

Robert Miller

Join the club

Promoting information literacy in online student academic organizations

How does a school foster a sense of community among distance learners scattered across the globe?

The University of Maryland University College (UMUC), headquartered in the United States and having divisions in Europe and Asia, serves more than 90,000 students worldwide in face-to-face and online classes.

To create communities among students with shared interests, UMUC has established online academic clubs in disciplines ranging from accounting to communications to history. Students can participate in the Global Business and Public Policy Forum, as well as the Women in Business Club. English, marketing, and human resources students also have clubs in which they can network with their peers and professors, learn about career opportunities, discuss recent developments in their field, and attend virtual seminars hosted by fellow students, faculty, and visiting experts. Each online club is managed by a faculty advisor who works with a learning coach from the university's Department of Academic Success.

Library liaison activities in student clubs

When I began work as information and library services liaison to the undergraduate sciences department, I was charged with the task of promoting library services, faculty-librarian collaboration, and information literacy goals to our science instructors. The ultimate aim of our library's liaison program is to work with faculty to help our students succeed.

At my first meeting with the sciences faculty, I spoke with the learning coach who oversees the department's three student

clubs: environmental management, psychology, and behavioral sciences. Because the clubs are always on the lookout for guests who can conduct an online seminar relevant to the students' interests, the learning coach invited me to pay a virtual visit and host a library-related seminar in each of the science department clubs.

The project was appealing. Here was an opportunity to create a library presence and to promote information literacy among students (and faculty) who participate in the clubs. There was also an added benefit. How often do students come in contact with an academic librarian when a grade is not on the line, when a paper is not due? Free of classroom pressures, online student clubs are friendly forums in which students exchange information on a subject they love and, more often than not, have chosen as a career.

Student club seminar: Publishing opportunities for undergraduates

Because of the special atmosphere in student clubs—their sense of a community connected to, but distinct from, the classroom—I wanted to present a seminar that would go beyond the usual topics covered in class-based library instruction, such as choosing a database, Boolean searching, etc. So for my first visit, to the environmental management club, I presented the online asynchronous seminar, *Publishing Opportunities for Undergradu-*

Robert Miller is reference and instruction librarian, information and library services at the University of Maryland University College Student and Faculty Services Center, e-mail: rmmiller@umuc.edu

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ates, a topic rich in information literacy goals and one with decided extracurricular appeal: by publishing a paper, students could look forward to an outstanding bullet point on their resumes or graduate school applications. The seminar covered:

- undergraduate journals that publish student research

- types of articles students can publish

- research studies

- literature reviews

- news-type feature articles

- working with a faculty mentor

- guides to science writing

- alternative means of communicating ideas in science

- conferences

- poster sessions

- blogs

As part of the seminar, students were encouraged to present ideas for articles (perhaps they had written an A paper that could be worked up for publication) and ask questions. If I was stumped by a question involving subject content or requiring in-depth knowledge of scientific publishing, the club's faculty advisor was there to help.

I tailored the publishing seminar as much as possible for the environmental management club. For example, the undergraduate journals I presented publish environmental articles, and I gave links to examples for the students to review. With the structure of the seminar in place, it was only a matter of adapting it for presentation in the Psychology and the Behavioral Sciences clubs. Students came away from each seminar with achievable ideas for publishing their work in venues that welcome undergraduate writers.

A library presence in student clubs

Presenting the seminars established a library presence in each club. To maintain that presence and continue promoting information literacy skills, I post brief, blog-like entries at the rate of about three per month in each club. Each entry contains links to helpful Web sites or articles in our library databases. Here are some examples:

Psychology Club. I summarized a magazine article I had read about the positive psychology movement, along with a link to the full-text of the article. I showed students how a popular article can be a springboard to scholarly sources, as magazines frequently quote experts whose published research can then be found in library databases.

Behavioral Sciences Club. In a faculty member's presentation on sociology and popular culture, I joined in the discussion to mention a documentary film I had seen about heavy metal music. The filmmaker holds a master's degree in cultural anthropology, so I showed students how to find the full-text of his thesis (which, by the way, is not about heavy metal) in ProQuest's Dissertations and Theses database.

Environmental Management Club. I alerted students to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) library closings, providing links to material from various perspectives on the issue: from EPA itself, ALA, and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

Career information useful for all clubs. I designed a quick guide, and tailored it to each club, on using the database ReferenceUSA to identify potential employers in a student's geographical area.

