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Cross Collaborations: Librarians Stepping Out of the Box to Serve Students

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Cross Collaborations: Librarians Stepping Out of the Box to Serve Students

Abstract

Despite declarations that libraries are the heart of the institution, they are frequently overlooked or taken for granted. Collaborations are a way librarians can more fully participate in the culture of the institutions they serve. A review of the literature finds an emphasis on collaboration with faculty members, both full-time and adjunct, but there is less emphasis on the many departments in academia that do not have faculty members. As academic librarians position themselves at the heart of their institutions, it is vital to work with all departments and not focus solely on faculty-based departments. This article highlights the literature on collaboration within academic institutions, examines current practices of librarians working with non-faculty members, and considers the best practices in creating and fostering collaborations beyond the faculty.

Keywords

Serving students; Collaboration; Academic libraries; Non-faculty collaboration; Academic institutions

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Introduction

Since academic libraries are declared to be the heart of the institutions they serve, collaboration is a key way to affirm this and for librarians to fully participate in the culture of the institution. A review of the literature finds an emphasis on collaboration with faculty members and, due to the growth of adjunct faculty, there has been an increase in the literature focusing on adjunct faculty. The focus clearly centers on the teachers and instructors in an institution to the neglect of other areas. Working with faculty members is important; however, in thinking about being the heart of the institution, it is important also to work collaboratively with other areas, such as the Career Center, TRiO Program or the Academic Success Center. The TRiO Program is a federally funded outreach and student services

program that provides “services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.”¹

This article surveys the literature on collaboration within academic institutions, examines where academic librarians stand today on collaboration with non-faculty members, and considers the best practices in creating and fostering collaboration with these members of academic institutions. As members of varying sized institutions, the authors of this paper focus specifically on what types of collaboration can be tailored for institutions from the smallest to the largest. Whether one may be a solo librarian or a member of a large team of librarians, there is always some way to collaborate with others in an academic institution. Again, the aim of this article is to provide academic librarians with the basics for creating and implementing collaboration.

Literature Review

A librarian is in a unique position to be a leader, and one medium through which to do so is collaboration.² Any discussion of collaboration requires an exploration of meaning. The term collaboration is frequently used by librarians as an alternate for “partnership” or “joint working,” but that leaves an incomplete impression and raises questions.³ Who are the parties involved? In the realm of libraries especially, community plays a significant role, but what are the communities? One definition of community is “a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings.”⁴ With increased emphasis on collaboration in libraries, this definition becomes even more important. When ultimately “all interpersonal communication is a collaborative effort,” one could argue that the very jobs of academic librarians depend on this increasingly important skill.⁵

The literature stresses the importance of collaboration, but why? What purpose does collaboration serve to those who work in libraries, in education, and in many other areas of community life? Why is it increasingly important to invest time and energy in effective collaborative endeavors? At its core, the need for collaboration ultimately stems from the effort to respond more “effectively and efficiently to the needs of users.”⁶ In higher education, collaboration is required in the effort to meet the needs of student populations with rapidly changing demographics.⁷ Additionally, as competition increases for every dollar of funding, those opportunities that do arise tend to target collaborative projects, while the purpose of education is to equip people for success in today’s workforce, it also necessitates collaboration both within and outside the educational institution.⁸ The workforce connection stems from a previously established need for strong information literacy skills.

