

Reaching university students via partnerships with non-academic departments

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Abstract

Though libraries have long formed important relationships with academic departments via liaison librarians, the time has come to “sell” library services through non-academic departments via mutually beneficial partnerships. Partnerships with non-academic departments can be instrumental in reaching students who do not seek assistance from the library but who need it. By forming a win-win partnership with departments such as Career Services, Student Affairs, Counseling Services and others, use of library resources and the number of students served increases. The partnerships can also result in an improved standing of the library in the campus community.

This paper provides examples of successful partnerships with measured outcomes that demonstrate the win-win of such partnerships.

Keywords

- Academic Libraries
- Outreach
- Collaboration
- College students
- Strategic Alliances
- Programming

Introduction

In September 2015 I accepted a position with Rider University as their Instruction and Outreach Librarian. While opinions of what outreach should entail varied widely among my new colleagues, two goals seemed clear – increase usage of the library and its resources and increase visibility of the library. In my interview, the Provost said she wanted the library to be the “heart of the campus.” Partnering with non-academic departments on campus helped the library to achieve both of those goals while helping those departments achieve greater success as well. It has been a win-win.

While striving to achieve the library’s outreach goals, we also kept in mind some of the ongoing goals of the library and the university – student success and retention. Research by Soria, Fransen and Nackerud (2014) suggests that student use of the library improves both. This was particularly true for first-time, first year undergraduate students (Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013). Haddow (2013) also links academic library use with student retention. If student use of the library increased, then the library’s outreach efforts would not only benefit the library but the university’s students as well. This was no small motivation.

In order to maximize usage, academic librarians have long served as liaisons for academic departments. This collaboration is effective for building relationships with faculty members that foster a library collection that is responsive to course needs and relevant research assistance including library instruction at the point of need for students (Carpan, 2011). This tradition certainly improves usage and standing of the library – why not apply a similar model to non-academic departments that are also serving students? As early as 2000, Jeffries suggests providing liaison programs with campus partners such as writing centers, information technology and student services (Jeffries, 2000). These departments can help increase students use of the library or provide promotion which improves the library’s visibility. In addition, partnering with non-academic departments can be fruitful in continuing to



Figure 2:

This figure shows a “word cloud” resulting from entering the mission statements from the corresponding Tutoring Center or Writing Center or Writing Lab from those institutions into Wordle. Note the size of words like student, success and learning.

that appear more frequently in the source text.” (Feinberg, 2014)

The word clouds shown in Figures 1 and 2 visually demonstrate one way that these organizations promote themselves, and while both academic libraries and tutoring/writing centers are dedicated to student success, it is arguably more apparent in the mission statements of the department on campus that offers tutoring or writing help. This may have more to do with the multiple missions that an academic library juggles rather than a lack of interest, expertise or resources for students. That being said, it seems prudent for academic libraries to partner with a tutoring or writing center where students are seeking help, in order to spread the word that the library is ready to help, too, in their own important way.

Getting Started

How does a librarian start developing partnerships with non-academic departments? It all starts with a conversation that is similar to one between a librarian and an instructor for an academic department. Whereas a librarian may ask an instructor about the goals, challenges and tasks of a particular course, the same questions apply to the director of a non-academic department. What are the goals of your department? What are the challenges you face? How do you achieve success? Additionally, some other questions can be instructive: How do you reach students? Are you under any university or college mandates? During the conversation, a way that the library could help or partner will likely emerge. Consider “closing” the deal with a leading question. For example, “Would the student tutors

benefit from a training session by a librarian on how to effectively use the library resources? Would that help them in their work with other students' research papers?"

Ways to Partner or Partnership Ideas

What are some of the ways academic libraries can partner with non-academic departments? Since student success and retention is a common goal, co-sponsoring an event or program is often a productive partnership. Also, a department may need the expertise of librarians for training their staff or helping develop a collection. They may request the use of space in the library or may benefit from the library adding items for check out to the collection to serve students and/or staff. These kinds of partnerships are often ripe for cross-promotion, as well. The following are some specific examples of partnerships formed along with the results.

