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Creating a Town Library Team: Collaborative Projects Between Public, School, and Academic Librarians

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Abstract

Library outreach, especially at the public and academic levels, is not a new concept. In the current climate of library budget cuts, instantaneous information, and readily available nonauthoritative sources, librarians, library staff, and library directors are making it a priority to educate their communities on the benefits of and accessibility to quality library resources. Collaboration between different types of libraries is also not uncommon. Partnerships between public and school libraries assist in coordinating information literacy curricula, promoting reading programs and providing access to materials and resources. This article encourages pushing those boundaries even further out to include academic libraries, thereby expanding the scope of inter-library relationships and embracing librarianship at all community levels. Each library has its own, unique perspective and clientele. Pooling information and networking at all levels of community librarianship benefits each library, its patrons, and the community as a whole.

Introduction

The current climate of instant information available via the Internet and electronic devices prompts some (usually non-library users) to conclude that libraries have become archaic and non-essential. Libraries nationwide are fighting back by adjusting their collections and programming to better serve the needs of today's patrons. A large component of this new library paradigm is increased library outreach, increasing communications with library stakeholders and gauging community needs that can be met by library programming and resources. School and public libraries frequently promote each other's resources such as summer reading programs and increased access to research materials and recreational reading collections. Adding academic libraries to this partnership increases librarian representation throughout the community, expands communication and collaboration among a wider range of libraries and librarians, and creates a united front of community library initiatives and support. This article makes the argument that expanding these cross-library relationships to include academic libraries will result in a stronger community library presence by expanding the community library spectrum to include higher education libraries, their advocacy, and their resources.

Literature review

The notion of cross-institutional collaboration and support between school and public libraries is well documented. Breeding (2015) notes that school libraries provide information literacy skills spiraled to build from a basic competency level to more sophisticated abilities. School libraries introduce reading materials leveled appropriately as the student progresses and instruct students on selection strategies. Public libraries build on these skills by providing an expanded collection and increased access by virtue of its available hours, including during school breaks. Some library collaborations, such as the

Limitless Library system between Nashville Public Library and the Metro-Nashville Public Schools, offer interlibrary loan services to school libraries, thereby increasing materials available in the schools. Creating this type of continuation of library skills and use benefits students and their families, instilling an appreciation for the library access they enjoy whether in the school setting or the community library. Smallwood (2010) documents public library programs designed to support young adults. These include programs for home schooled students, after school study sessions, support for teen parents, tutoring for student athletes, and nontraditional opportunities such as CPR certification training and teen theater.

Courtney (2009) makes the argument that increasing K-16 (K-12 and undergraduate education) collaboration facilitates spiraled information literacy instruction and continued momentum among engaged learners. These types of partnerships address a 21st century reality where access to information is up, as is the need to be able to discern fact from fiction. Familiarization with K-16 information literacy standards, identifying strong community partners, and defining concrete outcomes provides a successful approach to this type of partnership.

The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) was tasked with creating awareness among universities for higher education reform more responsive and engaged with the communities they serve. This means moving beyond outreach to legitimate engagement where information is not simply being imparted but is an avenue for an exchange of ideas and projects. In other words, the academic library not only reaches out to promote its resources, but also becomes involved in community organizations and their projects and programming. The study produced a seven-part test of engagement (guiding characteristics): Responsiveness, Respect for partners, Academic neutrality, Accessibility, Integration, Coordination, and Resource partnerships, providing a measuring stick for academic libraries wishing to gauge the success of their community engagement programming.

Godbey et al. (2015) address the potential for academic libraries to create programs to support public school students, thereby further preparing them for higher education. During their visit to the campus of the University of Las Vegas (UNLV), middle school students from GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) visiting the library took part in an exercise in which they became “ethnographers,” observing how college students used the library, including materials, space, and services, then coming back together to share their observations. This active learning exercise proved to be more engaging than and memorable for the GEAR UP students than the previously offered traditional library tour, giving them a better sense of the academic library atmosphere.

In summary, the literature review supports library collaboration that includes academic libraries in order to:

- facilitate the spiraling of crucial information literacy skills beyond elementary and secondary school
- provide legitimate, two-way engagement between the community and the higher education institution
- optimize the role the academic library can play in preparing public school students for higher education

Case Study: Library collaboration and networking in Kittias County

The following case study illustrates how an engagement and outreach academic librarian established relationships with local libraries and education organizations, and how those relationships complement and enhance the library-initiated information literacy and literacy skills efforts throughout the community. These partnerships include the local public and school libraries, the school district education foundation, and a local Rotary club. Projects include themed K-12 library initiatives, One Book One County book selection and promotion coordination, literacy programs funded by the education foundation and by the Rotary club, such as the summer Bookmobile and Little Free Libraries.

