Back to School: The Challenges and Rewards of a Research Library's Instruction Program for a Charter High School in Chicago

Rebecca Starkey

Introduction

The nation's budget crisis is having a significant impact on education, especially for public schools. In many states, schools are faced with making cuts to both staff and facilities. Among the resources at risk are school libraries and librarians. After a well-publicized sit-in at a Whittier Elementary School last autumn over the scheduled demolition of a building that parents wanted designated a school library (Dizikes, 2010), the *Chicago Tribune* published an expose on libraries in Chicago Public Schools. In the report, the Tribune noted that 164 public schools -- nearly 1 in 4 elementary schools and 51 high schools -- do not have libraries staffed by a trained librarian (Ahmed-Ullah, 2010). While the Illinois State Board of Education requires schools to develop a program of "Library Media Services", there is no requirement this be a library or staffed by a librarian (Ahmed-Ullah, 2010). Individual principals or school councils often make the final decision over library funding (Barack, 2009).

For charter schools, there are sometimes even greater challenges to providing library services. In Chicago, there are currently 38 charter schools with 104 campuses, now making up 10% of public school students (Illinois Network of Charter Schools, 2010). Charter schools are managed, staffed, and funded differently than neighborhood schools. Often newly established and accredited, charter schools often may not even have their own building, requiring them to share facilities and space with other schools. Negotiating use of these facilities is increasingly difficult for charter schools as district resources decrease (Ahmed-Ullah, 2011). Access to gymnasiums, cafeterias, computer labs, and libraries is limited.

The University of Chicago runs four charter schools on Chicago's South side as part of its Urban Education Institute. The University's charter high school, University of Chicago Woodlawn (UCW), is housed in a neighborhood middle school. Like many charters, it does not have its own library. While each UCW student is provided a laptop, this alone was not adequate for their educational needs. In December 2009, representatives from the UCW and the Urban Education Institute contacted the University of Chicago Library to see if their 59 high school seniors could obtain borrowing privileges.

The answer seemed natural. The students had a real need, and were attending a school created and managed by the University. Granting access would provide the Library with a wonderful opportunity to reach out to the community and support the University's efforts in urban education. But while we could envision the rewards, we did not anticipate the challenges that we would face in developing a program. Through this experience, we learned a great deal about our expectations and limitations in designing effective instruction programs for charter school students.

Background

When UCW approached the University of Chicago Library with their proposal, we had very little experience working with public schools. As a private institution, the Library has traditionally been very restrictive in its access. Since the 1990s, we have begun to open our doors to non-University users. Public schools, however, were not initially included in these groups. The complexity of our collections seemed beyond

Starkey *(Reference Librarian / Instruction Services Specialist and Bibliographer for Education)*
University of Chicago [Chicago, IL]

the scope of high school research. There were also fears over the potential disruptions younger students might cause in a library that focused on faculty and graduate research.

Despite these concerns, our increasing focus on undergraduate research made us reconsider our restrictive access to public school groups. We started to accept some requests from high schools to bring their students to the Library for field trips. These varied from basic tours ("Please show my students what an academic library is like!"), to visits where students come to the library for a day to work on a project. These programs were fairly unsuccessful. Tours, while providing a great sense of goodwill, were staff intensive for little pedagogical benefit. Research field trips were even more problematic. Students would have only 2-3 hours to learn how to use the Library and complete their research projects. We found that the visiting students became frustrated when they could not take books home or access our electronic resources when they left the Library. After several such experiences, we decided to discontinue these programs.

We had more success with our outreach to community schools. As part of the University's Neighborhood Schools program, we provide borrowing privileges to students enrolled in the AP and International Baccalaureate programs at two local high schools, Hyde Park Academy and Kenwood Academy. This program grants these students annual access to the Library and the ability to check out materials. But while their students have more opportunities to use the Library than the occasional field trip, there have been few opportunities for us to provide instruction other than orientation tours. Although we frequently encounter Hyde Park and Kenwood students at the reference desk, we find that they are struggling to use our collections.

Working with UCW, we hoped, would provide us with an opportunity to develop an integrated instruction program for public school students. UCW's proposal was to use the collection for a specific research project (a senior thesis), and the school would bring their students to the Library every other Thursday morning over a period of several months. The frequency of their visits would provide us with many more opportunities to work with the students. Our main concern was logistics. UCW wanted to bring all of their seniors to the Library at the same time. The Library has a very limited number of computers, and most of these are occupied throughout the day by our students. As part of the access arrangement, UCW agreed to have their students bring their laptop computers. In exchange, the University arranged for wireless access for the students. While this required some paperwork (each student had to sign an Acceptable Use agreement), it would allow them to freely use the Library with minimal impact on our users. With this agreement in hand, we began to work with UCW on the program.

YEAR ONE

In our initial planning meetings with UCW, we indicated our desire to work closely with the school to develop the most effective program possible. We acknowledged our inexperience teaching younger students, but emphasized how our work with

undergraduates revealed that library instruction was necessary for successful use of our resources. After our conversation, the UCW teachers agreed to schedule two instruction programs for their students.

The first program would be an orientation, with a tour and an introduction to the library catalog and basic research tools, such as Academic Search Premier. For the second session, UCW requested a program on academic honesty and training on a citation management tool, such as RefWorks. We suggested training on Zotero, an easy-to use open-source tool that can be used at home or in the classroom. We left the meeting believing that we had a very good start, and as the year progressed, we could add more instruction as needed.

