitable. Each of these elements, when present, have a ripple effect on the patron’s overall experience with not only the library, but with the spiritual discipline of hospitality.

Surprise and Delight

Once again utilizing strategies established in the business world, one might examine the concept of surprise and delight, which first caught my (Julie) attention while reading *The Come Back Effect* and reappeared in *The Spirit of Hospitality* and *The Culture Code*. Surprise and delight is a relationship marketing strategy that “has existed since businesses have been around” (Young & Malm, 2018) but as Greengard (2020) shares, has been identified by other names. “Over the past decade,” Greengard explains:

the phrase ‘surprise and delight’ has emerged at the center of marketing. The idea that it’s smart for a business to introduce experiences that slide the dial from ‘mundane’ to ‘awesome’ makes perfect sense, whether it’s in the form of a promotion or a streamlined way to interact or transact (para. 1).

Taking cues from the marketing world, what if academic libraries pursue avenues to surprise and delight, possibly through visual merchandising, all with the goal of making people feel truly special and appreciated. Greengard (2020) shares:

The end goal for surprise and delight shouldn't be to collect positive reviews on a Web page or land a string of gushing tweets – though these are certainly nice outcomes. It also shouldn't be limited to an occasional moment of bliss for a customer. It's all about constructing a more holistic framework for affinity and loyalty by solving problems, improving interactions, and making a customer feel truly special and appreciated (para 16).

Libraries should strive to go the extra mile by making patrons feel understood while also surprising and delighting them. One way Union's library provides this service is through research consultations or coaching appointments. Librarians meet with students one on one to assist with research questions. This specialized individual attention provides for the students' immediate needs and opens the door for future interaction. Ultimately, the goal of the coaching appointments is to teach students and reduce their library and research anxiety.

Libraries may want to think strategically about how they appear to patrons. "Thinking in terms of visual merchandising would be a sea change in many academic libraries. Libraries should consider the image they present, the atmosphere they create, and the overall impression that customers associate with their institution" (Dewan, 2019, p. 181). Retailers know the power of product placement and what draws people in for a deeper look, why not apply these principles to an academic library? "Bookstores know that a shelf filled only with spine-facing books makes the books invisible ... Using a mixture of front-facing and spine-facing books break a shelf into smaller, easier-to-view sections" (p. 183). Although front-facing books are not readily available at Union's library due to mobile shelving, multiple book displays provide students with reading recommendations from all library employees. In addition, social media is an outlet for the library to encourage and market the library resources.

Continuing to consider product placement and the issue of choice, what if the library blended the retail approach with the hominess of a personal library? In professionally decorated homes, designers blend spine-facing and front-facing books on shelves with decorative items. What if a shelf containing books on art displayed student and faculty pottery? Imagine the surprise and delight when a student's eye notices their professor's name attached to a beautiful piece of work! Or what about a celebration of the institution's athletic history with the placement of memorabilia around books on the topic of sports? "Displays give customers ideas for reading material and a manageable focus for selection. A group of books on an interesting

theme can catch readers' interest and call attention to books that would otherwise go unnoticed" (Dewan, 2018, p. 183).

Taking another page out of the retail world, what if each academic department at the institution was provided an endcap at the end of a shelf to display books of interest in that discipline or a display of what that department's faculty might be reading? "Products placed at the end of the aisle in a store-displays known as endcaps in the retail world-stand out from the rest of the merchandise and provide customers with a visual cue to what is inside the aisle" (p. 183). Rotating these displays monthly asks for collaboration from the academic disciplines while not burdening the library staff with the challenge of planning each one. An added value is that librarians, administrators, faculty and staff might reveal surprises and delights to each other while motivating student patrons to engage in "reading for pleasure" which "correlates strongly with academic achievement" (Dewan, 2019, p. 177).

One obstacle to overcome with Gen Z and specifically their library anxiety, may be the need to limit their choices. "Too much choice can be overwhelming for decision-making" (Dewan, 2019, p. 183). In *Paradox of Choice*, Schwartz (2004) clearly agrees with the majority of researchers like Elmore and McPeak (2019) and Twenge (2017) that too many choices has a paralyzing effect on Gen Z. Schwartz closes with suggestions to hopefully avoid the negative of "having too many choices" which includes "psychological distress, especially when combined with regret, concern about status, adaptation, social comparison, and perhaps most important, the desire to have the best of everything – to maximize" (p. 221). Perhaps limiting a student's choice through careful consideration of product placement might reduce the stress of Gen Z's FOMO (fear of missing out). Sometimes it will be necessary to take action and make a choice and not weigh all the options available. Less can become more in many situations. Students can be encouraged to check out a book, take it home, and know that it is acceptable to return the book if it's not enjoyable. There could just be a more suitable choice hidden in those stacks somewhere! Union's library applied this concept to research guides as well. The librarians have modified research guides to include a limited number of resources to use, hopefully reducing student stress associated with making choices.

Appealing to Emotions

One way to tap into the feelings of the patrons "because they are what motivate people to action" is through graphic displays which are "reader-centric, not book-centric" (Dewan, 2019, p. 184). Using posters depicting students getting lost in a book demonstrates to Gen Z that they can also acquire the identity of a reader by connecting with the "symbolic meanings associated with the consumer goods through the idealized models promoting them" (p. 184).

Dewan (2019) summarizes best the importance of creating a culture of hospitality in order to engage and retain Gen Z:

At a time when the value of higher education is being questioned, librarians need to think in terms of [hospitality], customer conversion rates and return on investment. Academic librarians buy books to support the academic program of their parent institutions, but they should also consider the value-added service of these books. The more students read, the more fluent they will become, and the more likely they will develop a habit of lifelong reading. If today's students have grown up in a culture of distraction that reduces their ability to focus and makes them less patient with book-length material, it is not too late to help them. Adopting and adapting retail-inspired [and hospitality-focused] strategies is one way that libraries can attract students to the activity of reading. (p. 184)

The hospitality provided by a library should be one of the main focuses as we see the benefits from various researchers. A library is filled with books but what good are the books if no one uses them, thus focusing on service will benefit the library and students using the library. At the Union Library, service is a main goal for the library director, each library employee knows that helping patrons is of the utmost importance whether we help by answering questions at the circulation desk, helping a student find a book, or checking to see if a patron needs assistance while browsing the library.

Conclusion

By considering the unique characteristics of this generation through the lens of the spiritual discipline of hospitality, libraries can evaluate current practices related to physical space, patron experience, and activities which attract new patrons. Understanding the characteristics that create a culture of hospitality and how these traits impact Gen Z specifically, academic organizations have a framework to explore how to best serve their patrons, whether that comes in the form of offering food and drink to how welcomed a student feels when utilizing available equipment and resources. Modeling the act of hospitality as laid out in Scripture provides an opportunity to meet not only the academic needs, but also allows numerous opportunities to engage personally with a generation in need of safety and security. †

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