

Studying for Exams Just Got More Relaxing—Animal-Assisted Activities at the University of Connecticut Library

JO ANN REYNOLDS and LAUREL RABSCHUTZ

Homer Babbidge Library, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut, USA

In recent years, academic libraries have expanded their traditional focus on intellectual and scholarly pursuits, with many libraries now initiating programs that support student growth, development, and wellness. Although providing animal-assisted activities to college students is a fairly new concept, the social and therapeutic benefits of pet ownership or simply interacting with a companion animal are well documented. The University of Connecticut's Homer Babbidge Library on the Storrs campus chose to support the physical and emotional well-being of students during the stress-filled week of finals by providing therapy dogs. Student interaction and feedback were overwhelmingly positive.

KEYWORDS *Animal-assisted therapy, exam stress, library program, pet therapy, student wellness, therapy dogs*

INTRODUCTION

In a 1988 survey of college students to determine the impact of stress factors on academic performance, 50 percent reported final exams as the most stressful academic event (Anderson and Cole 1988). Fast forward twenty two years to 2010, and a Google search of “final exams and student stress” yields more than 500,000 Web sites, many providing tips on handling exam-related stress. Final exams are still a major stressful event for countless students. In many academic libraries, hours are extended during final exams to

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Address correspondence to Jo Ann Reynolds, MS, Reserve Services Coordinator, Homer Babbidge Library, University of Connecticut, 369 Fairfield Road, Unit 2005 RR, Storrs, CT 06269-2005. E-mail: jo_ann.reynolds@uconn.edu

accommodate the influx of students, many of whom study throughout the night. Student behavior shifts from information seeking and social studying to a period of intense cramming, both individually and in groups. Students often have back to back exams in the space of a few days, and whether they are freshman or upper-level students, exams bring stress into their lives.

In recent years, academic libraries have expanded their traditional focus beyond purely academic pursuits. Both on their own and in conjunction with other campus partners, libraries are deviating from traditional programming to support broader dimensions of student development such as physical, emotional, or spiritual health (Hinchliffe and Wong 2010). Although the stress associated with college, particularly during final exams, provides evidence of a market for well-being support services, it has been a more natural and low-risk development for academic libraries to focus instead on enhancing social interactions, e.g., game nights (American Library Association 2010), or offering art galleries and snack bars (Shill and Tonner 2003). However, with a little creativity, academic libraries can also have a positive impact on student health and wellness.

The University of Connecticut's (UConn) Homer Babbidge Library on the Storrs campus chose to implement one such program, Paws To Relax, by offering therapy dogs for students to interact with during final exams in the spring of 2010. This program was easy to implement and was exceptionally well-received by both students and library staff. Many students took the time to tell us how much they liked the program. They missed home and their own pets, and it meant a great deal to them to be able to interact with the dogs. The following student comment captures the prevailing student reaction and depth of response. We encourage more libraries to implement similar well-being programs.

The paws for relaxation program is absolutely brilliant. I have a really rough finals schedule and when I finished my first two Monday morning I was really upset. I got into my dorm room and my roommate told me that there was a therapy dog in the library. I went there immediately and stayed for 45 min. I needed that so badly. I can't even express how much it meant to me to have that dog there. I have three at home and they are my go to gals for stress relief. To be able to go see a doggie and play with him for as long as I wanted made my life so much better today and my finals so much easier to do this. Please please please continue this program. I will help in whatever way I can to support this program. Feel free to contact me if the program ever needs a coordinator or a supporter or anything, just please keep this program around. (Kathleen Fox, UConn student)

ANIMAL-ASSISTED ACTIVITIES

The social and therapeutic benefits of pet ownership or simply interacting with a companion animal are well documented. Pet therapy, more accurately referred to as animal-assisted activity (AAA), is a goal-directed interaction designed to improve the quality of life through the utilization of the human-animal bond (Delta Society 1991). The animals and their handlers are trained, screened, evaluated, and registered by agencies, such as the Delta Society or Therapy Dogs International. These agencies have policies and practices in place to protect the integrity of the visiting animal programs, as well as safeguards for the clients and public by providing skilled AAA teams. It should be noted here that activity animals are not service animals, and, therefore, are not afforded the rights and privileges provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Improved quality of life and general well-being are often credited as benefits of having a relationship with companion animals. Research studies cite evidence of improved physical and psychological health directly connected to an association with companion animals (Beck 2000; Friedman 1995). Many species of domesticated animals (e.g., birds, rabbits, llamas, etc.) are suitable for AAA work. Dogs are primarily used for AAA programs due to their predictability, ease of training and testing, and their solicitous nature. The beneficial effect of interacting with companion animals applies across the life span. AAA programs serve many different populations and special needs. Popular programs are as varied as educational or therapeutic programs for children, hospice, and prison visits. Although persons of all ages receive benefits from AAA, the majority of programs involve the elderly.

