

# Making Space, Engaging Students:

## How One Department Built Outreach into Our Community of Practice

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ANN MATSUSHIMA CHIU (she/they) is the Social Sciences Librarian at Reed College. Having earned an MLIS from University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, a BA in Visual Arts from University of California, San Diego, and currently pursuing a MEd in Curriculum and Instruction, Ann is inspired by the intersection between information literacy instruction, zines, and culturally responsive outreach. Ann is particularly excited about outreach through the Reed Zine Library and zine programming. Their work on zine librarianship can be found in *Librarians with Spines: Information Agitators in the Age of Stagnation* (2016) and *Zines in Libraries: Selecting, Purchasing, and Processing* (2022). Besides programming zines, Ann is found gardening, going to live music shows, and hanging with her artist spouse and two exuberant daughters.



CARLY LAMPHERE (she/hers) is the Science Librarian at Reed College. Hailing from Southern California, she now resides in Portland, OR alongside her husband and cat Schrödinger. As a mixed-race Latina, and first-generation master's degree recipient, Carly is passionate about helping others attain their educational goals in whatever capacity they envision. She is dedicated to information literacy instruction within a DEI lens, STEM Librarianship, and technological literacy education beyond the classroom in our communities. When she is not in the library you can find her at home binging horror movies, building mini models, and decorating her living room with the hopes that one day it will resemble her own mad scientist cabinet of curiosities museum.



LILY DE LA FUENTE (she/her/ella) is the Humanities Librarian at Reed College. She completed an M.S. in Information Studies from the University of Texas at Austin iSchool. She also holds a B.A. in International Studies (Arts & Culture) and French Language from Texas A&M University. Her primary focus is to highlight immigrant, diaspora, and multicultural materials while advocating for low-income and first-generation college students. She's passionate about user experience (UX) and incorporating design thinking to improve library services and outreach. Outside of work she enjoys going analog and exploring the beauty of the Pacific Northwest with her trusty terrier Jack.



CALEAH JAMES (she/hers) is the Performing Arts Librarian at Reed College. Caleah came to Portland to work at Reed from Southern California bringing along her mom and French Bulldog Mochi. While studying for her MLIS at the Pratt Institute in New York City, Caleah focused on special libraries, particularly performing arts librarianship, which makes her position at Reed practically perfect. Caleah enjoys managing the Performing Arts Resource Center and is interested in active learning techniques, peer research, and acting as a mentor for her student workers. Caleah is a true crime/paranormal podcast junkie, and enjoys all things spooky and weird.



ANGIE BEIRIGER (she/hers) is the Director of Research Services for Reed College Library. She earned her MLS from Emporia State and has a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. As a long-time librarian and intentional manager, she strives to create a culture of inclusion and belonging for staff, students, and faculty. Her professional experience and interests include digital scholarship, staff development, and the intersection of librarianship and technology. She loves to explore the back roads of Oregon with her spouse and spends her days gardening, cooking, and listening to records with her two boisterous Boston Terriers.

Reed College is a small liberal arts college located in Portland, Oregon. Students work and study on a mostly residential campus and the library has historically been the heart of academic and campus life. This relationship was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic as Reed shifted to online learning and library staff worked remotely. After more than a year, students and library staff returned to campus but other disruptions impacted student use of services and physical library space. A major seismic renovation closed a large section of the library. During this 18-month renovation, almost 40 percent of library seating and assigned desks were unavailable for student use. These major disruptions meant that both incoming and some upper-level students had no established relationship to the library beyond virtual interactions. It became evident there was a need to re-engage and re-energize students' relationship with all aspects of library spaces and services.

The Research Services Department consists of liaison librarians who initiate co-curricular student outreach efforts in addition to their academic reference and instruction roles. The department stresses that there are other departments in the library doing successful outreach but this article focuses on Research Services efforts to address years of disruptions and to connect with students both inside and outside of the library.

Through department meetings and a focused summer retreat, the Research Services team concentrated intentional efforts on **making space**: space in our jobs to do this work, space for the students to be present in the library, and space to gather user feedback. Secondly, Research Services librarians sought to **engage students**: through reference pop-up events, campus collaborations, and cultural displays and programming.

