First-Year Learning Communities: Redefining the Educational Roles of Academic Librarians

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First-Year Classes & Learning Communities

Colleges and universities increasingly find themselves in the position of competing for enrollment, and the average student body is a mixture of traditional residential, commuter, and adult returning students. As a result, new issues have emerged concerning the assessment of learning and retention of students after their first year. Studies indicating the success of collaborative learning environments have given new weight to the concept of learning communities and the impact they have upon learning outcomes. Faith Gabelnick, et al., describe key advantages of today's learning communities:

> Learning communities […] purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students. Advocates contend that learning communities can address some of the structural features of the modern university that undermine effective teaching and learning. Built

on what is known about effective educational practice, learning communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes.[1]

The Coalition of Networked Information (CNI) initiated a New Learning Communities program that highlighted "increased student involvement in learning […] and the realization that students can create knowledge and meaning out of their learning experience."[2] Learning communities foster both social and academic involvement, the integration of which appears to be central to the students' perceived success in their transition to university life. As Vincent Tinto explains: "Often, social and academic concerns compete, causing students to feel torn between two worlds so that students have to choose one over the other. Learning communities [help] students draw these two worlds together."[3]

Recognizing the significance of the first year in creating a baseline for the students' entire college experience, many institutions have revisited their general stud-

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ies programs and have created opportunities for the development of new learning communities. According to Tinto: "Membership in the community of the classroom provides important linkages to membership in communities external to the classroom. For new students in particular, engagement in the community of the classroom becomes a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally"[4]

Information Literacy in the Curriculum

For many years academic librarians have advocated the integration of library instruction or information literacy into the curriculum of colleges and universities. Librarians assert that students must learn information skills in the context of their courses in order for those skills to be meaningful. True integration implies that information skills are accepted as a natural and essential part of the curriculum. Attempts at integration have had varying degrees of success.

Successful integration appears to be related to a few key factors. Administrative or institutional support and commitment are vital to success, as is a clear connection to the educational mission of the institution.[5] Specific, well-defined goals are important. Hannelore Rader points out that where there has been successful integration at an institution, the institution "had a strong commitment to excellent educational outcomes for the students in the areas of critical thinking, problem-solving, and information skills."[6]

Perhaps most important to success are collaborative and collegial relationships between teaching faculty and librarians.[7] Such relationships often take the form of a true partnership between faculty and librarians. D.W. Farmer goes even farther and calls for faculty, librarians, and students to step out of their traditional roles and form an "active partnership in a genuine learning community."[8] Marian Winner emphasizes that librarians "must demonstrate to faculty that they have the background and knowledge to be useful partners for faculty in curriculum planning, so that information literacy becomes an integral part of the course structure and so that skills the students develop are assessed."[9]

At the same time, and paralleling higher education curriculum reforms, many instruction librarians and programs have shifted focus to better empower students and foster independence and life-long learning.[10] This has become particularly important as more information is readily available, and our students try to meet their information needs through the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web. There probably has never been a better opportunity to demonstrate both the need to integrate information literacy into the curriculum and the significance of the librarian's role as information educator. According to Rader: "It is up to librarians to maximize their potential and to be in position to assume their role in the teaching and learning process as reforms take place."[11]

The role of teacher is not really a new one for academic librarians. We have provided instruction as part of our reference service and have taught sessions and entire courses of bibliographic instruction. Several years ago, instruction programs began to move away from library orientation and instruction in the use of specific research tools. More recently, library instruction has emphasized the teaching of process, problem-solving, and critical thinking. As this trend continues, we open up opportunities for a more direct impact on the curriculum and clearly respond to the educational goals of our institutions. As Evelyn Haynes asserts: "Librarians must be granted the authority, responsibility, and time to develop the programs that will accommodate institution-wide curriculum needs, rather than merely responding to individual requests from those faculty who already recognize the importance of information research to their teaching."[12] This sometimes means re-defining our roles or taking on new roles in the educational mission of our institution. According to Abigail Loomis we "must recognize and accept that our contribution to that educational mission involves much more than making information resources available on demand. It also involves teaching—teaching students how to find, select, evaluate, and use that information effectively and efficiently."[13]

Two First-Year Programs

New program initiatives at DePaul and IUPUI have expanded the possibilities for integrating library instruction into the university curriculum. The learning communities developed as a result of these programs present unique opportunities to integrate information and library skills into the first-year curriculum.

DePaul

As part of a larger initiative to restructure the Liberal Studies curriculum, DePaul University revised and expanded its First-Year Program. The First-Year Program

has two overarching goals: 1) introducing students to the process of intellectual inquiry in a university, and 2) community building. Most students take a required sequence of English composition courses in the first year, and it is in those courses that the Library has provided a basic level of library instruction. Two new components in the First-Year Program are taught by a faculty/staff team: *Discover Chicago*, an experiential course with Chicago-related field experiences, and *Focal Point Seminar*, a small interdisciplinary seminar. The instruction team for the Discover Chicago classes also includes a student mentor. The staff professional teaches the *Common Hour* portion of the course, a seminar focusing on transition skills in four areas: student success skills (e.g., note taking and time management); university resources (e.g., student services and the library); academic and career planning; and diversity/community issues.[14]

At its inception, the Common Hour was viewed as an extension of the services offered by Student Affairs, but as the program grew, the opportunity to work with these new first-year learning communities was extended to staff professionals throughout the university. In the first year of the program, a librarian served as a consultant to the faculty planning committee. In the second year, one librarian taught a section of the Focal Point seminar. This past year, six librarians taught eight sections of the Focal Point seminar. For the first time, inclusion of a library experience, activity, or assignment was required in all sections of the Common Hour. Two librarians currently serve on the steering committee charged with designing the curriculum for next year's Common Hour component and the job descriptions for those who will teach it.

