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Bridging the Gap

Mobile Librarian Outreach in the Wake of a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent shutdown, and its aftermath have challenged how academic libraries make contact and maintain connections with their communities. Starting work as a new librarian in the summer of 2021 presented significant challenges in connecting with colleagues and students. Faculty and students were navigating returning to the classroom, and the campus was struggling to reestablish community after a period of significant disconnection. As the science and data information literacy librarian at Dickinson College, I was navigating making connections with some departments that made heavy use of the library's instruction services and other departments that rarely requested instruction. Although I made contact with faculty who had established information literacy instruction in their courses, I still struggled to have more collegial interactions. Adding to this was a disconnect from the students and the feeling that I only interacted with them within the setting of a classroom or a research appointment. Students made appointments only when referred to me by their faculty, and I worked with them during instruction sessions, but there were few that sought me out regularly as a resource.

By necessity, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed all interactions online. Although the library has reopened and students have returned, in-person reference consultations have not resumed at the level they were pre-pandemic and students rely increasingly on chat- or e-mail-based reference support, a trend many libraries observed.¹ Anecdotally, students reported to me that science students rarely made use of the library, as the science buildings offered more study space and easy access to their classmates and science faculty.

In a fit of frustration with the feeling of a lack of connection, I announced during a librarian meeting that I was simply going to go start eating my lunch in the science building while wearing a hat that said, "I'm a librarian, interrupt me." I did not, in fact, do this. My library



Kaufman Hall mobile librarian station.

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colleagues pushed to establish a more formalized project which we titled “Mobile Librarian.”

Although we were unaware when we embarked on the project, reports on moving librarians out of the library described a range of outcomes. Little scholarship exists on the topic within the past five years, and none since the pandemic. Additionally, most of the reported research is qualitative. Existing research into on-site reference, satellite librarians, or mobile librarianship indicates that the practice leads to significant opportunities to engage with departments and students.² Some have experimented with placing librarians in locations like the writing enrichment center or within the student center.³ Those that positioned remote reference sites in central student centers found that much of the traffic served either as an “about the library” station or was mistaken for providing general assistance not related to the library. Others have relocated liaison librarians



Mobile librarian station in the Rector Hall atrium.

to academic departments, permanently embedding liaison librarians in offices within those departments or having librarians host hours in a classroom.⁴ Although these embedded librarians were able to make strong connections with the departments they served, this practice is not practical at a small school, and the librarians often felt disconnected from the library. However, librarians found that on-site reference served as an important customer service and marketing tool for the library.

The Program

Before the beginning of the Spring semester of 2023, I contacted the faculty in the sciences, announcing the mobile librarian program. I asked the faculty for feedback about times they thought would be most valuable to schedule the hours. I suggested a passing period in the mornings on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Due to this faculty consultation, I slightly extended one of the mobile librarian periods. I contacted the faculty with the scheduled times and requested that the faculty add the information about the mobile librarian hours to their syllabus and advertise the times in their class.

Beginning in week one and continuing every week during the semester, except spring break, I spent two hours in the front entryway of the academic building that is home to Environmental Studies and Environmental Science, Geosciences, Psychology, and Sustainability and two hours in the atrium of the building home to Biology and Chemistry and part of the same complex as Math, Computer Science, and Physics and Astronomy. The physical grouping of the sciences into these two spaces, with such accessible high-traffic common areas, was critical in reaching a large number of users. The hours were scheduled to overlap as much as possible with the passing periods of morning lecture classes to increase visibility to students. There was only one session that I was unable to attend, and another librarian went in my place. Sessions persisted into finals week.

I positioned myself in a location that had maximum sight lines from students walking past, and positioned a trifold whiteboard identifying me as a librarian and advertising what types of questions I could answer. The whiteboard also had a QR code with a quick link to my appointment calendar and a banner that advertised the service in line with the library's existing branding.

Results

There were 28 mobile librarian sessions. Data were collected after each interaction on the type of question, the type of participant, whether they were affiliated with a department, and the duration of the encounter. Across the 28 sessions, there were 87 interactions, 68 with faculty and staff and 19 with students. Interactions were between one and five minutes, and very few exceeded ten minutes. Questions during interactions were classified as either "research," "chat," "citation," or "other." "Chats" were used to denote more casual interactions where a user stopped by and had a conversation not related to a specific question. Some examples include pedagogical conversations, conversations with students about the challenges of research, and personal social interactions.

