A Community Without Walls: Testing the Waters

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Abstract

In a world where so many students have turned to the web for fast, "good enough" answers, how can librarians work together to respond? One good response is academic librarians can stimulate better collaboration with school librarians in both information literacy and collection development efforts. We will discuss the challenges an academic library faced in a collaborative project with local middle and high school librarians. We will also demonstrate why this project was important, analyze what was learned, and discuss future plans to address anomalies identified in programs geared to enhance the information literacy skills of students at all levels.

Although many academic librarians may be ambivalent or hesitant about working collaboratively with school librarians to promote information literacy skills, we believe there are benefits to this collaboration. We will describe our efforts to establish such a partnership and how we added new partners to our collaboration. We will also share our experience in working with student teachers from our University who are teaching information literacy skills to the students in our community. Building teams and developing mentoring relationships can be a difficult challenge; differing academic calendars and daily schedules, access to technology, and travel restrictions are just a few of the factors affecting a positive collaboration among area librarians.

The project was funded with support from the State Library (Illinois) under a program promoting a "community resource without walls." We value this concept and continue to be eager to learn how other librarians have approached or established these relationships. Our experience has enabled us to identify critical components of successful
collaboration between school and academic librarians and we were excited about extending this knowledge through lively discussion with LOEX conference attendees.
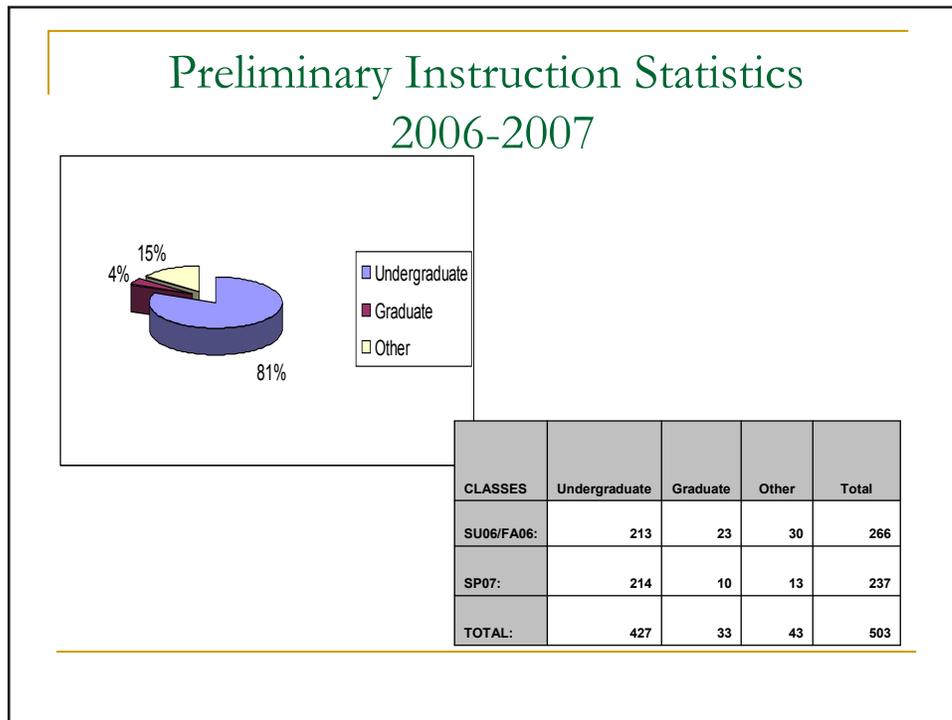
Background

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) is a vibrant, growing Metropolitan University. Our location provides easy access to professional and cultural opportunities in the metropolitan St. Louis, MO area. It has been recognized as one of the most beautiful campuses in the nation with 2660 acres of rolling hills, woodlands and lakes.

SIUE is almost fifty years old and has undergone a significant change in its population. The campus has become increasingly residential, with more than half of its student body living on campus or within the surrounding communities. 13,000 plus students are enrolled in liberal studies and professional programs, with a student to faculty ratio of 17:1

Lovejoy Library is named for the abolitionist newspaper editor, Elijah P. Lovejoy. The library has 17 professional librarians and a large paraprofessional staff. We have a healthy and growing instruction program that provides general and subject specific information literacy instruction to the campus and the surrounding community. The chart on the next page illustrates preliminary instruction statistics for 2006 – 2007.

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Figure 1

Preliminary Instruction Statistics 2006-2007

CLASSES	Undergraduate	Graduate	Other	Total
SU06/FA06:	213	23	30	266
SP07:	214	10	13	237
TOTAL:	427	33	43	503

More than half of our instruction for external groups (the "Other" category) was provided to high school students.

HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

In working with SIUE freshmen in a variety of settings - at the Information Desk, in Library instruction classes, in University Experience courses and individually - it became apparent that students had a variety of pre-college information literacy experiences. Faculty expected students to come with the research skills necessary to do college level work. Unfortunately, this was not always the case.