The rural community of Ellensburg is situated in the geographical center of this Pacific Northwest state. It is the county seat of Kittias County, which also includes (among others) the towns of Kittitas, Cle Elum, Roslyn, Thorp, and Easton. The county is bordered by the Cascade mountain range to the west, and the Columbia River to the east. Ellensburg boasts a population exceeding 20,000 ("QuickFacts" n.d.) and is home to Central Washington University (CWU). The James E Brooks Library (Brooks Library) serves the students, faculty, and staff of CWU. It is also the central state regional federal depository and is open to all members of the public, not just those affiliated with CWU. Other community libraries include Ellensburg Public Library, Carpenter Memorial Library in Cle Elum, Roslyn Public Library, and Gilmour Memorial Library in Kittitas. Public school libraries in Ellensburg are found at all three of the elementary schools (Lincoln, Valley View, and Mt. Stuart), Morgan Middle School, and Ellensburg High School.

The mission of Brooks Library states, "The Central Washington University libraries provide quality resources and innovative services to stimulate creativity, intellectual curiosity, and to facilitate life-long learning and research within the communities we serve." Identified goals are:

- Provide library services and resources in multiple formats that meet our users' needs.
- Reimagine the physical space of the library to better meet the demands of our students and faculty in the future.
- Educate users about the library's services and resources.
- Increase collaboration with students, faculty, staff, and the community ("University Libraries" n.d.)

These last two goals inspired the creation of a Student Engagement and Community Outreach (SECO) librarian in March 2015 (<http://listsmart.osl.state.or.us/pipermail/libs-or/2015-March/008923.html>). Additionally, outcomes identified in the library's strategic plan align with the CWU core theme, Public Service and Community Engagement with specific reference to community collaboration (Table 1).

Table 1

UNIVERSITY CORE THEME: 4. PUBLIC SERVICE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

UNIVERSITY OBJECTIVE 4.1 Enhance the commitment and the level of cooperation between the universities.

Unit Outcomes	Indicators	Expected Performance Level (Criterion)	Indicator/ Performance Level Reported By	Key Strategies/ Initiatives
Increased collaboration and innovation between university and community at large.	Library statistics Evaluation results	Increased in community patrons. Increased in faculty and staff participation in community events and projects.	Library faculty and staff	Identify and offer expertise to assist with community needs. Develop library marketing strategy and materials. Develop a media guide for use by library faculty and staff. Increase awareness of library services available to the general public. Survey other libraries and community organizations.

(James E. Brooks Library, 2012)

Establishing relationships

As the newly hired SECO librarian in August, 2015, I started by creating relationships with student engagement departments on campus, including Student Success, Inclusivity and Diversity, the Office for Undergraduate Studies, Disability Services, Veterans Center, Wellness Center, and the Associated Students of CWU. Simultaneously I reached out to community sectors that aligned with our goals, and who could benefit from increased collaboration with Brooks Library. This included our public library director and the high school librarian. These newly formed relationships resulted in a seat at the table on the Kittias County Regional Library Board and on the newly founded Ellensburg School District Library Advisory Council. After attending a presentation at my Rotary club by the co-founder and leader of the summer Bookmobile project I found myself joining the van to distribute books and read to the neighborhood kids. In January 2017 I was invited to join the Ellensburg School District Education Foundation board, further embedding Brooks Library in local school projects. Serving on a 2016 Big Read committee introduced me to CWU English faculty involved in the Lion Rock Visiting Writers Series, an annual program that brings nationally known writers to CWU to work with English students and to present to the public. This relationship would eventually result in a One Book One County collaboration that has brought together Brooks Library, the public libraries, the high school library, and the campus writers' series.

These actions were the result of keeping my ear out. By being willing to follow potential leads, I was able to connect Brooks Library and its goals of increased community collaboration and awareness of

library services and resources throughout the county. Every community has its own unique dynamic and opportunities. My experience will no doubt be impossible to replicate exactly. But perhaps sharing some of the positive developments these county-wide library relationships have resulted in will inspire readers to reach out and create their own community library networks, and to nurture their own community library connections.

