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## Academic Librarians and Student Affairs Professionals: An Ethical Collaboration for Higher Education

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### Abstract

Librarians' ethical directives point toward a collaborative effort in providing support for students outside the classroom. Academic librarians often focus on collaborative relationships with teaching faculty at institutions of higher education, but they should also form partnerships with other higher education professionals. Currently, few such partnerships have been reported in the literature. Staff who work in student affairs, including academic advising, career counseling, and other academic support offices would benefit greatly from librarians' expertise. Specific suggestions for building such collaborations are given, and proposals about future research and possible collaborations are offered.

### Introduction

Librarians' ethical directives and standards point toward a collaborative effort with teaching faculty in providing support for students (American Library Association., 1995; American Library Association., 2005) as do the professional standards of student affairs professionals (American College Personnel Association,

2004). Presumably, although these professional standards refer to collaborating with teaching faculty, they also apply to other higher education colleagues who are involved in supporting student learning in all of its many facets. Indeed, the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Standards for Libraries in Higher Education (2005) specifically advises that "[l]ibrary staff should work collaboratively and cooperatively with other departments on campus" (paragraph 28). As a matter of fact, the ACRL describes itself as "dedicated to enhancing the ability of academic library and information professionals to serve the information needs of the **higher education community**" (emphasis added; ACRL, 2005, paragraph 1). Similarly, the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards recommends that its members "[c]ollaborate and share professional expertise with members of the academic community" (2004).

Academic librarians and student affairs professionals in higher education share many of the same goals and values. In addition to the primary goal of supporting student learning, both academic librarians and student affairs professionals are advocates for all the students at their institutions so it seems natural that a partnership should develop. However, although both professions promote and document successful collaborative relationships with academic departments and faculty ((Dorskatsch, 2003; Evans, 2001; Fried & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Inc, 1998; Pulliams & ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services, 1990; Raspa & Ward, 2000; Swaine, 1999) there is scant literature to suggest collaborations between academic librarians and student affairs professionals (Poole, 2003) or to document existing partnerships (Evenbeck & Foster, 1996). So why aren't they collaborating more? Perhaps these partnerships exist, but they have been ignored in the literature.

### **Expanding Collaborative Relationships**

Academic librarians and student affairs professionals often focus on collaborative relationships with teaching faculty at institutions of higher education, but they should also form partnerships with other higher education professionals, especially with one another. Why does the literature in both professions seem to focus exclusively on partnerships with teaching faculty? Academic librarians are naturally focused on information literacy, and the natural conduit for this academic competency is the classroom. But the reasons may go deeper. Like it or not, there is a status hierarchy in higher education and teaching faculty are at the top, both at institutions that focus on research and those that value teaching and learning. They also have regular sustained contact with students through their courses, advising and research. So it is natural for other higher education professionals to reach out to teaching faculty first. However, there are smany other academic professionals in higher education who have the skills and competence to enhance students' learning, both inside and outside of the classroom or lab.

One possible explanation for why these academic professionals might not be collaborating is lack of awareness of one another's roles and capabilities. Academic librarians offer abundant resources to student affairs professionals but their expertise is not taken advantage of often enough. Another obvious answer is lack of time and other resources, especially support from higher level administrators. Perhaps some student affairs professionals do not take full advantage of this likely collaboration because they are simply very busy with an overwhelming caseload of students and often unaware of librarians' rich background in researching, evaluating and obtaining resources as well as their proficiency with technology.

Institutional differences, such as size, structure and focus may also inhibit such partnerships. In some two-year settings, counselors wear many hats, including academic advisor, career guide, and personal supporter (Pulliams, 1990). They could obviously use the librarian's help. But often these counselors are so focused on their primary responsibilities that they do not seek out obvious resources. Frankly, there are also "turf wars" in academe which might create artificial barriers to collaboration. Student affairs professionals may feel that students' lives outside the classroom are their responsibility. In lean budget times, when cutbacks often hit support services first, many academic professionals feel the need to define and defend their areas of service to students. This can inhibit collaborations that might actually expand both parties institutional strength and value.

### **Current Status of the Partnership**

Currently, few such partnerships have been reported in the literature. Do they exist? A collaborative effort between teaching faculty, librarians, academic advisors, and media specialists at an urban Midwestern

university aimed at retaining nontraditional and underrepresented students (Evenbeck & Foster, 1996) uses instructional teams to address the needs of under prepared students. These collaborations are aimed at first year students who we know are most in danger of dropping out. Although librarians and academic advisors are both part of the team, there is no indication that they specifically collaborate together. However, the article does make an important point about how overwhelming both technology and academic planning have become to both academic professionals and students. Obviously, librarians, with their expertise in information technology, can be of great assistance in sorting through the complex and vast resources available and help professional staff members evaluate them.

Studdard (2000) describes the benefits of library faculty volunteering to serve as academic advisors for students who have not declared their majors, both to students and to librarians. Jesudason (2000) reports on a collaborative effort between the athletic department academic advisors and instructional librarians at a Midwestern university and describes the e-mail reference services program that they have implemented. These articles provide further suggestions for how librarians can provide support and collaborate with other academic professionals. Librarians need to extend their outreach efforts to include student affairs professionals and to advise them of the rich resources that the academic librarians have to offer.

