

Does the “new library model” fit small- and medium-sized libraries?

Shippensburg University believes so

by Berkley Laite

In this and other publications we have read about the changes in our traditional library environments that are being brought about because of the pressures of technology, digitized information, and our constituents' demands.

We have read about K-16 cooperation at Wayne State,¹ partnerships with campus and community organizations at the University of Louisville,² and the concept of an Information Commons instead of the traditional Reference Department³ at the University of Arizona. All of these libraries are large, and one might be tempted to say, “Oh well, those are big libraries with big staffs. We can't do that!”

Shippensburg University is a state-owned university in southern Pennsylvania that enrolls approximately 7,000 students. We decided it would be possible to do similar things on a smaller scale. It isn't the size of the institution or the size of the staff that makes creative cooperation happen. It is the energy and the leadership of the administration that moves the library into new areas. Three things are necessary:

- the creative ideas;
- the commitment of one or two individuals to the ideas; and
- the commitment of the administration to support those individuals.

At Shippensburg University library (which has eight librarians) we, too, have been keenly aware of the information demands going unmet outside of our building (faculty unfamiliar with e-journals, school and public libraries needing to communicate with each other, migrant families completely unaware of the Internet, senior citizens struggling with the Web, and on and on).

We have also learned that all the “library knowledge” that we want to pass on to our users is becoming less and less important to them as their thinking becomes more and more Web based (Why doesn't our OPAC look like Amazon.com?).

As we sit at the reference desk behind a bold sign proclaiming “Ask Us Anything,” we certainly are not addressing any of the audiences outside of our building. Even putting a button on the library's Web page advertising “Ask A Librarian” only reaches a minimum number of our patrons. It is clear to us, as it is to most in our profession, that we must leave the building, build bridges, and offer services in unconventional ways.

Forming a consortium

Since Shippensburg University, as part of its mission, “works closely and collaboratively with other organizations at institutional, pro-

About the author

Berkley Laite is reference services coordinator at Shippensburg University in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, e-mail: bhl@ship.edu

grammatic and individual levels to develop common goals, share resources, and invest cooperatively in the future of the region," I felt there was support for some extensive outreach activities.

We began with the idea of initiating a local consortium. I approached Madelyn Valunas, dean of Library and Media Services, with the idea of contacting all of the librarians in our county to ascertain what interest there might be in forming a cooperative group. I received her support and sent out a mailing.

In May 2000, 26 librarians from Franklin County responded and we met. There were librarians from four school districts, the Franklin County Library System, the Chambersburg Hospital library, and three academic institutions: Pennsylvania State Mont Alto, Shippensburg University, and Wilson College.

Everyone at the meeting agreed that we needed to learn more about each other, to help each other, and to communicate with each other. At this meeting, we chose the name Library Consortium of Franklin County (LCFC) and decided to create an electronic list (lcfc-l@ship.edu) and to post a Web page (<http://www.ship.edu/~library/lcfc/>).

Grant proposals

Since that initial meeting, LCFC has submitted two grant proposals to the State Library of Pennsylvania. The second proposal is currently under consideration. This proposal asks for funds to purchase virtual reference librarian software from Docutek™ so that member libraries can share expertise. After investigating our reference traffic we discovered:

- The Franklin County Library System (FCLS) serves a population of 129,033 with six libraries and a staff of 65. In 1999, FCLS headquarters (with two professional reference librarians) answered more than 7,200 reference questions.

- The Chambersburg Area School District's 22 libraries serve a population of 8,657. During the 1999–2000 school year, these librarians responded to 17,000 questions.

- The Greencastle-Antrim School District's four libraries, with a staff of three full-time librarians and four part-time aides serving a population of 2,897, answered 5,250 questions.

- Shippensburg University's eight librarians, serving a student body of 7,000, answered nearly 2,200 reference questions each semester; approximately five percent of the questions are received and answered by e-mail.

It seemed obvious that we could help each other. The number of questions answered by staff in this consortium represents the value that patrons place upon library service. By sharing expertise and allowing our patrons to deal directly with other librarians, we can only add further value to our library service.

Public library cards

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provides a collection of databases from five different vendors to all school and public libraries under the name "Power Library." Some of the databases are also subscribed to by Shippensburg University, but not all. Therefore, university students do not have access to them unless they have a public library card from their hometown library.