When I begin a new discussion thread about an article or book I have read, a news item I have seen, and so on, my posts can serve as conversation starters. I also join threads that other club members have begun, pointing out information sources students can use to inform the discussion. Sources may be scholarly (the full-text of a research study in PsycINFO, for example) or popular (*Consumer Reports* information on energy-efficient appliances). I always try to model information literacy skills by linking to authoritative Web sites and demonstrating how library databases can satisfy all sorts of information needs, not just those generated by a research paper.

When recommending an article in a library database, I will usually cite it in APA (American Psychological Association) style, just to keep examples of properly formatted citations

fresh in the students' minds. And to underline the library's presence and availability, I sign my posts with my job title and a link to the library homepage.

Benefits of library participation

Since becoming active in student clubs, I have had the pleasure of being referred to more than once by students and faculty as our librarian. Club members think of me when they have various research needs. An alumna creating a psychology club seminar on curriculum vitae asked me to help compile a list of Web sites and books on the topic. An environmental management professor presenting a club seminar on nanotechnology asked what library resources were available, so I created a brief research guide. And when the behavioral sciences department applied for membership in an international honor society, they asked me to participate in the site visit, giving the society's representative a tour of our virtual library to affirm the wealth of resources we offer our online students.

Playing an active role in online student academic clubs helps me, as a librarian, achieve the following goals:

promoting information literacy skills in a context that students enjoy, a relaxed atmo-

sphere apart from the pressures of classroom performance;

learning about students' needs and what academic and career issues concern them the most;

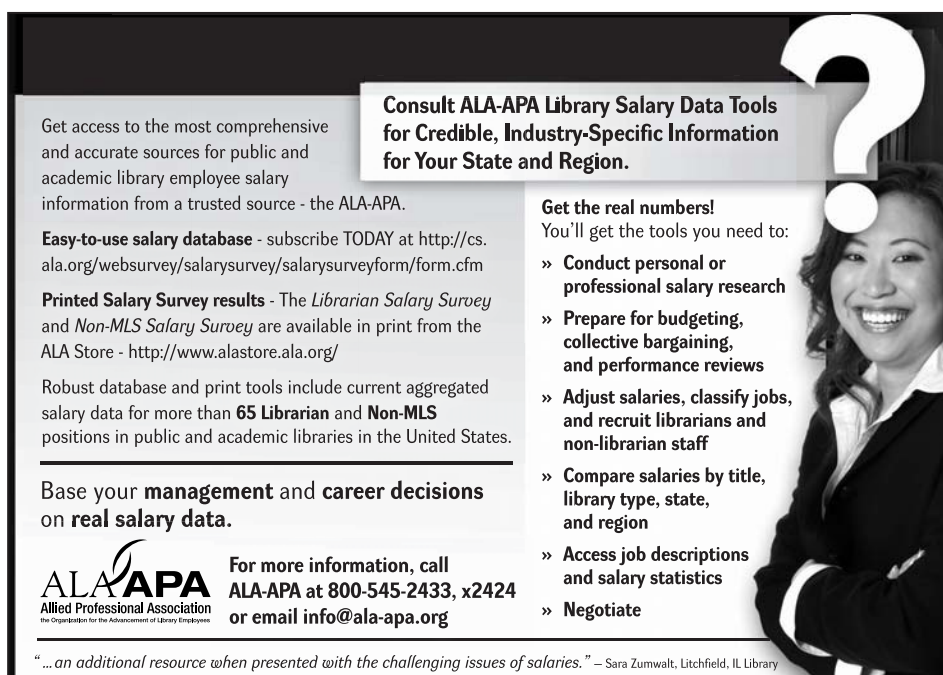
gaining subject knowledge by following club discussions that are rich in discipline-specific content;

building the university's online community by joining in conversation with and meeting information needs of students and faculty;

increasing the library's visibility; and showing students an aspect of library services they might not have imagined before, a librarian "out from behind the reference desk" engaged in subjects that are vital to the students' chosen career.

Of course, many of the contributions I have made in online clubs can be duplicated in a traditional environment. Students in a face-to-face academic club will benefit from a presentation on publishing opportunities or on any aspect of library services that would further the goals of the student organization. Certainly, a club's student leaders and faculty advisor will appreciate a librarian's help in conducting an information-related activity or two.

Join the club! ♪



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