

Katie Maier-O'Shea

Lessons from the fiction desk

Becoming a better academic librarian at the public library

Academic librarians are a loyal group. Like many, I committed to working in colleges while in graduate school and stuck with it. So after more than a decade of urban, academic librarianship, it is surprising that a suburban, public library has been one of the most significant influences on my career. After moving to the suburbs a few years ago, I decided to use my professional experience to connect with the community by volunteering at a local public library. I did not predict that it would teach me how to be a better academic reference and collection management librarian. It showed me that my concentration on academe was actually limiting my exposure to innovative library practices. It also offered a glimpse into the library experience many students have before entering college.

My first realization was how difficult it is to obtain a volunteer position. After submitting applications at three area libraries, I heard from the Arlington Heights Memorial Library (AHML) in the northwest Chicago suburbs that I had made it to the waiting list to become one of approximately 200 individuals who volunteer there each year. A few weeks later, I was offered a spot working Saturday afternoons at their busy Fiction, Music, and Movie desk. Working so hard to find a position at a public library seemed ironic after I so meticulously avoided public library courses throughout graduate school. When the new course catalog was released each semester, I quickly narrowed my choices by drawing a line through any course title containing the words public, children, or cataloging. As a result, my knowledge of

public libraries was limited and dated.

The public library environment was worlds apart from my familiar, academic territory. A couple million items circulate annually at AHML, compared to just over 40,000 at the small, private college where I work. During my shifts at the public library, there were a large volume of brief queries. At my college reference desk, I generally field a handful of reference questions per shift, but the answers are more in depth. The primary focus of academic reference is to show students how to do research, while many public library patrons approached the desk with lists of titles to find for them. Phone requests at the public library are heavy, as well. Within minutes of a patron's call, the staff members and I pulled their requests from the stacks, put them on the reserve shelf, or sent them down to the drive-up window. I was impressed by this well-oiled system even though it felt completely different from how I envisioned "librarianship."

The hectic feel at the public library desk was compounded by my lack of familiarity with popular titles. I quickly realized I knew almost nothing about current fiction or what Oprah thought people should read. With such a high number of popular titles, the AHML collection changes constantly. Fortunately, I was always paired with a library employee, all of whom showed an almost encyclopedic knowledge of current titles. I must admit, however, that occasionally I

Katie Maier-O'Shea is associate professor of bibliography at North Park University, e-mail: kmaier@northpark.edu
© 2010 Katie Maier-O'Shea

cheated and answered a reference question at the public library fiction desk just to remind myself that I do, in fact, have library skills. In time, I adjusted to the pace of the fiction desk and my knowledge of popular titles improved. I never quite reached the skill level of the public library employees, but I did take away a few lessons that I applied to my academic library work.

Prioritize change. The foot traffic at the fiction desk was not the only fast-paced thing at the public library. Service desks, holdings, and displays changed on a regular basis, and procedures were updated accordingly. New types of materials such as video games and Playaways were purchased and marketed without years of research. At colleges, things generally go in “academic time.” Set against the backdrop of century-old colleges and faculty careers that stretch a lifetime, even the most gradual changes may seem sudden. Students, however, are generally young, adaptable, and live in a world of constant change. Because they are in college for a few short years, they do not cling to the familiarity of how things have been done in libraries for years. To students, change is not as jarring as it might be to faculty, and not changing could harm the chances of engaging them. Therefore, openness to change—no matter how small—is essential in academic libraries.

Like most small, private academic colleges, our budget does not allow us to physically overhaul the library on a regular basis to keep up with user trends. Since I began my volunteer work, I have attempted to bring the same spirit of change that students might know from public libraries to the academic library. This ranges from spending a bit more time and money on new book and media displays near the library entrance, to signage advertising new collections and databases in the bathroom stalls of Old Main. Changing displays creates a unique visual experience each day a student enters the library, and marketing in the administrative building responds to the relative low circulation statistics of staff. The collection is kept fresh

through more aggressive weeding, and a small “experimental” budget line was added to purchase items more commonly found in public libraries. These modest budget lines for small changes present minimal financial risk, and the lessons learned are worth the cost if they do not succeed.

