“Take a Paws” with Therapy Dogs and Make it a Howling Success

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Introduction

College and university students experience varying levels of stress and anxiety throughout the academic year that intensifies during exam periods (Haggerty, & Kiely Mueller, 2017). In response, many academic libraries provide information on effective studying, stress management and self-care, and host activities that help students cope. The Library at the University of Guelph (U of G), Canada, is no exception. We provide appropriate, timely support that is proven effective, and we regularly work with campus partners to bring in additional knowledge and expertise. Since 2011, the U of G Library has hosted a multi-faceted exam stress-buster program to support students through this particularly challenging period of the academic year.

This chapter examines the “Take a Paws” therapy dog event we introduced to the exam stress-buster program in 2016, details key approaches to managing the risks associated with using live animals, and describes in detail our multifaceted marketing and promotion strategy. Readers interested in using this model in their

* In memory of Andrea E. Humphrey (nee Karpala, 1982-2017) beloved colleague and “Take a Paws” champion.
own context are directed to supplementary resources and a document repository from which they can freely download materials.

Description of Institution

The University of Guelph is a medium-sized, research-intensive university with a long history of excellence in research and teaching. Just over 20,000 students are enrolled in the university’s regular, undergraduate programs; 2,500 in the graduate programs and almost 600 students are enrolled in diploma programs. Many more students take degree-level or continuing education courses through the University’s Open Learning department each year. We are known for our programs in agriculture, veterinary medicine, and domestic science, but we also offer innovative programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in the humanities, social sciences, engineering, and life sciences.

Outreach/Marketing Problem Addressed

The University of Guelph Library has long focused on building connections with students, faculty, and staff to foster academic success and create a sense of community to meet the needs of diverse populations. As the “academic town square” within the institution, the library has become more relevant in strengthening students’ social framework. This has never been more important than in recent years when colleges and universities have seen a rise in stress levels among undergraduate and graduate students and in the demands for counseling and other, mental health-related support (Fiocco, & Hunse, 2017; Evans, et. al, 2017).

We wanted to support students during peak stress periods and let them know that we care. We have hosted a successful exam stress-buster program since 2011 but we wanted to do more to support our students’ mental well-being. Our solution: offering an evidence-based approach to helping students relax and calm themselves through interaction with trained, experienced therapy dogs. They return to their work with a greater sense of well-being and confidence, feeling calmer, more relaxed and refreshed (Grajfoner, Harte, Potter, & McGuigan, 2017).

How We Did It

In April 2016, the University of Guelph Library, in partnership with the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program (http://www.sja.ca/English/Community-Services/Pages/Therapy%20Dog%20Services/default.aspx), introduced Take a Paws
“Take a Paws” with Therapy Dogs and Make it a Howling Success

to their exam stress-buster programming. The inaugural event was such a success that it is now offered every exam period. The key elements of the event proper are listed below; details relating to marketing and promotion follow in the next section.

**Venue.** Room(s) were selected for location and appropriateness and approved by Environmental Health and Safety (see the Risk Management section).

**Session details.** Four to six sessions of 1.5 to two hours each are held the first week of exams, during which students may pet and cuddle with the dogs or simply sit quietly in the room dedicated to the event. Each 1.5- to two-hour period consists of 15-minute visit periods separated by five-minute breaks (during which the dogs can play, be taken outside to relieve themselves, etc.). Library volunteers monitor the activity in the visit room and manage the flow of students.

**Participants.** Four or five dogs (and their owners) serve in each session. The number of students interacting with the dogs at any one time is strictly controlled: student-to-dog ratio is capped at five, (e.g., four dog teams are used, a maximum of 20 students can visit in each 15-minute period).

**Registration.** This is managed using an online system. Students are encouraged to pre-register for their preferred 15-minute visit period; walk-ins are allowed only if space is available. The day of the event, students check in, sign the photo release, receive their entrance ticket, and wait quietly until the beginning of their 15-minute session.

**Marketing and Promotion**

The exam stress-buster program was well established when we introduced Take a Paws, and we easily incorporated this new event into the existing, and very successful, promotion strategy (see Table 12.1).