Public libraries have used therapy dogs in programs to teach children to read for several years (Hartman 2010). However, providing AAA programs to college students is a fairly new concept, but one that has been well received. Both the University of Wisconsin—Madison's and Kent State University's Student Health Services run pet therapy programs for students (Riggenbach 2010; University of Wisconsin-Madison News 2010) and a growing number of colleges are also allowing students to bring their dogs and cats to live in their dorm room (Steinberg 2010). College students face many of the same issues as the elderly such as living away from home, often leaving pets behind and adjusting to an impersonal institution. In addition, students are dealing with all of the other demands placed on young adults in college. Studies have shown that interacting with an unknown dog reduced blood pressure, lowered anxiety (Wilson 1991), and reduced self-reported depression (Folse 1994) among college students. These findings make programs such as Paws To Relax a natural fit for students undergoing the stress of final exams. For the AAA teams, college students are a rewarding population to work with as they aren't as frail or susceptible to disease as the elderly, nor are they as impulsive and unpredictable as young children.

IMPLEMENTING ANIMAL-ASSISTED ACTIVITIES IN THE LIBRARY

The decision to provide AAA should follow the policies and guidelines of your institution, as well as any state laws concerning health certificates or vaccinations. Your institution's Center for Students with Disabilities will be familiar with assistance animals and will probably have policies in place to guide your program. The support of your library's administration is essential.

Before beginning any pet visitation program, there are some considerations to be addressed to insure a positive experience for all involved. Your coworker may insist that his dog, "Fluffy," just loves everyone and should participate in the program. While "Fluffy" may be a great pet, there is no way to determine the dog's reliability in an unfamiliar environment. Animals that are screened and registered with a therapy dog agency have been tested for controllability and predictability in a variety of situations. The human partner is trained to recognize signs of stress in their animal and knows how to interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and levels of ability. In addition, they are familiar with infection control practices, and they adhere to a code of ethics and professional conduct. The use of registered AAA teams helps avoid problems related to liability as these teams are covered by the agency's commercial general liability insurance policy or have appropriate coverage through their private insurance. Resources for locating appropriate AAA teams are found through agency Web sites (e.g., <http://www.tdi-dog.org/>; <http://www.deltasociety.org/>). These organizations often have local chapters that can identify teams in your area.

Scheduling Therapy Dogs

Before contacting a therapy dog organization to solicit AAA teams, determine the time periods during which you will provide animal assistance. Questions to consider include whether the coordinating staff member(s) must be on site during all visits, availability of staff to escort AAA teams to their stations, and ease of parking and building access at various times of the day. Scheduling teams during the busiest periods will reach the most students. At the University of Connecticut, we found the busiest times to be after noon and into the evening during the midpoint of the exam period. However, it's best to not limit AAA team visits only to those times since the schedules of the handlers will be the determining factor as to when assistance dogs can be available.

Since it takes a great deal of energy to provide emotional support, be aware that therapy dogs get tired, too. Although some dogs will be able to visit for ninety minutes, limiting visits to one hour will be the norm for most. Defer the length of visit to the handler who is the best judge in determining her dog's capabilities.

To ensure maximum attentiveness to the students, handlers should work with one dog at a time. Crowds of students may surround each team asking questions and awaiting an opportunity to stroke the dog. A one-on-one dog/handler relationship allows the handler to keep her focus on the dog while answering questions and tactfully guiding the students to take turns interacting with the animal. In addition, some handlers have trained the dogs to perform behaviors on cue, and this is easier to accomplish with a one-on-one relationship between the dog and handler. At the University of Connecticut, we were fortunate to have several handlers whose dogs could perform entertaining and/or context specific behaviors such as “praying” for success on exams, bowing, and waving to the crowd.

Communication

A successful AAA program ensures that timely and accurate information is communicated to all participants—handlers, security, building maintenance, publicity staff, handler escorts, and public service desk staff. Keeping everyone informed during the busy, hectic final exam period is key to ensuring students are aware of the event, as is having handlers and their escorts in the right place at the right time. We found an Excel spreadsheet to be an efficient tool for keeping track of the dates, times, and stations assigned to handler teams. The resulting scheduling can be easily E-mailed via a distribution list set up in your E-mail program.