### Who We Are

This is a collaborative article written by the Research Services Department, 80 percent of whom are librarians of color working in a predominantly White institution. We collectively embody and apply a lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and anti-racism in all our work, including these outreach efforts. This article discusses the process for devel-

oping outreach opportunities, the challenges associated with these efforts, and the details on how we center traditionally underrepresented students in our planning. We hope our journey will inspire and empower fellow library workers in Oregon and beyond to make space for their unique student and community populations.

### **Making Space**

As the campus returned from emergency online learning and work from the pandemic, it became apparent that the students were not engaging with the library like they used to. Gate counts and reference desk visits were down, implying that students were studying outside the library. An uptick in online consultation requests with subject librarians showed that students were unsure how to use and navigate library resources and still needed help. After studying remotely for over a year, did students feel they belonged in the library? Did our increasingly diverse community of students see themselves represented in the space? The department began to brainstorm new ways to make space for students beyond traditional areas of interaction to determine how to create a space that was welcoming, intuitive, and appealing.

#### ***Making Space for Students***

**Reference Desk Revamp.** In fall of 2022, students returned to a reopened library with service desks that were unfamiliar and even unwelcoming. The reference desk struggled to promote itself as a relevant service for student research since the space had not been updated in years and lacked appropriate signage. As the student reference assistant supervisor, the newly hired Science Librarian embraced the opportunity to reimagine the space. This makeover was part of an effort to help create a space that is useful, welcoming, and approachable.

To update the reference desk, new signage and bulletin boards were added, new artwork was framed, and plants were used to green up the space. The loaner art from the library's archives collection was replaced with black-and-white photos of a diverse representation of students in the library throughout the years. New additions like a neon sign that says "Ask Us!" boosted the visibility of the desk and its services. The long-standing tradition of offering candy and library swag at the desk enthusiastically continued with the purchase of library-themed stickers, bookmarks, and pronoun pins.

These additions elevated the reference desk to a new and improved space made possible by the Research Services team's dedication to making the reference desk a place that encourages new and returning students to visit the desk more throughout the year with questions, ideas, and, if needed, a little bit of candy while they're on the go!

**Zine Library.** In order to make space within the library for students' voices, especially identities that have been historically excluded, underrepresented, and marginalized, there has been an intentional effort to advocate for event programming, internships, and student-led collection development for the Reed Zine Library. Founded in 2018 by the former head of Special Collections and Archives to diversify the primary source collection, the Zine Library currently has over 1,000 zines and is now known to be one of the largest circulating academic zine collections in the state of Oregon (see Figure 1). Currently, the Zine Library is curated and run by the Social Sciences Librarian, who came to Reed with experience organizing community-run zine and art festivals, running a small art press, writing scholarship on zines, and hosting numerous zine-making workshops.

While the Zine Library was closed during the pandemic, it remained one of the few spaces open during the main library's seismic construction. The Zine librarian's intention was



Figure 1  
The Reed Zine Library

to revisit the zine collection that had sat dormant for a year and a half in order to represent the COVID-19 pandemic experience and to capture zines covering the 2020 racial justice reckoning and other emerging student interests such as accessibility, sexuality and gender, and DIY/punk culture. The Zine librarian hired student interns to develop displays and exhibitions that included the Zine Library space and envisioned new forms of zine-related programming. The result of two years of effort was more than 150 new zines added into the collection, four student interns hired to focus on programming and exhibits, and 10 zine-making workshops. Newly engaged student groups, such as the Queer Student Union, the Latinx Student Union, the Multicultural Resource Center, and the Students for Education, Equity and Direct Service showcased and celebrated zines they created.



Figure 2  
Students hang out in the Performing Arts Resource Center

**Performing Arts Resource Center.** Nestled on the opposite side of campus from Hauser Library is the Performing Arts Resource Center (PARC), managed by the Performing Arts Librarian. The PARC is part library and part equipment rental and serves faculty and students in the departments of Music, Theatre, and Dance. The space consists of one large room with a service desk, stacks, computers, three work spaces, and two staff offices. The space felt wide open but not necessarily inviting or “lounge-worthy.”

