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Information literacy leadership

The traits we didn't know we had

The role of teaching librarians has naturally evolved over the decades as information literacy (IL) has been defined, redefined, and conceptualized from a set of standardized skills to an interconnected group of understandings. To build effective instruction programs, teaching librarians quickly develop numerous competencies. The successful teaching librarian learns to communicate effectively with students, collaborate with disciplinary faculty across the campus, and develop innovative approaches for teaching IL. Over time, although perhaps unknown to the teaching librarian, all of these skills that create good teachers also create good leaders.

The authors gave a presentation titled *Becoming Leaders, Creating Leaders* at LOEX 2020. Early in the session, we issued an informal poll to gauge attendees' self-perceptions regarding leadership. About half of the attendees felt fairly strongly that they played a leadership role within their own libraries. However, far fewer perceived themselves to be leaders across their broader organization. This may not be surprising, but it is interesting to reflect how we, as a profession, might move IL forward if we recognize our leadership capabilities.

This article offers some of that reflection as we describe GEARUP with Information Literacy, a multiyear, campus-wide initiative, and discuss four leadership traits we cultivated in the classroom and rely on as we work to advance IL in a meaningful way.

Teaching librarians as leaders

Teaching librarians are well-positioned to be-

come effective communicators, collaborators, and advocates for information literacy. Sharon Mader wrote in 1996 that "Instruction librarians have a natural affinity toward leadership positions because the leadership qualities identified are those that instruction librarians generally exhibit or develop in order to be successful at their jobs."¹ Leadership qualities and their connection with teaching and instruction in libraries include traits like being innovative, self-reflective, collaborative, and communicative.² ACRL's *Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians* provides a detailed description of the role of leadership within the profession. According to the document, "the teaching librarian demonstrates leadership both in leading by example and leading across campus contexts."³

With in-depth IL knowledge and pedagogy, teaching librarians should be guiding and directing conversations about IL across disciplines so that librarians are true teaching partners, moving their institutions forward with new initiatives, while identifying and connecting with existing institutional goals. There is cer-

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tainly evidence within the field where librarians model effective leadership to embed IL within the curriculum,⁴ assignment design,⁵ and connect IL with university accreditation standards.⁶ These are excellent examples, but we know there is opportunity for our profession to grow as leaders, and as evidenced by our LOEX poll, we believe many librarians still struggle to see themselves as leaders. It was a struggle for us as we found ourselves, somewhat abruptly, pulled into leadership roles.

IL Ambassador Program

The creation of the GEARUP with Information Literacy program at Northern Kentucky University (NKU) provides an example of how teaching librarians can harness the competencies they develop through their daily work to take a leadership role on campus. In 2017, NKU issued a call for proposals for the university's next Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), a campus-wide, multi-year student learning initiative required by all schools accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). We (the authors, along with our colleague, Mary Chesnut) submitted a QEP proposal focused on improving students' IL and a year later, found ourselves leading the campus-wide initiative, branded as GEARUP with Information Literacy.

A key part of the initiative is the creation of an Information Literacy Ambassador program, in which selected disciplinary faculty collaborate with librarians to integrate IL concepts into their courses and serve as IL advocates on campus. To educate and support ambassadors, we implemented a Faculty Summer Institute—an intensive and active three-day workshop where ambassadors engage with the Framework, backward design, and form connections with librarians.⁷

Beyond leadership for the ambassador program and summer institute, we also play a major role in the broader implementation of GEARUP. We found ourselves giving multiple presentations across campus to introduce GEARUP to various constituencies, working with the university's marketing department

to promote GEARUP, developing training opportunities relevant to various groups, and creating a campus-wide information literacy assessment plan. To do this successfully, we called upon leadership traits we had developed as teaching librarians.

Key leadership traits

Communication

We had already developed skills to advocate for IL in our roles as teaching librarians. We had a history of working with many disciplines, from first-year composition to graduate nursing programs, where it was easy to make a connection between IL and course content. However, we now had the attention of disciplines we had not often, or sometimes never, worked with to embed IL. Now, we were able to build on our existing communication skills to articulate that all students, in all disciplines, require IL skills for lifelong learning.

Beyond faculty, we also had to communicate with administrators, staff, and student groups to promote GEARUP and the value of IL. Our experiences working with various disciplines, student populations, and faculty in teaching one-shot sessions, aided us in being flexible with how we presented information. Having developed communication skills while working with diverse student groups during one-shot sessions, we were equipped to effectively impart the importance of IL.

Risk taking

As teaching librarians, we often take risks, frequently trying new active learning techniques—usually in one-shot sessions with students we have never met before—without knowing whether the activity will be a success. We willingly provide instruction in subject areas where we have limited disciplinary knowledge, trusting our own expertise will see us through. We reach out to faculty we don't know in departments we have not worked with before, knowing that our efforts might be ignored. We know we have to be willing to try, and fail, if we are going to develop as teachers and support our students' IL development.

Proposing a library-led QEP was a significant risk. We knew if our proposal was accepted, it would mean the library would be in the campus spotlight in a way that it had not previously been. And the stakes are very high, for if implementation is unsuccessful, significant problems arise for the university's reaccreditation. Additionally, we recognized that not everyone would welcome our efforts or agree with the decisions that we were making. For example, at one meeting to introduce GEARUP to a group of faculty, we had to make our presentation about this new campus-wide initiative immediately after hearing a discussion from members of the group that they were tired of new campus initiatives. Although situations such as this were challenging, we were able to call upon our previous experiences taking risks, and being willing to fail, to support our efforts to take on this greater leadership role.

