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Viewpoints

Needed: Improved Collaboration Among Subject Librarians

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Let's work together! The library literature abounds with articles on embedded academic librarians - librarians who have strong working relations with faculty. What is often not addressed, however, is the need for partnering between subject librarians. The typical academic library appears to have subject librarians entrenched in information silos with invisible boundaries that other subject librarians dare not cross. The image of librarianship as a "siloed" profession seems particularly acute at academic institutions which have transitioned recently from normal schools producing K-12 educators to liberal arts colleges emphasizing the sciences and engineering. A residual opinion often exists at these institutions, namely that the two goals -- to develop future scientists and mathematicians and to produce future science and mathematics teachers -- are in conflict. This viewpoint article addresses this problem and is a call for more collaboration among subject librarians with a goal of an

enhanced level of service to students and faculty and the overarching mission of the institution.

Let's begin by examining the situation that we encountered at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ). We arrived as newly hired subject librarians in Physical Sciences and Engineering (PS&E) and Education, respectively. The PS&E Librarian came to academia from three decades in corporate research, while the Education Librarian brought many years of academic education experience. TCNJ was an undergraduate institution transformed, in the last ten years, from a normal school for educators (founded in 1855) to a liberal arts college embracing the teacher-scholar model with a very short tenure track based on a strong emphasis on scholarly research for both teaching faculty and librarians¹.

Lack of academic research experience created a knowledge gap for the PS&E Librarian, who conducted a series of focus groups to understand the information-seeking habits of the faculty and students. The initial findings, covering computer science and engineering faculty, have been reported in this journal (Tucci, Winter 2011) and definitely paved the way for better communication and improved service. Subsequent focus groups conducted within the Physics and Chemistry Departments also explored the needs of the pure science major. When it was time to arrange focus groups with the Mathematics and Statistics Department, it became apparent that a revised approach was needed because this department had TWO department heads, one for "pure" mathematics and one for mathematics education. The PS&E Librarian definitely needed help addressing the needs of faculty and students in mathematics education. So, in contrast to earlier focus groups, the Education Librarian was invited to join the discussion - a first for TCNJ. A series of focus groups, attended by both librarians, soon demonstrated that the two sections of the Mathematics Department had very different information needs that neither librarian could have anticipated. The contrast between the requirements of a mathematical scholar studying an abstract concept, and a student preparing to make mathematics exciting on the elementary level, was astounding. We were witnessing two cultures in one department.

The two subject librarians expressed many divergent views before collaboration began. Although neither librarian wanted to defend their respective territories and boundaries, the combining of contrasting views required a great deal of discussion. As an example, the PS&E

Librarian considered LibGuides to be a glorified electronic version of the old Cliffs Notes, while the Education Librarian considered them essential guides for prospective educators. This example illustrates the difference in the pedagogical approaches where the PS&E Librarian believed that budding scientists and mathematicians should be trained to tackle an unknown problem and have the information literacy skills to find a path to a solution. On the other hand, the Education Librarian believed the path should be outlined and the specific tools required delineated. How to present these opposing perspectives to students was a challenge, but the solution provided an improved educational experience for students. Here are some of the constructive steps we took.

The focus group discussions with the Mathematics and Statistics faculty clarified that their teaching and research were supported by not one, but two librarians. The connection was established and the benefits were immediate. Librarian collaboration grew to include job responsibilities from collection development to information literacy instruction. The Education Librarian created an online research guide for Mathematics Education K-12 and presented this to the math education faculty. The math education LibGuide [<http://libguides.tcnj.edu/mathed>] demonstrated the range of resources (curriculum materials, K-12 literature and textbooks, reference works, databases, etc.) available to future mathematics teachers, which had never before been introduced or explained to students. Of particular importance was the newly created Curriculum Reference collection, which houses reference works on research in mathematics education and standards. Faculty members have expressed their appreciation for the ready availability of these important materials. The PS&E Librarian, in turn, created a Mathematics LibGuide [<http://libguides.tcnj.edu/Mathematics>] outlining major reference works, journals and databases.

The guides are crosslinked and complement each other, rather than duplicating efforts. The task of preparing the guides allowed the librarians to join forces to analyze the collections and request new materials or improved access.

It was important to clarify which librarian and fund would be used to purchase K-12 mathematics resources. Subject librarians may not feel comfortable selecting these materials and the Education Librarian may feel it stretches that budget too thin. The TCNJ librarians examined this issue and also shared suggestions for titles to maximize purchases with collection development funds. In a reciprocal move, the Mathematics &

Statistics Department was motivated to donate K-12 textbooks to the library collection. These recent editions enhanced both library offerings and access to the materials for students.

One of the most exciting outcomes was in the area of library instruction. Each fall incoming students in the Mathematics and Statistics programs are required to take a six-week orientation course (MAT099) with the goal of introducing them to their chosen major. Students in this course are majors in Mathematics, Mathematics Education, or Statistics. In fall 2011 the librarians jointly taught four sections of MAT099. This allowed for the introduction of basic information literacy skills, specific to the full range of their studies, rather than a narrower focus on pure mathematics. Without overlapping their content, the librarians were able to provide interactive sessions which encompassed both resources for the disciplines of mathematics and statistics and mathematics education. This is significant, given that the majority of math majors at TCNJ intend to become teachers. The books, journals, and databases, as well as the search techniques employed in math education, all differ from those traditionally introduced in a pure math class. Math education faculty began to call upon the Education Librarian to provide information literacy instruction in their classrooms to address the research needs of particular assignments. This in turn has resulted in reference consultations by future math educators that had previously not occurred. Faculty report improved use of scholarly literature by students resulting in better assignment outcomes.

As the neglected needs of the math education majors became apparent, we realized that the information needs of students involved in undergraduate research in pure math also needed attention. The teacher-scholar model embraced by TCNJ for faculty and librarians necessitates an active research program and supports many initiatives that encourage teacher/student curriculum-based research. How to support this undergraduate research, on a limited library budget, and deliver information literacy instruction to address a more sophisticated level of information needs are challenges that have yet to be addressed at TCNJ.

It is vital to open new channels of communication to serve everyone in an academic department or program. We encourage librarians to build bridges across disciplines. The lines we draw to define our jobs are not necessarily clear or beneficial to the departments we serve. Librarians wish to serve, but may simply be unaware that they are excluding a segment of the department, such as those teaching and researching

outside the traditional science in programs in K-12 education programs or the general education curriculum. Students seeking degrees in secondary education take most of their courses in the major, physically and academically separated from the education department and off the radar of the Education Librarian. We can't assume that teaching faculty will come to us, if they feel underserved. We can't afford to let major programs fall through the cracks. The rewards from going the extra mile to assess departmental needs are great. The results offer the potential to build new bonds within the library and across campus, resulting in improved resources and services to faculty and students. This joint endeavor has been eye-opening for the two of us and has given us a deep sense of satisfaction knowing that we have made a positive contribution to the level of service and scholarship at our college. We encourage others to share with us their experiences in collaborating with other subject librarians so that we may continue to learn.

Notes

¹ **Author Clarification:** The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) was founded in 1855 as The New Jersey State Normal School with a focus on teacher education. In 1966 the NJ State Legislature designated it a liberal arts college offering diverse majors and during the 1980s it became a limited-sized, highly-selective-admissions liberal arts college. Over the last 10 years, TCNJ has experienced curriculum transformations to reflect a growing emphasis on the teacher-scholar model and undergraduate research.

References

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