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Solo But Not Separate: Preparing 21st-Century School Library Professionals Who Can "Go It Alone"

Becky Pasco
University of Nebraska at Omaha, rpasco@unomaha.edu

Preparing 21st-century School Library Professionals Who Can "Go It Alone"

Preparing school librarians for a diverse array of 21st-century educational environments is a daunting task. Faculty in school library preparation programs send candidates out into sparsely populated rural areas, dense urban settings, and everything in between. Some candidates will provide services and resources in updated, modern facilities, while others will operate in tiny, tattered little corners. Some new professionals will ply their trade in technically rich arenas, while others will work in technically starved settings. Regardless of place and space, resources and services must be developed and delivered in a proactive and productive manner for the P -- 12 community. School library preparation programs are charged with getting all candidates ready to operate effectively in any and all of these scenarios. This is no small endeavor, as many, if not most, of today's school library candidates will "go it alone."

The "solo librarian" is a bit of a misnomer. School librarians are first and foremost teachers, and "teacher-librarians" are surrounded by and work with educational professionals of many flavors. Daily, school librarians teach, coach, demonstrate, interpret, inform, and enlighten P -- 12 students right alongside faculty colleagues. Faculty in school library preparation programs work hard to enhance their candidates' ability to integrate themselves into the instructional fabric of the school. School librarians who understand the importance of collaboration in its many forms will never "be alone."

Where "solo" does come into play is when one acknowledges other roles and realities -- beyond that of teacher -- required of 21st-century school librarians. While a school librarian's colleagues might recognize, appreciate, and even applaud a school librarian's skills as a master teacher, they often don't know or see the myriad of activities going on behind the scenes or even right in front of them! Skilled school librarians run their programs in a manner that renders the "scaffolding" invisible, and our mythical propensity for having things in order often results in professionals going it alone" for parts of many journeys.

The ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians (AASL 2010) provide school library faculty with a series of skill, knowledge, and dispositional targets to ensure candidates are able to design and direct school library programs that provide the kind of engaged learning and information environments that will help make the Standards for the 21st-century Learner (AASL 2007) a reality for P -- 12 students. Faculty in school library preparation programs who align their coursework with current indicators of "quality school library preparation programs" will address five standards that require them to develop candidates who:

Teach effectively (Standard One: Teaching for Learning); Promote reading in all forms, formats, and for all reasons (Standard Two: Literacy and Reading); Understand the impact of access on knowledge creation (Standard Three: Information and Knowledge); Articulate passionately the value school libraries add to their P-12 patrons' lives (Standard Four: Advocacy and Leadership); and

Manage their information, human, and fiscal resources (Standard Five: Program Management and Administration) in support of the academic, personal, and professional growth of all stakeholders.

To communicate, model, and promote in candidates the skills and dispositions in the new ALA/ AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians, faculty are called upon to continue a strong emphasis on collaboration between school librarians and their school and community stakeholders to ensure candidates leave with a heightened resolve to be an integral part of activities that impact P -- 12 students' academic achievement and personal success. If it does take a village to raise a child, 21st-century school librarians will position themselves in the middle of the town square -- not "just outside" in the suburbs or alone on the outskirts. Well-prepared candidates might find themselves logistically solo, but will know to proceed with a strong commitment to never "work solo." Educators of future school librarians are called upon to:

Produce candidates who embrace a team approach to developing literacy in all its many forms through the use of information resources, information tools, and a robust and relevant information literacy curriculum -- Well-prepared candidates might find themselves as the sole information expert on the team, but will resist the complacency of "thinking solo" and proceed with a commitment to create an entire community of information experts.

Develop candidates who have not only an appreciation for, but are driven to provide ethical and equitable access for all members of their learning environments -- Well-prepared candidates might find themselves as the "sole" individual assigned to make decisions about the access to and use of information resources, but will move quickly towards an inclusive, collective approach to the development of policies, procedures, and services that support their patrons' needs.

Demonstrate how networking can provide important and meaningful support by requiring candidates to interact with a variety of other information professionals in public, academic, and special libraries, as well as with members of their state, regional, and national library organizations -- No school librarian needs to "feel solo" when leagues of professionals are willing, able, and waiting to lend an ear and a hand as needed.

Help candidates think strategically and lead with purpose by providing them with the knowledge, tools, and motivation to conduct community and other types of analyses to ensure decisions are based on data that accurately reflects the characteristics of their diverse communities -- Well-prepared candidates who go" into their communities won't "grow" into solo librarians.

Faculty members often serve the dual roles of both teacher and mentor in preparing 21st-century school librarians, and both roles are crucial in the development of candidates for the complex and political world of library and information work in today's P -- 12 schools. The two roles represent a continuum of preparation and support for frontline candidates who need strong partners in their professional journeys to diminish any perception or feeling that school librarians work "alone."

Faculty members, in their role of teacher, carefully cultivate the public-service and technical skills necessary to direct a productive and proactive school library program. Faculty members, in their role of mentor, can nurture the miens of locus, leverage, and leadership that are equally important to their candidates' success. Faculty who think "outside their campuses" and extend their reach beyond their

classrooms to establish formal and informal networks for candidates after they graduate can be part of the solution to "solo."

For school libraries to not just survive, but to thrive in the slippery educational, economic, and political terrains of the 21st-century, candidates in school library preparation programs must come out of the chute with the skills and dispositions necessary to help P -- 12 students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other community stakeholders successfully negotiate today's dynamic information environments in pursuit of high-stakes personal, academic, and professional targets. Diminishing federal, state, and district support tied directly to shrinking budgets may increase the chance that today's school library candidates might have to "go it alone" to provide the services and resources important to their patrons' success.

To ensure school libraries retain their "place at the table" (McCook 2000), school librarian preparation programs must resolve to turn out candidates able to move from adequate to accomplished in a short period of time. This challenge will require passion, resilience, and determination on all our parts, but school library preparation programs whose candidates join the frontline embracing their chance to be unique, autonomous, and independent will have a more meaningful and enjoyable professional journey than those who see themselves as solo, isolated, or alone.

Works Cited:

American Association of School Librarians. 2007. "Standards for the 21st-century Learner." <www.ala.org/aasl/standards> (accessed August 20, 2011).

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McCook, Kathleen. 2000. A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building. Chicago: ALA.

Standards for the 21st Century Learner can be viewed or downloaded for free at www.ala.org/aasl/standards.

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Becky Pasco is a professor and coordinator of Library Science Education Programs, University of Nebraska Omaha, and currently serves as chair of the AASL NCATE Coordinating Committee rpasco@unomaha.edu.