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# Don't Wait for Them to Come to You

## Partnering with Student Support Services

*Katie Bishop, University of Nebraska at Omaha*

AT ANY INSTITUTION a positive culture is a critical element in overall organizational effectiveness. In my four years at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) Libraries I have seen the transition of a dean, an associate dean, two directors, and multiple faculty and staff. Notwithstanding this turnover, the library staff members have successfully come together to create a new student-centered, inclusive, and engaged library culture. Many factors went into this change, and the leadership turnover actually served to strengthen our library organizational model into one that is more open and communicative. However, the culture changes in my unit, Research and Instruction Services (RIS), launched with my Assessment in Action (AiA) project.

### Initial Collaboration Project

While RIS was doing many things right, with a robust information literacy instruction program, an established liaison network to academic departments, and a strong collections strategy, I believed we could do more to help underserved populations on campus. At UNO the number of first-generation, ethnically diverse, or military-affiliated students increases each year. Student support services assist these populations considered at risk for attrition. Partnering with one of these established programs offered an opportunity for providing information literacy and other library services specifically to underrepresented or vulnerable student populations. However, I not only wanted to develop a solid partnership, I also wanted to have evidence of the value of this type of outreach and support. Because we already had a roving research assistance program for academic departments, suggesting roving to a student support services office made sense both to library administration and to program staff. In addition, this project addressed UNO's strategic plan to be student-centered and would potentially address a perceived unmet campus need, an important factor when planning any new initiative.<sup>1</sup> After looking at a few programs, Project Achieve (our federal TRIO Student Support Services Program) seemed like the most optimal fit.

As a TRIO program, Project Achieve supports between 180 and 200 students qualifying as first-generation, limited-income, or disabled. The staff there serve as advisors, review essays, provide tutors, and develop programming. This high level of staff involvement from the partnering office is ideal because it primes students to take advantage of additional services (such as help from a librarian).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, students in the program often spend several hours a week studying or socializing in the Project Achieve office, so bringing library services to them made sense. Ultimately I wanted to answer this question: What is the effect of having a librarian embedded in a student support services office on student confidence when conducting research and on their use of and attitudes toward library resources and staff?

To answer this question I roved to the Project Achieve office three hours per week. Prior to starting my roving hours, I sent out a pre-assessment survey asking students to self-assess their use of the library, feelings toward library staff, and perceived research abilities. I followed this up with a post-assessment survey of the same questions toward the end of the first academic year of roving. Fifty-five surveys were collected for the pre-assessment and thirty-six for the post-assessment. I found that high satisfaction with research services staff is correlated with an increase in student confidence when conducting research, and that students in the Project Achieve program reported higher confidence in finding and using resources after a librarian was embedded in the PA office. In addition, the count of roving reference transactions at Project Achieve demonstrated an unmet need. These transactions accounted for 27 percent of the total numbers. In other words, this small group of students accounted for nearly a third of the total roving statistics compared to roving reference at colleges such as Education, Public Administration, and the College of Business.<sup>3</sup> Roving reference may be more successful when partnered closely with other campus staff. Even though this case study was quite small, finding that familiarity and satisfaction with library staff correlate to student confidence when conducting research was key to expanding outreach efforts at the library going forward.

Furthermore, the relationships I developed with the students in Project Achieve felt stronger and more meaningful than the relationships I have with the students who come to my office hours or email me for consultations. Project Achieve students seek me out at the library even though I am not the specific librarian for their major. When they need help from a subject specialist, they ask me to make the introduction for them. I've been invited to their research presentations and college graduations. After breaks I get warm greetings and even hugs from these students when I first see them. By working with Project Achieve I've been able to attend their awards luncheon and see students interact with deans and the chancellor. I've volunteered with the campus Habitat for Humanity group, which is run through Project Achieve. Students seemed to appreciate the informal time spent sharing a meal or in activities such as hauling garbage and huddling together on a rickety porch during a thunderstorm. Having roving hours in an office where students come to hang out, take a break, and chat with their friends allows for bonding moments where I can fully share in successes and provide support through challenges. The relationships students form with peers, staff, and faculty on campus help students become more engaged and help improve retention. By closely partnering with a student support services program, librarians may be able to develop deeper, more meaningful relationships with students, providing social or emotional support in addition to educating; these relationships are associated with greater rates of engagement, which leads to higher persistence.<sup>4</sup>

I had always suspected that outreach to student support services and other student groups could be beneficial to both the program offices and the library.<sup>5</sup> However, we didn't have a structure in place for creating and maintaining these additional partnerships. Creating a small project gave me data that demonstrated an association between librarian involvement and student success. Armed with my data from my partnership with Project Achieve, I worked with my then-director on outreach to other student support services programs, again looking at programs working with underserved students. With offices right down the hall from Project Achieve, the Thompson Learning Community (TLC) was the next logical partner. Students enter this program after being awarded a scholarship for students with a demonstrated financial need. Unfortunately, roving turned out to not be the best intervention because in TLC, advising and tutoring are stronger at the peer level than at the staff level. This did not deter me, though. I knew there was a way to make outreach work at the different programs once I understood the need of each student population.

