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The Library Leading: Knowledge Management Supporting Community College Institutional Strategy

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Abstract

This case study demonstrates how librarians at LaGuardia Community College led a college-wide knowledge management project to implement *Ask LaGuardia,* an online knowledge base where users can find answers to common questions on navigating this large, urban college. Students had been experiencing difficulty receiving clear, correct, and consistent answers to their questions while staff had been challenged by information silos. LaGuardia's president chose the Library for a leadership role in this initiative supporting a broader strategy of better alignment between Academic and Student Affairs. The Library's positive reputation and knowledge organization expertise made it a natural fit. Four years in, available data and observations indicate that *Ask LaGuardia* is meeting its goal of easing students' difficulties around finding college information while earning campus-wide support in the process. LaGuardia's librarians demonstrated one way in which libraries can lead a knowledge management effort, thus, increasing their value to their parent institutions.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Leadership, Collaboration, Strategy, Students

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Introduction and Background

Challenges

When an urban community college administration decided to strengthen the alignment

between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, it did so realizing that "the College's

fragmentation contributes to our loss of students at every juncture and that faculty, staff,

and students do not know where and how to seek help and information" (LaGuardia

Community College [LaGCC], Alignment Initiative, 2012). Students especially were

experiencing difficulties receiving correct, consistent, and clear answers to questions

about college processes. If students are sent to one or more offices in search of answers,

or must circle back to an office they have already visited, or discover that the information

received was wrong and they must begin again, they experience serious drains on their

time and energy. Such problems also carry a cost in terms of student satisfaction that

could lead to retention challenges. And on the other side of the service counter, staff face

the challenge of sharing and organizing information in a siloed, higher education (HE)

environment where terminology as well as perspective might vary across administrative

units.

All this was occurring at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, NY, a

component school of the City University of New York (CUNY). LaGuardia is a city- and state-

supported two-year college in New York City's most diverse borough, Queens (New York, n.d.,

p. 15). LaGuardia offers over 60 associate degree programs to nearly 19,500 students and

continuing education courses and programs to over 73,000. Half of LaGuardia's students are

among the first in their family to attend college (LaGCC, Office of Institutional Research &

Assessment, 2017, p. 3) so that many students have no family experience in navigating HE and,

thus, have greater information needs in this area.

Library's New Role

The College's president recognized that behind the alignment and retention issues lay an

information management issue. Therefore, she called in the College's experts in knowledge

organization from the Library Media and Resources Center. Librarians first interviewed top level

administrators and managers. This led the librarians to propose a knowledge management project

addressing the differing terminology and perspectives across College units that hampered

information sharing and contributed to the students' difficulties in receiving clear, consistent

information (Devine, White, Ovadia, & Egger-Sider, 2012). Thus, the Library went on to

coordinate a collaborative knowledge management project to develop the *Ask LaGuardia* online

knowledge base, which students, staff, or anyone can use to find answers to common questions

about admissions, registration, financial aid, and more.

Article Overview

Little has been written about involvement of college libraries in academic institution-

wide knowledge management. This article uses a case study methodology to step into this gap

through examination of how librarians at LaGuardia Community College fostered a successful

campus collaboration to implement a knowledge base rendering information about College

processes easier for everyone to find. The knowledge base supported the institutional strategy of

better alignment between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs in order to strengthen student

retention and success. This case study describes the role of the Library in the project, including

leadership and collaboration; introduces the knowledge base; and discusses changes at the

College and the Library resulting from the project. Leading knowledge management to support college strategic goals may possibly be a unique role for a community college library, and LaGuardia librarians demonstrated their value to their college through this high-visibility project.

Literature Review

Academia has lagged behind business and other sectors in utilizing knowledge management (Agarwal & Marouf, 2014). Successful efforts in this area require measures that may challenge the way HE is organized into siloed departments and programs (McClellan, Cruz, Metcalfe, & Wagoner, 2006; Petrides, 2004). In academia, libraries may practice knowledge management within their own departments (Forrestal, 2015), but scant literature exists on HE libraries and college-wide knowledge management other than faded predictions (Townley, 2001).