### **Lending Librarians' Expertise**

Staff who work in student affairs, including academic advising, career counseling, and other academic support offices would benefit greatly from librarian's expertise. Poole (2003) urges community college librarians to reach out to student affairs professionals, citing their common values and experiences in their work with students. In particular, she notes the reluctance of counselors to adopt and adapt to technology, which has certainly been noted elsewhere (Casey, 2000; Lewis, Coursol, Khan, & Wilson, 2000; Myers, Gibson, 1999). There are many ways in which student personnel in both two-year and four-year settings can benefit from the librarian's expertise with technology in terms of offering web-based services, communicating effectively via email, and other remote services to today's students who insist upon a high level of technology rich services (Poole, 2003).

Beyond the obvious areas of information and technology, academic librarians can offer support to student affairs personnel in terms of library resources pertinent to their field. They can offer state-of-the-art information on learning styles to tutors. Their experiences with virtual reference services can help personal and career counselors anticipate potential pitfalls as they embark upon the cutting edge field of cyber-counseling (Poole, 2003). Certainly, their up-to-date information sources can help career development centers keep their facts and figures about employment opportunities current. Librarians can help writing center staff members become more efficient in their assistance to students who need help with specific format or style requirements and other technical aspects of assignments.

In return, many student affairs professionals are trained in interviewing skills that could enhance librarians' reference interviewing skills in zeroing in on what exactly students are looking for (Poole, 2003). Student affairs professionals can offer librarians more opportunities for contact with students in nontraditional ways. Not only will this increased exposure to students benefit librarians in terms of better advertising the vast array of services the library has to offer, it also gives librarians more personal satisfaction in terms of more sustained interactions with a broader population of students. Studdard (2000) describes the process of watching students grow and learn throughout their academic careers. If a librarian teams with an academic advisor to help a student evaluate information about selecting a major, that librarian might become a reliable source for that student attempting to find information for other purposes, such as academic papers. This same student might rely on the same librarian again, working in conjunction with a career counselor, to begin to make career choices and plan for career success as they look toward graduation. The librarian becomes another trusted advisor and mentor for the student, another great source of information on campus, a wise sounding board, with accurate, up-to-date information to share.

### **Conclusions and Future Research Possibilities**

Obviously, collaborations between academic librarians and student affairs professionals would greatly benefit both parties. The first step would be to survey both fields to find out if such partnerships already exist. White and Wilson (1997) posed similar questions and followed up by surveying a random sample of 1000 school counselors about whether or not partnerships currently existed between school counselors

and teacher librarians, and to discover how existing collaborative relationships could be strengthened. They found that seventy-one percent of the school counselors who responded reported benefiting from a partnership with the school librarian. So perhaps similar collaborations exist between academic librarians and student affairs professionals in higher educational settings but are missing from the literature of both fields. The above mentioned survey (White & Wilson, 1997) might also provide suggestions for how existing collaborative partnerships can be strengthened.

White and Wilson queried school counselors about needed services that their teacher-librarian was not currently offering and about services they currently did provide that were particularly helpful. In response to the former category, 348 "services needed" were identified; in response to the latter category, 454 "services provided" were reported. A similar list might be gathered from student affairs professionals. White and Wilson specifically noted that teacher-librarians should be conscious of possible challenges to potential partnerships in terms of "communication, collaboration and interpersonal skills" (p. 11). These areas of concern echo attributes needed for successful collaborations noted in the literature on partnerships between teaching faculty and librarians.

In another article discussing the theory and practice of collaboration between school library media specialists and teachers, Monteil-Overall (2005) argues that a fully-developed collaboration goes beyond coordination and cooperation. She contends that a true collaboration has a much higher level of engagement between the participants and involves "a trusting, working relationship between two or more equal participants involved in *shared thinking*, *shared planning* and *shared creation*... Through a shared vision and shared objectives,... opportunities are created that integrate subject content and information literacy by co-planning, co-implementing, and co-evaluating students' progress..." (emphasis in original, section A, paragraph 7). In order to engage in collaboration at this level, Monteil-Overall notes the need for collegiality, congeniality, respect, reciprocity and trust in order for an effective collaboration to develop. She also identified two factors, time and the administrative support, that can act as either enabling or inhibiting conditions. It makes sense that these factors might also effect collaborations between academic librarians and student affairs professionals. As Monteil-Overall points out, a true collaboration "is the process of *shared creation*: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own" (emphasis in original, section A, paragraph 2). Once such a partnership develops, the shared goals and vision lead to a level of understanding that facilitates proficient communication. Laying the groundwork together, partners "know where each other are [sic] coming from."

Monteil-Overall's (2005) statement about the importance of administrative support and time is also critical in terms of providing funding for collaborative workshops to form or strengthen partnerships between academic librarians and student affairs professionals. These trainings could be opportunities to exchange information and to raise awareness of common issues, conduct frank discussions about ways to improve collaborative relationships, and establish goals and measurable outcomes for a successful partnership that would be mutually beneficial and ethically professional.

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