Organizing the Information Literacy Ambassador program and designing and leading the Faculty Summer Institute also represented a type of risk. When we began promoting the ambassador program, we had no idea whether we would solicit enough interest to make it work. And, while teaching IL concepts was familiar to us, our primary audience for instruction had always been students. For the summer institute, our audience would be faculty, and we would need to venture into the realms of instructional design and faculty development. We filled the curriculum for the first three-day institute with a variety of activities, without knowing whether those selected as ambassadors, some of whom were from disciplines we had never worked with before, would be willing to engage in the ways that we hoped.

Team building

Team-building skills develop naturally from active learning classrooms where we might guide groups through a task. We ask students to solve search problems or discuss the concept of authority in groups. We become adept at gently nudging less-productive groups toward engagement and structuring discussions so that quieter voices will emerge. Ad-

ditionally, the organizational structure of instruction programs generally encourages team building within a unit. IL rarely falls to a single librarian, rather a team of librarians work together to ensure consistency of student learning. Finally, a successful teaching team should extend beyond our library colleagues. We learn to collaborate with teaching faculty to ensure we are working toward the same learning goals.

GEARUP relies strongly on team building and requires a great deal of collaboration and year-round support to ensure faculty cohorts are energized and inspired. The institute's curriculum was designed with team building in mind, incorporating multiple opportunities for faculty to engage in groups, contribute ideas to shared documents, and find connections between disciplines. Together, ambassadors work in groups to discuss the six core concepts in ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy, they brainstorm together to consider barriers (bottlenecks) as to why students struggle with research, and they compare learning outcomes to help each other integrate IL in their individual classrooms. From the beginning of an ambassador's year, we want to develop a sense of community among the cohort. We schedule meetings and workshops throughout the year, not only as touchpoints between ambassadors and librarians, but as a way to continue learning. Each additional workshop or meeting has a purpose or theme to be discussed so that there is structure throughout the year.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence, like any of the other traits listed, didn't happen for any of us immediately. As we developed our communication and team-building skills, in addition to taking risks, our self-confidence gained momentum. As novice librarians conducting one-shot lessons, it becomes clear that the information we share with students is extremely valuable to their success. We have worthwhile knowledge and skills to help students not only with research assignments, but with lifelong learning and critical thinking. Positive feedback from faculty regarding their students further

bolsters this confidence in our abilities and instruction.

In the implementation of GEARUP, self-confidence was key while talking with groups we had rarely interacted with previously, like administrators. This often took place in formal, structured meetings, which made the experience all the more formidable. Remembering that we have valuable knowledge and abilities that help create successful student learning experiences, we were able to trust ourselves and our abilities.

Recommendations to develop leadership

Novice teaching librarians will naturally develop leadership skills early on in the classroom, but conscious efforts can be applied to intentionally develop or enhance existing skills.

- **Communicating:** Develop an elevator speech so that when you communicate with anyone in your organization, you are better equipped to explain the importance of IL. For example, you might develop a talking point about how incorporating IL concepts will save an instructor grading time if their students are submitting better quality research.
- **Team building:** In the classroom, build your team-building skills by using collaborative technologies so that students work together to learn concepts. For example, post a question on a shared Padlet regarding the definition of peer-review or analysis of a news source. Allow small groups to brainstorm an answer, providing them an opportunity to solve the problem together.
- **Risk taking:** Commit to trying one new active learning technique each semester or using a new technology. Volunteer to provide instruction in a discipline where you lack familiarity, or for an audience that you don't usually work with. For example, you could organize an IL workshop for graduate teaching assistants or instructional designers.
- **Self-confidence:** Get involved in a campus committee, even one that may not directly relate to your role as a librarian. For example, if your university has a faculty

senate or a staff congress, volunteer to be a representative. Look for opportunities where you can start to take a more prominent campus leadership role.

The role of teaching librarians has certainly evolved, but the connections with leadership have always been there. Take some time to be intentional about your own development, focus on developing one or two key traits, and, in turn, you will see your self-confidence grow. Pretty soon, you'll find yourself leading in places you might never have imagined.

Notes

1. *Becoming Leaders, Creating Leaders* at LOEX 2020, loexconference.org/files/loex2020_presentation_becomingleaderscreatingleaders-2.pdf.
2. Sharon Mader, "Library Literacy," *RQ* 36, no. 2 (1996): 193, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20863103>.
3. Sharon Mader, "Library Literacy," *RQ* 36, no. 2 (1996): 192-197, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20863103>; Laura Saunders, "Librarians as Teacher Leaders: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities" (conference paper, ACRL, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2011); ACRL (2011, March 30-April 2, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).
4. ACRL, "Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians," April 28, 2017, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/teachinglibrarians>.
5. Tiffni A. Travis, "Librarians as Agents of Change: Working with Curriculum Committees Using Change Agency Theory," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 114 (2008): 17-33, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.314>.
6. Rachel Wishkoski, Kacy Lundstrom, and Erin Davis, "Librarians in the lead: A case for interdisciplinary faculty collaboration on assignment design," *Communications in Information Literacy* 12, no. 2 (2018): 166-192, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2018.12.2.7>.
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