

Kevin Deemer

A view from above, looking back, moving forward

A librarian's experience working as an interim assistant dean

I have been away from my library for almost a year. I have not been on sabbatical, but rather serving my campus as interim assistant dean for academic affairs. My primary responsibilities included creating and staffing the class schedule, hiring full- and part-time faculty, participating in new academic program development, celebrating student successes, holding students accountable for their academic transgressions, and generally telling a lot of people no.

Working as assistant dean was an eye-opening journey into aspects of higher education administration I never knew existed. Stepping outside the library and seeing it through a different lens was a gift. Not only did I develop a newfound appreciation for academic administrators, but the different vantage point enabled me to see new opportunities for the library, as well as past oversights in library service.

Looking back, the experience of being assistant dean transformed my view of librarianship two ways. First, I discovered new ways for the library to help academic administrators with the work they do; and, more importantly, I realized how as a librarian I was oblivious to the needs of a growing campus population: part-time teaching faculty.

In 1968 librarian Robert Munn wondered if academic administrators thought about the library and upon investigation he concluded, "They (administrators) do not think much about the library at all."¹ Until recently, I have always been disappointed and skeptical of Munn's conclusion. Now, it saddens me to admit he was right.

While assistant deaning, I thought very little about the library. Since it did not cre-

ate work or problems, it received minimal attention. When the day-to-day demands of enrollment, budgets, schedules, and student complaints arose, the library was simply pushed to my periphery. It was too easy to get caught in the crisis(es) du jour trying to extinguish the proverbial fires; the position should come with oven mitts!

The experience of being assistant dean changed how I viewed the library's role on campus. On the one hand, I am disappointed by how easily I forget about the library; but on the other hand, I now see new opportunities for my library to enhance the campus's educational and social missions. These opportunities may have always been there, but until I stepped outside the library I never knew they existed.

Since returning to the library, I took the initiative to learn about the information needs of other campus administrators and then showed them how the library could be leveraged to their advantage. For example, I volunteered my research skills and library resources to help a campus fundraising committee gather data regarding healthcare issues and trends in preparation to meet with local business owners and potential donors. I also helped our Office of Corporate and Community Services gather demographic and business data they needed. Then, I showed how using a few library databases could help streamline the process of identifying potential clients. I helped another administrator use library resources to create a

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mailing list for a needs assessment survey to prepare for a potential new degree program.

The administrators I have helped are genuinely appreciative and often surprised by how the library can assist with solving problems and saving time. More importantly, I was able to showcase to campus leaders the importance and relevance of information literacy and its practical application as it relates to institutional advancement.

Don't forget part-time faculty

As rewarding as it is to help administrators rediscover the library, the biggest "Ah-ha!" moment I had as assistant dean came while working with part-time teaching faculty. Experiencing firsthand how they are hired and orientated opened my eyes to how much my institution relies on part-time teaching faculty and how difficult it can be to hire qualified part-time faculty.

Part-time faculty are an ever increasing population on most campuses and, in my opinion, overlooked and underserved by librarians—a point reinforced when I searched the library literature and found very little in regards to providing library services or outreach specifically to part-time teaching faculty. As a profession, I hope more librarians will begin to examine part-time faculty's unique library needs.

As assistant dean I realized how disconnected and isolated part-time faculty can be from campus resources. For example, they do not have offices, phones, or computers provided by the university. They may only be on campus one night a week and often work part-time (if not full-time) in addition to their teaching. They tend to teach primarily freshman and sophomores, two groups librarians are always trying to create relationships with. Part-time faculty receive minimal training or exposure to campus resources like course management software, e-mail systems, multimedia equipment, and the library. My conversations with part-time faculty members helped me see that as a librarian, I rarely interacted with them, but as the assistant dean, I realized part-time faculty would greatly benefit from a better understanding and access to campus resources.

I have a new commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of part-time faculty. I see

numerous opportunities for librarians to help them. Simply inviting part-time faculty to use library spaces for work or meeting with students is a great first step in building a relationship. As I move forward in my own library, I plan to modify and expand services for part-time faculty and continue the conversation I started with them as the assistant dean.

The expression about not seeing the forest for the trees rings true for me. As the campus librarian, I thought I had a clear understanding of my role on the campus. Once I was no longer the librarian, I began to see new connections and opportunities for partnering and service to the campus. I believe if you look within your institution you too will see new opportunities. From my perspective, I am a better campus citizen and certainly a better librarian. At least that is the way I see it, now.

Note

1. R. Munn, "The bottomless pit, or the academic library from the administration building," *College & Research Libraries* 29 (January 1968): 51–54. *RM*

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