IUPUI

First-year classes have become a primary focus of library instruction activity at IUPUI. First-year seminars are now a part of the Learning Communities Program. All learning communities include a first-year experience class, and many link two or more classes. IUPUI learning communities address the general goals of learning communities, and many also serve to introduce students to their prospective majors. As an integral component of the Learning Communities Program, instruction librarians have worked primarily with the first-year experience classes.

IUPUI learning communities use an instructional team approach in the first-year component. An IUPUI instructional team is a collaborative venture that brings together a teaching faculty member, a librarian, an academic adviser, and a student mentor. The faculty member leads the team, which collaboratively develops and implements the curriculum for a particular class. Each team member plays an active role in designing and delivering the course, depending upon his or her particular expertise. Librarians are assigned to several learning communities each semester and their roles vary from team to team, always centering on the library- and information- based learning objectives.

Common Elements of DePaul and IUPUI Programs:

• A history of "traditional library instruction" placed in writing courses;

• A focus on first-year programs that introduce students to the university, build a learning community, and promote academic success;

• Administrative support, both from library administration and from the university;

• Well-defined outcomes that relate to the educational mission of the university;

• A team approach in which librarians collaborate with faculty and others, expanding our role as educators.

Benefits

The advantages of first-year learning communities such as those at DePaul and IUPUI are numerous. The impact of these programs is most evident in the following areas:

• Integration of library instruction into the curriculum from the beginning of the student's college experience;

• Development of collegial relationships with others outside the library (both faculty and staff);

• Increased visibility of librarians within the university community, which expands the perception of what are considered the "traditional" responsibilities of library professionals;

• New opportunities for librarians to participate in students' socialization into the university;

• Extension of the librarians' teaching experience in areas that can benefit from a generalist's approach.

Challenges

Innovative programs and new course models present

challenges and opportunities to examine various aspects of the endeavor. One needs to ask questions, such as:

- What skills are required, and what are the existing skills, of the librarians?
- How much preparation will the librarian need, and how will the additional responsibilities balance with his/her workload?
- How are these new responsibilities relevant to the overall goals of the library?
- What impact can the librarians' participation in the new programs have on their identity and role within the university, and how does that involvement complement other public service activities?
- How might librarians pursue or maintain administrative commitment and financial support?

Conclusion

At DePaul and IUPUI, the information component, including librarians' active participation, is an integral part of students' first-year experience. Early in their academic careers, students see the value of information and connect with information professionals. This demonstrates the importance of information literacy and presents the librarian as expert in this arena. Not only are students able to see librarians as knowledgeable and skilled with information and library research but also as teachers, guides, and coaches. Most students, as well as teaching faculty, are unaccustomed to librarians fulfilling these roles. Whether working one-on-one with a student or leading a library instruction session for a group, librarians have a lot of teaching experience. First-year learning communities can demonstrate this experience to the larger university community. It is not only our opportunity; it is our professional responsibility to become involved in programs that foster these new learning environments.

Notes

1. Faith Gabelnick, Jean MacGregor, Roberta S. Matthews, and Barbara L. Smith. Learning Communities: Creating Connections among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 5.

2. Philip Tompkins, Susan Perry, and Joan K. Lippincott, "New Learning Communities: Collaboration, Networking and Information Literacy," *Information Tech-nology and Libraries* 17, no. 2 (June 1998): 100–106.

3. Vincent Tinto, "Classrooms as Communities: Exploring the Educational Character of Student Persistence," *The Journal of Higher Education* 68, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1997): 599–623.

4. Ibid, 616–17.

5. Evelyn B. Haynes, "Librarian-Faculty Partnerships in Instruction," *Advances in Librarianship* 20 (1996): 191–222; David F. Kohl, "As Time Goes by…:Revisiting Fundamentals," *Library Trends* 44, no. 2 (fall 1995): 423–29; Hannelore B. Rader, "Information Literacy and the Undergraduate Curriculum," *Library Trends* 44, no. 2 (fall 1995): 270–78; Gabriela Sonntag and Donna M. Ohr, "The Development of a Lower-Division, General Education, Course-Integrated Information Literacy Program," *College & Research Libraries* 57, no. 4 (July 1996): 331–38; Patricia S. Breivik, "Making the Most of Libraries in the Search for Academic Excellence," *Change* 19 (July/Aug. 1987): 44–52; Abigail Loomis, "Building Coalitions for Information Literacy," in *Information for a New Age. Redefining the Librarian*, ed. American Library Association Library Instruction Roundtable (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1995), 123–34.

6. Rader, "Information Literacy and the Undergraduate Curriculum," 271.

7. Haynes, "Librarian-Faculty Partnerships," 214–16; Loomis, "Building Coalitions," 426; Rader, "Information Literacy," 271; Sonntag and Ohr, " The Development of a Lower-Division, General Education, Course," 333–34; Virginia M. Tiefel, "Library User Education: Examining its Past, Projecting its Future," *Library Trends* 44, no 2 (fall 1995): 318–38.

8. D.W. Farmer, "Information Literacy: Overcoming Barriers to Implementation." in *Information Literacy: Developing Students as Independent Learners*, New Directions for Teaching and Learning Series, eds. D.W. Farmer and Terrence F. Mech (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 104.

9. Marian C. Winner, "Librarians as Partners in the Classroom: An Increasing Imperative." *Reference Services Review* 26, no. 1 (spring 1998): 25–29.

10. Kohl, "As Time Goes by," 426–27; Tiefel, "Library User Education," 318.

11. Rader, "Information Literacy and the Undergraduate Curriculum," 277.

12. Haynes, "Librarian-Faculty Partnerships," 217.