As far as the academic library's evolving role within its larger HE institution, Oliveira (2017) investigated the literature as it relates to libraries and student retention; however, these efforts did not extend much beyond the traditional library functions of instruction, collections, and reference. In the UK, four university libraries each influenced institutional strategies related to pedagogy and space (Appleton, Stevenson, & Boden, 2011). Other writing on the future of academic libraries did not stray far from libraries' conventional contribution areas related to student learning (Miller, 2014) or faculty research Kaufman (2007). In contrast, library service points at California State University, Monterey Bay embraced helping students with non-research questions, recognizing the important role libraries can play in helping students navigate college processes (Grallo, Chalmers, & Baker, 2012).

LaGuardia's Information Challenges

At a commuter school where no one lives on campus and 46% of full-time attendees

work (City University of New York, n.d., table 4), students face challenges to their time when they cannot find needed information. If in trying to get their questions answered, students encounter obstacles, these additional demands may be on top of an already strenuous schedule of school, work, and family obligations. Students can be stressed by not knowing where to go for assistance or the requirement for multiple trips to school to sort out a problem. In addition, if students do not find needed information—or the correct information—this may negatively impact their college success. In the direst cases, unanswered questions about financial aid or admissions may prevent students from applying to, being admitted to, or attending LaGuardia at all. Curtin University (n.d.) in Australia has also noted administrative challenges to student success in its retention strategy.

Academic and administrative staff are likewise challenged around information sharing. Because students are pressed for time, they may try to get all their questions answered from whatever faculty or staff member the student is speaking with. Whether answers reside within an employee's areas of expertise or not, students expect almost anyone working in a public-facing position to be able to help them. An Alignment Initiative reported that LaGuardia's, administration wanted to see staff cross-trained and able to assist students more comprehensively; however, administration had not implemented any professional development to support this. The resulting situation left students as well as college personnel unsure of where to find answers to their questions (LaGCC, Alignment Initiative, 2012, p. 6). The College's accreditation review observed this information fragmentation in both assessment and advising and recommended improving coordination of effort between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, because failure in these areas could affect student course completion and academic success (Middle States, 2012, p. 29).

Differing terminology and frames of reference among divisions and offices also caused difficulties. For example, staff came to reference campus groups or programs by various names and acronyms as those names changed over time. Confusion arose when staff tried to help students who referenced the same group by a different name. Varying perspectives contributed to students receiving different answers depending on whom they asked. Bursar staff, for instance, gave a different response than Financial Aid staff to a question about the cost of tuition—Bursar personnel responded with the current tuition as reflected on the bills being sent to students, while Financial Aid personnel gave the next academic year's tuition numbers because students usually apply for aid a year in advance.

Library Leadership of Knowledge Management

Recognizing the consequences of the siloed information environment at LaGuardia led to formal recommendations for improving the alignment between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to keep students on the road to graduation and college success. To this end, the College's Alignment Initiative report recommended improving "communication and clarity… and providing consistent, accurate and accessible information" and recognized the need to "engage the expertise of the Library Department faculty as knowledge managers" (LaGCC, Alignment Initiative, 2012, pp. 1, 7). In response to this and the challenges noted earlier—especially regarding terminology differences impeding communication among departments—the College's president reached out to the Library for leadership and expertise.

LaGuardia's president did not have a clear idea of the kind of project needed to address the information sharing issues (S. White, personal communication, December 14, 2017), so Library faculty put their expertise to work and began by looking at the terminology challenge and how to address it in a College-wide knowledge management project. This project defined

knowledge management as "the task of coordinating the specialist knowledge possessed by employees so that it can be exploited to create benefits and effectiveness for the organization and its constituents" ("Knowledge management," 2006). First, librarians advocated for an online knowledge base that could control for varying terminology across the College and our student population. Second, they addressed information sharing more comprehensively by recommending implementation of a College information protocol and hiring metadata librarians for the project. Finally, librarians reviewed software and discussed connecting knowledge management with other College initiatives related to student communication and retention (Devine et al., 2012).