**Table 12.1.** Marketing Channels for U of G Exam Stress-Buster Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus Unit</th>
<th>Channel/Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Signage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• One large poster in a high-traffic area on the first floor of the library; two large, tall banners near entrance; scrolling on digital signs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Library website</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Banner scrolling on main page (linked to exam stress-busters article on the Library’s webpage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Included in “Events” listing (plus link to registration page)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Active promotion through regular posts to the library’s Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook accounts leading up to and during the exam-stress buster period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Boosted a post on Facebook to broaden the reach; used the same post on Instagram the week leading up to the event when registration was open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Campus Unit</strong></td>
<td><strong>Channel/Details</strong></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Library         | Social Media (continued)  
  - Sample social media post: “Sign-up to snuggle with an adorable therapy dog and Take a Paws from exams!” (plus link to exam stress-busters article).  
  Note: If you use only one channel, choose the one that has the most followers/engagement. For the U of G library, it was Facebook. |
| U of G          |  
  - Event listing on U of G’s main events calendar |
| Event Partners  | Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) and OVC Pet Trust  
  - Active promotion through Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook accounts  
  - YouTube video. “Take a Paws @UGLibrary on April 5-April 6, 2016.” View it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIZMBNeE |
| OVC Pet Trust   |  
  - OVC Pet Trust Facebook photo album for “Take a Paws” https://www.facebook.com/pg/OVCpet/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1218978148120185 |
| Campus Partners | Worked with campus partners to promote exam stress-buster program  
  - Included in NewsLinks that goes out to all faculty/staff, and in the Student Affairs newsletter (which reaches all divisions of Student Life)  
  - Targeted first-year students living in dorms through Residence Life listserv  
  - Sample wording for promotion by partners: “Exam Stress Busters: Need a break from studying and need some puppy love? Sign-up to snuggle with a therapy dog for 15 minutes as part of the Take a Paws program” (plus link to Exam Stress Busters article on the Library's webpage) |
| GryphLife       | The program has developed since the inaugural event to the extent that Take a Paws is now an official organization within “GryphLife,” the online community for University of Guelph students. Photos that have been taken at Take a Paws events are uploaded to the site and are freely available for viewing and sharing. https://gryphlife.uoguelph.ca/organization/takeapaws/gallery/ |

**Partnerships are Critically Important**

We partnered with the communications teams at the Ontario Veterinary College ([ovc.uoguelph.ca](https://ovc.uoguelph.ca)) and OVC Pet Trust ([https://ovc.uoguelph.ca/pettrust](https://ovc.uoguelph.ca/pettrust)). Thanks to their support, we were able to provide extra incentive to students to register early for the inaugural event. The first 500 students to register received their very own limited edition “Buster” stress dog.

We also ran a “Share your exam stress-busting tips with U of G students” campaign. Members of the university community were invited to download a dog bone image from the OVC website (see Figure 12.1), write their own stress-buster tip on the page, and post an image of their tip to their social media account(s) with the #UGstressbusters tag. Different versions of the tips sheet have been created and continue to be used for sharing stress-busting tips from semester to semester.
Figure 12.1. The dog bone image that we encouraged university members to use for sharing stress-buster tips.

Figure 12.2. Stress-busting tips being shared on Twitter including a Buster stress dog.
Recipients of the Buster dogs were encouraged to take photos of him in interesting locations (see Figure 12.2). The campaign was an immediate hit. Images of Buster—observing surgery at the veterinary clinic, playing the piano, working out at a fitness class, being creative with a coloring book, and more—began appearing on social media and were immediately liked, favorited, and shared.

Our partnership with the Ontario Veterinary College and OVC Pet Trust proved particularly powerful in promoting the event and providing real-time social media coverage during the visits. OVC has 21,500 Instagram followers alone.

Be Prepared to Liaise with External Media

The communications teams of the library, OVC, and OVC Pet Trust liaised with external media to field questions and coordinate visits by journalists. See Table 12.2 for details.

**Table 12.2.** Examples of Coverage of Take a Paws events by external media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Event</th>
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Cautions

No event involving human–live animal interaction is without cost or risk. Those associated with Take a Paws were easily managed, and the mental health benefits to the students (and library volunteers!)—and the goodwill engendered by the library—far outweighed the costs.
Costs

**Therapy dogs.** The cost associated with using St. John Ambulance therapy dogs in this program was trivial. Owners volunteer their time to the program and pay for their own transportation to and from campus. The library provided free parking and bottled water for owners and dogs, and had a package of puppy pads available in case of accidents.

**Health and safety.** The first aid responders who attended the visits sessions were student members of the volunteer University of Guelph’s First Response team. All have St. John Ambulance First Aid certifications. The organizers supplied lint brushes and hand-pump sanitizers for all to use.

**Give-aways.** The Library, OVC, and OVC Pet Trust provided free “swag” for students (e.g., “wellness tips” package, branded pens, writing pads, small book bags) that was paid for through their respective budgets. Students did not expect any freebies. Just having the opportunity to meet and cuddle with tongue lolling, tail wagging bundles of fur was satisfying enough.

**Communications.** The time and costs associated with designing the communications materials, entrance tickets, etc., and organizing and running the event (including social media coverage during the event) were built into the Communications team’s budget. Managers approved the participation of library volunteers, and the time was served during their regular working hours.

