

Emily A. B. Swanson

# Lessons learned at the general education table

## Effective contributions to campus committees

**A** year after I began my job as an instruction and reference librarian, I was appointed to my institution's Liberal Education (LE) Committee; the committee that sets the required core general or liberal education curriculum. Over the last two years, I learned much about liberal education, committee work, and how I, as a librarian, can serve my campus. My service began at the same time the committee was preparing for a yearlong study of the campus's LE program. The program had been in place for seven years and is currently the buffet style program—pick two science courses, one art course, etc.—that many institutions have. There was and is a growing movement on campus to change it; however, first, the committee thought it best to gather data on LE and other institutions' LE programs.

In my second year, the committee began to investigate different LE models and create a plan for presenting these models to the campus. We are still in the midst of this process. I am now going into my third year on the committee and while every school is different, I have learned a few key lessons while sitting at the LE table. Although, some of what I have gathered is LE specific; much can be applied to any campus committee:

**1. Be vocal.** At first, I admit, I was intimidated by the committee. I overcame that initial feeling by focusing on the mission – creating a unique and special LE program for the campus. By focusing on that goal and realizing my role on campus gave me a valuable perspective,

I became more vocal. I realized I can help this committee in many ways, whether it be sharing my view or volunteering to serve on a subcommittee.

**2. Get to know your committee members.** Serving on any committee is a great chance to meet people you may not meet otherwise. The LE Committee has representatives from every school on campus and administrators. This is a wonderful opportunity to represent and market the library. Committee work also allows you to find out what is going on across campus and in different departments so you can keep the library up to date on changes.

**3. Advocate for your library.** After promoting the library's services, I had committee members ask me to do information literacy sessions for their classes. This provided the faculty with an occasion to see what my role was on campus and how I contribute to teaching and student learning.

**4. Use your campus knowledge.** Librarians work with students from all different departments. This gives us a unique view of the campus and one that many faculty members may not see. My broad view of the curriculum on campus gave me a unique perspective when we discussed the LE program.

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Furthermore, I work closely with the library's work study students and, through conversations with them, I was able to get their perspective on LE and their LE classes. I believe they felt comfortable speaking frankly with me, since we do not have a teacher-student relationship. From these informal conversations, I was able to gauge a small section of student's attitudes toward LE.

**5. Use your library school skills.** While we were gathering data, I realized that we had faculty input on LE from surveys. We had student data from their course evaluations but the evaluations only assessed the individual class and did not reflect on their perception of LE as a whole. From my conversations with the student workers I realized we were missing a valuable voice: the student body's ideas on LE program. From my Research and Evaluation Methods class in graduate school, I was familiar with different ways to gather patrons' input, and I applied that to our data gathering mission. I suggested doing focus groups sessions with upperclassmen on their LE experience. We conducted eight focus group sessions, and I was able to sit in on five of them. The focus group information proved to be enlightening and extremely valuable as we progressed to the next stage of investigating and discussing potential LE models. As we began to investigate possible models, I worked with a committee member to create a literature review; I found articles, and she wrote the literature review.

**6. Volunteer and follow through.** As anyone who serves on committees knows, there is always work to be done. I found that volunteering to do work was a great way to earn the appreciation and recognition of the committee. It can be hard to find time to get the work done but by making it a priority, I was helping the committee and showing that I was a dependable team player.

**7. Be strategic.** Recognize that everyone has different interests. A new model may sound like the perfect solution to you but it may mean a reduction in credits to a faculty member. Represent your library's interests. The library and specifically information literacy need to be represented in the new LE.

**8. Be bold.** Information literacy is essential to liberal education. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) says that liberal education is "essential for success in a global economy and for informed citizenship."<sup>1</sup> To create an informed citizenship, you need to teach information literacy. Information literacy will serve students long after they graduate. Moreover, it spans all disciplines and is central to critical thinking. Which leads to my final lesson learned...

**9. Get involved.** I had the opportunity to go to an AAC&U General Education Assessment Conference. To my delight there were some librarians there discussing assessment of liberal/general education. However, there could and should be so many more. Information literacy and liberal education fit hand-in-hand; both are necessary to the other.

If I have learned one thing during my tenure on the LE Committee it is that librarians have valuable contributions to make to liberal/general education and more should be at the table.

## Note

1. "What is Liberal Education?" AAC&U, accessed August 23, 2013, [www.aacu.org/leap/what\\_is\\_liberal\\_education.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/leap/what_is_liberal_education.cfm). *ZZ*

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