

# A transformational outreach program for an academic health sciences library

## Looking beyond research institutions

**F**or many years and for a variety of reasons, the University of Michigan's Taubman Health Sciences Library did not engage in community relationship building or define community outreach as one of the priorities in its services and overall mission.

With the arrival of a new director in 2006, and changes in organizational leadership and focus, the library began to take part in a series of community events on an informal basis and to foster relationships with local organizations and community partners.

As a first step, librarians began attending local events, distributing brochures and giveaways, and promoting sources of reliable health information from the National Library of Medicine. These events included book festivals, art fairs, and powwows, as well as other community gatherings. A series of hands-on workshops were taught at numerous venues, such as the public library, the local center for independent living, and senior citizens' centers. All of the workshops featured training about the many online resources available for accessing health information.

The Health Sciences Library began hosting exhibits and events targeted to both academic and community partners and to build a presence and reputation as a reliable provider of online health information to different populations.

The new dedication to community outreach initiatives led to recruitment of a

full-time outreach coordinator, allowing for further expansion of the library's outreach services. In addition, partnerships began to be developed with the public health practice community in the State of Michigan and with the Ann Arbor public school system.

The library also strengthened its presence as one of the 16 libraries designated as an Outreach Library for the Greater Midwest Region (GMR) of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM). As part of its service mission, the NN/LM GMR provides funding opportunities to advance library involvement in targeted areas.<sup>1</sup>

The Health Sciences Library applied for and was awarded three subcontracts: one related to consumer health, another to health disparities, and the third to public health and social media. The combined effect of these myriad activities within the local community, along with the infusion of dedicated staffing resources supplemented by external funding, has resulted in the library's informal outreach efforts being transformed into a more formal, sustainable outreach program.

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## **Consumer health program and the community with disabilities**

An initial collaborative effort that involved outreach to community members was the partnership between the Health Sciences Library and the local community with disabilities. Since one of the health sciences librarians had a number of strong ties to that community, we were fortunate to be able to collaborate with educator/advocates at the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living (AACIL) and to receive funding from a subcontract from the NN/LM GMR to support the “Creating Health Information Connections for Persons with Disabilities” project.

To gain knowledge about working with this community, we conducted a series of three focus groups at the center. We invited individuals with a variety of disabilities to take part in these groups and sought to identify their needs for online health information, their preferred methods of receiving it, and barriers or perceived barriers to accessing and retrieving health information. We acquired valuable insight and data from each of these focus groups that guided our work on the project.

In general, our focus group findings indicated that people with disabilities have many of the same health information needs as the general population, such as facts about both general and specific health topics as well as assistance in locating health practitioners and support groups.

One of the important components of the project was to host sensitivity training for the Health Sciences Library staff. Members of AACIL provided the training. An indicator of the success of sensitivity training session was that AACIL was asked to provide the sensitivity training session for the entire University Library staff. We also produced a one-page guide to health information resources, including MedlinePlus, NIH Senior Health, and Clinical Trials.gov that was distributed to more than 1,100 AACIL constituents.

## **Health literacy training program**

As part of another NN/LM GMR subcontract focused on health disparities, the Health Sci-

ences Library collaborated with another local organization, Washtenaw Literacy, on the “Michigan Health Literacy Awareness Training Program” (MHLATP) project. Washtenaw Literacy is an organization staffed by trained tutors who are dedicated to improving the reading and writing skills of individuals in the local community. The goal of this project was to raise awareness among health professionals about issues related to low literacy and poor health literacy among their patients and to provide communication techniques and resources to improve patient care.

Building on an established curriculum developed by Washtenaw Literacy, the Health Sciences Library expanded the current curriculum to address information about poor health literacy as well as low literacy. Classes were offered to health providers in a variety of settings, particularly in neighborhood-based health clinics. Training featured sensitivity awareness information, resources on low literacy and English as a second language, as well as recommendations for working effectively with clients who need improved literacy skills. Feedback from the clinic staff has been very favorable and will inform future training sessions being planned for other health care settings.

To further promote awareness of issues related to literacy, the library organized a two-day health literacy forum and workshop. The first event featured a panel discussion of health literacy issues and programs in Washtenaw County, including the Washtenaw Literacy Coalition’s “Learning Is A Family Thing” program, which contains a session on health literacy, as well as a School of Public Health faculty member’s research on the impact of health literacy on public health. A poster session highlighting community projects about health literacy followed the panel discussion. The poster session helped create further awareness of health literacy initiatives that are currently taking place in the community and encouraged future collaboration. The final event of the forum was an overview of the Medical Library Association’s Health Information Literacy

Research Project and presentation of their “Prescription for Information: Addressing Health Information Literacy” course.<sup>2</sup>

### **Partnership with the public health practice community**

The Health Sciences Library also worked to establish partnerships with the public health practice community in Michigan. This effort, the third one enabled by sub-contract funding from the NN/LM GMR, was entitled “Creating a Road Map: Local Public Health 2.0,” a collaborative project between the University of Michigan Health Sciences Library and the Genesee County and Monroe County Health Departments to develop best practices for integrating Web 2.0 technologies into the work of local public health departments. The library conducted a needs assessment and an evaluation of opportunities for the use of Web 2.0 technologies within the public health departments, and librarians taught a series of workshops to train staff in the use of the most relevant social media technologies, based on the department’s needs. After the training had been completed, the project team continued to work with individuals, committees, and the departments as a whole to integrate the technologies into their work.