Human Precautions

**Safe venue.** The visit rooms were chosen for their accessibility and appropriateness for this event and approved by Environmental Health and Safety. Trained first responders and the fire marshal are present in the building during the event. Room selection criteria include

- A separate room (i.e., not an open, public space) offering sufficient space in the hall for students to wait for their session to begin, with minimum disruption to students who may be studying in adjacent areas.
- Conveniently located close to exits (for animals, in case they need a bathroom break) and washrooms for owners.
- A room large enough for the dogs, owners, visiting students, room monitors and other, necessary personnel to move comfortably.
- Flexible seating/tables so floor space can easily be cleared and the temperature can be controlled with good airflow/exchange.

**Safe animals.** Opponents of bringing dogs to campus for such events typically express concerns about aggression/bites, germs, disease, infection, parasites, accidental urination/defecation, boisterous behavior, or handlers’ trustworthiness (Jalongo & McDevitt, 2015). To minimize these concerns, only certified, experienced therapy dogs participate in our events. St. John Ambulance Therapy Dogs have
passed a rigorous assessment process administered by certified, SJA Therapy Dog evaluators. Dogs are selected for their temperaments and active desire for human interaction. They are accustomed to—and thrive on—being approached and handled by strangers. As weekly visitors to libraries, schools, retirement homes, healthcare facilities, and hospice, they and their handlers typically spend up to two hours visiting individuals and groups. They also participate in public events (e.g., parades) where they may be exposed to hundreds of people in an afternoon. For links to therapy dog organizations in the United States and Canada, see http://www.akc.org/events/title-recognition-program/therapy/organizations/

Privacy. All participants in the Take a Paws events are asked to sign a photo release form so that students, library and university communications staff, and external media can take photographs/videos and freely share them.

Animal Welfare

Any use of animals on campus must comply with the institution’s animal use policies and practices. At the University of Guelph, obtaining approval to host Take a Paws was a lengthy process. Organizers were required to submit a detailed, “Animal Utilization Protocol” (AUP) that underwent rigorous review by the University’s Animal Care Committee. Though this requirement is not standard across institutions, it always is best (from a risk management perspective) to structure the event with the welfare of the dogs in mind. Key factors to consider are optimizing the student-to-dog ratio, the length of time the dogs interact with each group of students, the length of rest periods in-between, controlling environmental factors (temperature, noise levels, etc.), managing the flow of students in and out of the room, and the total length of time the dogs are on campus. The author would be happy to share her experience of gaining approval through the AUP process with any colleagues whose institutions have similar requirements.

Assessment

The inaugural event included a simple assessment of the students’ experience. Within an hour of their scheduled visit with the therapy dogs, students received a link to an online satisfaction survey. This was automatically sent to each participant’s email address by the registration system. 95% of the students who answered the survey reported that their stress was significantly reduced after the event. The students, library staff, dog owners, and the dogs themselves, enjoyed this event so much that it has since become a regular event in the Library’s “Exam Stress Buster” programming.
Reflection

The rationale for introducing animal-human interaction to the existing exam stress-buster programming was based on a few different factors. The first was evidence-based stress relief during studying. Interaction with therapy dogs provides participating students with an opportunity to take a physical and mental break from their studying. This decreases their stress levels, increases their sense of well-being, and helps them to return to studying feeling refreshed, more optimistic, and able to concentrate. The timing of the event (during the first week of exams) enables participating students to have a positive experience during the height of their exam stress. This positive may transfer to exams taken later in the exam period.

640 students attended the four two-hour visit sessions during our inaugural event. For the following exam period, we expanded the number of sessions to give
more students the opportunities to spend 15 minutes cuddling with the pooches. 720 students participated. This event, though successful, was too ambitious for the organizers to sustain from semester to semester (e.g., more challenging to schedule the dog teams; greater time commitment for organizers and volunteers), and too tiring for the dogs (we had not yet introduced a five-minute break into the protocol). The third time we did this, we offered fewer visit periods but included five-minute breaks throughout each of the four two-hour visit sessions. It was equally well attended by students. Our demand for additional Take a Paws events keeps increasing, and some advocates envision a monthly Take a Paws event at our University. You can see some of our happy students and dogs in Figure 12.3.

Research Study (Partnership)
The organizers of the library’s Take a Paws event are thrilled to partner with an animal welfare researcher from the Ontario Veterinary College. Since December 2016, Dr. Katrina Merkies and her research team have attended the events and gathered data for a study on the effect of the student-animal interactions on the dogs’ stress levels. Just as the library is committed to supporting the mental well-being of our students, we are also committed to doing so in a way that preserves the well-being of the therapy dogs.

References