With the workforce component inherent in information literacy, librarianship becomes a prime candidate for collaboration efforts.⁹

Once we accept the need for collaboration, the next step is to consider one’s co-collaborators as well as the means for that collaboration. One medium that enables effective collaboration, is technology. Together, technology and collaboration represent two of the three ways that librarians promote student learning. The third way is through improving literacy.¹⁰ Some of the social media platforms, especially Twitter and Facebook, provide an appealing way to exchange ideas. Librarians have an opportunity to embed and exchange ideas, as well as to “influence how patrons and organizations develop sustainable workflows with the new media.”¹¹ This is especially important in this age of competitive media vying for a portion of the population’s time and attention. These platforms also open potential new roles for librarians in teaching.¹² There is another hidden benefit of these new technologies, related to social media, graphic arts, and web-based applications. Teaching “high-tech” invites students to play while interacting with the resources, thereby introducing fun into the lesson. Ultimately, T. K. Huwe argues, “fun and entertainment have a way of opening the mind, breaking down cognitive boundaries, and sparking the imagination.”¹³ This hidden benefit helps people stumble past roadblocks that would otherwise be more difficult. Digital reference is used in many libraries across the country, enabling patrons to interact with reference librarians through a technology portal that is sometimes a more comfortable mode of communication for patrons. With the use of digital reference on the rise, more collaboration occurs.¹⁴ Clearly, technology is more than simply a tool for communication; it has the power to reach people that might otherwise have been left behind.

In higher education, it is vital to have a clear idea of what academic departments exist on campus. Instruction sessions already occupy a significant amount of available time. If, as Melissa Moore says in "Reeling 'Em In," the most successful instruction session "takes place ... in the context of a course, with the involvement and support of the teaching faculty member," then it makes sense to deepen those connections with teaching faculty.¹⁵ One way to do so is by embedding within the class. The very concept of embedding is collaborative, as it, by design, involves "direct and purposeful" communication while working in conjunction with someone else. Elements of this harken back to the days when libraries existed within academic departments, before outgrowing the space and ability for faculty to manage them. Research libraries grew from those combined collections needing more space and separate management, but they are ultimately static and passive. The process of embedding within classes is just one avenue through which that is changing.¹⁶

Collaborating with academic departments is often a familiar form for librarians, but what about non-academic departments on campus? Other departments can benefit from working closely and directly with the library. One such example is the campus health department or health center. This is the department that deals most directly with student health, a component that impacts student grades and even their ability to stay in class. In other words, it is also ultimately connected to retention efforts. The number one resource for students for health-related information is their parents, followed second by the internet. "However, those students rank Internet health information second from the bottom ... in believability."¹⁷ In short, not only do students need reliable information sources, but they need help learning to use them. This is a situation that librarians are prime candidates for assisting.¹⁸

Libraries can also collaborate quite effectively with other institutions and even businesses. In Illinois, there is a strong history of cooperation and collaboration, with a leading icon being Hugh Craig Atkinson. Atkinson was the University Librarian at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and introduced automated library systems to not only his institution, but to others as well. He was recognized for his collaborative efforts with awards and accommodations. Two subsequent directors of the Illinois State Library, both heavily influenced by Atkinson, furthered his legacy, developing a strong sharing trend in the state that continues today.¹⁹ Building more formal consortia arrangements is also a way for multiple libraries to collaborate. These arrangements allow libraries of varying sizes to share and leverage resources in multiple areas, including the aforementioned digital reference.²⁰

Collaboration does not have to happen outside the library itself. If indeed all communication is ultimately a form of collaboration, the collaboration efforts can be seen in many areas of the library, including those interactions at the Reference or Information Desks. Reference work is fundamentally a collaborative effort. With the patron, the librarian is working to figure out what the need is, and then how to satisfy it, whether in person or through digital reference. This may involve a referral, which is probably the most familiar collaborative conclusion. But it can also include working with other professionals through collaboration forums. This interaction is very important to the life of the library. As Samuel Swett Green suggests, "the value of the library to the user is heavily influenced by the quality of the interaction between the user and the librarian."²¹ Not satisfying the needs of the users can have the unwelcome consequence of that user not returning. This is particularly important to keep in mind with digital interactions, where the only connection with the patron is over some form of screen. Clearly then, collaborations are engaged in on a daily basis,

whether discussed in those terms or not. Being conscious of these actions will strengthen them and make them more efficient and rewarding.

