

Guest Editorial

Importance of Research and Publication by Community College Librarians



One of the hallmarks of a profession is the ability of its members to give advice to clientele derived from a body of generalized and systematic knowledge that comprises its theoretical core. Donald E. Riggs warned years ago of an erosion of the foundation of librarianship due to neglect of research activities to build upon and support its theoretical base.¹ The dearth of intellectually thought-provoking articles and theoretically sound research being submitted for publication is alarming to scholarly editors.^{2,3} Although how-to anecdotal literature geared toward helping librarians do their jobs better is abundant, rigorous qualitative and quantitative investigations continue to decline. Most publishing efforts originate disproportionately from only one sector of academia. Riggs has observed:

The bulk of manuscripts received come from university libraries ... However, there are many exciting developments occurring in community and four-year colleges, and these two institutions are woefully underrepresented in the literature on academic libraries/librarianship.⁴

Roots of the Problem

Why are community college librarians not contributing? Librarians in two-year institutions do not face the same kind of publication and tenure pressures faced by library faculty in other segments of higher education. Their immediate survival concerns revolve around time factors in providing practical, individualized service in an expanding work environment chal-

lenged by limited resources. Wearing multiple hats and juggling the increased responsibilities of teaching library skills, information literacy and troubleshooting computers, these librarians are overloaded, short-handed, and usually underpaid.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a trend in community colleges that has mushroomed over the past twenty years has been to economize by hiring adjunct staff, who account for more than 60 percent of faculty/librarians at two-year colleges.⁵ These part-time vagabonds often have no office space in which to work, few communication channels with professional colleagues, and little time or incentive to participate in the research process. It is difficult to concentrate on scholarly pursuits while worrying how to pay one's medical insurance!

At many community colleges in Florida, administrators have aimed to save money by leaving library directorships unfunded and unfilled for years, thereby straining skeleton crews left to fend for themselves without library management, divvying up the additional administrative duties. No one in these institutions is providing leadership to encourage reflection and evaluation of what we are doing or why. Sadly, the historic community college motto of being "all things to all people" has been warped into a twisted interpretation meaning "all things to all people all the time provided by as few full-timers as affordable."

In general, community colleges have a reputation of being on the bottom rung or lower tier of the American higher edu-

cation system. Although many have been providing inexpensive but quality education for decades, they often are regarded as stepchildren in the intellectual world. As such, expectations are lower, for both students who attend and results produced by librarians/instructors who teach in these institutions. The academic elite tend to view community colleges as less worthy of serious scholarly attention.

While universities have a research component as one aspect of their mission, community and junior colleges focus their efforts on teaching and serving lifelong learning needs of their constituents. The faculty reward systems differ at these distinct levels of higher education. University librarians struggle to meet research and publication requirements for tenure-track positions, but many community college librarians enjoy faculty rank without classroom teaching responsibilities or scholarly demands. The notion of faculty status has even been politicized in Florida by guaranteeing it to librarians in the state statutes.⁶ The legislature has entitled us to the name without playing the publication game!

Because so many community college educators have so little experience with academic research, there is an understandable hesitancy to undertake such intimidating projects. Most two-year college librarians hardly feel qualified to tackle any scholarly writing beyond the scope of their own experience. Library school curricula lack rigor in this preparatory area. Most MLS degrees are nonthesis, requiring course work and internships only, so many graduates enter their profession without ever having had to conduct significant research studies. Is it any wonder those who choose careers in the community college system produce the least of the professional literature?

Why It Is Important

The research drought is reaching crisis proportions as the gap in professional literature is becoming more of a chasm. Community college libraries are leading the way in this new millennium with cre-

ative activities related to instructional support, active learning, resource cooperation, delivery of distance education, and integration of emerging technologies. Such innovative ventures need to be examined systematically and shared with the rest of the educational world.

Community college administrators are inclined to regard librarians as marginal professionals in comparison to other faculty. To upgrade and promote awareness of the professional status of librarians, it would be beneficial to demonstrate our ability to engage in relevant scholarly endeavors on a par with nonlibrary faculty in the academic milieu.

Learning-centered institutions will gain support for their efforts when there are hard data to back up claims. Library programs can be enhanced and expanded only if there is substantive evidence pointing to unmet needs and/or changes that should be implemented. Because library services touch all segments of community college populations, librarians can play a central role in providing insight into institutional effectiveness. It is our professional obligation to do so. Not only will community college libraries gain new momentum through empirical validation, but the individual researcher will find personal satisfaction in making a meaningful contribution to the field.

