

Toccaro D. Porter

Advocating for students through encouragement

Communication on a human level

Don't give up." "You've got this!" The manner in which we communicate with students is not always measurable when assessing a librarian's performance. Nevertheless, honesty and encouragement factor into how I communicate with students during library instruction. This essay details an approach that I have used in eight years of teaching information literacy sessions to advocate for and talk with students on a human level.

Advocacy

Advocating for students is part of the evolving responsibility of librarians in the millennium. In the context of library instruction, advocacy is a natural effect of the interactions we have with students in showing them how to find credible sources. The dominant trend of assessment in libraries has influenced how librarians advocate, particularly with a focus on outcomes that clearly enumerate to stakeholders how students benefit from having access to librarians.¹⁻⁴

Administering pre-and-post tests showing how students who received instruction performed and linking information literacy participation to graded course assignments are examples of quantifiable forms of student advocacy. Test results, the number of classes taught, and student attendance represent tangible data. Pairing that type of advocacy to assessment initiatives can make a strong case that librarians are needed despite budget

concerns. But the interaction librarians have with students is not always about analytics. It becomes situational. Librarians must do what the moment calls for whether the action is measurable or not.

The way librarians talk to students

The early years of training as a diversity resident librarian taught me that the most practical way to advocate for students is to partner with the professor. When professors speak highly of the library, their words impact how their students use the library. Similarly, the way librarians talk to students can empower them to be assertive in the information-seeking process.

For example, when teaching, I emphasize to students that "My job is to show you where and how to find credible sources. But the final decision on which sources you choose to use is up to you." As we continue searching and students are asked to give input on the relevance of articles found, their responses are in the affirmative: "Yes, that looks good" or "No, not that one." Sometimes multiple students will chime in, even if the subject is not related to their own topics.

Students taking ownership of the source selection process and using the power of

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their voice is a great thing to witness. This point touches on the value of democratic learning setups, where the instructional design approach is balanced for students to actively participate without concern for reprisal. Students are urged to ask questions, make mistakes, work collaboratively, and form opinions independent of the instructor. Library instruction is a way to have such moments with students.

Encourage students

Librarians are in a unique position to uplift students. We understand and have experienced the range of emotions had by students during the information-seeking process: including uncertainty, anxiety, and doubt.⁵⁻⁷ But we also know strategies for successfully making it over to the other side of a journey that begins with selecting a topic, performing an array of searches, evaluating content clues, and finding credible information.

Beyond the instructional guidance we provide, it is okay to speak words of encouragement. That is, to incorporate soft skills approaches with hard skills training. Being a teaching librarian does not mean we must instruct a student to do something. Instead, what may be needed are words of encouragement, praise, or reassurance. For instance, when a student shows me a draft of their paper, I can sense when there is a need for an authority figure to provide affirmation. In these moments I typically say, "You've got this!"

There are also times when I see a student from a previous session and will follow-up about the progress of a paper. For example, one student wanted to write about fashion consciousness and body awareness. When early searches did not produce relevant sources, she talked of changing the topic.

My suggestion was that she take more time to perform an exhaustive literature search before making a final decision because of her enthusiasm in discussing the topic. I communicated that I supported her decision either way. The point is when a

student displays excitement about a subject, find ways to root for the student to not give up.

Why encouragement is needed

Being a student represents a special journey that brings adversity from meeting course requirements to coming into one's own independence. Librarians cannot be the balm for all the wrinkles that mark students' lives, but we can let them know they are not alone in the academic community. In a way, the instructional guidance that librarians perform is similar to coaching.

Micki Holliday states, "A coach, by definition, helps workers grow and improve their job performance by providing suggestions and encouragement."⁸ Librarians do this by working with student groups that include athletes and helping them apply the principles of library and research concepts to their assignments.

