

Are we overlooking our most vital resource?

Building librarian/student partnerships

by Carol Anne Germain

Some college librarians view students as passive, needy, and sometimes even a bother! I have heard colleagues say, "This would be a great place to work if there weren't any students." Yes, but . . . ! I know that students' opinions of librarians are often as generous. However, I believe that we need to step back and take a new look at students and our relationships with them. Students can be excellent informers, educators, and partners, and nurturing relationships with students can make librarians better informers, educators, and partners.

Partnership, in the English language dates back to 1576. The definition of this term in *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*:

1. the state of being a partner: PARTICIPATION
2. a relationship resembling a legal partnership and usu. involving close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities.¹

Students provide great opportunities for developing rewarding partnerships. Librarians interact with the student population on

a regular basis: in the classroom, within the library, and on campus in day-to-day exchanges.

Too often it is easy to overlook that students are educational assets. We need to acknowledge, and tap into, their knowledge, insights, and experiences. This includes not only talented students but also those less gifted. Surprisingly, you may learn more from the latter group. When librarians and students work and participate in common ventures, they can create an invaluable experience.

Whether you're a bibliographer, an instructor of information literacy or a cataloger, student input can help make your job easier. When we develop close relationships with students, we get a different perspective about our reference interview styles, how we develop library Web pages, and why and what influences our library acquisitions.

As librarians, we become immersed in our library worlds and overlook some of the details that may not be so obvious to our students. For many of us, it may have been years since we were students, but working with student partners will help bring us closer to what students are doing and how we can aid them.

About the author

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Partnerships come in a variety of flavors. The most common are one-on-one: internships, assistantships, work study, and independent study students. These tend to be more personal and a good starting point. Conducting a credit course can also provide partnership opportunities. At the University at Albany, students take a class where they learn about electronic library resources then work as consultants in our online access areas. Small groups, such as peer mentoring or study groups, also provide partnership opportunities.

How do you set up partnerships?

First, begin with a plan. This will include a list of doable projects with realistic timelines, a strategy for recruiting students, and a reward system. Choose what is most comfortable for you. There's no need to start big—better to have a little success than a large flop.

Start a folder, electronic or print, with a variety of projects. For each, write an outline of the project, what you expect of the student, a time budget, and a list of required materials. Setting up a similar "project packet" for the student will help provide direction. If this is an ongoing project (i.e., working at the information desk), you may want to develop a student handbook with procedures, policies, etc. Review this material and make sure you are providing clear instructions for the project. Ask a colleague to review and evaluate your materials.

Once the relationship has begun, try to keep an open line of communication. Ask the student for feedback and questions. Meetings may add to the experience or arrange informal check-ins. Praise or provide constructive comments; like us, students need to know where they are in the process. If there are time issues, deadlines may be helpful. At completion, ask them to evaluate their experience. This may be a short questionnaire or an essay.

All students welcome

Recruiting students may seem difficult, especially if your campus doesn't have a library school, but there are many opportunities for soliciting students. Students do not have to be library school graduate students to be effective partners. Often, undergraduates will

bring a refreshing perspective to this experience.

There are many ways to connect with students. These include contacting student organizations on campus; many sororities and fraternities have community service requirements. Try to coordinate efforts with the institution's academic support/learning resource center. You may find opportunities at your institution to become a faculty mentor. Set up an independent study with one of the academic departments. Again, this does not need to be the library school, a business student may be an excellent candidate for reviewing your purchase policy for the journal collection. If there is a nearby library school or graduate education program, look into getting an intern. Organize a library peer group; this could include peer tutoring that focuses on computer use. Set up a course for student consultants in your online access areas.

What a student partner can do

- Review a newly written tutorial.
- Evaluate a database subscription.
- Co-create an exhibit.
- Coordinate focus groups.
- Create promotional materials for an upcoming event.
- Critique the library's Web page.
- Provide renovation suggestions.
- Observe a BI or information literacy class.
- Serve on the new OPAC committee.
- Contribute questions to a user survey.
- Code a Web page.
- Write articles for the student news paper (good avenue with paper reporter).
- Recruit a student(s) to be on an information literacy advisory committee.
- Try out library finding aids.
- Search the Web for information.
- Assist with a signage project.
- Plan public relations efforts.
- Design the layout of a book.
- Collaborate in a research initiative.
- Create graphics and other innovative Web resources.

Of course, the most obvious are those students working in the library. Reach out to circulation and other library departments to provide projects in between the mundane reshelving, check-in/check-out, and other blah, blah, blah duties.

There are many ways to recruit student partners, but be thoughtful about your intended project. Asking a computer neophyte to manipulate graphics for a Web page is probably not a good idea. As well, a doctoral candidate may not take kindly to placing labels on a mailing. Creating an application or requesting a résumé will let you see student's strengths and weaknesses. Depending on the assignment, you may want this to be a competitive position. No matter what, you'll want a good fit for you and the student to have a good partnership experience.

Involving students in projects, such as outreach efforts, can be extremely enlightening. Since we want to reach their commu-

nity, they may be the best link. They know what other students read, listen, and pay attention to.

Partnerships can be very rewarding but they are not always easy. There is a fair amount of overhead involved. Thinking that you're getting a student to ease your workload isn't a good idea. This commitment will take an investment of time, thought, and energy.

If you are teaching a full course or sponsoring internships or independent studies, this is especially true. Make sure you know all the rules set up by your institution regarding grading, attendance, and requirements. Some students may be so good that you'll find yourself spending lots of time setting up projects to do.

Show your appreciation

Another important component of the partnership process is to make sure you keep up with them. *Partake, praise, and provide plums* (not just the fruit, though!):

- Take them out to lunch.
- Have small parties.
- E-mail messages of thanks.
- Give them an appreciation plaque at the end of their assignment.
- Snail mail a card.
- Homemade baked goods really work.
- Offer a letter of recommendation.
- Ask them about their academic life and make suggestions about grants, scholarships, graduate schools.
- Offer research assistance.
- Review their résumé.
- Set up an award program.

Students are not the only ones who receive something from partnerships. For me, student partners have provided insight into how they view the library, my teaching, and the instruction tools I've developed. They've made working on a project more fun—their energy is often delightful and captivating. I've been rewarded with small gifts and thank you notes, but most importantly when I look into their eyes, I see respect and understanding and know that I've played a meaningful part in their educational and personal process.

Note

1. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993). ■

Student feedback

One of the benefits partnering provides is student feedback, and they are often quite frank! *Listen*—their suggestions are usually right on target. Responses from the tasks they've encountered may include:

- That Web site is too busy.
- What is a classification system?
- Do you know about cascading style sheets?
- Students from my dorm don't come to the library because . . .
- Patrons in the online access area find the desktop icons confusing.
- I don't get the example: Procol Harem?
- The Self-guided Tour should include fine information.
- Would you come talk to my organization about your Dialog services?
- It takes too long to get to the full record.
- Why isn't the financial aid handout in the Financial Aid Office?
- Rage Against the Machine does a lot with the censorship issue—why not use them as the example?
- Do you need? . . . I can do anything!



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