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Campus Partnerships—Collaborating in the Niches

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Barbara's job includes responsibility for the UO Libraries' instruction program, instructional partnerships with UO's First Year and Writing programs, and developing cross-campus partnerships. She is also the psychology librarian and frequently teaches research skills classes.

Barbara has been an active member of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) serving as Chair of the ACRL University Libraries Section and as a national ACRL Board member.

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Our campuses are filled with silos that keep us separated and often unfamiliar with each other's goals, programs and services. Especially on a large campus, collaboration can seem elusive or be perceived as just the domain of the higher level administrative officers. But there is room for collaboration and partnership at all organizational levels and the library is well-positioned to engage with all parts of the campus.

Academic libraries are increasingly contributing to campus collaboration by reaching out from its traditional research and collections orientation and extending itself into non-traditional areas such as residence life. Working with the campus housing department on the integration of the library into the living-learning residential culture has been an active partnership at the University of Oregon and other campuses. But we need to go beyond these areas and also discover the many niche student services offices that share the goal of facilitating student academic success.

These niche student services offices can also provide the library with substantial benefits. With limited resources, we need to extend our reach to connect with a larger percentage of the students. With a large undergraduate student population it is convenient to think about undergraduates as a monolithic group. But, we gain more awareness of the varying student needs when we become more connected to the diversity on our campus. The niche student services offices facilitate this heightened awareness with their focus on specific student groups that have substantial demographic, economic, ethnic, age, and learning style diversity. Today's students typically do not come to college knowing about the role of the university library. They need to hear the "story" about libraries from someone with whom they have a personal and trusted relationship. The people on campus with the most personal relationships and opportunities to tell the "library story" frequently are student services professionals.

If we see our larger goal as contributing to student academic success, it doesn't work to wait until students come into the library building. Students need to learn about us from all corners of the campus. To reach the widest number of students and have a sustainable long-term effect, we need to integrate the library into the fabric of the campus infrastructure. Collaboration that is embedded in the campus infrastructure allows the library to develop a scaffold approach that leverages other campus resources and has the potential for more varied, nuanced, and long-term engagements.

However, reaching out to the campus niche student services offices takes a somewhat different approach than our typical academic discipline liaison. It means learning about what each part of the organization does and how they see the world. It means understanding the different campus sub-cultures and occasionally being aware of the political or cultural tensions between campus units. It requires being alert to subtle campus-level changes and thinking about the opportunities that might exist or be developed. And, it pushes us to rethink our marketing messages and use some different techniques.

Connecting with these campus partners may be a little outside of our traditional comfort zone. There is not as clear a path as there is with working with research and teaching faculty. They may have a limited view of what the academic library can offer. And our perceptions may not always resonate with them in same way. But there are great benefits to be gained in fully understanding all the ways the campus interacts with students and finding opportunities to get connected with a greater number and diversity of students.

Some strategies include:

- Identifying which parts of the campus organizational structure you don't know well and the roles they play.
- Browsing the campus web pages, newsletters and other communications.
- Developing marketing messages that reflect the library in broader and more inclusive terms (i.e., academic success instead of research papers)
- Looking for opportunities such as changes in personnel, new staff, or different programmatic developments.
- Calling to introduce yourself and expressing interest in learning more about what they do—personal connections are essential.
- Following up with email asking for a short meeting to learn more and jointly consider how the library could contribute to their students.
- Planning a short meeting and mostly listening to how they think about their program and the students they serve.
- Being enthusiastic and looking for common ground
- Learning to speak "their language" and avoiding library lingo
- Thinking creatively about how any aspect of the library or library staff skills could positively contribute to their students' academic success or campus engagement (go beyond the usual "research" orientation—think about all the library's assets such as: academic success, space, librarian/staff expertise, technologies, a central campus place where lots of students congregate, library's long & late hours, etc.)
- Starting small with one idea about collaboration or one thing to follow-up on.
- Realizing that sometimes collaboration doesn't work out the first time. The timing may be wrong or sometimes you aren't talking to the right person.

Some growing areas of niche campus partnerships are:

Offices for First Generation College Students (i.e., Pathway Oregon & McNair Scholars)

Challenges —The library is not typically the first thing that comes to mind for first generation students as many daunting issues such as finances, personal issues, and navigating the university academic culture may take priority. Programs like Pathway Oregon have large numbers of students who are spread across the campus in all different majors and often do not have any specific classes together.