Despite our plans, the programs did not turn out exactly as we had anticipated. Working with such a large group of students was a challenge. Since all of the students visited the Library at once, the sessions had to be conducted in our large conference room. While the students brought their laptops for the sessions, we did not anticipate the number of librarians necessary to guide them through the hands-on program. The three UCW teachers that attended the program did not involve themselves in the presentation as we had hoped, but remained quietly in the background. It became clear that many students were having trouble following along and their interest waned. Although some students were attentive, others caused disruptions.

After these initial programs, UCW continued to use the Library for the next several months, but we were not asked to conduct further instruction (despite our offers). When UCW students met with us at the reference desk, our interactions clearly indicated that little of what was taught in our programs was retained.

At the end of the year, we contacted the coordinator of the senior research project with a questionnaire regarding the experience. While we felt that the instruction fell short of our standards and were concerned that our inexperience negatively impacted on the program, the questionnaire indicated that UCW was satisfied. They believed that their students had made significant use of the Library, and were encouraged that they had even used the Library outside of class. They were also pleased that the students had learned to ask for assistance from our librarians. Their only complaints were that they wished they had begun their research earlier and that they felt we needed to dedicate more time to Zotero training.

YEAR TWO

Despite these positive remarks about the previous year, during the summer, we were determined to do better. So when we me met with the new UCW project coordinator in the fall, we urged a change. After highlighting our concerns, the coordinator agreed, and we proposed new goals:

1. Provide focused instruction centered on an assignment that can be completed during class time.

2. Reduce the class size substantially for better interaction.

3. Involve the teachers in the library instruction to improve student engagement and use of the library.

We began by restructuring the first instruction program. To reduce class sizes, we decided to hold three concurrent "mini" instruction programs: an introduction to the catalog, an overview of Google Scholar and JSTOR (the databases requested specifically by UCW), and a tour of the building. The students would be split into three groups, and would work with one teacher and one librarian, rotating to a new session every 45 minutes. The smaller class sizes would allow us to interact with the students. Students would be given a specific task: to find two articles and two books on a topic related to education using the databases we demonstrated, an assignment could easily be completed in the time allowed. The resulting visit was a much better experience than the previous orientation session. The students were engaged, and asked many questions. Nearly all of the students were able to complete their assigned tasks, and left with a much better knowledge of how to find resources at the Library.

To encourage teacher engagement in the programs, the Library granted borrowing privileges to UCW teachers. While the University oversees UCW, as a public school, their staff members are required to be administratively separate. As a result, their teachers do not automatically receive library access. Faculty privileges were highly desired by the UCW, and this gesture created a significant amount of goodwill. As part of the arrangement, we also volunteered to provide instruction on how the Library could be used for their teaching and professional development (UCW faculty are encouraged to engage in an academic research project every year).

To kick off the program, we arranged for the teachers to come to the Library together during their weekly staff-development meeting. However, we quickly discovered that scheduling programs with public school teachers can be difficult. While the group was to arrive at 3:30 p.m., many teachers did not come to the Library until well after 4:00 p.m. because they were wrapping up their work with students. This significantly limited our time to provide instruction, as many staff needed to leave by 5:00 p.m. We could not provide more than a basic overview of the collection and a short tour. Despite this, the teachers seemed energized by the visit, and we discussed options for them to return for additional training.

By the end of the fall quarter, the program seemed to be moving forward. The Library offered to provide programs for UCW students on using our Special Collections Department and on citing resources. We also proposed a program for teachers on the role of libraries in preparing students for college, an idea gathered from Georgetown University Library (Georgetown University Library, 2010). The offers were greeted enthusiastically. However, when the students resumed their weekly visits to the Library in the New Year, our proposed instruction programs did not materialize despite several attempts by our staff. Once again, we followed up with the coordinator to determine what happened. Were they dissatisfied?

On the contrary, our correspondence with UCW staff remained overwhelmingly positive. They were very happy with their visits to the Library. Once again, students were actively using the collection, even after school, and finding good resources for their papers. UCW students have so far checked out 136 items this year. The coordinator was happy with their work and noted their students' enthusiasm towards libraries in general increased. While the students' final projects are not yet complete, UCW views the outreach program as a success.

How do we have such different views? Much is revealed in our discussions with UCW staff. While there was real interest in engaging with the Library and making us of it resources, there was also a clear sense that the teachers were somewhat overwhelmed. The staff research projects, one reason we offered teacher borrowing privileges, were discontinued due to "unexpected challenges". One teacher described his year as a "roller coaster ride". This reminds us of the daily struggles of teaching in an urban charter school. For many teachers, a well-developed library instruction program may not be the primary focus of their teaching.

Conclusion

Was the program a success? If our aim is to help UCW students become information literate, clearly we did not meet ACRL outcomes but perhaps this goal is too lofty. While the program did not proceed as envisioned, UCW believes their outcomes have been achieved. Students who did not have a library were granted access to a top research collection. They had librarians introduce them to new information resources, leading to greater use of scholarly books and journals in their senior theses, a project designed to help prepare them for college research.

There is much to debate about academic library outreach to public schools: the appropriateness of our collections for secondary school research, our lack of certified teacher-librarians, and the larger issues of charter schools and public school funding. Despite these questions, there are distinct benefits for academic libraries to pursue such programs—and not just for the students. We found the experience was helpful for our teaching, as it made us step out of our comfort zones and examine how we design our programs for specific user groups. In addition, it provided us with an opportunity to look hard at our expectations. Successful outreach programs take time to develop and the most successful results come from collaboration based on mutual goals. But above all, outreach programs such as these remind academic libraries to look outside the comfortable walls of their institution to see the broader issues facing education in the United States today. While our small program cannot solve the problem of information access in urban schools, it reminds us that there may be much more we could do.

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