

WILLIAM: THE STORY OF A LIBRARY DOG - Laura Piper, Library Assistant, Chichester College Group

The group is based across five campuses: Chichester, Brinsbury, Crawley, Worthing and Haywards Heath. The organisation of the libraries and sharing of resources varies between campuses. In this article, we will be referring to the libraries at Chichester and Brinsbury. On these campuses, the library sits within the Additional Support department. There are two term time only members of staff at Brinsbury and eight at Chichester, in a mixture of full and part time roles. These include librarians, library assistants and an apprentice.

Why a library dog?

We carry out a regular student survey to find out how to improve our service. We target both students who are users of the library and those who are not, allowing us to see why some students choose not to use the library. A recurring theme over the years has been that non-users perceive libraries as 'boring'

We wanted to shake up the image that libraries have, as places to study silently. Although it remains a quiet study environment, we did not want students to think it has to be silent and joyless. To achieve this, we decided we needed to try something new, something that the students would never expect.

Enter: William!

We decided to bring in a library dog because we had seen how successful they could be in other environments. Research has shown the beneficial impact therapy dogs have had in schools and William is not the first dog to work at the college. There have been therapy dogs working with Additional Support previously, who have been effective in helping students with concentration and pastoral care. This would be a completely new way for a dog to engage with students, however.

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William is my miniature wire haired dachshund who, from a very young age, demonstrated an incredible ability to understand people's moods and a love of children. I applied to Therapy Dogs Nationwide, a charity that assesses dogs' temperaments for therapy work. He passed with flying colours, allowing us to start planning for him to come into college.

There were risk assessments to carry out and discussions to be had about how we could ensure the safety and wellbeing of both

students and William. I would urge any library that would like to introduce a therapy dog to be very careful, seek advice and not rush into it. The safety and enjoyment of everyone is paramount; the moment anyone becomes uncomfortable, William is removed.

What does William do?

Our main aim when introducing William was to engage non-users with the library and its services, increasing library footfall. He achieves this simply by being present. We put a sign on the door to warn people who are uncomfortable around dogs or have allergies that there is one in the building but this seems to act as a beacon and "William days" are now our busiest.

We have found that just by having a dog in the library, students who never previously visited, come in to play with him and speak to us. Our relationship with the students has changed, as they now feel that they can chat to us and are more willing to ask for help. This change in dynamic has also meant that we are better equipped to spot when a student is struggling or unhappy and pass this on to the relevant people. In most cases, simply having a cuddle with William is enough, but we can also see when more help is needed.

Having William has made the library a relaxed space to study. We now have students from the nursery through to level 7 using the space, often all at the same time! In the 2020 Student Survey, when asked "What do you like about the library?", responses included "William is the best part about coming to college" and, our favourite, "William is singlehandedly and unequivocally the backbone of this college."

It's not all lying about for tummy tickles though; William also has specially targeted groups to promote literacy and reading. Each week, we have a GCSE English revision drop-in session, for those who have concerns about their exams and do not feel they can ask for help in a classroom setting. We hope that by having William present as a non-judgemental set of ears, students feel they can ask for help with confidence and feel supported.



He also goes to the onsite nursery with stories for the children and hosts visits to the library. This is intended to provide a positive literacy foundation for the children and introduce them to libraries in a memorable way. It also teaches them appropriate behaviour around dogs, as we show them how to approach a dog and what to do if a dog is scaring them. These are all life skills that perhaps a library wouldn't be expected to provide but have encouraged users to keep returning.

Outside of the library, teaching staff have heard of William's popularity and ask for him to attend lessons. We have been asked to provide pastoral support for students after a stressful

exam or coursework hand-in, allowing them to relax before getting back to learning. We also help with students on an individual basis; perhaps when something has happened at home and they are likely to miss lessons without a reason to stay.

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William has modelled for animation and art classes and stood very still whilst costume design students adjusted his work coat for him. He was also a favourite at Freshers' Fair and the Teaching and Learning Takeaway event for staff. These kinds of opportunities make the library's presence felt throughout the college and increase knowledge of the services we offer.

William's most successful group, however, has been the Foundation students, who come to read and listen to stories. The Foundation Programme is a specialist provision for young people aged 16-25 with additional needs. When we started these sessions over a year ago, many of these students were disinterested in reading and rarely spoke to us. After building up a bond with William, they now look forward to coming for their weekly visit and interact with us far more. There are students who will only speak to William, which is wonderful to overhear. There are also some students whose confidence has increased so much that they are willing to read to the group.

What next for William?

Before lockdown, the plan had been to work on building up our relationship with the Maths and English GCSE department, continuing to increase numbers of students attending William's drop-in sessions and going into classrooms. However, those plans have currently had to go on hold as we have had to implement new rules throughout the college which makes having William here difficult. We are still trying to work out ways to allow him to be on campus whilst adhering to social distancing rules. Hopefully, it won't be long before he can come back regularly and get back to doing what he does best!

In the meantime, he has an apprentice to train up. Watch this space to see whether Etta makes the team!



*Kirnan, J., Ventresco, N. E., & Gardner, T. (2018). The Impact of a Therapy Dog Program on Children's Reading: Follow-up and Extension to ELL Students. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(1), 103–116. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0844-z>