Advertising is also a significant factor in the program’s success as is a catchy and memorable title. We dubbed our program “Paws to Relax” to help spread the word. Well-designed and timely advertising provides information to library staff as well as to the student population and can be done at no cost given the Web and social media options available. Allowing sufficient lead time for your institution’s publicity department to schedule a photographer and reporter to cover the event during the first day or two may provide coverage on the news Web site for the rest of the week. Early notice to the staff maintaining your campus’ student Web site will ensure that you reach a large percent of the student population. We found that daily or even hourly updates on Facebook or Twitter, along with pictures of the breeds or AAA dog scheduled at a specific time, resulted in “fan” clubs descending on their favorite breed or AAA dog (see Figure 1). It’s also a good idea to place signs at entrance points, in well-traveled areas, and at AAA team stations, and to include the weekly schedule of the teams to be found there. Not only does this help students who want to find a specific breed or team, but students who want or need to avoid the dogs can easily do so. The old cliché, a picture is worth a thousand words, is worth adhering to when designing your signs. Using full-color photographs of the animals will ensure that many more eyes will be drawn to them. In the end, however, advertising at the University of Connecticut proved to be just the initial spark. Once students became aware



FIGURE 1 Dooley, Newfoundland, with his fan club.

of the dogs in the library, the program immediately went viral with students texting and using their cell phones to spread the word to their friends. In several instances, teams began their visit with five or ten students and within minutes were surrounded by twenty or thirty more (see Figure 2).



FIGURE 2 Luna, Golden Retriever, surrounded by a crowd of happy students.

Building Logistics

Locate the AAA stations in areas with high traffic and visibility and which also have a large open space sufficient to accommodate twenty-five to thirty people. Most AAA animals will be acclimatized to stairs and elevators, so a ground-level station is not imperative. Ensure the stations do not block the only route to a library resource and allow space for animal-averse patrons to avoid contact. We choose not to have roaming teams to minimize contact with patrons whose animal fears or allergies might increase their stress level. Our stations were furnished with an overstuffed chair for the handler and a free standing sign advertising the program. Based on participant comments, future AAA programs will include the station's schedule and photos of the dogs assigned there. Many teams came back for a second visit, and their "fans" wanted to know when they would next be there.

"Duty" Calls

A well-trained AAA dog will be housebroken and have done their "duty" prior to starting their shift. Ten teams provided eighteen visits at UConn, and although we had no accidents during our five-day program, we were prepared with a clean-up kit. Obtain a 5-gallon bucket, some sponges, paper towels, a spray dilution of stain and odor remover, and dry absorbent granules. Nature's Miracle© makes both types of products and labels their granules "Pet Mess Clean Up© ." Also include some plastic bags, gallon size or larger, but not zip lock. Whether the kits are centrally located or stored near each station ensures that all staff involved in the program knows where they are located.

Parking

Ideally, parking for handlers will be very close to both the building and an airing area for the dogs. Make any necessary arrangements with parking services in advance. If parking passes are required, mail them out ahead of time or make alternate arrangements. Be mindful of air temperature as animals cannot be left in hot vehicles for even a short time and arrange parking logistics so that the handler will not have to leave their animal in the car unattended. The airing area need not be large; a small strip of grass, dirt, or gravel will suffice. Although most handlers will be prepared and have plastic bags with them should they be necessary, it's a good idea to have some near the airing area.

A campus map with the route marked should be sent out in advance and include any special instructions regarding parking. Exterior signs directing handlers to the best route to both parking and your building are necessary

and should be generously placed to avoid delays and visit overlaps. Choose an easily recognizable logo and share it with handlers when you send the campus map and parking instructions.

Program Costs

Most libraries will be able to offer a therapy dog program for little to no external costs. The program at UConn was run with no budget. As is the case with the majority of therapy dog organizations, our dogs and handlers were volunteers whose members donated their time. All of our advertising was done via University Web sites and publicity channels and social networking sites, for which there was no charge. The library's Public Programming, Communications, and Marketing Team had sign stock and pedestal signs and printed all of our signs on an in-house color printer. The library's publicity staff spent about five hours making signs. Public service desk staff near one of the stations provided regular updates on the library's Facebook page. The overstuffed chairs were temporarily moved from other areas of the library. Clean-up materials were provided by the program's coordinator, but would have cost less than fifty dollars if purchased outright. The biggest single internal expense was staff time for the program coordinator. The program's coordinator spent about five hours in advance of finals week E-mailing participants, updating the schedule, and communicating with other library staff regarding parking, publicity, location of stations, etc. From Monday through Friday of finals week, the program coordinator spent approximately fifteen hours placing signs and escorting teams. Recruiting other library staff as escorts could reduce the program coordinator's time investment.

Encore!

In addition to the numerous positive comments received about the Spring 2010 Paws To Relax program, many students asked us to run the program during fall semester finals as well. They felt that a fall program was even more important because it is harder to engage in outdoor activities to relieve stress due to the shortened daylight and inclement weather. Most of the therapy dog handlers also asked us to let them know when we were going to run the program again. Their experience was so positive and rewarding that they are eager to come back. As a result of all the positive feedback, the Homer Babbidge Library has decided to continue the program for the 2011 year and include sessions during both fall and spring finals.

CONCLUSION

A well-planned and organized animal assisted activity program will be well-received by students and library staff. AAA programs can be implemented

with minimal start up costs and investments of staff time yet reap benefits to students' well-being. We offered the Paws To Relax program at UConn during spring finals in 2010, and it was wildly successful with students. The staff also enjoyed the added perk and stress relief in their day.

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