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Academic Librarians and Outreach Beyond The College Campus

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Although numerous efforts have been made to enhance the literacy skills of children and youth, recent research clearly demonstrates the continuing need to develop and implement additional imaginative programs which lead to an increase in reading and reading comprehension skills. Whereas public and school media librarians have paved the way towards building successful literacy programs, academic librarians should also participate in literacy outreach programs for children and youth in order to help build these skills and encourage lifelong learning. This article addresses why and how academic librarians can help with the nation's efforts to combat illiteracy.

Literacy Research

Literacy refers basically to all activity that is linked to reading and the handling of books and information (Genisio 1998-1999, 346). Although libraries historically "reflect this value" of enhancing literacy skills (Rubin 2000, 246) with the information environment that currently exists today, reading literacy is even more critical for survival (Eyre 2003, 220). "[It] all comes back to reading and the twin thrusts of getting readers hooked early in life and providing plenty of practice...you can survive in today's world if you can type with only one or two fingers. You can survive without ever using keyboard shortcuts or realizing the full potential of your software. But, ...you are going to find survival both difficult and expensive if your reading skills are poorly developed. In this Information Age, reading and reading skills ...will enable users not just to survive, but to thrive" (Eyre 2003, 220). With regard to children and youth, research repeatedly confirms that intervention through reading programs provides positive outcomes for the development

of their literacy skills. According to Virginia Mathews, there is now clear scientific evidence that being talked to, read to, and exposed to books and to adults who read are essential to achieving full brain development, which has long been understood by librarians (1997b, 81). During early developmental years, "the effects of a poor start increase as the child grows older and the chances of success diminishes" (Mathews 1997a, 98-99). The critical years are from birth to five and 10 to 14 in terms of larger social consequences. Mathews interprets findings from a longitudinal research project on the "resilient child" by Dr. Emma Werner that suggests children at risk for developing social problems could be helped through intervention at an early age. The intervention of librarians, therefore, can help to engender or enhance flexibility, problem solving skills and a sense of identity. For example, when librarians share a story or game with a small child, they inspire and motivate that young person.

These ideas are supported by *The Indicator of the Month: Early Literacy Experiences in the Home*, A Report released on December 1, 1998 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Institute of Education Sciences, United States Department of Education. The report indicates that "participation in literacy activities provides valuable developmental experiences for young children. In addition to developing an interest in reading, children who are read to, told stories, and visit the library may start school better prepared to learn" (Wirt 1998). Another report by NCES, the *Indicator of the Month: Reading and Writing Habits of Students, Achievement, Attainment, and Curriculum*, December 1997, reveals that recreational reading boosts overall reading ability and literacy. The report found that "9, 13, and 17 year-old students who reported reading for fun at

least once a week had higher average reading proficiency scores than students who reported never or hardly ever reading for fun.” Recognizing that recreational reading contributes to reading competency, librarians are encouraged to share their own love of reading and discovery with these groups of children (Smith 1997, 84).

Involvement of the Academic Librarian in University Outreach Efforts

Librarians have always emphasized helping and serving people as well as organizing and disseminating knowledge to the community for its advancement. All types of libraries—from school media to academic—maintain these common services and continue to educate patrons in a safe and caring environment. Academic librarians, as a group, should maintain their primary mission of supporting the research and technological goals of their university. However, they can do more to contribute to other university goals, especially to those involving outreach to young people beyond their campus.

According to Richard Dougherty, former Director of the University of Michigan Libraries, “college and university librarians have for too long sat on the sidelines. They have resisted the opportunity or responsibility to reach out and become more involved with young people in their community” (Dougherty 1991, 155). Dougherty admonishes academic librarians for not doing something about the “marginal reading and comprehension skills” of youth. He states that it is “...imperative that academic librarians be associated with their colleagues’ [i.e. media specialists and public librarians] efforts to help kids become successful readers and successful students” (Dougherty 1991, 155).

Academic librarians already have a keen awareness of the cultural and educational needs of the academic community due to close working relationships with other faculty and departments on campus. They have long supported the academic community through formal instruction and the development of user-friendly access to relevant resources. Because of their obvious public service orientation, academic librarians are especially well qualified to participate in community outreach programs

such as literacy programs for children and youth. They can help promote reading for enjoyment, the use of library collections and consequently, lifelong learning.