Rethink “service.” When I tell professors about the drive-up service at the public library, some are appalled. To those who equate libraries with their college days, a drive-up bypasses the beloved experience of strolling through the stacks. For college students who are physically able, I agree that looking for books on the shelves should not be avoided, but not because it creates fond memories. As a teaching institution, it is important for students locate the item and the stacks, and serendipitously find other relevant titles in their area. But for public library patrons who need a specific title, the drive-up grants individuals with small children or mobility issues access to the collection without leaving their car. It also allows patrons to call in a request from their cell phone and pick it up on the way home from a long day at work before the library closes. Similarly, “nontraditional” students who can only come to the college library late at night when the reference staff is not on duty will be better served with online tutorials and reference services, which still fulfill the library’s learning outcomes.

While the primary focus of our holdings and services is to support the curriculum, the concept of service extends to the collection, as well. Because many college students do not have the time and money to purchase bestsellers, we significantly increased our collection of contemporary, award-winning fiction, bestselling nonfiction, and film regardless of their direct connection to the curriculum. Audiobooks were well received by faculty and staff who commute to work. A small “programming” budget funds multiple paperback copies supporting book discussions held in the library. After consulting with the library student workers for ideas,

(continues on page 373)

Inseparable: A Faculty-Librarian Teaching Team," *Research Services Review* 23 (1995): 51-62, 53.

3. James K. Elmborg, "Libraries and Writing Centers in Collaboration: A Basis in Theory," *Centers for Learning: Writing Centers and Libraries in Collaboration*, ed. James K. Elmborg and Sheril Hook (Chicago,

IL: American Library Association, 2005), 1-20, 11.

4. Leslie Foutch and others, eds. "How to Embed a Librarian," *Proceedings of the 35th National LOEX Library Instruction Conference*, San Diego, ed. Brad Sietz (Ypsilanti, MI: LOEX Press, 2009), 51-56, 52.

5. *Ibid.*, 52. ¶

("Old wine in new skins," continued from page 357)

exactly like all the others. Adding a graphic can provide a mnemonic signpost for repeat visitors: "Oh, yes, *this* is the page that I found that on."

Conclusion

A thoughtful and well-maintained subject guide can be a valuable resource for library users and an excellent marketing tool for the institution. The rules above can serve

as guidelines to keep your guides relevant and informative.

Note

1. The URL "whitehouse.com" is alleged to have once pointed to a pornographic Web site. This made it an illustration in early information literacy materials of the importance of domain names. ¶

("Lessons from the fiction desk," continued from page 359)

we used some of the "experimental" budget on board games that can be checked of the library. Each of these is an inexpensive way to improve the image of the library while fostering the college's emphasis on community building.

The public library is academic library "prep school." While academic librarians are interested in their patrons' high school experience with databases and research papers, there is little discussion about incoming students' use of their local public libraries before entering college. Because some high schools do not have librarians, a first-year student's primary experience might very well be their public library.

Prior to my volunteer experience, I was surprised when new college students presented me with lists of titles to look up for them. I was happy to take the time to teach them, but assumed that if they did not know the online catalog was available to all patrons, it was because they had little to no library experience. While this could be the case with some, my volunteer experience taught me that the student might have had a great deal of experience at a high-

service library such as AHML. Academic librarians will now teach them how to find resources on their own, but their positive experiences at public library service desk certainly played a role in their willingness to ask for help.

Volunteering at a public library offered me a broader and very reassuring look at libraries and librarianship. It also provided free lessons in creative marketing and collection management.

While public libraries' top priority may not be scholarly research, the positive impression of libraries they offer their patrons could be even more beneficial to academic libraries in the long run. They create users who view librarians as helpful individuals who create engaging, dynamic environments.

Once a specialty I avoided, I now equate public librarianship with linking patrons to cutting-edge collections using high-quality service, and innovative marketing. By building relationships with our public library counterparts, academic librarians can learn how to better serve our patrons and predict their expectations. ¶