Kittias County Regional Library Board (KCRLB)

Not long after I took the SECO position, the director of our public library in Ellensburg invited me to attend the regional library board's quarterly meetings. Although I was not a voting member, I was able to share events, developments and resources from Brooks Library at each meeting. According to the KCRLB bylaws, the board is comprised of directors from the Ellensburg, Cle Elum, Kittitas, and Roslyn public libraries, plus one at-large member designated to represent the unincorporated cities of the county without a public library. The Thorp and Easton school boards are also able to appoint representatives if they choose to participate. In February 2017, I was appointed to the newly vacated at-large position, making me a voting member of the board. In November 2017 the board of commissioners approved an amendment to the bylaws to include Central Washington University among the board membership, further embedding the Brooks Library into the county librarian network.

There have been many positive aspects to this form of outreach, one of the biggest being our involvement in the One Book One County selection. In 2016 a CWU group led up by a library faculty member and including members of the CWU English department applied for a National Endowment for the Arts Big Read grant, based upon the Tim O'Brien novel, *The Things They Carried* (O'Brien, 1990). As part of the grant, the public librarians agreed to make the novel their selection for the 2016 One Book One County (OBOC) community read. The grant application was not successful, but we were encouraged to make some adjustments and resubmit for Big Read 2017. The county librarians agreed to hold *The Things They Carried* for the 2017 OBOC, but this meant they were back to looking for a replacement title for the 2016 community reading program. One of the English faculty and a CWU collaborator on the Big Read grant was also the coordinator of the Lion Rock Visiting Writers Series. She provided a listing of authors slated to come to campus that year. One of the authors, Ava Chin, would be presenting on her book, *Eating Wildly: Foraging for Life, Love and the Perfect Meal* (Chin, 2014). The county librarians saw this as a book the community would enjoy reading and discussing, with the added benefit of being able to meet the author and hear her thoughts on the story and the writing process. This example illustrates how networking between the academic librarian, my contacts at the university, and the regional library board created a symbiotic moment for the entire community. This relationship remains strong. The same English professor went on to bring award-winning author Ruth Ozeki to our community for the 2018 OBOC to discuss her novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (Ozeki, 2013). Another happy result of her involvement is her application to become the new at-large member of the KCRLB, further solidifying the network between the academic library, the public librarians, the English department, and the community.

Ellensburg School District Library Advisory Council

As a former school librarian and former student in the Ellensburg School District I was eager to reach out and explore potential connections with the school district librarians. As luck would have it, I was the winner of the YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) gift basket at the 2015 PNLA

conference in Vancouver, Washington, which I promptly re-gifted to the high school librarian as a means of introduction. Soon I was invited to sit on the newly formed Ellensburg School District Library Advisory Council (LAC), the brainchild of the high school librarian, who defined the role of the LAC: “To provide input, support, and advocacy for the Ellensburg School District libraries,” and the purpose: “To promote and build the library programs in the Ellensburg School District and Community” (C. Day, personal communication, January 12, 2016). The public library director, a member of the education foundation, and librarians from all public schools were also invited to sit on the LAC. The advisory council meets bimonthly (when possible) with specific objectives in mind: create and update a five-year, district-wide library plan; present to the school board annually on library projects across the K-12 range and into higher education, advocate for more library collaboration time, especially to facilitate spiraling of information literacy curriculum; and identify an annual theme to address at all levels (Fake News was the 2017 theme, Kindness/Little Free Libraries in 2018). Creating a mission statement was one of the first orders of business for the LAC: “The mission of the Ellensburg School District Library Advisory Council is to promote open access to literature, information, and technology in order to enrich our students’ education and inspire lifelong learning.” (C. Day, personal communication, May 16, 2016). Participating in the LAC presentations to the school board and annual theme activities serves to increase awareness of Brooks Library as a library team player and as a resource institution that is open to all members of the public.

One of our faculty created a research guide (LibGuide) on “Fake News” (<http://libguides.lib.cwu.edu/fakenews>) and was invited to present it on several occasions to high school students. When Brooks Library hosted a CREW (Continuous Review, Evaluation, and Weeding) workshop with expert Bonnie Boon, several members of both the public and school district libraries attended. Another successful partnership is that of our Freedom to Read table at the downtown Farmers Market the Saturday prior to Banned Books week. Originally organized by Brooks Library, this table presents examples of challenged books, information taken from the ALA (American Library Association) website regarding challenges, buttons, bookmarks, and candy. In 2016 we invited staff from the public and school libraries to join us at the table and it’s been a joint project ever since. Traffic to the table has increased as local students and families are always thrilled to see their beloved librarians downtown, and curious to learn that books are still being challenged today.