A Commitment to Children

Academic librarians are committed to multiple efforts involving literacy programs that reach beyond their immediate academic community. For example, ALOUD, the Academic Library Outreach Discussion Group (<http://www.iwu.edu/~sdaviska/aloud/>) met at the American Library Association’s 2004 Annual Conference in Orlando, Florida. The group’s focus is “...the creation, planning, implementation and assessment of outreach services and initiatives in academic libraries” and the sharing of “strategies for outreach, foster K-16 librarian connections and create partnership opportunities”. The group of academic librarians who met in Orlando discussed, among other things, “...how to build an outreach program, the development of an outreach culture, and outreach activities already tried by academic librarians, including those involving children”. In developing the programs on literacy, librarians strive to promote reading for enjoyment, reading for relaxation, and reading to escape. In addition, involvement over an extended period of time, rather than a single session, will help foster feelings of trust between the librarian and the young people. The bond between the librarian and young person developed through this early intervention might help to discourage future social problems. It is a rewarding experience for the academic librarian as well as the child (Mathews 1997a, 99). Although outreach programs at the university level represent a range of library departments, including reference and instruction, collection development, preservation, information technology and cataloging, there is widespread agreement that outreach reaps many personal and professional rewards. This is especially true since service activities help meet academic tenure and promotion requirements at many colleges and universities.

Academia’s Emphasis on Children and Family

Between 1996 and 2000 the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-

Grant Universities conducted surveys and issued a report to help define the direction of public universities. Among the major findings in the Kellogg Commission report was the need for universities to become “engaged institutions” whereby the university would redesign its teaching, research, extension and service functions to become increasingly involved in their local communities. The engaged institution discovers new ways to move beyond outreach and public service and takes the university’s expertise and resources off campus. The recommendation to become an engaged institution was supported by the thirty-six universities that responded to the *Kellogg Public Higher Education Reform: 2000* survey. The Commission then made the following recommendations that universities:

- Increase efforts to conduct multi-disciplinary research on societal problems
- Find incentives for faculty to be engaged with society (Byrne 2000, 6)

As a member of the Commission, the former University of Florida (UF) President Charles E. Young initiated an action agenda in the UF 2002 Strategic Plan which was based on the Commission’s reports. The Plan considered current academic strengths; the needs of the state based on demographic, economic and environmental changes affecting it; and the need for the university community to “assist the state in developing economically [and] addressing social and environmental problems” (Young 2002, 20). Dr. Young recommended a greater emphasis on the involvement with families, children and youth in order to ensure success for all people in the state of Florida. This engagement and outreach to children and families would become a major component within interdisciplinary programs. One significant aspect of this research involves community service and public outreach programs administered by faculty. In particular, UF’s Office of Community Service enables “active community participation and social responsibility central to the educational environment at the university. The Office supports students, staff, and faculty interested in promoting service, activism, and community-based research to address needs identified by the community” (Office of Community Service, UF 2004).

The University of Florida, ranked among the top 16 national public universities according to the 2005 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, has embraced greater engagement on a community-wide basis. A number of top universities have also affirmed the need for an increased emphasis on improving the well being and education of children within their local communities. Some universities meet the challenge by prioritizing families and children through health-related education for youth; through service to children and families in terms of environmental and literacy programs; and through the creation of partnerships with government and other agencies. The following examples reveal outreach efforts by other large, public institutions:

- University of California offers research and other types of public service through the Community Outreach Partnership Center with children, youth, and families among the Center’s highest priorities (<http://la.ucla.edu/>).
- University of Michigan Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning promotes community learning programs, and engages “students, faculty members, university staff, and community partners in a process which combines community service and academic learning in order to promote civic participation, build community capacity, and enhance the educational process” (<http://www.umich.edu/~mserve/>).
- University of North Carolina Community Outreach and Education Program, Center for Environmental Health and Susceptibility improves public health programs and policy by facilitating communication among Center researchers and North Carolina community organizations, teachers, students, public health officials and businesses (<http://www.sph.unc.edu/cehs/index.htm>).
- University of Wisconsin Morgridge Center for Public Service promotes citizenship and learning through service within local, national and global communities by students, faculty and

alumni
(<http://www.morgridge.wisc.edu/about.html>).