Engagement—Academic success, retention and graduation are key areas in these programs. So program staff are exploring partnerships that could increase students' academic success. These students typically receive a high level of advising from the program, so getting connected to their advising sessions is one option that has worked for the University of Oregon Libraries. Some programs like the McNair Scholar have specific academic requirements built into them that may provide an opening for higher engagement with the library. Making the library relevant and integrated into these students' lives may require a high touch and flexibility. A future direction may be to find a way for the library to be part of a campus structure that provides an introduction to the academic university culture.

Offices for Accessibility or Disability Services

Challenges —Students with disabilities make up over nine percent of the higher education population; the largest growth area is students with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are very individualized and each student may need different accommodations, so time and availability are important. Many learning disabilities involve difficulties with text, so it is likely that students face substantial challenges in working with complex, heavily text-based, and sometimes non-intuitive library research resources.

Engagement—One-on-one consultations away from the reference desk that allow for quiet space and time to have the student feel comfortable are essential. Referrals from the program advisor to a specific librarian often work the best so the student faces feels welcomed and sees the situation as having less uncertainty and ambiguity. Navigating the numerous unknowns involved in seeking help at the public reference desk can be overwhelming. The incorporation of visuals such as short videos in library websites and teaching tools may substantially assist these students. As this student population grows they will need substantially more engagement by librarians. The University of Oregon Libraries is focusing on developing more collaboration with the UO Accessibility Services office this year.

Offices for Returning Students

Challenges —These students are usually older than most undergraduates and often have very busy personal lives. They often are combining work and college and may have family responsibilities. They typically do not have much time to be in the library during regular business hours. Veterans are a large group of returning students, but often do not self-identify on campus so reaching them as a group is difficult.

Engagement—These students find online assistance, particularly those that they can pursue on their own time, to be particularly useful. Offering child care so that students with families can use the library more easily may increase library use, but also has substantial costs. Writing for the returning students' newsletter has been one strategy for increasing the University of Oregon Libraries' visibility. The Libraries also are regularly represented at the transfer students' orientation events. Getting more connected to the veterans on campus will be an area of investigation in the coming year.

Offices of Multicultural Academic Success or Support

Offices of multicultural academic success serve a large number of students. Closer collaboration would connect the library to a more diverse student population and make libraries more aware of how to make a difference in their academic success. The University of Oregon Library is developing a plan to collaborate with its Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence during the coming year.

Advising

Advising may seem to be fairly disconnected from the goals of the library, but it has high potential for collaboration. Campus advising reaches a large number of students and does it on a regular basis throughout their college career. Meeting annually with advising staff is a good way to help them know we are also members of the team interested in the students' success. Advisors are also the people who know which students are in academic distress (low GPA). One idea to explore is for the library to develop a brochure or other way that would help students in academic distress realize that the library is interested in their academic success. Advising and libraries also have the potential to partner in shared spaces as advisers look for more opportunities to influence academic success and retention by increasing advising on weekends or after traditional business hours.

As our campuses change and develop more diverse and specialized student engagement models, we need to expand our portfolio and integrate the library further into the campus infrastructure in as many ways as possible. One part of this plan needs to be the inclusion of niche student service programs and offices which have regular contact with a diverse and increasingly large group of students. This approach can connect us to students who may not see the library as a factor in their academic success and may not be regular users of the library.

However, our library organizational charts and traditional positions frequently do not lend themselves to collaboration with these burgeoning areas. Libraries sometimes err in assigning the responsibility for this type of high-level collaboration as an add-on or to a new librarian. Integrating the library into the infrastructure of the campus requires substantial time, experience, and understanding of the culture of higher education. It takes a broad and deep institutional knowledge and an awareness of the campus as a political entity. It also takes a substantial knowledge of the library system and a person who understands the strategic goals of both the library and the campus. The University of Oregon made a deliberate decision to increase the priority of collaboration across the campus in the development of the position description that includes the words "campus partnerships." This model provides an opportunity to seek campus collaborators and develop long-term partnerships to extend the awareness of the library and its many roles in fostering student academic success. Working with these campus niches also increases our development as a more nimble learning organization as we adapt to our changing student populations and higher education environment.

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