Although the Library resides administratively under the Division of Academic Affairs, in everyday campus life colleagues view the Library as a service supporting the entire school. As faculty, librarians serve on College-wide committees, participate and lead in College governance, and advise student clubs and organizations. Librarians deliver an ambitious instruction program, bringing them in frequent contact with fellow faculty members from other academic departments. The Library also recently managed a large renovation project, which increased the Library's space by 60%. Librarians have earned their positive reputation through these and other activities. In turn, this reputation benefitted the knowledge management project by positioning librarians as leaders, contributors, and collaborators across the College. Given the Library's position at LaGuardia, the College's president made a shrewd choice of the Library as one of the co-leaders of knowledge management. Monetary and personnel support was awarded for the knowledge base, called *Ask LaGuardia*. While the online platform housing the knowledge base is funded through Student Affairs, the day-to-day operation is managed by the Metadata Librarian hired for this.

Collaboration

Implementing a college-wide knowledge base requires collaboration, sometimes intense, across departments and divisions. To promote unity for this endeavor, the College's president appointed project co-leaders across divisions: the Chief Librarian/Library Department Chair from Academic Affairs and the Assistant Dean of Enrollment Services from Student Affairs. Other collaborating units at the College include the Information Technology Division, selecting software and integrating the chosen product into the College's website; Marketing & Communications, promoting the knowledge base as well as soliciting content for it; and the various programs, offices, and departments providing the content. In the early phase of the project, an Executive Committee directed the knowledge base launch. Now, a team of representatives from the collaborating units hold regular meetings to oversee *Ask LaGuardia*'s operation.

The knowledge management team also collaborates with parties outside the College. Early on, project leaders chose to use consultants to ease the process of gathering content. As a more neutral third party, consultants led administrative unit staff through process-streamlining exercises to demonstrate the need for better information management and to promote project buy-in. Working with the consultants proved valuable for the outside view they brought to the project without the "this-is-how-it's-always-been-done" mindset sometimes found among long-term staff. Another important external collaborator is the platform vendor for the *Ask LaGuardia* knowledge base. The vendor played a large role in the pre-launch phase, working primarily with the Metadata Librarian to optimize the platform. The vendor continues to contribute, joining virtually in the project team's monthly meetings to review knowledge base activity and address any operational or content issues.

Collaboration among all the stakeholders has sometimes struggled to run smoothly. In the beginning, participants did not always know whom to copy on emails, invite to meetings, or update about telephone conversations. With knowledge management unfamiliar to all participants, no one knew what might arise at any meeting and that someone who had not been invited would be needed to answer a key question. Also, collecting and editing information for *Ask LaGuardia* has been another duty on top of the already full workloads of LaGuardia personnel; this situation led to delays in some areas when staff were readying to launch the knowledge base. However, after operating for several years, *Ask LaGuardia* and its maintenance has settled into most staff workflows.

Ask LaGuardia

The knowledge management team implemented the *Ask LaGuardia* knowledge base primarily for students as an authoritative information source about navigating LaGuardia Community College processes. It is open for anyone to use and requires no login. *Ask LaGuardia* was created with the goal of providing a single best answer to each question asked rather than making the questioner choose from a list of potential answers. Some staff rejected the notion of one correct response to a question because each student's situation differs. Although one cannot deny that every student is unique, *Ask LaGuardia* can still offer responses that encompass the vast majority of student experiences. For other students with more unusual situations or needs for person-specific data, the knowledge base lets them know where to find further information or assistance.