Overwhelmingly the Mobile Librarian interactions consisted of chats. Primarily these were with faculty. These conversations provided an opportunity to discuss integrating information literacy, pedagogy, or priorities for the library's collections. These chats also resulted in meetings outside of mobile librarian hours, including collaborations on faculty-led instruction, developing information literacy assignments or classes, requiring or encouraging student research appointments as part of a class, and an opportunity to test new ideas. After a conversation with a faculty member, they decided to require research appointments for all the students in their class. Mobile Librarian also offered an additional way for faculty to have more casual conversations with me: most of the conversations that led to new programs or collaborations would not have emerged otherwise.

In contrast to the more casual chats shared with faculty, student interactions during Mobile Librarian tended to be focused. Sometimes it was clear that in walking by, it occurred to a student that they did, in fact, need some research support. Several of these interactions resulted in referring students to an appointment or to follow-up e-mails simply due to time constraints. In one meeting, a student sat and worked on an assignment for 20 minutes after their question was answered. Several students actively sought assistance with citations or support with programs like Zotero. Some students used the mobile librarian hours to drop in for a research appointment.

Although correlation is not causation, it is notable that my research appointments increased by 272% in the spring semester of 2023. Even if I ignore the newly required appointments, there was still a substantial increase (154%) in student appointments. This may be anomalous because this is my second year at the institution, but analyzing research appointment reports from previous librarians responsible for the same departments still shows a similar increase.

Conclusion

This program's success made the decision of continuing it in the fall of 2023 easy. Other librarians on the research and instruction team also plan to add Mobile Librarian hours in more central locations like the campus coffee shop and student center. The faculty clearly viewed the program as a success. Many stopped by during the semester to ask how the

students were responding, and some even requested specific times for Mobile Librarian in the fall. At the end of the semester, I sent a report on the program to the faculty, which resulted in the most replies to any e-mail I have sent. One responded, “your idea worked!” and another thanked me for “being a presence in our academic buildings.”

At its core, Mobile Librarian at Dickinson College sought to reconnect faculty, students, and librarians with each other by providing librarian access in common areas in the classroom buildings. The early results are compelling, and the program is straightforward enough with a broad enough application that any academic library could potentially benefit from this type of outreach. Some of this outreach was effective simply because I was new to the institution, and it served as a valuable opportunity to make the acquaintance of faculty with whom I had not had much opportunity to interact. In observing my interactions with faculty, students were encouraged to seek me as a resource. The program also reminded faculty and students of the resources that the library could provide. Multiple collaborations directly resulted from conversations during the mobile librarian hours. ❧

Notes

1. Laura Rose Taylor, “2021 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey: Highlights and Key Academic Library Instruction and Group Presentation Findings,” *College & Research Libraries News* 84, no. 4 (2023): 149.

2. Nancy Kranich, Megan Lotts, Jordan Nielsen, and Judit H. Ward, “Moving from Collecting to Connecting: Articulating, Assessing, and Communicating the Work of Liaison Librarians,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 20, no. 2 (2020): 285–304, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2020.0015>; Phyllis Rudin, “No Fixed Address: The Evolution of Outreach Library Services on University Campuses,” *Reference Librarian* 49, no. 1 (January 2008): 55–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763870802103761>; A. Ben Wagner and Cynthia Tysick, “Onsite Reference and Instruction Services: Setting Up Shop Where Our Patrons Live,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (2007): 60–65; Elizabeth Stephan, “Taking the Library to the Users: Satellite Reference at the University of Mississippi,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 14, no. 4 (June 10, 2008): 59–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10691310802046835>; Donghua Tao, Patrick G. McCarthy, Mary M. Krieger, and Annie B. Webb, “The Mobile Reference Service: A Case Study of an Onsite Reference Service Program at the School of Public Health,” *Journal of the Medical Library Association: JMLA* 97, no. 1 (January 2009): 34–40, <https://doi.org/10.3163/1536-5050.97.1.006>.

3. Sandra Wong and Anne O’Shea, “Librarians Have Left the Building: Ask Us HERE! At Simon Fraser University,” *Feliciter (Ottawa)* 50, no. 3 (2004): 90–92; Anne Charlotte Behler and Wendy J. Girven, “Ask! Your Library at the HUB: Penn State Libraries’ Experiences Providing Reference Services at the Campus Student Union Building,” *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 3, no. 1 (June 13, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v3i1.332>.

4. Brenda L. Johnson and Laurie A. Alexander, “In the Field,” *Library Journal* 132, no. 2 (2/1/2007 2007): 38–40; Jennifer Lee, K. Alix Hayden, and Don MacMillan, “‘I Wouldn’t Have Asked for Help If I Had to Go to the Library’: Reference Services On Site: Theme: Nontraditional Reference Services,” *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship* no. 41 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.29173/istl1998>.