Student Success Center (aka Writing Center or Lab, Tutoring Center or Lab)

In the course of an introductory conversation, the Director of Rider University's Student Success Center requested a training session for the tutors (professional and student) on accessing the library's resources. A training session was held for nine tutors which demonstrated effective ways to access books and journal articles. The training also covered citation tools, accessing legal and business information and pro/con information for debate topics. Attendees of the training learned how to contact a librarian with questions (even while in a tutoring session) and how librarians could assist their clients when the needs were beyond the scope of help normally provided by the tutors. Results from a survey delivered after the session indicated that the director and the tutors found the training worthwhile. A subsequent session was planned for the following semester for the tutors who would be new to the center at that time.

Buoyed by that success, I sent an article to the director of the Student Success Center entitled *Our powers combined: Helping students see how writing and research fit together* by Cochran and Horrocks (2016). In it the authors describe a variety of ways writing centers and academic libraries can work

together including an event called Write Now! where writing center tutors provide writing support in the library before finals week. Did the Student Success Center staff want to try a Write Now! Event at Rider's Moore Library? The director and the new writing lab coordinator responded with an enthusiastic yes, and we held our first event on December 6, 2016 from 7-10 p.m. Tutors from the writing lab offered drop-in writing support to students in an instruction room in the library. Students started arriving at 6:45 p.m. and help was still being offered as late as 11 p.m. Fourteen undergraduate students and one graduate student received assistance and expressed appreciation for the service. Datic and Herkner (2014) describe a similar partnership in their article, *Get ready for a long night: Collaborating with the writing center to combat student procrastination*.

In addition to partnering on tutor training and a writing event, the library also provided a quiet, writing space in the summer 2016 for the Student Success Center's Bridge to Success program which helps incoming freshman develop writing skills the summer before starting their college career. In a cross-promotional effort, the Student Success Center hung flyers with library hours and contact information in their tutoring rooms and is designing a bookmark with Center hours and services for reference librarians to provide at the library's Reference Desk. The relationship allowed the librarians a better understanding of what the Student Success Center offered so that more informed student referrals could be made to the Center. These efforts have increased use of the library and its visibility on campus.

Career Development and Success Center (aka Career Services)

In an introductory conversation, the new director of Rider's Career Development and Success Center was excited to learn how some of the library databases can be helpful for students when preparing for interviews. In response, I created an Interview Prep LibGuide that she could share with students and let her know that a library colleague had already created a Career LibGuide with helpful information about career selection and development. She linked both of these to her center's website, and we linked the Career

Development and Success Center website onto the LibGuides in another example of cross-promotion. Later, she invited me and Rider University's Business Librarian to a meeting of her Career Counselors. The meeting resulted in invitations for the Business Librarian and me to co-present with a Career Counselor in three future workshops about job and internship seeking. In these sessions the library's databases were highlighted for students looking for positions.

Other librarians have had success with partnerships with the Career Services departments on campus. Librarians at the University of Buffalo assisted the Career Services Office with instruction, collection development, reference service, web development and even signage (Hollister, 2005). Song describes a case study involving a collaboration of instruction between the Business Career Services Office and the Business and Economics library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2007). Academic libraries partner with Career Services department in instruction designed to prepare students for interviews through workshops (Joranson & Wider, 2009) or collaborative seminars (DeHart, 1996).

Counseling Services

Since academic libraries often see increased usage during finals week, it is a good place to reach students experiencing stress. Meyers-Martin and Borshard describe additional resources and services offered at libraries during final exams week to address student stress (2015). Inspired by stories of therapy dogs at academic libraries at Texas A&M (Perrone, 2013) and Yale Law School (Chanen, 2011), my colleagues and I sought an opportunity to provide dogs in the library for stress relief during exam week. When perusing Rider Counseling Services' website, I noticed that pet therapy was part of their offerings.