Ask LaGuardia's unusual metadata consists of the various ways users ask about the information contained within a response. This approach allows someone asking about tuition cost, for example, to receive the correct response no matter if they word their query "How much

is tuition?" or "How much does one year cost?" or "What is the price of school?" because each requests essentially the same information although using different language. This system feature helps LaGuardia's many first-generation students unfamiliar with the language of college in general, not to mention LaGuardia's alphabet soup of acronyms from ALEKS (an online math assessment tool) to YAIP (an internship program for young adults).

The vendor's technology matches each incoming question to the best response. If the system fails to find only one best match, the knowledge base responds with multiple answers the user can choose from. If the system fails to find any matching responses, *Ask LaGuardia* prompts the user to check for typing errors or try asking again using different words. Users who receive no answer or who are dissatisfied with the response can "escalate" their question to the College's Student Information Center by filling out an email form to receive a personal response.

The knowledge base requires regular monitoring of user interactions to check for questions yielding less than optimal results—either no answer, multiple answers, or an incorrect answer. The Metadata Librarian ascertains if results were indeed the best a user could expect from the system, if the matching processes failed to make the best match, or if new content is needed in the knowledge base to answer the question. The vendor and the knowledge management team routinely use the system's reporting capabilities to monitor activity to keep the knowledge base optimized.

Use of the Knowledge Base

Activity in *Ask LaGuardia* is one indicator the project has achieved some success. As of 2018, the knowledge base has been operating for four years and grown from its initial content at launch of 288 responses to over 500. Knowledge base use fluctuates with the academic year, ranging from 4,000 to 13,000 questions per month. The system provides an answer—or several

to choose from if the query is broad or unclear—to over 95% of user questions on average. While the knowledge base provides a mechanism for users to leave feedback to any response viewed, less than 1% of users ever do this. Project leaders are disappointed, as they had hoped this feedback would prove more useful in improving the knowledge base.

While students have always been the primary focus of the knowledge base, LaGuardia staff, faculty, and librarians also use it every day. Student Information Center staff are trained to rely on the knowledge base to provide consistent answers to general student questions. First Year Seminar classes use *Ask LaGuardia* to introduce the College's newest students to a resource to help them find answers online themselves at any time. This participation from First Year Seminars was an "unexpected bonus" (S. White, personal communication, December 14, 2017). As a tool for helping students, *Ask LaGuardia* has also impacted librarians in their everyday interactions at the reference desk. The Library is the only facility open and staffed in the evening and weekends, leaving no other place for students with questions to seek assistance. Librarians use the knowledge base to help students find information about areas library staff may have limited familiarity with, such as the financial aid process or placement testing. Librarians appreciate the ability *Ask LaGuardia* gives them to help students with such questions. The knowledge management team recognizes staff usage as a vote of confidence in *Ask LaGuardia*.

Change at LaGuardia

But beyond usage, student behavior may have changed as a result of the knowledge base. Knowledge management leadership went into the project believing that success with the knowledge base would reduce student lines and wait times at the College's busiest offices, as students could find answers to straightforward questions themselves by using *Ask LaGuardia*. Such reductions would, in turn, free staff to spend time on the more complex and unusual

problems students face. Initially, the project team tried to get statistics from some of the College's service points in hopes of comparing student traffic before and after implementing the knowledge base, but this never took place. However, a collaborative conference panel offered by members of the knowledge management team presented select data from some offices in order to gauge the influence of *Ask LaGuardia*. A look at the number of students asking questions in person during the busiest time of the year for the Admissions Office revealed a 12% decrease in office traffic comparing August 2016 to August 2017 but a 32% increase in responses viewed in *Ask LaGuardia*. Looking at those same months, the Financial Aid Office reported a 21% decrease in office and email traffic while seeing an 8% increase in responses viewed in the knowledge base. While *Ask LaGuardia* may not account for the entire change from students seeking staff-intensive assistance to those using the more do-it-yourself approach, staff believe that it did contribute to this trend.