Since 18 percent of our Pennsylvania students come from Franklin County, we suggested to the Franklin County Library System that we encourage students in our library instruction classes to get library cards and that we take the students' applications for the cards. This idea was eagerly accepted.

Going to the schools

Two university librarians have been regularly making presentations to high school faculty during in-service days, providing Internet instruction to middle school students, and offering online reference service to all school districts.

Offering programs

The library organized a program that qualified for continuing education credits for school librarians. An audience of 57 librarians and school administrators heard guest speaker John Emerick, director of School Library and Media Services for the Pennsylvania Department of Education, discuss findings from a 1999 study entitled "Measuring Up to Standards." The findings demonstrate how students' reading scores can be directly linked to the quality of the libraries in the school district.⁴

Beyond the consortium

Word has spread beyond the Franklin County borders about the proposal for the virtual reference librarian software, and librarians in neighboring counties have expressed an interest in participating. Adjacent county public libraries have also expressed an interest in our taking library card applications for students from their counties. In fact, it has become necessary to consider a name change for the consortium so that it represents a larger regional focus.

More than reference service

Shippensburg University cannot duplicate the physical construction of the Information Commons that is being built at the University of Arizona, but we can bring in outside services. We shared the Information Commons concept with our Learning Assistance Center, which provides tutors and remedial assistance to the student body. As a trial, the center placed tutors in the library with regularly scheduled hours. This was so successful that the staff responsible for tutors will be moving into the library this fall with the tutoring staff.

Other constituents

The library has offered sessions to senior citizens through the Life Long Learning Center, to migrant workers' children via the public library system, to the campus secretaries through the Shippensburg Association of Educational and Office Professionals, and to local K-12 librarians.

Two librarians, Douglas Cook and myself, have conducted all of these activities, which brings me back to the last sentence of my first paragraph: "Three things are necessary: the creative ideas, the commitment of one or two individuals to the ideas, and the commitment of the administration to support those individuals."

I've described the ideas and the commitment. The third part is the support of the administration. Valunas, the dean of the library, believes that outreach and cooperation are so important that "outreach activities" has become part of my job description. I am encouraged to seek opportunities for cooperation and collaboration, while being certain that our library can support whatever I am pursuing.

In addition to the dean, my colleagues have given me their blessing by assuming more ref-

erence desk duty and library instruction. Without their support and their belief that what I am doing is important, the library could not be involved in so many activities. They all believe that because no library, or librarian, can independently satisfy all information needs of patrons, it is necessary to build collaborative relationships for the purpose of meeting our responsibilities.

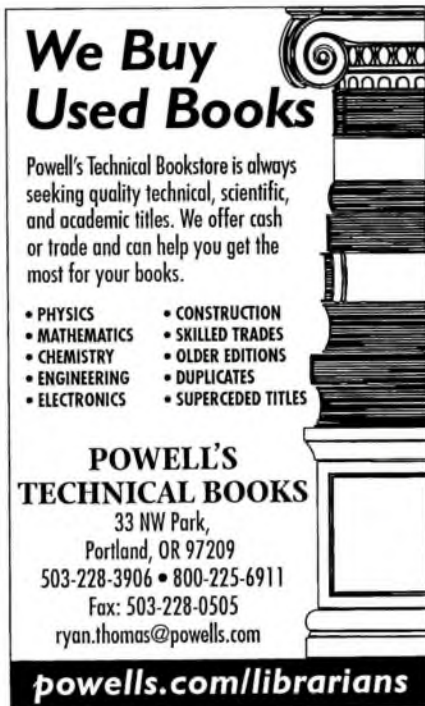
Notes

1. Janet W. Nichols, "Sharing a vision: Information literacy partnerships (K-16)" *C&RL News* 62, no. 3 (March 2001): 275-85.

2. Hannelore B. Rader, "A new academic library model," *C&RL News* 62, no. 4 (April 2001): 393-96.

3. Prototype Information Commons, University of Arizona, <http://dizzy.library.arizona.edu/library/teams/pic/pic.htm> (18 May 2001).

4. Keith Curry Lance, Marcia J. Rodney, and Christine Hamilton-Pennell, *Measuring Up to Standards; the Impact of School Library Programs & Information Literacy in Pennsylvania Schools* (Greensburg, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Citizens for Better Libraries), 2000. ■



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