As part of an effort to attract new students to the space as well as returning students who had been in lockdown or learning from home, new equipment was purchased to support co-curricular learning and meant to inspire play. Department funds purchased high-engaging equipment like Nintendo Switch players, drones, Go-Pros, instant cameras, virtual reality headsets, and guitars (see Figure 2).



Figure 3  
A student adds a comment to a talk-back board in the library lobby

Reimagining the PARC meant providing a comfortable and inclusive hangout space where students could study, practice music or theater, and engage with faculty. Through the addition of artwork, a listening station featuring a new vinyl collection, and a modular couch, the PARC became a cozy hangout area that students gravitate to. As a result, student use and circulation of items increased.

***Making Space through User Experience***

Making space also means improving user experience (UX) through design thinking and collecting feedback from library users. In spring of 2023, we expanded services into the library lobby in order to survey the community and identify pain points while remaining mask- and social distance-friendly. A talk-back board with questions was left at this main focal point for student, staff, and faculty interaction between class periods. The community started responding and we realized it was a much-needed dialogue that had ceased to exist during the pandemic. These talk-back boards were left up in four- to six-day intervals to try and reach the Reed community after hours and on the weekends. We left sticky notes and markers out, and, as a result, we received unfiltered results (see Figure 3).

Some talk-back boards were used to provide bite-sized instruction moments highlighting essential services like Reed’s “Ask a Librarian” chat and email services. On another talk-back board we highlighted the library’s list of A–Z Databases the week before finals when students

were actively looking for resources. As part of the reference desk revamp, we conducted A/B testing using low-fidelity prototypes and asked community members to cast their votes on the visual redesign of that space. The goal was to understand how community members were using services that extend beyond the reference desk.

### **Engaging Students**

The Research Services department believed it was important to engage with students in co-curricular, informal ways in addition to the established reference, instruction, and consultations that make up the core of traditional liaison work. By focusing on engaging students outside the library, librarians could establish crucial relationships, introduce themselves, and break down library walls which may be preventing some students from asking questions or seeking help. After several semesters of isolation, anxiety, and trauma that impacted everyone in different ways, it was also time to create opportunities to simply have fun and bring lightness to our work.

#### ***Engaging Students Outside of the Library: Reference Anywhere***

If students weren't coming to the reference desk, Research Services decided to take the reference to the students. "Reference Anywhere" was launched as a pop-up reference support for students in an environment outside of the library. Over three semesters, Reference Anywhere set up at different high-traffic locations on campus. The first effort featured a couple of librarians on the patio outside the Student Commons, where students pass on their way to and from the dining hall. The pop-up offered library swag, handouts with library resources, and friendly librarian faces in an informal setting. The result was dozens of students stopping by the table to ask questions, grab some stickers, and engage in casual conversation with the librarians.

There were more pop-ups over the next two semesters with more librarians, music, balloon arches, and candy to draw students in. Toward the end of year, Reference Anywhere sought seniors who needed support for their capstone thesis project. As the department is responsible for thesis research and formatting support, it was important to have a space for seniors to come ask questions, get feedback, and make sure their thesis was formatted correctly. Having real-time interactions was so valuable as some students just had quick questions or minor corrections that we could easily answer face to face.

The simple act of relocating to a nonacademic space that was convenient for students was successful, not only in numbers of students approaching the table, but in the volume of reference questions answered. Moving forward, Research Services plans to hold strategic tabling events at points of need (i.e., before finals week, for incoming freshmen, at the residence halls) and to participate in other tabling events throughout campus. Through evaluating the Reference Anywhere turnout and feedback, we have found that having a library presence outside the library is invaluable for increasing student engagement and building relationships with library staff and spaces.

