CREATING COMMUNITY IN THE VIRTUAL STUDY HALL:

Lessons from Spring 2021

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The Terrapin Learning Commons

A Virtual Study Sprint session

Background: Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in March 2020 all campus activities at the University of Maryland went virtual. Students were no longer able to gather with friends and study groups or set up in the library working late into the night until they finished an assignment. To replicate the "library as place" element now missing from library services, the Terrapin Learning Commons (the undergraduate study space at the University of Maryland) implemented a virtual study hall where students could join a Zoom room and work quietly alongside other students. While students who attended the program gave positive feedback about the event, turnout was low.
In spring 2021 the program was redesigned. The changes made to the program, updated goals, challenges, and outcomes are outlined below:
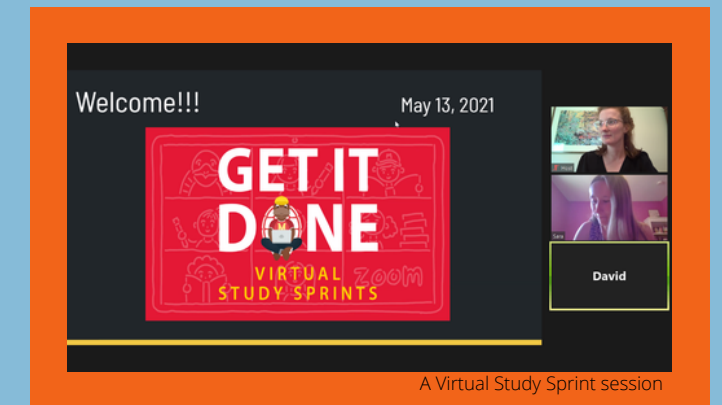
Our Model

The most significant change was the addition of breakout rooms for group study, which we targeted toward student organizations. Group leaders could fill out a form to request a designated breakout room where their group could study and connect in the way that best suited their needs. Meanwhile, the main Zoom room was still available for solo participants.

Student Organizations were identified through the TerpLink website and contacted by email. Email advertisements were also sent out via departmental email blasts.

Main Zoom Room
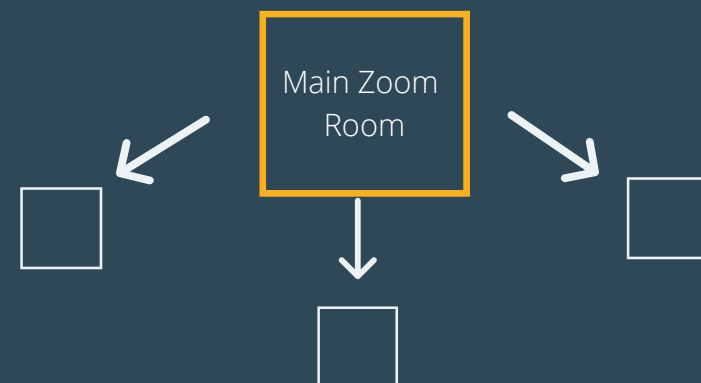
Goals

Promote Engagement with the Library

Support student learning

Build connections between the library and student organizations

The new model had the additional goal of starting to build partnerships between the library and student organizations.

Like all library programs, one important goal was to remind students of the presence and support of the library. We hoped that a consistent and well promoted program would achieve this even for students who did not attend.

Challenges

When planning, organizing, and implementing library programs virtually, one major challenge is the lack of natural feedback you might get at an in person event. A lot of our perceived challenges had to be speculated, since we did not specifically assess things that prevented students from attending the program.

Possible challenges:
- Zoom fatigue
- Pandemic struggles with motivation and mental health
- Awkwardness of virtual events
  - lack of participants
- Effort required by group leaders to set up event
- Communication

The ongoing pandemic and "new normal" has many students feeling overwhelmed. We suspect that the extra effort required to attend a virtual library program was likely a significant factor in the low attendance we continued to see.

What We Learned

Virtual programming continues to offer challenges and in spite of the changes made to the organization of the program, attendance remained low.
In spite of low attendance, feedback was good. Students appreciated the motivation and accountability as well as the opportunity to connect in the breakout room. This indicates that the program was tailored to fill a need that is genuinely there.

If the TLC continues to offer this program they may consider further adjustments to improve attendance. These could include:
- Staff or departmentally sponsored group study rooms
- Connecting with faculty to create study rooms for particular classes. Faculty could offer incentives to attendance
- More targeted marketing to certain student organizations