Ellensburg Morning Rotary Club (EMRC)

I joined the EMRC in June 2016 and immediately got involved with the Literacy Committee, distributing donated books to the local food bank, nursing home, and the summer Bookmobile. The Literacy Committee also maintains and restocks a Little Free Library in the community and provides a book shelf full of books for every completed Habitat for Humanity home in the county. It is probably due to the size and nature of Ellensburg, but our paths frequently cross in myriad ways – there are three librarians in the EMRC: myself, the public library director, and a former elementary school librarian. So, while I can somewhat break my library connections into tidy compartments, it is not at all unusual to find overlap between the different entities. Another example of this is the community Bookmobile. After the co-founder presented on the program to the EMRC, I started volunteering, helping kids and their parents pick out summer reading books. Several of the Bookmobile volunteers are educators and school librarians, providing me with another opportunity to connect and collaborate. As faculty advisor for the Metropolis Rotaract club, I am also a member of the EMRC Generations Committee. This

committee coordinates the community services efforts of the junior Rotary clubs: EarlyAct (5-12 years old), Interact (13-18 years old), and Rotaract (18-30 years old). The advisors meet on a monthly basis to report on programs and events, and to coordinate efforts. This provides me with another avenue to interact with students and advisors across the district, and the opportunity to promote Brooks Library as a community resource.

Ellensburg School District Education Foundation (ESDEF)

Following a LAC presentation to the school board, I was invited to join the Ellensburg School District Education Foundation, a nonprofit organization created to “support education through public and private cooperation” (“Ellensburg School District Education Foundation,” n.d.). The Foundation raises money each year to be distributed in mini-grants to applicants from the school district. Projects funded could be a high school English class theater trip to Seattle, manipulatives for the third-grade classrooms to share, backpacks filled with books for low income students, and registration fees for the middle school robotics club. Being a member of the ESDEF board has made me more familiar with the individual schools, their needs, their parent teacher organizations, and how Brooks Library can contribute directly. For instance, I learned the principal at one of the elementary schools is a heavy reading advocate, providing “Read Boxes” (an “on your honor” lending library) throughout his school and welcoming new students by allowing them to pick out a book to keep from a shelf in his office. Brooks Library allocates funding every year to purchase books through First Books and Scholastic that are then distributed to community organizations serving low income families (FISH food bank, Bright Beginnings, the alternative high school, the youth center, EMRC Literacy Committee). Learning of this principal’s reading advocacy projects allowed me to deliver a box of multiple copies of brand new, high interest fiction and nonfiction for distribution to his students. I also relay mini-grant application rules and deadlines to educators that I know are working on a project that requires funding beyond their district budget allocation.

Conclusion

Whether it is collaborating on a One Book One County book selection, a community Freedom to Read table, the strategic planning for district library curriculum, local literacy projects, or extracurricular funding for educators, Brooks Library is involved and has a voice in these discussions, discussions that impact our libraries on a regional basis. The fact that community outreach is a dedicated portion of my job description, and that I am given time to attend the associated meetings and events, allows me the time and freedom to pursue and nurture these collaborative relationships as part of my professional duties. As a result, Brooks Library is more readily recognized as a community resource, and team player with the community libraries. These relationships will be further developed to align more specifically with the Brooks Library’s strategic plan, with an eye to college readiness programs and increased K-16 student use of our resources and familiarity with the library space and assets.

Benefits are already being derived from the formation of our town-wide library team. It gives librarians at every level in the district the ability to come together and share and expand projects and developments such as community-wide literacy themes, and increased distribution of reading materials via a variety of social and educational programs. By way of annual reports and presentations, this collaboration keeps our local school board and county commissioners apprised of community literacy efforts and challenges, helps to raise the libraries public profiles, and provides the librarians the ability to

demonstrate support for each other.

Readers will have different opportunities in mind that they are able to cultivate into mutually beneficial partnerships that cross perceived library boundaries. Expanded access and facilitated communication between institutions serves to coordinate information literacy skill acquisition and increases awareness of library resources available throughout the community for the benefit of all.

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