In an introductory meeting with the director and a counselor, I learned that Counseling Services was struggling to find opportunities to spread tips about maintaining wellness and stress management. To do this effectively, they needed to be present outside of their building located on the edge of campus. The library seemed an ideal location! In exchange, the staff

of Counseling Services was pleased to bring stress reduction workshops to the library during exam week. These included meditation, yoga, art therapy and pet therapy. The therapy dog events were the most popular. On December 15, 2015 the library hosted three dogs for two hours. Over 120 students stopped by to visit the dogs. Eighty students completed a survey which indicated that 97% of them would recommend the event to a friend and would come back for a future event if one was planned. Since pet therapy is a regular service for staff at Counseling Services, they made all of the arrangements including contacting the dog owners and scheduling the visit. The Counseling Services staff was able to make contact with a large group of students and distribute stress management tips at the event. It was a win-win, again!

University Communications and Marketing

While some departments on campus are well positioned to increase student usage of the library via partnerships, others can be useful with increasing the visibility of the library on campus. At Rider University, University Communications and Marketing is the department that markets Rider to the community. It also handles a number of the internal promotion tools like the campus online event calendar, the TV monitors that display slides of Rider events and services around campus, the weekly internal newsletter – Rider Report, and the student, faculty and staff listservs. After a brief introductory conversation, the Communications Director let me know how and to whom to send press releases, emails or promotional slides so that the department could help the library promote itself and inform the campus of events, programs, services and study space availability. In a little over a year the University Communications and Marketing department facilitated library promotion by including thirteen slides for the television monitors, distributing seven emails to faculty, staff and students and publishing three articles in the Rider Report based on press releases the library sent.

Office of Student Affairs

The Office of Student Affairs is a crucial partner for academic libraries. Among other duties, it is usually the department that handles new student

orientation. Unfortunately, over the years, all mention of the library had disappeared from Rider University's new student orientation. The libraries were not even mentioned in the student packet under Services and Resources! I met with the Associate Dean of Freshmen to ask if the library could participate in new student orientation. While they did not have time in their program for a brief presentation by the library, the department included a brief description of the library and their services in the orientation brochure, agreed to include a flyer with the library's popular services, hours and contact information in the orientation packet and invited the library to participate in an Awareness Fair.

The Awareness Fair was held during the lunch break for each new student orientation. Participating campus organizations could bring a table display highlighting their services and talk to interested new students and their parents/guardians. This gave the library an opportunity to make contacts with shy students and assure anxious parents that there are quiet places for study and professionals to guide students through the treacherous waters of research. The library display welcomed new students, provided some info about library services and invited students to learn more about being a Library Ambassador. Four Rider Librarians attended six Awareness Fairs, talked with 67 parents and students, signed up 17 students to receive more info about the Library Ambassadors and smiled at countless others. This provided early exposure to the library and librarians which, it is hoped, will lead to early usage of the library by the incoming students. The library's presence at the Awareness Fair also improved its visibility on campus. As a result of the library's presence, several of the new students became Library Ambassadors (student advocates for the library). In addition, the proximity of the library's display to the College of Business's display resulted in a conversation with their Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Faculty Affairs about library instruction. This resulted in an invitation to the Business Librarian to attend a meeting of College of Business Faculty to discuss library instruction opportunities for their classes. This outreach effort to a non-academic department,

then, advanced the liaison efforts for an academic department as well as the library's outreach goals.

Office of Admissions

In a partnership with local high school libraries, Rider University Libraries offered an opportunity for high school classes to visit the Library, receive research instruction, utilize the library space and resources, and attend a campus tour. The Office of Admissions was happy to offer campus tours to bright college-bound seniors and the library was seen as aiding the University's goal of increased student recruitment. This enhanced the library's visibility on campus.

Conclusion

Partnerships between non-academic departments and academic libraries can be a win-win. All campus departments share an interest in student success and retention which is linked to library usage. In addition, libraries can help departments achieve their goals while those departments can help increase the usage of the library and improve its visibility on campus.

Usually, a conversation is all it takes to get started. When reaching out, remember to ask non-academic department staff what the goals, mandates and challenges are for their department. Know what the library has to offer – expertise (training, instruction), space (instruction rooms, study rooms, quiet space) and stuff (collections, equipment, etc). Be open, generous and flexible. Enjoy the partnerships and the success they will bring the library, the partnering department and the students.

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