And, like a coach, my role is to share knowledge with students, outwardly express belief in students' abilities, and hope from the sidelines that the instruction will be useful. Hence, when wrapping up a session, my comments to students are intentional. "Don't give up." "You can do it!" "If I don't see you again, best wishes to you all for success the rest of the semester." These comments serve to remind students of their potential for success in academia.

Conclusion

Encouragement can help students mentally stay persistent in completing the task that is ahead. This stance is appropriate within academia, where students are driven to maintain constant activity from completing the next assignment, enrolling in the next class, etc. In all these things, we must not forget the human element. With everything that students are asked to do, librarians must tell students that we believe in their ability to do the work, not waiting until they reach the mountaintop, but voicing the sentiments throughout their uphill climb.

Notes

1. Debra E. Kachel, "School Librarians as Equity Warriors: Advocating for All Students," *Teacher Librarian* 46, no. 2 (December 2018): 44–46.

2. Judi Moreillon, "Building Collaborative Relationships with Students," *School Library Monthly* 31, no. 5 (2015): 27–28.

3. Debra Kay Logan, "Putting Students First," *American Libraries* 39, no. 4 (January/February 2008): 56–59.

4. Mark Ray, "Aiming Higher for Successful Advocacy," *Teacher Librarian* 41, no. 5 (June 2014): 61–62.

5. Barbara Wildemuth, "Library Anxiety

Impedes College Students' Library Use, but May Be Alleviated Through Improved Bibliographic Instruction," *Evidence Based Library & Information Practice* 12, no. 4 (2017): 275–80.

6. Erin L. McAfee, "Shame: The Emotional Basis of Library Anxiety," *College & Research Libraries* 79, no. 2 (March 2018): 237–56.

7. Alison Cleveland, "Library Anxiety: A Decade of Empirical Research," *Library Review* 53, no. 3 (2004): 177–85.

8. Micki Holliday, *Coaching, Mentoring and Managing: Breakthrough Strategies to Solve Performance Problems and Build Winning Teams*, 2nd. ed. (Franklin Lakes, New Jersey: Career Press, 2001), x. ❧

(*In defense of course reserves,* cont. from page 522)

have a campus culture in which professors are extremely proactive in placing reserves requests and providing students with access to personal copies, we have an opportunity to increase access to materials by meeting professors halfway and being proactive in placing items on reserve on our own initiative. This work has begun with the pilot of our textbook donation program, but can be even further expanded as we move forward.

This is perhaps a good model to follow for campuses, like ours, who do not have dedicated funding for reserves collections, and is a creative solution to the problem of the expense of replacing damaged books. Additionally, it may be worth looking into seeking sources of funding to purchase new materials, as some campuses successfully do, to fill in gaps, especially in providing textbooks for large general education courses with multiple sections and expensive materials.

Lastly, it seems fair to suggest that engagement should also include understanding what the campus community wants from a reserves program. Survey research, perhaps in partnership with students in social sciences disciplines, is needed to assess what works currently for most students and what could use improve-

ment, and to solicit more ideas for where we could possibly go. Through these three types of engagement—engaging faculty and students through outreach, engaging library staff to be proactive, and engaging students by soliciting advice—course reserves services will continue to expand, increase access to important materials, and help continue to keep library services relevant and appreciated in campus communities.

Notes

1. Donald A. Barclay, "No Reservations: Why the Time Has Come to Kill Print Textbook Reserves," *College & Research Libraries News* 76, no. 6 (2015): 332–335, doi:10.5860/crln.76.6.9331.

2. Stephanie Pitts-Noggle and Ryan Rafferty, "Investigating Textbook Reserves: A Case Study of Two Models for Reserves Collections," *College & Research Libraries News* 78, no. 1 (2017): 66–79, doi:10.5860/crl.v78i1.16568.

3. Anne Christie, et al., "Student Strategies for Coping with Textbook Costs and the Role of Library Course Reserves," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 9, no. 4 (2009): 491–510, doi:10.1353/pla.0.0077. ❧