Outcomes of the project included creating a staff blog using Blogger, an intranet using Google Sites, a collaborative writing space using Google Docs, a wiki-based policy manual on Google Sites, and a Google Calendar for shared events and scheduling. One of the more successful aspects of the project was that the intranet that was created as part of the process of integrating Web 2.0 technologies into the workplace became the homepage on all staff members’ computers. Another positive aspect was the amount of interest in the project, resulting in opportunities to speak about it at a wide range of public health organizations and library conferences, including annual conferences of the American Public Health Association, the

Medical Library Association, and the Public Health Information Network in addition to the International Congress on Medical Libraries in Brisbane, Australia.

### **Partnership with the Ann Arbor Public Schools**

The Health Sciences Library became one of the Partners for Excellence with the Ann Arbor Public School System in November 2008. Since then, health sciences librarians have collaborated with the health and wellness teachers of the middle schools and high schools to provide up-to-date, relevant information needed to supplement the curriculum.

Working with one of the teachers, who served as primary contact, for a required course on health and wellness, health sciences librarians e-mailed lists of current, relevant Web sites and online resources to this teacher to share and to add to the high school health curriculum, addressing nine health topics over the course of the school year. The topics covered included depression, domestic and relational violence, street drugs (ecstasy, rohypnol, and GHB), smoking and nicotine addiction, alcohol drinking, stress and its effects, bullying, marijuana, and sexually transmitted diseases.

As a follow-up, health sciences librarians met with two outreach coordinators of the school system to review progress on the project. The librarians were invited to attend the teachers’ in-service day at the beginning of the academic year to provide hands-on training to the high school health teachers on searching for reliable health information on the Internet. The librarians were also invited to a classroom session to interact with the students during one of their classes. This successful collaboration between the Health Sciences Library and the Ann Arbor Public Schools, detailing methods and materials used with the students, has recently been published in the *Journal of Consumer Health on the Internet*.<sup>3</sup>

## Social media resources for promoting outreach activities

In order to better connect with our community, we have created an online presence to promote outreach services, using a variety of social media technologies. We have set up a Facebook account for outreach, “MLibrary Healthy Communities, Health Sciences Library.”<sup>4</sup> We post content almost every day, including links to quality health information, announcements about upcoming community events, and other programs of our partner organizations. The daily posting frequency seems to be appreciated and well liked by our fans. Through the Facebook analytics feature, Insights, we are able to track the demographics of our fans, and from the various comments to our postings, we can also see what information is most responded to by our Facebook fans.

In addition, Facebook’s events invitation feature has proven quite helpful in promoting our library and community partner events. We are able to send out invitations to our events, exhibits, and book club meetings. Posting photos from many of these events has been an effective way to give the library a public face. Our fans can follow us through many of the events that we host and those that we are involved with in the greater community.

We have also found Twitter to be another helpful tool to promote our outreach services.<sup>5</sup> This has been a useful means for not only promoting our events and interacting with our community, but also as a means of reporting out from events through a live Twitter stream. To save time, we have connected both our Twitter and Facebook accounts so that all Facebook updates are automatically routed through Twitter.

## Conclusion and next steps

With community outreach now defined as part of the library’s service mission and with dedicated staffing resources, we continue to look for new partnership opportunities and to explore new areas for

collaboration. Although the primary focus of outreach activities has been within the local community to date, there is the potential for branching out further within the state. In May 2010, health sciences librarians participated for the first time in the University of Michigan’s Road Scholars program.<sup>6</sup> This program is a week-long traveling seminar and educational tour of Michigan, funded by the Office of the Vice President for Government Relations, to enable participants to learn more about communities in the state, including their particular health and social issues.

Information gained from the tour will be useful to the library as we identify new collaborative partnerships and plan future outreach initiatives.

## Notes

1. The consumer health, health disparities, and public health outreach projects were funded in whole or in part with federal funds from the National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services, under contract no. N01-LM-6-3503 with the University of Illinois-Chicago. For more information, see NN/LM GMR Funding Opportunities at [nmlm.gov/gmr/funding/](http://nmlm.gov/gmr/funding/).

2. For more information, see MLA Health Information Literacy, [www.mlanet.org/resources/healthlit/](http://www.mlanet.org/resources/healthlit/).

3. Merle Rosenzweig and Anna Ercoli Schnitzer, “Partners for Excellence: How the University of Michigan Health Sciences Libraries Assisted the Ann Arbor Public Schools in Their Health and Wellness curriculum,” *Journal of Consumer Health on the Internet* 13, 4 (October 2009): 359–73.

4. For more information, see MLibrary Healthy Communities, Health Sciences Library, [www.facebook.com/MLibrary-Healthy](http://www.facebook.com/MLibrary-Healthy).

5. For more information, see MLibraryHealthy, [www.twitter.com/MLibrary-Healthy](http://www.twitter.com/MLibrary-Healthy).

6. For more information, see Michigan Road Scholars, [www.mrs.umich.edu/](http://www.mrs.umich.edu/). *ZZ*