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Roving Librarians: Taking it to the Streets

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Abstract

The idea of the roving librarian on a college campus is not new. This mobile information service allows students, faculty, staff, and community library users access to personalized information service in a variety of areas and promotes library service. A roving librarian project gives librarians the time to focus on serving patrons as individuals rather than on the building as the primary resource. It also allows librarians the opportunity to have formal and informal conversations with students which can enhance information services. Roving may well contribute to the retention of community college students and may also serve to strengthen the quality of students' educational experiences and aid in their academic success.

The idea of placing reference librarians outside the college library is not a new concept in academic librarianship. Mobile information service librarians often referred to as "roving librarians," allow students, faculty, staff, and community library users access to personalized information service in a variety of public areas. By locating in high traffic zones such as the cafeteria, student gathering spaces, hallways near vending machines, and outside faculty offices, the roving librarian becomes a visual emblem for library service and provides students, staff, and faculty with reference assistance while creating positive public relations for the library. This presence in common areas outside the library can be especially important during critical junctures in a library's existence, including a building move, renovations, and busy times in students' assignment schedules. It also provides an innovative means of connecting with college students who might not otherwise find themselves seeking librarian assistance with their research.

Tunxis Library is part of a community college that serves 12 surrounding towns and cities in central Connecticut and enrolls up to 7000

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students during a semester. Although our staff had long been talking about the importance of having a librarian stationed amidst the popular haunts of our students and faculty, it was only when we learned of the exact time period of our move to a completely new building on campus that we decided to make that dream a reality by writing a grant for a roving librarian service. We did not want to take a chance on losing our dedicated population of library users during the hectic time period of the move and we saw an opportunity to think outside the building and set up in busy areas of the college. We received a grant of \$6000 to purchase high quality portable hardware and by taking advantage of the availability of wireless connectivity through the campus, the roving librarians were able to relocate easily.

Sporting red laptops, small wireless printers, a heap of new “hot reads” books (including urban literature, memoirs, graphic, and young adult novels), as well as some garish signs about librarians “taking it to the streets,” we rocked and roved. Pulling together several chairs from the immediate area of the roving location (not just one, but several) is a critical component to the allure of the roving librarian. Equally critical is the loss of a little dignity in the guise of whimsy (we often wore t-shirts with the word “LIBRARY” in FBI lettering which appealed to one of our larger constituents—the Criminal Justice majors). The final ingredient in the mix is the librarian. The roving librarian has to be a great conversationalist.

So much of library literature has focused on “library as place,” when, in practice, and particularly while roving, the community college library appears to succeed best when we focus on conversation. Much of what we plan, design, and implement in our library is based on the conversations we have with colleagues and students and our high ratings in student surveys and faculty commentary reflect our basic tenet that learning and growth occurs through honest and continuous communication. We do a lot of talking and listening.

This tenet was corroborated on a grander scale in a recent study from researchers at Syracuse University entitled, “Participatory Networks: The Library As Conversation” (Lankes, Silverstein, Nicholson, & Marshall, 2007). This study is based on the conversation theory of Gordon Pask (1976) who wrote that knowledge is created through conversation. The current study posits that if knowledge is indeed created through conversation, and libraries are in the “knowledge business,” then librarians are also in the conversation business. Thus, librarians are responsible for facilitating this “knowledge creating” conversation both personally and through their library’s various networks and infrastructures (Lankes, et al., 2007).

We have always believed that the power of conversation is our best card played and the roving project works because of that focus. Librarians can be smart. Librarians can be cool. But most of all, librarians have to be accessible and adept at hosting a conversation.

Equally important to the positive public relations of a roving project is

an awareness of potential deficits in our outreach to students. We know that there are students who attend the college who do not use library resources or services. There are students who may not plan time to visit the college library for assignments, who may be reticent to enter a library, who may have little experience or understanding of print or electronic resources, or who may not realize the value of a librarian's expertise in providing research assistance. Two years ago, we conducted an informal focus group session with 20 first year students asking them about their perceptions of librarians and libraries. The predominant response was that librarians are sad and lonely middle-aged women and that libraries are "scary" and "intimidating" places. It has been reported that library anxiety can be a psychological barrier to academic success among college students, particularly first year students (Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, & Lichtenstein, 2002). So, though the perception of the lonely librarian and scary library may have rung true in students' previous encounters before enrolling here, it was certainly not a perception we wanted continued. Roving in the everyday spaces of our students afforded us an opportunity to show that we were neither "sad" nor "lonely" and that if the library seemed scary, we were more than happy to pull up some cafeteria chairs and share a couple of sodas to allay that fear.

We also know that personal interaction with a librarian can increase the retention of at-risk students in college. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) noted that there are a number of conditions that can foster student learning and development and help to remove obstacles to college students' pursuit of their academic and personal goals. Chief among them is the linking of personal connections across the academic and out-of-class dimensions of students' lives. Roving librarians can play a role in this linking as we share personal and friendly interchanges with students while providing some direct or incidental learning. We also learn more about our students and their current interests and curiosities during roving than we would have in the traditional reference setting. One student we met through "roving" attends college by day and works as a standup comic in New York on the weekends. He gave us a DVD of his act and entertained us with some of his YouTube videos which were filmed on campus. We gave him advice on time management, ordered him some Richard Pryor and Lenny Bruce DVDs, and showed off our keyboard prowess with some quick informational searches on the red laptop.

Personalized assistance for developmental college students has been proven to not only aid in their academic success, but to provide a means of mentoring students to continue with that success (Cousert, 1999; Thomas, 2000). Personal intervention works as an ongoing retention strategy for community college students and requires the collective support of the campus community, including librarians (Cousert, 1999). In this role, the roving librarian's work extends beyond librarianship to that of instructional and personal interventionist. We listen to students' academic trials and personal

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obstacles and we advise. We also talk to students who may be coming to the campus to socialize, but are not attending their classes. Sometimes it only takes one campus professional to ask a student what is going on in his or her life to help the student get back on track before the semester ends. One of the current trends in student retention is the fee-based personal coaching program that trains college staff how to coach students in weekly one-on-one sessions in order to “strengthen student engagement and first-year retention” (Like a personal coach, 2008). Roving allows us the opportunity to touch base regularly with students, on their terms, and to offer further library-related communication through our “Ask a Librarian” email, instant messaging, or by telephone.

We believe that personal and friendly contact outside the library building is especially significant for students who are new to college and may have perceived their high school library as a passive space where students go only when they need “information,” or as an uncomfortable space created for students *other than themselves*. Our new library building has many opportunities for student gathering, group study, Internet use, café refreshment, conversation, community events, and relaxing. Some students would never know about this new facility if we didn’t do a bit of hawking during our roving experience. In some cases, we actually walk students over to the new building for a personal tour.

Ideally, librarians want to show that the role of the library has a strong impact on campus mission and goals. We want to strengthen the quality of students’ educational experiences, help students become more connected and confident, and contribute to student motivation and educational persistence.

We also want to show off our own greatest asset: the librarians. We believe that by having a physical presence in the busy areas of the campus, we can accomplish this. The roving librarian project gives us the ability to focus on serving patrons as individuals rather than on the building as the primary resource. We can also increase awareness of library services, learn more about our students, dispel preconceived notions, bring our expertise to the college community and, through the magic of the wireless network, provide immediate information of any kind. Our efforts have paid off; we answer 40 to 50 questions per day while roving. And then, of course, we get to have that really great conversation.

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