#### ***Engaging Students through a Collaborative Campus Book Club***

Through the library's renewed efforts to engage students both inside and outside of the library, liaisons redoubled their focus on outreach to established student groups and centers of campus activity. One example is the long-standing Multicultural Resource Center (MRC) Book Club created in 2019 as a partnership between Reed Library, the MRC, and the Office of Institutional Diversity. The club was established by the Humanities Librarian and the former MRC director as a way to collect student input and acquire new titles that help deepen understanding of cultural roots and promote self-exploration of identity through

radically tender and honest storytelling. The MRC Book Club has become a bridge between the students who frequent the Multicultural Resource Center and the library, ensuring that all students feel equal ownership of academic spaces. Not only do students, faculty, and staff enthusiastically participate, but several library departments now also actively reach out to this flourishing student community to advertise upcoming events, employ student workers, and ensure that the library represents all student interests.

In its current form, the MRC Book Club provides free paperback copies by poets and authors of color to the campus community twice a year. Each semester, titles are chosen and selected by MRC student staff composed of the team's Black/African Diasporic Events Coordinator, Asian American Pacific Islander Events Coordinator, LatinX Events Coordinator, Indigenous Events Coordinator, and Arts & Communications Coordinator. Top book titles are then voted on by the wider campus community via the MRC listserv mailing list. With each selection, material is ingested into the library collection representative of Reed's BIPOC and LGBTQ+ student interests. Diversifying the collection with student input in such a visible way has encouraged other campus partners to reach out with their own book club ideas as related to pandemic healing and the new normal.

The book club readings are currently accessible and available for checkout in ebook and print format at Reed Library. When financially feasible, authors are invited to campus to join the conversation surrounding their work. Previous author visits have included Safiya Umoja Noble (see Figure 4), Tommy Orange, Gabby Rivera, and Taylor Johnson. Being able to read the text and then interact with the author has been a memorable experience for the students and staff. The conversations have been facilitated by members of Reed faculty and staff and offer fresh perspectives on timely topics of intersectionality.



Figure 4  
Author Safiya Umoja Noble speaks with students in the Multicultural Resource Center Book Club



### ***Engaging Students through Cultural Displays and Programming***

One of the ways the library has worked to alleviate our students' feelings of isolation and feeling unwelcome was to increase culturally specific event programming through library displays and exhibits. Research Services has hired four student exhibit interns so far, giving students the opportunity to explore their personal interests and identities in order to address gaps in the collection. To date, our interns have been students of color who were also international students, work-study students, first-generation college students, and first-year students.

Recent exhibits took a predominately White space and highlighted diverse stories and scholarship such as *Echoes of Harlem* based on the Harlem Renaissance unit in the introductory Humanities course; *Decolonizing Identity Through the Lens of Latin America: Art and Storytelling* based on the Mexico City unit in the introductory Humanities course; *Counter-narratives: Critical Race Theory in Context*; *Selena: Queen of Tejano*; *Exist, Resist: Uncovering Queer Narratives*; *Navigating Climate Activism*; and *Continued Resistance: A Legacy of Activism in the Asian American and Pacific Islander Diaspora*. Interns then connected and shared their displays with their peers in order to celebrate diverse representation, unique perspectives, and their communities' take on the next generation of who the library showcases.

### **Conclusion**

While liaison librarians in Research Services are expected to engage in academic outreach as part of their core responsibilities, co-curricular outreach is additional work that should feel authentic and personally rewarding. Creating an environment where this work is possible is also crucial to its success. Librarians need to be aware of their workload, consider marketing and assessment of these events, and seek funding. Library leadership needs to advocate, direct resources, and clear barriers to this work. Many of the Research Services librarians began to explore opportunities for outreach while being granted the flexibility in their regular job duties. This gave Reed College librarians an opportunity to pursue passion projects, gain professional development, and be creative in outreach endeavors. Each librarian was able to contribute their unique ideas and collaborate with others on new outreach efforts. They used their individual interests, expertise, and lived experience to effectively create outreach opportunities that were authentic and personal.

Some of the robust ideas that came to fruition were reference stations outside the library, book clubs for underrepresented students, zine events, cultural exhibits and other gatherings for the Reed community. We leveraged our knowledge of social media and marketing to boost engagement numbers and ignite a renewed excitement about library services. These events and activities have become an engagement-centered catalyst for cultivating co-curricular and academic relationships with students and faculty that we hope will sustain itself for many years to come.

### **Further Reading**

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