College leadership has demonstrated its commitment to the knowledge base through including *Ask LaGuardia* in strategic planning and continuing to fund it. Knowledge management has aligned neatly with other College initiatives such as improving communication to students (Devine et al., 2012) and academic advising (LaGCC, Alignment Initiative, 2012). *Ask LaGuardia* has been integrated into the College website where it has replaced earlier online FAQs for Financial Aid and for Admissions. Finally, one no longer hears about large numbers of students receiving incorrect or inconsistent answers to their questions. By available measures and reports, the knowledge base is succeeding at its job, led by the LaGuardia Library.

As a result of seeing the knowledge management project through from idea to implementation, the Library has increased its visibility and authority at the College. LaGuardia's Chief Librarian sees that the Library now has an easier time advocating for its needs and

becomes more involved in College endeavors since helping to support student success with the

knowledge base. And as one of the most heavily trafficked points at LaGuardia, the Library is

now recognized as providing basic advising for students with help from *Ask LaGuardia* (S.

White, personal communication, December 14, 2017). The knowledge base is now part of the

College's marketing strategy as team members from Marketing & Communications work with

the Metadata Librarian and area experts across the school to craft content that maintains

standards for College messages. *Ask LaGuardia* has also created a link between librarians and

metadata that has led to staff contacting the Metadata Librarian for assistance with metadata for

the College website's directory and other projects. Also, the Metadata Librarian has made

contacts across the College through her work on the knowledge base that have led to a

conference panel (Jardine et al., 2017) and a conference poster (Jardine & Capuano-Vella, 2016),

both presented with knowledge management colleagues.

Evaluation and Aspiration

Taking available information into account, the knowledge management team believes

that *Ask LaGuardia* is succeeding in its mission. Usage measured by number of queries has

doubled from its initial 12-month period. The team views usage as the primary metric for this

tool given that data about activity outside the knowledge base would include effects of other

student success initiatives in progress on campus. Students and staff would not be using the

knowledge base if it were not helpful. Other positive outcomes from implementing the

knowledge base include recognition of the role of librarians, aided by *Ask LaGuardia*, in

providing basic advising outside business hours and the informed perspective of student services

managers that the knowledge base contributes to declines in office traffic. Finally, the near

disappearance of reports of student complaints about not finding needed information is the best

news of all**.**

      The knowledge management team continues to work on growing the knowledge base and

knowledge management. Planning is underway for adding content from the College's robust

Adult & Continuing Education Division. The team leaders would like to work with the

consultants again but must wait for a more favorable funding environment. Perhaps the most

persistent dream on the knowledge base wish list is personalization. Students want information

that applies to them, so an option to log in to get user-specific answers, such as amount due on

tuition, would be a welcome feature. In addition, the knowledge management team still has

hopes of collecting data to better evaluate the contribution of the knowledge base to student

success and retention (S. White, personal communication, December 14, 2017).

Conclusion

      This case study showed how LaGuardia Community College Library took on a new role

to lead college-wide knowledge management supporting institutional strategy and how such

efforts impacted both the Library and the larger organization. The Library increased its prestige

and visibility as a result of successful implementation of the *Ask LaGuardia* knowledge base.

Proper support such as hiring the Metadata Librarian and funding an online platform played a

large part, but technology alone cannot create successful knowledge management—people must

bring it to fruition through leadership, collaboration, and hard work, but the effort is worth it.

Knowledge management can accomplish much, from helping students and staff save time to

promoting cross-divisional cooperation.

      LaGuardia's Library is an early player in college-wide knowledge management; perhaps,

other academic libraries will be encouraged to follow, seeking opportunities in knowledge

management at their school as another way to contribute to student success and present their

value to their organization. Libraries might consider testing the knowledge management waters

with a smaller project within their own department, thus, creating an example for their

institutions to see. As the institutional experts at maintaining and organizing information,

academic librarians have much to offer.

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