Collaborations with other departments and institutions do not come without their challenges, however. This can be more frequently seen in the way of culture wars. Libraries value resource sharing, first and foremost, but other institutions might have other priorities, such as preservation, industry training, or profit.²² On a small scale, this exists in faculty or administration who undervalue librarians as academic equals, citing lack of publishing and teaching credentials. Indeed, research indicates that collaboration efforts on the part of librarians might be welcomed by faculty who do not see teaching as part of the librarian role, in areas of assessment or curriculum development.²³ The lesson here is, though the task may be daunting there may well be a creative solution.

Why should we put forth the effort, then? Given all the challenges described, inherent in the process, what benefit can the Library depend on? There are, in fact, several practical results of collaboration. For one, collaboration brings new users into library collections and services, an always important endeavor, helping libraries to stay fresh and valid. Collaboration also enables full use of professional strengths by pooling resources and skills. One of the strong benefits is also problem solving and productivity. Different groups, different institutions, frequently see situations differently and bring their own strengths to the picture.²⁴ There are also funding implications in collaboration; those providing grants and other funding often favor collaborative endeavors. In that way there are real fiscal benefits to broaden one's horizons. One strong benefit gets back to the core of a library's existence: students. Seventy-three percent of college students use the internet more than library sources. One way to bring them into the library space is to develop innovative and collaborative spaces conducive to the kind of work they are

doing.²⁵ In this time of thinning resources, any way to bring people in requires some consideration.

Having established the importance of effective and efficient collaboration, the next step is to consider the nuts and bolts of executing a plan. There are three things to keep in mind when laying the groundwork to any collaboration: create a plan, know the resources, and keep things fresh. The first perhaps seems obvious, but it is easy to jump into something without a clearly laid out plan of what expectations are and a map of how to get there. Resources that should be familiar go beyond the physical or virtual; they include any training that might be needed as well as support from a team leader and/or administration. The final of those three reminders, to keep things fresh, probably requires no expansion. Just as it says, do not get stagnant. A vibrant plan and living relationship will accomplish far more than stale interactions and inertia.²⁶ Any collaboration must start from a place of respect. When in discussions with business people, or professionals in the industry, start from a position of respect of their approach and practices. When building fruitful collaborative relationships with teaching faculty, respect how they function. Only once that respect is established can faculty be nudged and shown the value in a new method.²⁷

In short, "collaboration ... is the key to success."²⁸ Careful, targeted, effective collaboration will reap rewards for those willing to engage in it. Librarians should initiate collaborative opportunities, armed with research about the opportunity, and have a plan. After all, "Libraries uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society...fostering the development of a civil society. Libraries build social capital and encourage civic engagement by developing community partnerships, facilitating local dialogue, and disseminating local data."²⁹ Collaboration is a part of the process,

but it does take time. This is a long-term endeavor, which takes time to fully build and reap the full benefits. It is, however, both necessary and worth it.

Existing Collaborations

But what is being done on actual campuses? Examples focused on include collaborations that are happening at institutions of the authors of this article, specifically with offices of the Dean of Students and Career Services, and related units. These are just some of the departments where these kinds of collaborations can be made and they can be with any number of departments within the library. Part of this discussion includes emphasis on the fact that similar collaborations can be sized to fit any institution, no matter how large or small.

Dean of Students Office

Working with the Dean of Students Office is a unique collaboration that any size library can pursue. At the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the Dean of Students Office has the role of assisting students, both transfer and freshmen, in acclimating to college life. Although this acclimation involves helping students transition to the university by offering tips, strategies and suggestions on surviving college both academically and socially, the Dean of Students Office can expand services to ensure college success by incorporating library services into the students' college experience. One area of the library that may be able to offer a new perspective to students is utilizing the department of Special Collections.

At Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the Special Collections department teaches undergraduate and graduate students how to use primary sources in scholarly research. Although the traditional way to incorporate special collection materials into the classroom is typically by working with faculty from the departments of English, History, Art,

and African American Studies courses, collaborative work between the Dean of Students Office and the department of Special Collections offers a new opportunity for the library to connect to students enrolled in orientation courses offered by the Dean of Students Office. At the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, this collaboration occurred when the Dean of Students Office contacted the Special Collections Research and Outreach Librarian to work with the freshmen, one credit course, "First Semester, First Year Seminar." This course, associated with Student Orientation, Advising and Registration (SOAR), provided information to new students on housing, class requirements, meal plans, etc. Special Collections became involved by providing a session for this course by presenting information on the history of the University.

For this session, the Special Collections Librarian's role involved providing an overview of the services and research material available for student use in special collections and arranging a "show and tell" of the rare and unique items housed in the collection. Because this course focused on the University, the librarian decided to share materials from Special Collections that would enhance the student's acclimation to the university and campus environment. By targeting items mostly from the collection of University Archives, students received a presentation and a hands-on-interactive history session with the use of original documents on the establishment of the university. These documents such as photographs, handwritten letters, notes and speeches, all related to the development of the university from its beginnings as a two year college originally located in a high school to the large research university that it is today.

The benefit of the Special Collections session resulted in freshmen students understanding the foundation on which their school was established. This information assisted freshmen in reaching a comfort zone in their new environment, their home away from home. Freshmen



students who took the seminar learned significant details that eventually put things into perspective in relation to their surroundings and the university as a whole. For example, they knew the significance about classroom spaces on campus, information about people the buildings were named after, and they were knowledgeable about the history of the administration and how departments and programs came into existence. This collaboration between the Dean of Students office and Special Collections provided another layer for potential student success. By including historic information about the university's foundation to the session, a sense of belonging and comfort was provided, which allowed students to feel accepted and part of the university, which relates back to students getting acclimated to a new environment. As academic librarians look for ways to assist in meeting the needs of students, it is important to look outside of the obvious collaborative initiative opportunities and to look deeper for connections that enhance student success. Working with departments such as the Dean of Students office allows that collaboration to happen.

Career Services

Working with Career Services is another campus department with which librarians can build partnerships. Librarians frequently field questions from students about the library profession. Questions such as "how did you become a librarian?" and "what do you do as a librarian?" are not uncommon. In answering these questions, the librarian at Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte realized that these questions mirrored those she herself had had when exploring career opportunities. Based on the above questions, it was concluded that student perceptions of a librarian's job was limited to *librarians just shush people and check out books*. Clearly, many students were not aware of all the career possibilities that existed within the librarian profession, or that just about any academic background can fit in somewhere.

The instigating event for getting this information out about librarianship was when a faculty member from the history department requested that, in addition to the library instruction for his specific semester course, the librarians also present information on the library profession as a next phase of career options for students wanting to pursue graduate school. In preparation for this session, the Special Collections Librarian contacted the Career Services Department on campus to provide additional information on salary statistics, the various types of library positions that exist and the various positions that are expected to be in high demand in the next few years, as well as general information about the profession. Career Services provided a person of contact for these students, should they need further assistance with their career exploration of librarianship. In addition, during the library instruction session, *Faces of a Profession*, a video, created by ACRL/ARL, with librarians talking about the profession, was shown to students to give them a glimpse of the wide variety of diversity that is found in the profession which included various types of people, education and skill sets.³⁰

For the library instruction sessions, the librarian typically team teaches with subject librarians for History and Africana Studies. Obviously working with faculty who are strong advocates for the work that librarians do is a tremendous benefit to this outreach collaboration. And this support made a difference in this initiative. The faculty member made it mandatory to have a component of "library careers" built into the library instruction presentation. The class, broken down into three sections—traditional bibliographic instruction, instruction related to research using primary resource material from special collections and a section on the library profession as a career - was well received by students.

