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# Joining forces to enlighten the research process

## A librarian and writing studio integrate

Over the last decade, academic libraries and writing centers have been living parallel lives by working with students who are completing course work under pressure, as well as assisting them in making sense of assignments that seem to work against the traditional learning process. The common goal that both tend to share is helping students complete their research papers. These endeavors have allowed the two entities to establish their own instructional practice that strives to place emphasis on the importance of teaching and learning with the goal of improving the educational experience for students.

There are six corresponding challenges that both libraries and writing centers tend to confront: 1) guiding students through the writing process, 2) assisting students with assignment guidelines, 3) working with students who are dealing with time constraints, 4) empowering students to become the facilitator of their own learning, 5) evaluating sources for quality, and 6) preventing the use of plagiarism.<sup>1</sup>

These challenges have provided libraries and writing centers the opportunity to expand their boundaries and develop collaborative partnerships so they can continue to spread the mission that research and writing is an inseparable process.<sup>2</sup> The usual product of this process for students is a written assignment that involves research, and students are not often in the position to decipher what their information needs are in the relation to this task, so they seek assistance. Librarians and writing center staff

can be very useful throughout this process. In most situations, writing center assistants can refer students to librarians for information needs, and librarians can refer students to writing centers for assistance with ideas, rhetoric, and mechanics.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this paper is to discuss why a librarian and a writing center collaborated in order to streamline the research process for one department at Vanderbilt University.

### Purpose

Human and Organizational Development (HOD) is the largest undergraduate major at Vanderbilt University. The goal of the program is to prepare students to become leaders in organizations and communities; therefore, the HOD curriculum depends on a strong foundation of information literacy competencies, as well as a rigorous understanding of the writing process.<sup>4</sup> The first course in the program, Applied Human Development (HOD 1000), is critical for students as they begin developing these pertinent skills. Approximately 250 students enroll in this course each year. The main course requirement is a research paper, which requires that students locate and evaluate scholarly information. This paper also serves as a foundation in understanding the basics of college-level writing. In the past, students have needed extensive

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library assistance with this assignment as they try to find appropriate information and use the American Psychological Association (APA) style.

The HOD librarian had tried different methods in trying to help these students. The approaches ranged from providing information literacy workshops outside of the classroom to the librarian embedding herself in the course for an entire semester.<sup>5</sup> Both of these techniques had moderate success, but the spring 2009 semester brought a fresh perspective to the problem. Peabody Library began having conversations with the staff of Vanderbilt's Writing Studio, and it became quite clear that the HOD 1000 students were looking to both the library and the Writing Studio for guidance with this assignment, since the Writing Studio had seen a large increase in their HOD consultation numbers. The Writing Studio's concerns in regards to the research paper mirrored those of the library. The concerns included the students' misinterpretation of assignment specifics, such as the differences between popular and peer-reviewed literature, and what research databases would contain appropriate references for their papers.

To streamline the research process, Peabody Library and the Writing Studio decided that they would collaborate in the spring semester by offering subject-specific workshops that would aid these students with their research paper assignment. The HOD librarian teamed with a student writing consultant who, by coincidence, was also serving as a teaching assistant for the HOD 1000 course. The workshops were held outside of class during the evening hours when the majority of the students would be working on the paper. The content of the workshops consisted of how to use relevant library resources, APA style and the incorporation of research into the writing process.

The two-part workshop series attracted 60 students who spoke very positively about the experience. This accomplishment solidified the connection between the two service-oriented units and paved the way for

a new fall collaboration. Over the summer, the HOD librarian had discussions with the director and assistant director of the Writing Studio to see if they believed that having a librarian stationed at the Writing Studio each week would be beneficial. The HOD librarian thought the idea of "one-stop shopping" for HOD research assistance might be the answer for these students. The librarian informed the Writing Studio staff that after the success of the spring workshops, the writing consultants had still been referring HOD students to her when they needed to consult more scholarly resources; and the librarian had encouraged students to return to the Writing Studio for assistance with writing mechanics, so it made sense to simplify the process so the students would only have to travel to one service point for assistance with research and writing. This new collaboration would not only help the HOD students achieve academic success, but it would also assist Peabody Library and the Writing Studio in obtaining a basic understanding of how their services work and how they could further complement each other.