Overcoming Barriers

Without the lure of a tenure carrot, what else can possibly motivate community college librarians to pursue research and publication? Monetary rewards may be one enticement. Although most public community and junior college budgets are at the annual mercy of state and local governments to allocate salary increases, many institutions have some leeway in offering merit pay or productivity bonuses. More community colleges now have foundation endowments able to fund such employee perks. A timely announcement of professional contributions may be compensated by one's ad-

ministration in the form of dollars, re-assigned time to launch further explorations, or other negotiable benefits. It is the responsibility of librarians to publicize awareness of their own distinctive contributions to the academic community, which may in turn be recognized and rewarded in positive ways.

Research can have practical applicability if it is initiated by frontline staff who have intimate knowledge of problems impacting their work and hold vested interests in finding solutions to their own needs. Only by scientifically scrutinizing current practices can ways and means emerge that may help community college librarians implement more effective programs and services for users. Such basic and applied research will consequentially enhance and solidify the theoretical foundation of librarianship.

Sources of Support

To underwrite their research proposals, community college librarians need to be more aggressive in exploiting funding sources already established for such purposes. Staff and program development (SPD) grants, tuition reimbursements, and sabbatical leaves of absence are possible avenues of support. Many local philanthropic and service organizations also are willing to patronize special interest projects that may further their objectives in the local community.

Campus institutional research and planning departments are always involved in studying some aspects of accountability. Librarians should be attuned to current research in progress at their colleges and offer their libraries as experimental testing grounds for whatever the institutional research needs require. It makes sense to investigate the availability of secretarial support, data processing, and other services from those in-house offices that specialize in research.

In light of the increasing presence of university programs on some community college campuses—particularly those sharing joint facilities—another logical step is to foster partnerships with univer-

sity librarians who are searching for research populations and suitable topics to fulfill their own publication and tenure demands. In addition, university faculty from other departments (e.g., education, computer and information science) may be receptive to collaborative research activities of mutual interest.

Linking up with library graduate schools may forge connections to a free labor pool of graduate students willing to distribute surveys, collect data, and prepare reports to meet course assignments or receive independent credit.

Conclusion

There exists today a wealth of untapped talent and expertise among community college library personnel. The librarians who staff these dynamic learning resource centers have diverse, interdisciplinary backgrounds. Their unique and specialized interests are fertile ground for cultivating valuable research endeavors heretofore undeveloped by traditional academicians. Moreover, a new breed of information specialist is joining the ranks of librarianship. These techno-savvy newcomers bring to the profession strong academic credentials; they are generally well grounded in research methodology, enthusiastic about the future and eager to lend a hand in creating it.

Research scholarship contributes to the fulfillment of community college missions germane to teaching and service. Librarian researchers can become indispensable assets to their institutions by capitalizing on unexamined, pertinent topics and issues of local concern. For instance, recent emphasis on workforce development, dual enrollment, and joint baccalaureate programs are areas ripe with opportunities for probing scientific inquiry. Community college librarians are favorably positioned to gather, analyze, and interpret data on these and other trends. Such work may even become paradigmatic, thereby contributing to the advancement of library theory. Developing a strong theoretical base does not diminish the need to continue the useful

publication of best-practices literature that offers tips for improving services and performance. Rather, undertaking experimental research on broader issues that affect the institutions and commu-

nities served by two-year colleges complements the practical, nuts-and-bolts material. The desire of some community college librarians to participate in the scientific research process needs encouragement and opportunity for realization. It just might help save our profession.

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Notes

1. Donald E. Riggs, "Losing the Foundation of Understanding," *American Libraries* 25 (May 1994): 449.
2. Gloriana St. Clair, "Steps toward Writing a Sure Thing," *Library Administration & Management* 11 (winter 1997): 5.
3. Donald E. Riggs, "Research: Value, Methods, and Publishing," *College & Research Libraries* 60 (May 1999): 208-9.
4. ———, "Editor's Observations," *College & Research Libraries* 58 (Nov. 1997): 496-97.
5. "Part-time Instructional Faculty and Staff," *Condition of Education 2000*. Available online at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/coe2000/section5/indicator57.html>.
6. 1998 Florida Statutes, 228.041 (9)(c): 81.