Surprisingly, the section on careers tends to draw a lot of discussion among the librarians, instructor and students. By including the career

component in typical library instruction sessions, students began to look at their academic fields more holistically by having an open mind to how their education and skills can be utilized in the library profession. Because the instruction team was able to share the various roles of librarianship to students, they were able to reach those students who might consider a career in librarianship. The more librarians talk about their profession to prospective library students, the more the old traditional perceptions of librarianship will disappear, making way for more discussion and promotion about the innovative ideas as well as the future of librarians. As librarians continue to engage with interested students about librarianship, developing a partnership with Career Services will enhance efforts in growing the profession and promoting the diversity of the field.

Undergraduate and Graduate Admissions

What better way exists to promote library services than through the Admissions Offices of Undergraduate and Graduate Students? Collaborating with these two offices is a great way to reach prospective students and their parents. Getting involved with Open House programs allows that opportunity. Obviously students attend open house programs to learn about academic programs, housing accommodations and campus life in general, but prospective students also need to know about other resources such as collaborative learning spaces, quiet study spaces and the kind of technology that is offered or provided for students on a college campus. Librarians can use this platform to promote those resources to prospective students. Just as academic advisors are visible and available to Open House visitors to answer questions about the university during the scheduled event, librarians can also reach out to visitors on campus. Why not ask to be a part of the program? Possible engagement opportunities include providing a library tour, offering a 10 to 15 minute presentation to Open House visitors, highlighting the

various resources the library has for its students, and setting up a designated area to share information and answer questions about the library.

Atkins Library, at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, has taken advantage of Open House programs and Family Weekend programs. Whenever the library has an opportunity to engage with prospective students and family members who visit the campus, special treatment is initiated. One such treatment is rolling out the red carpet by opening up the reading room in Special Collections to show off not only the amazing historic resources in the collection, but also to showcase the student-friendly, unique research space that is available in the library for both students and the public. This collaborative work with the Admissions Offices accomplishes several things. Parents are able to see a different side of what the university has to offer to students. At these Open House programs, visitors experience more than seeing the classroom space or the living and dining quarters available on campus. Working with the Admissions Offices offers another possibility for student engagement as well as an opportunity to meet prospective library users. Connections like these are made at Atkins Library when the Special Collections staff uses the Open House program to showcase the many rare and unique items that are housed in the collection. Items such as the oldest book in the collection, historic photographs, documents and letters that have a direct correlation to a certain time period or a specific location in the area are perfect “show and tell” materials to promote library holdings. Providing visitors access to special collection materials by actually showing the rare and unique items to visitors also highlights prospective areas for research and promotes the wide range of primary resources that are available to the public and university community.

If the library has a strong rare book or special collections department, a good tip, when given



the opportunity, would be always to ask visitors where they are from or what their interests are because discovery is the best thing a patron can encounter when walking into a library.

Collaborating with the Undergraduate and Graduate Admissions Offices offers possibilities to connecting to life-long researchers as well as an opportunity to promote the rare and unique items found in Special Collections.

Academic Success Center

As the name implies, the Academic Success Center is working towards the success of the student. Collaborations with a department that works to ensure students' successes can bring nothing but good to the library. At the University of South Carolina Lancaster, the Academic Success Center works as a tutoring hub for a small, two-year institution and is located within the library. This department has actually pursued a connection with the library and this communication has led to collaborations with them. The department is run by a full-time faculty member whose primary function is to operate the center and to supervise the tutors. While the number fluctuates, generally there are eight to ten tutors who provide services for anything from writing to accounting. The center includes an open computer lab for up to 28 students and has a prominent location on the second floor of the library.

Multiple collaborations have been undertaken by the librarians and staff of the Academic Success Center. Primary collaborations have consisted of workshops, which have had mixed results. The first workshops were hosted by the Academic Success Center and taught by the librarians. These workshops covered basic research and were meant to fill the gap for students who were not enrolled in a class that included a library visit or library instruction. Unfortunately, these workshops did not have many

participants and were discontinued after a semester.