## Creating an Outreach and Instruction Librarian Position

In the meantime, about a year into my initial project, my director retired and I was hired to assume that role. Because of the positive relationships I developed through outreach to student support services, I wanted the replacement for my position to prioritize outreach. The library dean had retired a semester prior, and the associate dean was also transitioning. With an interim dean coming in, I knew I had to convince my unit and the other unit directors of the benefits of aligning my open faculty line away from traditional liaison work and toward outreach and instruction. The conclusions from my AiA project provided me with a positive case study, but I needed to also demonstrate that this move is the logical next step for liaison librarians.

Reviewing job descriptions, academic literature, and conference presentations provided me with solid evidence supporting the creation of this type of position. Outreach positions have been advertised in a variety of forms for decades, but traditional reference positions are shifting more toward outreach to specific student populations.<sup>6</sup> Liaison roles have been adjusting over the past five to ten years, with some moving away from the traditional collections, reference, and instruction to more functional, skill-based models.<sup>7</sup> In addition librarians are using more user-focused techniques to understand the skill level and needs of student researchers.<sup>8</sup> Reaching out and engaging library users is considered a key part of many of these new and realigned positions.<sup>9</sup> In a study of academic library strategic planning, 71.4 percent of the plans examined contained some form of outreach, marketing, or public relations as a goal.<sup>10</sup> By presenting the current trends in liaison librarianship to my unit and current library leadership, I was able to get support and approval to realign each subject specialist position as it opens. The new Outreach and Instruction Librarian is now responsible for coordinating outreach to dual enrollment and other school groups; participating in student involvement events; collaborating with Student Affairs, Student Government, the UNO Book Store, and other partners on student-centered outreach efforts; and developing programs to engage student learning communities.

## Expanding Partnerships with Student Support Services

When the new Outreach and Instruction Librarian arrived, we worked together to develop an outreach plan for the upcoming year. Past outreach efforts had been conducted by different library staff working with a variety of groups across campus, so we needed to coordinate those efforts. In addition, there were several opportunities for new partnerships, but we had to be strategic about the next steps to ensure success. The outreach plan involved reviewing current efforts, identifying key areas of expansion based on campus and library priorities, and developing a set of best practices for implementing new partnerships and programming.

As part of the AiA program I learned to value both qualitative and quantitative data. Therefore our best practices involve a multimodal assessment effort including interviews with support services staff, exit slip surveys, attendance counts, usage statistics, and roving reference counts. While numbers give a snapshot of use, the qualitative data from student support services staff and students tells a richer story of the impact of our outreach. The outreach plan and assessments are further outlined below.

The first step to any new partnership is a needs assessment. This initial interview helps keep the expectations of both program staff and librarians in line with the type of help we can provide.<sup>11</sup> In addition, understanding the mission and outcomes, student population, and current programming offered helps us tailor interventions to match student expectations. Programming and interven-

tions developed based on the needs assessment are evaluated by looking at the quantitative statistics and by a follow-up interview with the program staff at least once every academic year.

With an outreach plan in place, I directed the Outreach and Instruction Librarian to maintain the close partnership with Project Achieve, look into ways to improve collaboration with TLC, and reach out to the Office of Military and Veteran Services (OMVS). These programs were the best starting places because they already had working relationships with the library to various degrees. I had partnered with Project Achieve and TLC, and OMVS staff had met with the directors to explore collaboration opportunities. UNO prides itself as being one of the country's top military-friendly institutions as recognized by rankings from the *Military Times* and *U.S. News and World Report*, so OMVS is a key strategic partnership for the library. In addition, TLC and OMVS followed the Project Achieve model of being high-touch programs working with students needing an extra level of help. Whether because of a financial need in the case of TLC or because of other unique concerns as active military or veterans, these more vulnerable students benefit from additional support; we wanted the library to be a vital partner in helping provide it.<sup>12</sup>

During the needs assessment with TLC we learned that the students meet with peer advisors, complete regular study hours, and participate in a Passport events program that requires second-year TLC students to attend a specific number of campus events. In response to this information, RIS staff developed a series of undergraduate workshops that were listed as TLC Passport events. To help with peer advising and study hours, we reserved library tables for TLC advisors and students.

Through a separate assessment of Composition II final papers, we knew that undergraduate students seemed to generally need more information literacy instruction, particularly on evaluating sources. With this need in mind, the workshops were open to any undergraduate student who needed help with research. However, we marketed the workshops heavily both through the Passport program and to Comp II instructors. Ultimately, the workshops were well attended both by TLC students and by Comp II students whose instructors had assigned them to attend for extra credit. We learned that while historically it had been difficult to get students to attend workshops, piggybacking on other programs and courses has a significant impact on attendance. We had five workshops during the fall 2016 semester with sixty-five students attending, mostly TLC students (roughly 28 percent of the students participating in the second-year program). Encouraged by this success we streamlined the series down to three for spring 2017 and had fifty-seven attendees, mostly Comp II students.

