Learning Communities: A Selective Overview of Academic Library Involvement

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In 1932, Alexander Meiklejohn published a book that addressed the implementation of learning communities at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. The book, The Experimental College, serves as proof of the existence of such communities well over sixty years ago. It is clear that in the mid to late 1990s learning communities have piqued the curiosities of students and teaching faculty alike. Though they go by different names at various colleges and universities, and have somewhat different components, the common idea of learning communities is to have from two to four courses linked so that the courses have the same students in all classes. Such groupings not only promote greater interaction, but they also increase the coherence of what students are learning. In a 1990 book, Faith Gabelnick explains how learning communities purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students. This article will investigate where academic libraries and academic library user instruction fits in this purposeful restructuring by focusing on the accomplishments of four distinct learning communities operating from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the Southwestern University of Georgetown, Texas, the University of Central Florida, and the University of Washington at Seattle.

While the literature of the library profession certainly is not teeming with articles primarily concerning learning communities, there are indications that academic library interest may strengthen in the coming years. In both the ERIC and Library Literature indexes an interesting term becomes readily apparent, that being the Freshmen Year Experience. Rightly so, the Freshmen Year Experience is based largely around
residence halls, the place where many, if not all, freshman spend a good deal of time. These areas are being utilized to reinforce and enhance classroom learning because they are places with a high concentration of students. In effect, students who take part in the Freshman Year Experience will not only enroll in the same classes but will also live on the same floor of the residence hall. The 1994 book Realizing the Educational Potential of Residence Halls, edited by Charles Schroeder and Phyllis Mable, revealed that students in residence hall environments which were structured as learning communities had significantly higher levels of involvement in educational activities and interaction with faculty and peers. They also found that this involvement led to higher levels of educational achievement and persistence.

Interestingly enough, the idea that successfully implemented learning communities will help students “persist” has become increasingly noticeable among university administrators who equate this persistence with higher retention rates. Learning communities have become very effective nationwide at improving retention. While it is apparent that these communities foster a sense of belonging, they also develop an appreciation of collaborative learning and create an appreciation of other students' perspectives. In theory, it would seem that students participating in learning communities will develop a somewhat heightened ability to embrace complexity and, during the experience, gain new perspectives on their own learning process. With such an integrated and successful tool that could easily be a highly marketable product, learning communities started to get the attention of librarians in the late 1980s.

The John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a branch of the City University of New York, was experiencing, in the mid 1980s, a retention problem with entering freshman students. These students were leaving after one year of study or one semester of study. A special committee was formed and decided to establish a pilot program called Linkage. Robert Grappone, in a 1987 article, writes on the design of this learning community, “The basic logistics entailed block-registering the students. The groups were to travel together through three courses in different areas...Instructors were asked to coordinate assignments, where possible, with the hope of each link in the chain enhancing its counterpart. Since these students were targeted due to various factors associated with freshman retention, librarians on the John Jay staff provided the structural and intellectual support these students needed.” As an added support component, a part-time librarian position was created for the program and served as a liaison between the various groups. This so-called “Freshman Librarian” would work out of the library as a combination academic counselor, tutor, and research advisor for the students. Equally important, Grappone, who accepted the position of Freshman Librarian at John Jay College, also stressed to these students the importance of understanding and utilizing the library as an integral part of their education. The underlying goal of the librarians as well as the instructors and administrators was
achieved. The success of the Linkage program became obvious after its first semester. In all the classes that participated, teachers reported grade point averages significantly higher than in non-linked classes. Student registration the following spring showed a higher percentage of re-registration than among non-linked students. Furthermore, Grappone explained how the added responsibilities and interaction along with the influence in shaping assignments created the integrated approach sought by many academic librarians. The enthusiasm of the participating faculty and the benefits to the students made this model program a viable tool to aid in student retention programs.

A similar program, though on a much grander scale, was implemented at Southwestern University, an undergraduate liberal arts and sciences institution in Georgetown, Texas. Joan Parks and Dana Hendrix, writing in the Reference Services Review, report that “since 1985, at a time when it was becoming clear across the country that a cohesive and common approach to the freshman-year experience was important, the university has enrolled all entering first-year students in Freshman Symposium.” At Southwestern a different scholarly topic is addressed in the Freshman Symposium each fall semester. All new students attend the same lectures, do the same assignments, and break into smaller faculty-led groups for discussion and class meetings. Library instruction has become an integral part of the university's Freshman Symposium, with library literacy a goal of the program and coordinated library involvement in at least one common assignment each year. The librarians who work with this program follow a course integrated instruction plan. The current approach is to offer the subject-specific bibliographic instruction required to support the students' assignments, and at the same time acquaint undergraduates with the facilities and services of the library. Though the planning and preparing for each fall's symposium requires much time and coordinated effort, Parks and Hendrix believe that the library is contributing in a major outreach effort to students. There are other challenges as well, such as making the assignment meaningful and reasonable due to the fact that it has become better integrated into the course and more substantial over the years. In preparation for each year the head of reference attends a two day workshop in May along with other symposium instructors so to witness first-hand how the course is developing and help define the library component. Parks and Hendrix found that “the success of the library component in Freshman Symposium has increased library visibility and university expectations for the library in general, in the view of librarians who have experienced the increase in library involvement in this major bibliographical instruction effort” and sincerely feel that “we...have raised faculty awareness and expectations for bibliographic instruction and other library opportunities.” The authors argue that regardless of changes made to the program itself, they anticipate that the library's contribution to this learning community will continue to flourish. With the backing of teaching faculty, integrated library instruction appears to be quite appropriate, if not necessary, for universities interested in designing similar learning communities.
An interesting approach to user education and learning communities is developing rather swiftly among large universities that sponsor intercollegiate sports programs. The learning communities are comprised of the athletes who participate in these highly competitive and demanding programs. Oftentimes, these athletes are without the necessary skills to compete as successfully in academics as they are able to do on the playing field. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has attempted to address this issue through Proposition 48. Phyllis Ruscella, a librarian at the University of Central Florida, explains an implication of this proposition is that “educational institutions are morally obligated to provide academically weak athletes with superior academic support programs” and “institutions with competitive revenue sports programs, eager to maintain accreditation and avoid sanctions, have taken up the cause of student athletes by providing specialised services addressing their scholastic needs.”