The second collaboration undertaken by the librarians and staff of the Academic Success Center also encountered mixed results. The purpose was to provide a day at the end of the semester when students could come to the Academic Success Center and have a place to write their papers. Students were given access to writing tutors and librarians who could help with last minute research. While many students utilized the location for the writing collaboration, few had need of research assistance, or at least few expressed a need. Due to the perceived potential of this collaboration, the librarians and staff of the Academic Success Center are investigating new and effective ways to better market it to students and to design a model that would attract more student participation.

While there were definite mixed results for the collaborations that have occurred, the relationship between the Academic Success Center and the library has strengthened. In addition, it has worked to cement the idea that the librarians can provide expertise in other areas beyond just teaching the one-shot classes.

Best Practices

Once a need or opportunity is recognized, it can be difficult to plot the next actions. Questions arise as to how collaborations are initiated, what is needed to develop collaborations, and how relationships are strengthened over time. When starting to build relationships with various stakeholders on campus, it becomes imperative to start thinking about these questions and start developing an idea of what the goals are in the relationship and what the partner departments might want. When all parties are working towards the same goal, the ending result of how to get there may be expressed in different ways, but finding how those ways intersect is vital.

The first step is to determine a purpose. This can be writ large (what is the Library's role on campus) as well as targeted (what is the purpose of this collaboration?). A Statement of Purpose can be helpful, but is not necessarily needed. A key element, however, is communication. Be clear about what Library goals are, as well as goals in specific collaborations.

Maintain existing collaborations where appropriate, and utilize existing relationships when possible, is a second action step. Is there already a relationship with specific departments? Approach these relationships as being actual relationships that already exist, and as ones that stem from a common goal. Relationships can take a long time to develop and nurture but are the most important basis of any collaboration. It is easier to begin a collaborative effort with a preexisting relationship because there is familiarity among the parties involved. Go to that department and discuss the possible ways in which a library partnership can fit into their current plans. It may be that what they are doing right now doesn't work; however, once the connection is made future collaborations are possible.

Foster relationships. Make sure that even when there is no current collaboration that time is taken to continue to nurture that connection. It can be as easy as just touching base with the other group occasionally. It is also important when building a relationship that it is with a department as a whole and not just one person. People leave positions or change positions and if the connect is just a one on one with an individual, the work has to start again to build the relationship again.

Third, when approaching someone to start a collaboration project, have a plan. Know what all parties involved can expect to achieve from it, as well as a plan for how to execute it. Once there is a project to work jointly on, it is necessary for each party to work in conjunction to reach their

goal. With regular outreach it is the responsibility of one group to do the bulk of the work, with collaboration, though, it is a joint effort that both groups work towards a goal. Make use of each other's strengths.

Remember, it may not work right each and every time. Instances abound where all parties involved felt it was a worthy effort but it ultimately busts. This is a time to reinforce relationships with those departments and continue to work towards common goals. It may be a matter of trying the same thing again, perhaps tweak the existing plan, or it may be to try another project together. Ultimately, the most important part of a successful collaboration is the relationship. Whether the event or project goes amazingly well or spectacularly fails, the relationship is the pin that will allow for future collaborations.

Conclusion

While only a few departments were discussed in this article, there are many other departments on campus in which collaborations can be built, including athletics, student affairs, student organizations and other groups. What better way to make academic libraries the heart of an institution than to work with everyone within that institution. If those connections can be made, then one way to show the worth of the library can be the value added all around campus. In addition, it expands the number of allies in the library's court. Relationships are vital to working with any department on campus, whether it be with the English faculty member or with the staff at admissions. Those relations create opportunities for both the library and the department to better use the combined strengths for the success of the student. That is why librarians exist—for the success of the student, the faculty, the staff, and the institution. Work together to build something wonderful!

Endnotes

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