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Tapping into student networks

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Claudia Ruediger and Sally Neal

How do we extend the library's reach? We know that when students are working on assignments and projects, more likely than not, they will turn to their peers for help. Students surveyed in a recent study reported turning to friends or classmates 61 percent of the time when they needed help using the Web.(FN1) Let's face it, librarians are not our students' first pick! Our campuses are a hubbub of student interaction, a literal social soup, yet librarians often stand on the sidelines. By venturing out of the library and jumping into the soup, we can tap into the daily lives of students and grow new ways for them to get to know us, the library, and the library's resources.

CAMPUS LIVING UNITS AS NETWORKS

Across campus, down the road, or next to the library, there are vibrant campus communities librarians seldom enter; these are the campus residence halls and living units. They are our students' homes. Many college students, particularly first-year students, live in campus housing. Students spend a lot of time there sleeping, eating, socializing, Web surfing, and yes, studying. In a sense, campus housing forms the basis for informal learning communities and offers librarians an often untapped opportunity to weave the library and basic information literacy skills into students' daily lives.

Residence life programs often guide a campus' total residential environment: from housing to programming to community building. Enhancing academic growth is frequently part of their mission, so it is not unusual to find student-staff who live in the residence halls and living units and have some type of peer mentor or peer advisor responsibilities. These students might be academic mentors in predominantly first-year student dorms or students in charge of programming or community building for a particular floor, or scholarship chairs in Greek housing. Whatever their exact role or title, these students are part of the daily social milieu of our students' campus lives. They are in influential positions and are part of a natural student network librarians can tap.

USING STUDENT NETWORKS: AN EXAMPLE PROGRAM

During the summer of 2000, then librarians at DePauw University (a Midwestern liberal arts school of approximately 2,100 students), we began to investigate ways to more fully integrate information literacy opportunities into the daily lives and activities of our students. With the proliferation of online resources and easy campus-wide access to these resources, we recognized that many students still came to the library, but in a virtual context. We wanted students to know there were real librarians they could call on, and we wanted to give them an opportunity to get to know us. We initially thought, if students could get to know us personally, then they would more likely feel comfortable calling on us--the experts--in time of need. Reinforcing that the library offered them many helpful services and resources was obviously another goal. Our initial idea was simply to offer workshops and drop-in sessions in the residence halls, where the venue would be more informal and convenient for students.

Residence Life staffs, we learned, are constantly looking for ways to enhance academic programming in campus housing. As we talked and exchanged ideas with our own campus staff, the director of housing and residence life and the assistant director of Residence Life, we noticed an added benefit. Two units that rarely interact, the library and residence life, were getting to know each other and learning more about each other's resources and services. Residence Life

was also able to help us gain some insight about our students, such as acquiring a better understanding of their study habits. With their assistance, we crafted a program geared to the nuances of our own on-campus students. Residence Life pitched in and gave us some real nuts and bolts help, such as doing publicity for our programming. This saved us time and capitalized on their student savvy. They were better able to target publicity, knowing where to hang flyers and when to send out e-mail distributions. Residence Life, we discovered, is a wonderful library campus partner, with whom librarians share some key complementary interests.

We decided to focus our attention on first-year students. To support this new programming idea, Residence Life paired us with their Academic Peer Assistant Program (APA). Academic Peer Assistant (APAs) are "...upper-class student leaders who live in the residence halls and serve as academic resources and mentors to first-year students."(FN2) Their role was to create a supportive living and learning community in the residence halls. APAs became an integral part of our outreach programming, providing publicity, attending workshops, and most importantly, serving as trained peers able to assist fellow students with basic library and research information needs at the point of need, whether it be midnight or 8 a.m. Sunday morning.

During APA training week prior to the fall semester, we met with the APAs and provided them additional hands-on training in the use of the library's Web site and resources, so they would be better prepared to serve as a resource to other students. These training sessions also provided the APAs time to get to know us. Additionally, we had just created a virtual library tour geared to concerns and needs of first-year students, and the APAs were also introduced to that tool. The virtual tour became a valuable resource APAs could use and suggest to fellow students.

Once the fall semester got underway, we offered informal drop-in sessions in the residence halls' computer labs. The goal of these sessions was to introduce students to librarians, the library as a physical space, and the mechanics of accessing a handful of core electronic resources. The tool used in these sessions was the virtual library tour. Thus, both librarians and the APAs used the same tool, reinforcing its usefulness and relevance to first-year students. The drop-in sessions were offered at various times of the day and evening. Throughout the academic year, we kept in contact with both the Residence Life directors and the APAs via personal contact and e-mail. This ongoing contact offered the APAs support and gave us feedback. While the drop-in sessions ended up not being as well-attended as we had hoped, the relationship forged with the APAs proved to be a worthwhile endeavor, albeit short-lived. Both authors accepted positions at other institutions and the project was not carried beyond its first year. When we left, we looked at ways to bring this program to our new institutions and continue to improve upon the concept.

ADAPTING THE PROGRAM

The program we developed at DePauw is adaptable to other institutions. At one of our present institutions, Southeast Missouri State University, a group of students similar to APAs called Community Advisors (CAs) was easily identified. At Southeast, a campus of approximately 9,000 students, CAs serve a very supportive role. And like many other institutions, most first-year students at Southeast live on campus.

The CAs are undergraduate students who live on each residence hall floor and act as resources, facilitate student development, and provide programming "... for student education and interaction."(FN3) Again this is a group of influential students who are part of the daily social sphere of students living in the residence halls. Residence Life at Southeast welcomed interaction with the library. At approximately 75 students, the size of the CA group makes developing a program a bit more challenging, but it was still fairly easy to arrange a brief training and discussion session with the CAs during their training week in the summer of 2002

and to keep in contact with them throughout the school year. As with the APAs at DePauw, the CAs were also introduced to an online tool--the Kent Library Walking Tour--that they could use and refer fellow students to 24/7.

BENEFITS

Tapping into a natural student social space and network, such as campus living units, can open up new ways for librarians to integrate information literacy into our students' daily lives and activities. Creating a relationship with a group of students who are engaged in mentoring roles in residence halls is of particular value. These students are well-positioned to influence other students, from how they view the library to what resources they use when working on class assignments and projects. They serve dual roles, as both a peer and a leader, particularly in relation to first-year students, and have access to fellow students in ways library instruction programs simply do not. Partnering with other campus units, such as Residence Life, can enhance library integration on campuses large and small. They can help us in numerous ways to understand our students, enabling us to shape programs and activities to suit the way our students live.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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FOOTNOTES

STRENGTHS OF THE INITIATIVE

- * Going to the students.
- * Training a core group of students who can then direct their peers.
- * Allowing a group of students to get to know librarians on a more personal level so they can promote us informally to peers.
- * Students can learn from each other and be library ambassadors.
- * Peer assistance.
- * Giving students instruction and tools to help each other.
- * Students have an accessible peer contact within their own community to turn to concerning library questions.
- * Students as conduits for attitudes, ideas, and information about the library and librarians.