- Pennsylvania State University provides numerous Penn State summer youth programs, continuing education and other programs (<http://www.outreach.psu.edu/>).

Incentives for the Involvement of Academic Librarians

Dr. Young outlines the library's basic role in the Strategic Plan: to provide the academic community the resources necessary to achieve its research mission; to help students gain information and computer literacy skills including an emphasis on a collaborative, active learning environment; and to promote and advance the University in the area of technology. When Dr. Young incorporated elements of proactive engagement and service into the Strategic Plan, he indicated further ways for the University to maintain its reputation and address state needs. He encouraged his faculty to meet university goals such as service to community and families through university-wide collaboration and the participation of thoughtful, intelligent and experienced faculty, including library faculty who also hold academic rank and faculty status.

Participation in engagement and outreach programs helps address community needs but also provides career development incentives. The Strategic Plan includes one of the faculty initiatives recommended in the Post-Kellogg Commission survey: "institute a career instructional track for faculty whose primary assignment is in the areas of instruction, pedagogical development and service" (Byrne 2000, 26). Thus, one incentive for participation in outreach activities is to satisfy the service component of the tenure and promotion criteria for academic faculty, including librarians. Tenure is that condition attained by the faculty member in an academic department through distinction in teaching, research, extension, or other scholarly or creative activities, service and contributions to the University and the profession {F.A.C. 6C1-7/019(a)}

(<http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/pers/facultyeval/tenure.html>).

The UF Libraries' *Career Development Handbook* articulates qualifications for tenure and promotion. They are specifically based on the performance of professional responsibility, professional development and scholarship, and professional service activities. The criterion of Service to the library, the university, the state and the profession includes participation in engagement activities beyond campus. A nominee must have a strong service orientation and meet a high standard of involvement. Participation in literacy initiatives beyond campus is a positive means by which faculty can meet the service criterion and also reflect the university's commitment to support children and families in Florida.

Examples of Partnership Programs

The entire community has a stake in helping raise the literacy levels of American youth. The programs developed by librarians and others in the community can help reinforce the importance of reading imaginative literature to develop the heart and mind of young people. Human beings learn and develop through story. Knowing that successful reading is also essential to the achievement of information literacy, how then have academic librarians become directly involved in helping young people prepare for the rigors of postsecondary education or to achieve success in a job?

An examination of the relevant literature published between 1980 and 2005 revealed numerous efforts by librarians to design, implement and assess quality outreach library programs which brought children and librarians together, not only for the express purpose of increasing literacy skills but also for the development of a passion for reading for pleasure. Such programs have been implemented all over the United States. Numerous successful programs continue to be initiated by public librarians and school media specialists. However, given the state of literacy today, there are not nearly enough programs in operation to help young people. Our professional colleagues in the schools and public libraries have indeed embraced the outreach efforts of academic librarians when it has been offered. Parents have also responded

enthusiastically to efforts by academic librarians to become involved in the literacy development of children and youth in their surrounding communities. We wish to highlight a range of possibilities for adaptation by academic librarians and also call attention to cooperative ventures reported by numerous librarians in the professional literature.

A Parent-Child 6th Grade Reading Club, organized by a group of tenured and untenured academic librarians at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida began with one librarian's desire to introduce kids to the great escape that a good book provides. Tenured and untenured librarians volunteered to read the assigned award-winning young adult novel each month, to attend a monthly planning meeting the weekend before the club meeting, and to participate during the monthly two-hour club meeting as enthusiastic facilitators of book discussions. Another possibility would be to involve the school media specialist or the public librarian, and perhaps hold the monthly, evening meetings at the local public library or in the school library. A program like this might result in greater use of their collections, and hopefully, their own unique programs. Such cooperation might also lead to greater collaboration and support in the future. It would be mutually beneficial in terms of visibility and advocacy for libraries.

Project Booktalk is a cooperative venture between the Alachua County Library in Gainesville, Florida and the University of Florida's College of Education. The purpose of this program is to reach those preschool children from low-income families who are placed in Family Daycare homes until they are old enough for Head Start. Disadvantaged kids have no access to expensive books, or to someone who will read to them. With this program, volunteer university students enrolled in children's literature classes take a bag of ten children's books, conduct a story hour, leave the books for the center staff to use with the children during the week and then return the following week with new books, returning the previous week's books to the library. Children benefit from exposure to quality books and for many of them this is their only pre-school experience with books. We know that "...children from families that read to them on a daily basis may receive

more than nine hundred hours of reading instruction before they enter kindergarten at age five..." (Lamme 2002). Project Booktalk helps these at-risk children develop language skills and book awareness, necessary components for success in reading.