The overall goal of our project was to assess a baseline of information literacy skills when freshmen enter the college environment. We made the following assumptions regarding the information literacy needs of freshmen:

1. Students in all disciplines are expected to employ sophisticated information gathering techniques for their coursework.

2. Freshmen must learn critical thinking and research skills in their disciplines as preparation for a lifetime of changing information needs.

3. Their most effective learning experience in the library is usually connected to a specific information need and is often discipline specific. Examples include the preparation of a research paper or gathering documentation for a persuasive speech.

4. The information environment is too complex and is changing too rapidly to expect freshmen to acquire information literacy without a planned, systematic,

and cumulative instructional program. The hit-or-miss strategy that might have worked for students and scholars in the past is not efficient or effective.

We became increasingly concerned that students were not adequately prepared to meet the expectations of the classroom faculty. What did they learn before they came to college?

ADDRESSING OUR NEED

In 2005, the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) had a program that offered support for projects that explored "the Library: A community resource without walls." This program seemed ideally suited to our interest in getting a better understanding of the instruction our freshmen received prior to arriving on our campus. We wanted to establish a collaborative relationship with the librarians in our community. We believed an understanding of their efforts would help us to better tailor our own instruction program to the needs and abilities of our students.

We were successful in receiving a grant for our proposal, *Building a Framework for Partnership: Collaboration Among the Libraries of Madison County*.

Our goals for the project were to:

1. Initiate and share cooperative school and academic library information literacy projects that are aimed at increasing students' information literacy skills, i.e., students' ability to locate, evaluate, and use information.

2. Raise school librarians and teachers awareness of

students' information literacy needs.

3. Collaborate with faculty and school librarians in incorporating information literacy into the SIUE and participating schools' curricula.

4. Increase awareness at the academic library of middle and high school students' information seeking skills and needs.

5. Improve school library's knowledge of SIUE research models as they relate to students' information literacy skills.

6. Improve schools' knowledge of academic library programs and services as they relate to students' information literacy skills.

7. Seek funding for collaborative projects between school and academic libraries which focus on improving students' information literacy skills.

8. Collaborate to develop library instructional materials which can be modified for school assignments.

9. Develop and disseminate best practices

10. Develop a network of librarians who will partner to enhance information literacy skills throughout the county.

The Grant

Although our institution draws students from across the region and the world, we decided to begin our project on a much smaller scale and limited our contacts to the 26 middle and high schools in Madison County, Illinois. We worked with the administrators in the SIUE School of Education to determine the protocol for working with schools and school personnel in our community.

Following their advice, we communicated by phone and mail with all of the school library personnel. We also took advantage of a scheduled system library meeting, to introduce our project to the school librarians in attendance. We made site visits to more than half of the schools in the county.

Before visiting the schools, we discussed the need to gather consistent information and the type of questions we wanted to ask. Lacking personal experience in survey design, we sought the assistance of the Office of Assessment on our campus to create the survey. (Appendix A) We received the best responses to our survey through the information we collected on our site visits. Through these personal contacts, we were able to elicit more in-depth information about the learning environments of the students.

At the LOEX 2007 Conference, we solicited audience participation regarding potential problems in establishing

partnerships with school librarians. Here are some of the comments that were shared:

Will high school librarians perceive the partnership as "telling them what to do?"

Will the partnership create more work for them?

Can the partnership activities count toward professional development credits?

Will this collaboration create more problems for academic librarians? Will we be the victims of our own success?

Who will be responsible for teaching the students when they come to the Library? Will we go to their schools?

We certainly considered most of these questions when we conducted our study.

Findings

Perhaps the most significant result of our contacts was the affirmation that librarians shared common goals. School librarians were equally concerned about the information literacy skills of their students. It made our conversations easy. They were involved, as we were, in educating their faculty/teachers about the library's ability to provide opportunities to enhance student learning. A goal for all of us is to ensure that students become lifelong learners.

In talking with the librarians we discovered a common interest in networking, sharing ideas and assignments, and mentoring. We learned that there had been a turnover of many of the county school librarians and that many of the librarians had not had an opportunity to meet each other. The workshop we planned would bring them together.

Despite the commonality in goals, librarians throughout the county experienced wide ranging work environments. We discovered variations in collections, staffing, budgets, administrative support, physical facilities and equipment.

Another purpose of our visits was to share information about Lovejoy Library's programs. Many were unfamiliar with our campus and had never visited our Library or taken advantage of our services. We advised them of the opportunities to:

. Bring classes for Library tours and instruction
. Use the library collections
. Borrow resources through the Interlibrary Loan system
. Attend professional development activities on campus

Workshop

One of the major elements of our grant was to sponsor a workshop. We designed the workshop based on the information we gathered from our site visits. Because of the variance in school calendars, finding a mutually satisfactory date was our first concern.