Just what the scholastic needs of student athletes are became the initial focus the Library Director, the Bibliographic Instruction Coordinator, and the undergraduate studies Academic Coordinator for Athletes. This group decided that two one-hour sessions would be taught by a librarian during the mid-term weeks of the semester. The university library eagerly accepted the proposal to participate in the structured support program for this “at risk” group. The challenge was to plan two hours of library instruction that would go beyond the basics, presenting more sophisticated library research techniques and promoting critical thinking skills. In order to accomplish the goals set forth in the planning stages of instruction, several teaching techniques were used such as group discussion, role-playing, and group activity. Ruscella characterized the program as a success in meeting instructional goals through verbal feedback from students, student comments about the library experience included on the end-of-the-year evaluation of the program for athletes, and the satisfaction expressed by the professionals involved. The conclusions drawn by Ruscella have the overall tone of the athletic spirit. She writes, “As a member of the university educational team, the academic library should aggressively participate in campus-wide efforts to sustain the scholastic achievement of its athletes. And what better place to begin than with the freshman recruited to play a sport and enrolled to earn a college degree?” (p. 235)

Deborah Masters, Cheryl Beil, and Stephen Loflin, all of George Washington University, delivered a paper at the 1995 ACRL conference in Pittsburgh which employs the same language Ruscella uses in concluding her article. They write, “The academic library can and should play an active and proactive role by contributing to academic and social strategies by other campus units, and by initiating its own strategies consistent with these objectives.” Words like team, aggressive, and strategy all point to an academic library that is willing to be dynamic and actively seek out how to better serve the campus community. While user education appears to have found a somewhat permanent place on many campuses, the case for learning communities remains less
assured. A great deal of coordination is involved with establishing and successfully implementing these communities so that students will find them to be relatively seamless, a program without any added pressures already associated with being a college freshman.

These programs, nonetheless, are continuing to develop, most notably at the University of Washington at Seattle. Anne Garrison reported on a program called UWired for C&RL News in April of 1997 where the “UW Libraries, Computing and Communications, and the Office of Undergraduate Education...sought ways in which the undergraduate learning experience could be enriched, a sense of community established, and technology brought into the service of learning and teaching.” What began as a pilot project targeting 65 students now involves over 1,000 faculty and 2,000 students. The primary function of UWired is to create an electronic community in which communication, collaboration, and information technologies become integral parts of the pedagogical process. The University of Washington already had, since 1987, a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program. UWired is a technological outgrowth of the already successful FIG program. Essentially, UWired expanded the freshman seminar into a two-credit course team-taught by a peer advisor, a member of the UWired staff, and a librarian. Garrison explains how the class focuses on the core competencies of electronic communication, the Internet and the World Wide Web, and library resources, in addition to the traditional campus survival skills. UWired also recognizes student athletes as a learning community unto themselves, much like the University of Central Florida. Coaches, librarians, and faculty are working together to enhance student athletic academic success through the use of information technology. Through UWired, athletes have access to laptops computers and can remain connected to academic resources while on the road. It is the kind of involvement in all aspects of campus life that makes UWired unique and a forerunner of new learning communities. Garrison seems to say it all when she writes, “Through the UWired program, librarians have become active partners in an educational process that is making information and technology literacy distinguishing characteristics of a University of Washington graduate” (p. 243).

In a sense, learning communities seem poised to become the next great campus innovation. There is evidence that these communities have been functioning since the 1980s and clearly show signs of continuing development. Academic libraries can do no less than actively pursue a role in learning communities in whatever fashion they may take, such as students participating in athletic programs. If most highly successful college athletes were to stick around for 4 years and earn a degree as well as boost the athletic standing of the school then, who knows, maybe libraries can attract some of the money the school would gain from ticket sales?
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Faith Gabelnick, Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines (San Francisco : Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 5.


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