Alongside our partnership with TLC, we were also developing strategies for working with the Office of Military and Veteran Services. After the needs assessment interview, the Outreach and Instruction Librarian worked to develop programming that would best meet the needs of this particular student population. She created a LibGuide and offered roving at the OMVS office. Roving was less successful based on transaction counts, so after the follow-up interview with OMVS staff, her current intervention is a research checklist presented at OMVS student orientations, along with a training plan for OMVS staff on library research skills so they will be more equipped to help their students at the point of need. The follow-up conversations also helped OMVS realize that their student population was underachieving in composition courses, so they will be adding students enrolled in composition to their advising check-ins.

In addition OMVS staff came to the library and offered training on how to best serve military and veteran students and their families. We've incorporated this type of training from other offices on campus as well. We've hosted two Safe Space Workshops provided by the Gender and Sexuality

Resource Center and will soon be hosting a workshop from the Accessibility Services Center. All members of the library staff are encouraged and invited to attend. These train-the-trainer events both help make the library a more inclusive space and also remind all library staff that we are committed to supporting our students in every way possible.

## Expanding Outreach Initiatives

Along with specific interventions to various student support services programs, we've developed a more coordinated outreach effort across the library. Hiring an Outreach and Instruction Librarian has vastly increased our broader outreach efforts. With this new priority, three of the RIS associates now report directly to the Outreach and Instruction Librarian, creating a focused team. Prior to hiring this position and restructuring, we had a few pockets of general student outreach, but developing new outreach programming was haphazard at best. It was difficult to maintain our display cases, and outreach projects were often abandoned. With this new team in place, outreach initiatives are not only completed, but are also assessed for their success and viability. For each event we record how many library staff participated, time spent, partnering organization, audience, and attendance. Projects are tweaked, rethought, or sustained based on results.

Our largest broad outreach initiative is participating in De-Stress Fest, events held during Prep and Finals weeks developed by Student Involvement. In the past we had held a few events at the library, but these events were not well advertised so attendance was often low. By creating a partnership with Student Involvement, we were able to tap into their budget and marketing. We were supplied with games, bubble wrap, and other crafting supplies. This left us with funds available for additional events. All of our programming made it on the De-Stress Fest calendar, and our events were well attended. De-Stress Fest events have library-wide participation, with staff and faculty from every unit participating in some way including hosting game nights, helping out during a crafternoon (an afternoon of crafting activities), or finding new programming for our interactive video wall.

As part of the AiA project I gained an appreciation for assessing and evaluating programs to make sure they are not only successful, but also sustainable. After our first semester partnering on De-Stress Fest events, we realized that events that take a lot of prep and staff time may not be viable even if they are well attended. For example, when we had multiple crafting nights, students did attend and enjoy these events, but we had to staff each station for hours over the course of several days. By scaling these events down to one or two afternoons or evenings, we are still accomplishing a fun outreach activity, but aren't placing an undue burden on staff. To make up for the loss of a few active events we increased our passive events, handing out pages of coloring sheet, squares of bubble wrap, pipe cleaner "Fidget sticks," stuffed animals for students to cuddle, and mini Zen gardens created using our makerspace. Over the past academic year we've had forty-two general outreach events for UNO students with nearly 3,000 students attending the events. This doesn't count students engaging our interactive displays or our informal whiteboard assessments. By expanding outreach to include fun events, we hope to increase students' social engagement with the library. Because my AiA study found a small correlation between student satisfaction with library staff and overall confidence when conducting research, we wanted students to view the library as a welcoming environment with friendly staff who care about students. Positive student engagement, including cultivating a supportive environment, is associated with higher retention rates for first-year students and with six-year graduation rates.<sup>13</sup>

## Campus Recognition

Our new dean started on the same day as our new Outreach and Instruction Librarian. Throughout the search we wanted to make sure the new library administrator understood our growing focus on students and our culture of inclusivity, creativity, and openness. Over the past eighteen months the dean has embraced this culture, agreeing to open and staff a more accessible lower-level entrance and extending library hours to 24/7 during parts of Prep and Finals weeks. Furthermore, promoting and strengthening partnerships and collaborations has become a priority on the UNO libraries' new strategic plan.

This spring the UNO Student Government recognized the library's newly energized focus on outreach to students. Representatives partnered with our Outreach and Instruction Librarian on an event for National Library Week. Student Government supplied coffee and doughnuts, and we held a social media contest with library selfies to win a study space over finals stocked with goodies. During its awards ceremony, the Student Government presented a letter of commendation to our dean and also gave him the 2016–17 John Christensen Student Service Award recognizing faculty who go above and beyond for students outside of regular instruction. This acknowledgement of the library's student-centered culture further validates our outreach efforts and encourages us to form new partnerships and explore new services.

## Biography

**Katie Bishop** is the Director of Research and Instruction Services and Humanities Librarian at University of Nebraska at Omaha. She holds an MA in American Studies from the University of Iowa, and an MS in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois. Her research interests include assessment, change management, and instruction. Reach her at [kbishop@unomaha.edu](mailto:kbishop@unomaha.edu).

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