SaddleUp for Reading was developed as a reading and activity program for kids by a reference librarian at the University of North Texas in conjunction with a Youth Services Librarian at the Emily Fowler Public Library in Denton, Texas. This unique program emphasized the subject of horses. More than 50 children between 8 to 12 years of age participated in the monthly book discussion meetings. The 90 minute program held in the public library the last Saturday of the month was organized into three sections: a book talk, followed by a program activity and a guest speaker. Although the principal goal was to encourage reading, other activities included book talks, a live telephone interview with an author whose works were read by the participants, and volunteer guest speakers from the community. A Reading Derby, a log of all materials read by individual students, was among the successful features of this reading program for upper elementary students. It was organized so that each child would record the length of time spent reading, and would therefore be inspired to read even longer. Advertising the reading program in the local newspaper resulted in generating interest among adults. Several community members contacted the library to offer their time as volunteers to help or to act as speakers for the kids (Antonelli 1997, 4). One of the popular guest speaker segments consisted of a live phone interview with a children's author.

Teens in Academe: Donald J. Kenney, as the Head Reference Librarian in the University Library at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, singled out academic librarians for unfairly viewing high school students as "...unruly and troublesome..." and for engaging in "...a disturbingly subtle discrimination against YA users of academic libraries..." The increasingly heavy and legitimate use of academic libraries by these secondary students is the result of the national pressure for students to excel and to take International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses. Such courses require the use

of a greater variety of research materials than are usually found in the local public or school library (Kenney 1989, 181). "One key to establishing a positive relationship between young adult users of an academic library and its staff is through outreach programs to local school systems and public libraries." Successful programs initiated by academic reference librarians for high school students could include: regularly scheduled student orientations, written guides and handouts pertinent to their needs and made available to the schools, scheduled thorough reference interviews and appointments with library subject specialists, etc. Academic librarians need to remember their responsibility toward this group. These same high school students may very well be their future college and university students.

Reaching the Unserved, Libraries Can Attack Illiteracy says Sue McCleaf Nespeca who served as Youth Services Coordinator in Youngstown, Ohio. Ms. Nespeca is primarily interested in the children who do not/can not walk through a library door. She is keenly interested in the barriers children face: parents who are stressed to their limit, so pressed for time that many do not read to their children or bring them to the library to borrow books. Many lack transportation; others are simply not motivated to go to a library. She maintains that librarians must go to the unserved children who are found in day care centers, community centers, homeless shelters, home schools, hospitals, etc. Academic librarians can help by volunteering to assist with the development of "... after school literacy and reading/skills programs for unsupervised school children during after school hours...Only by joining efforts will we begin to reach the unserved child" (Nespeca 1990, 22). University and college librarians may not have the freedom to work with kids during the typical

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workweek but they certainly can organize programs in the evening or on a weekend. Consider holding a program in one of the many shelters, centers, or local hospitals where children often find themselves for lengthy periods of time. Local service organizations can help provide financial support for multiple copies of a variety of children's books and young adult novels, and would be more than happy to do so. The same goes for local businesses that already have a history of supporting local youth soccer and baseball or basketball teams. Finding financial support to cover the cost of paperbacks and food should not be a problem because most businesses are indeed quite generous when it comes to supporting youth activities.

Conclusion

An engaged university understands the need to take its expertise and resources beyond the walls of academe and into the community. As a result, strategic plans often reflect this goal to encourage university faculty, including academic librarians, to develop and participate in community outreach programs and partnerships. In the programs that have been discussed in this paper, outreach focuses on the reading and reading comprehension skills of children and young adults. Such programs have traditionally been provided by school media or public librarians. However, we believe academic librarians should support the development of these skills. It is apparent that outreach fulfills the university mission of service. Outreach also affords university faculty an opportunity to fulfill one of the criteria of tenure and promotion while providing an undeniable benefit to children and families within the local community.

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