It was agreed by both parties that the HOD librarian would serve as the first HOD assignment advisor during the fall semester. She would help students in the HOD program interpret their course assignments and advise them on how to begin the research process. It was agreed that the librarian would have set hours each week at the Writing Studio, so if students needed to ask questions about library resources they could just turn to her, instead of packing up their belongings and heading to the library.

The timing of when to commence this experiment was crucial since the librarian and Writing Studio staff wanted to reach as many students as possible. After much discussion, it was decided that the librarian would work six hours a week, just like a Writing Studio student consultant, and that her office hours would be on a drop-in basis. She would begin advising in early October, when students began receiving research oriented assignments, and be part of the Writing

Studio center staff until mid-December.

Marketing this concept to the students was paramount and needed to be done as soon as the fall semester began so students could be aware of this new service. Both service units agreed that they would publicize the service on their respective Web sites, and the librarian wrote an article for the Writing Studio's newsletter in which she promoted herself and her advising role. This newsletter article was also distributed via e-mail to the HOD faculty. Another marketing tool that the students seemed to think was clever were bookmarks that listed the librarian's picture, contact information, and the hours that she was at the Writing Studio each week. The bookmarks were available for students to pick up at both the library and the Writing Studio. Once the marketing was done, it was time to get the project off the ground.

Even though the project had been marketed to the campus community and the partnership made perfect sense to both the library and Writing Studio staff, the thought on whether students would really use such a service came to the librarian's mind as she set up her work space on her first day at the Writing Studio. Her uneasiness quickly diminished when the first HOD student arrived for a research consultation. The consultation consisted of questions related to the usage of the APA style for a literature review. When the consultation was over, the librarian asked the student how she had found out about her advising role at the Writing Studio, and the student said she had picked up a bookmark one day while she was checking out books at the library. During the weeks that followed, the librarian had 24 additional research consultations. One HOD professor was so supportive of this initiative that she announced the librarian's Writing Studio hours in each of her courses and listed them on her course-management Web site.

The majority of the consultations consisted of how to find resources for a literature review, instruction on library databases, and the mechanics of APA style. The time length

for an individual consultation ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. The drop-in visits to the Writing Studio showed that the students had overcome barriers when asking for assistance and had become comfortable in seeking their librarian out whether she was at the library or not.

A good number of the students that the librarian worked with were not aware of the services that the Writing Studio provided. So, if they needed assistance they were able to make an appointment on the spot or if a writing consultant was available, they could get help immediately. The students really liked having their research and writing needs streamlined for them, and, as one student stated, "I can just come here and get all of the help I need instead of having to go to two different places."

## Conclusion

The HOD Assignment Advisor experiment was a huge success, and the personal contact that the librarian had with these students developed research and writing habits that will continue to grow throughout their academic careers. The students now view both Peabody Library and the staff of the Writing Studio as partners in the academic experience; however, these types of ventures do require planning, time, and effort. The librarian recommends being realistic about what one can achieve in a semester. Prioritize and plan other work-related projects accordingly so there is enough time to devote to this type of endeavor. This two-month project required 54 hours of committed work time, but if the common goal is to see that students achieve academic success, then the hard work will lead to outcomes that benefit everyone involved.

## Notes

1. Rachel Cooke and Carol Bledsoe, "Writing Centers and Libraries: One Stop Shopping," *The Reference Librarian* 49 (2008): 119–27, 120.
2. Dennis Isbell and Dorothy Broadus, "Teaching Writing and Research as

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. ¶

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*("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. ¶

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*("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. ¶