



Volume 64 | Issue 2

Article 8

12-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Roth, Joren and Schulz, Oliver (2021) "Adventures in Gardening: Librarians Instructing at Universities," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 64 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol64/iss2/8>

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Adventures in Gardening: Librarians Instructing at Universities



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In the beginning, God created mankind to tend “the garden.” As instructors, we also tend to the needs of our students to see the most abundant growth possible. This adventure in gardening can go down different paths. Our approach to instruction of students will also vary. Some of us are blessed to work with students for a project or semester; others may have only a fleeting moment to make the most significant impact possible.

For us, these roles take place at Colorado Christian University (CCU), a four-year liberal arts college, originally founded in 1914 as the Denver Bible Institute. The student population currently exceeds 9,000 students, enrolled in the more than 200-degree programs in the two colleges: the traditional on-campus College of Undergraduate Studies (CUS) and the online extension centers of the College of Adult and Graduate Studies (CAGS).

Among the team of librarians at CCU, most classroom teaching and instruction falls to Joren Roth and Oliver Schulz.

- Joren recently joined CCU as the Instruction and Outreach Librarian, which makes him primarily responsible for the One-Shot library instruction as well as any subject area follow-ups for both CUS and CAGS.
- Oliver is the Technical Services Librarian at CCU and has been adjunct teaching in CCU’s CUS and CAGS theology degree programs.

From our experience, garnered over many years within a variety of other educational settings, however, teaching in the university classroom is fairly new to each of us. As “newbies,” we offer a few lessons learned in our respective “gardens.”

Joren Roth in the “one-shot” instruction role:

- **Know your audience:** Especially as the new kid on the block, I came to realize the importance of spending sufficient time in advance to know who it is I’m speaking to. I first presented to a group of Clinical Mental Health Counseling master’s degree students, but soon thereafter, I prepared instruction for the First Year Integration students. The session planning for these 18-year-olds demanded intricate redesign even if so subtle as to change simple cultural references or idioms to others known and relevant to the group before me.
- **Active and Ongoing Engagement:** I help form the student experience and “library memories” through a group interaction learning strategy such as “Think, Pair, Share.” The students come alive when they communicate with each other about their respective library memories. This simple two-minute exercise focuses the students’ minds on the “library” part of their brains, and they become primed to add new thoughts about how the Academic Library experience is both similar and different to their previously held expectations.
- **Follow up the instruction:** I’ve found it profitable to share instructional notes with hyperlinks, which outlines the resources and skills discussed during the instructional session. Students are less distracted and have more retention when they wait to explore all the links until after the initial instruction is complete. This “quick-link e-document” directs the students through some active time just after the instruction to immediately apply newly gained knowledge. I also give students a follow-up survey so they can communicate how the instruction affected them while the material is still fresh in their memories.
- **Believe in your product and service:** I am much more adamant and confident when sharing what I know to be of quality. This confidence in my library’s resources and its librarians increases my enthusiasm thereby increasing the likelihood that each concept will be caught and retained by the students. These students need to continually hear and see this message. They need to know that all librarians are available and eager to help them grow.

Oliver Schulz in the classroom teaching role:

- **Explain the instructions:** Students tend to glance at instructions instead of reading them carefully. As a result, students often skip over important aspects of projects. I strive for short and clear instructions, avoiding every unnecessary word, giving example assignments, and upload video instructions if possible.
- **Purposefully engage the students:** Many students are hesitant when they first arrive at college. I decided to copy another professor’s method of drawing students’ names out of a hat. I call on them to read Bible passages (I teach a Bible course), answer questions, express their view on a given topic. I will often display multiple Bible passages at once, so that students can turn to them simultaneously, preserving class time.

- **Recognize the “signs of the times”:** In the fall, freshmen often require more time as they acclimate to college life than returning or transfer students. I have learned to start the fall semester slower, taking more time to cover the syllabus and introductory lectures, trying to “ease” them into the college setting. In the spring, I move much more quickly into the material.

Similarly, I have observed that students are more tired after a holiday week/weekend than at any other time. In order to counter this sleepiness, I plan to conduct the first class after such holidays differently: I will forewarn the students to know their material, and then cover it in “Jeopardy” style: students win candy for correct answers. (If this plan fails, it will give me material to write a follow-up report for *The Christian Librarian*.)

- **Get personal with your students:** Students have been appreciative for the efforts to be involved in their lives. On the first day of class, I ask them to share where they are from, something unique about themselves, prayer requests, what they enjoy doing, and what they hope to learn. While I have limited flexibility, I try to incorporate this feedback into the semester’s material. At the beginning of every class period, I ask for prayer requests and give students the opportunity to pray for them. It does not seem like much, but students seem to appreciate it.

As we work the roles that have been given us, the key is to fulfill them faithfully and joyfully. Gardens can be both beautiful and productive places where every portion and part contribute to the whole. Ultimately, God grants the increase and allows us to participate in the beauty of the adventure. †