Librarians were invited to attend the workshop through personal phone calls and letters. We used matching funds from the Friends of Lovejoy Library to provide food and parking for all workshop attendees.

The primary purpose of the workshop was to promote networking among the librarians of Madison County. During the course of the half day that the librarians could spare, we:

- Shared findings of our site visits
- Discussed available resources
- Toured the Library building
- Provided food
- Planned collaborative experiences

We did encounter some challenges in planning our workshop. The Regional Superintendents Office had a longstanding practice of holding a county wide teachers' institute on the campus of SIUE each fall. We believed this would provide a great opportunity to introduce our grant objectives to the school librarians in attendance at that meeting. However, the regional superintendent cancelled the county wide meeting and each school instead held their own teachers' workshop. We were not able to be in attendance at all schools simultaneously - so we had to revise our plans for meeting with the librarians and realized that personal contact was essential. We decided to hold a workshop at our library later in the spring. Calendar conflicts, staffing shortages in the schools and policies regarding professional development activity leave, provided additional challenges to the planning of our workshop.

POST-GRANT ACTIVITIES

We have been encouraged to continue this collaboration by the school librarians' response to our project. In our visits to the schools, we discovered that the English and Social Studies classes assigned the majority of research projects that required the use of library resources. We contacted the faculty supervisors of the student teachers from our university in these disciplines, and asked to meet with them during one of their weekly seminars. We hoped that by introducing the student teachers to the resources available for them and their students, we could affect the learning experiences of the students in the schools of Madison County. We encouraged them to make connections with the school librarians and made them aware of opportunities to use the campus library as a resource for their teaching. The positive feedback we received from these sessions with the student teachers, has encouraged us to expand this outreach to additional disciplines, for example foreign languages, fine arts and the sciences.

Starting in the fall of 2007, we will assess the information literacy skills of our new freshmen with funding from our institution as SIUE Assessment Scholars. This research builds on the study funded by our LSTA grant. The grant allowed us to begin to partner with local school librarians to strengthen and enhance information literacy education at the pre-college level. We believe that assessing the information literacy skills of new freshmen enrolled at SIUE will dovetail nicely with the collaborative efforts begun with local area school librarians. We will be able to provide those educators with a better sense of the range of information literacy skills students demonstrate as they begin their college experience at SIUE. If we can identify the information literacy competencies necessary for successful college level work, middle and high school area librarians can work within their schools to better prepare students for the challenges ahead.

LOOKING AHEAD

We acknowledge that forming these collaborative partnerships may present some challenges but we believe the future is bright. Working outside of your own institution requires crossing boundaries that may be more imagined than real. As professionals, librarians share common goals for information literacy whether they are stated in *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* or *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.* Forming collaborative relationships may not be easy. There can be hurdles to overcome, but in order for the relationships to blossom, they require cross fertilization and communication. Through our experience with this project, we believe it is worth it!

While our experience focused on academic and school libraries, it is clear that other potential partnering relationships exist. At the LOEX 2007 Conference, the question of potential partners engendered good discussion. Here are some of the partners that were identified:

Community colleges
Public libraries
System libraries
Special libraries
K-6 schools
Pre-schools
Community reading programs
Residential facilities, including nursing homes

ASSESSMENT OF LIBRARY STUDENT PREPARATION

1. **Library services offered** (Please check as many as apply.)
    Which of the following services does your library offer regularly (once a month or more)?

    ☐ Library tours   ☐ Photocopying

    ☐ Orientation classes   ☐ Interlibrary loan

    ☐ Instruction sessions   ☐ "Info Pass"

    ☐ Workshops for teachers   ☐ Internet resources

    ☐ Technology training   ☐ Internet training

    ☐ Database training   ☐ Others_____

2. **Library skill training** (Please check as many as apply.)
    What kinds of training in information literacy skills do you offer regularly (once a month or more)?

    ☐ Card catalog   ☐ Indexes (Reader's Guide)

    ☐ Electronic catalog   ☐ Author searches

    ☐ Library organization (Call numbers)   ☐ Title searches

    ☐ Boolean searching (AND, OR, NOT)   ☐ Subject searches

    ☐ Expanded and refined Boolean searches

    ☐ Formulating research questions

    ☐ General references (encyclopedias, almanacs)

    ☐ Others_____

3. **Clientele offered training** (Please check as many as apply.)
    To whom do you regularly offer library training of the sort indicated above?

    ☐ Teachers during school day

    ☐ Teachers as separate in-service

    ☐ High school students

    ☐ Middle/junior high school students

    ☐ General public adults

4. **Student use of library**
When students use your library in support of writing a research paper, what kinds of resources do you observe them using?

5. **Communication**
How do you communicate with school teachers?

6. **Subject use**
From your observations and experience, what three subject areas constitute the heaviest library use in terms of writing research papers? What do you think accounts for this use?

7. Have you personally visited SIUE library in the last three years?

☐ Yes

☐ No