

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Commentary

Perceptions of Value

A Story from One Pennsylvania Community

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This is the story of how a local community successfully saved a high school librarian position through the coordinated efforts of concerned, well-informed parents, teachers, school librarians, a university librarian, neighbors, friends, and others. Takeaways for academic librarians and others in the Pennsylvania library community are discussed.

Introduction

We know as academic librarians that input/output measures are insufficient to demonstrate to our administrators the value of what we do. What measures do we use instead? It all depends on the needs of our institutions, but finding relevant measures is only the first step in the process; our communities must also perceive that we provide value. Part of our work then is managing the perception of our value. Some of us are fortunate to be in communities and institutions that “get it”: Our communities know that libraries have changed over time and are about more than books and that librarians are the information technology power users within their institutions or communities who help users navigate an increasingly complex online information landscape.

But some of us are not so fortunate, working in communities and institutions that do not “get it,” where the belief persists that librarians are “keepers of the books,” or where stakeholders buy the hype that young people today know all about technology because they constantly use technology and, after all, “everything is on the Internet.” Being power users, librarians know that using technology to send text messages, listen to music, and watch videos does not automatically give people the knowledge to find, evaluate, and use information for a specific need. If it did, then why do so many of our students confide to us, “I’m not very good with computers”?

Who, Me?

The importance of managing our communities' perceptions of librarians and libraries was recently brought home to me. Let me set the stage: Over the last five years, I have worked closely with two Pennsylvania high school librarians on the topic of the transition of students from high school to college. Allison Burrell, librarian at Southern Columbia Area School District in Columbia County, and I presented at the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (PSLA) and wrote an article about our research of academic librarians' assessment of how well-prepared students are for college-level research (Burrell & Neyer, 2010). Allison Mackley, high school teacher-librarian in the Derry Township School District, and I co-chaired the PA Forward Information Literacy Committee, and in 2013, planned the first PA Forward Information Literacy Summit (sites.google.com/site/painfolit/events/painformation-literacysummit), an event that promises to occur annually. In addition, I have worked on my campus at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania to make the concept of information literacy part of our new general education program.

Due to my work, Jennifer Bates, a high school librarian in Central Columbia School District, contacted me by e-mail in May 2014. Her daughter attends high school in the Bloomsburg Area School District (BASD), and Jennifer was very concerned with a proposal before the BASD School Board to replace the high school librarian, who was retiring, with an aide. Sadly, the administration perceived that the librarian essentially ran a "study hall" and reasoned that an aide could do the same thing at less pay. Jennifer had already spoken at a school board meeting about the importance of retaining the high school librarian position; she was planning to speak again but wanted the board to hear other voices and perspectives besides her own. She asked if I would attend the meeting and address the school board. My first reaction was, who, me?

Nevertheless, I was not too difficult to convince. I told her I wanted to help, but because of my schedule, I could not attend the meeting. Jennifer did not miss a beat: Could I perhaps write a letter and send it to the school board and to her, and she would read it on my behalf? I said yes. I quickly composed my letter, using research from the PA School Library Project (paschoollibraryproject.org), Project Information Literacy (projectinfolit.org), and the Association of American Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative (www.aacu.org/leap).

View the letter from Linda Neyer to the
Bloomsburg Area School District here:

bit.ly/1w7nmDx

The letter identified information literacy development and undergraduate research as high-impact practices that improve student retention, a big concern in higher education right now. I also noted that the students I have worked with in the Bloomsburg University health science programs—highly competitive programs for admission at Bloomsburg—tend to come well-prepared from high schools with active school library programs. I urged the board to retain the high school librarian position to help students become lifelong learners, which is part of the school district's stated mission. Since the meeting was less than a week away, Jennifer sent me the e-mail addresses of the board members, and I sent each one of them my letter. Jennifer said the letter was "perfect" (it was not) and that she would read it at the meeting during the open comment section (she did).

She sent me a follow-up e-mail to let me know how the meeting went and told me that after the comment period, the assistant principal spoke in more detail about the elimination of the high school librarian position. He

explained that having a 21st-century librarian was a "luxury" for the district, not a necessity. He said that he did not know when students would find the time to use the services of the teacher-librarian. (Jennifer noted that students have nine study halls per six-day cycle, thus calling into question the validity of the assistant principal's statement.) The assistant principal also stated that he knew that "all this" (meaning, how to cite) was being taught already in the classes by the English teachers. He said they would "groom" the aide to work under the direction of the teacher (but it was not stated which teacher) and that the elementary school librarians would help.

A straw vote was taken at the meeting concerning the position: Three voted to retain the librarian position, three voted to eliminate the position, and three did not vote. Although the vote was discouraging, Jennifer did not give up. She asked if I could attend the June meeting when the final vote would occur. In the meantime, she would contact as many people as possible to come speak, including me. What could I say? Of course I would. I also contacted Allison Mackley, my PA Forward Information Literacy co-chair, for her advice on talking points. Among other things, she pointed me to the PSLA's website for working with administrators (www.psla.org/advocacy/administrators).

On the evening of the meeting, I parked in the lot behind the school district building a little before 7 p.m., where I met Jennifer. Together we entered the building and went into the room where the meeting was to take place. I signed my name to a list of people wanting to make a public comment and then took my seat in the back row of two rows of folding chairs. The 10 or 12 school board members, the school superintendent, and the secretary, sat at tables arranged in a U-shape, facing us. Additional chairs were arranged in perpendicular rows to the audience's left, and some school district employees sat there; however, the assistant principal did not attend. More and more people filed in the meeting room so that soon all the public seats were taken. The room was packed. Jennifer had done a great job enlisting support.

After we said the Pledge of Allegiance, the meeting was called to order, and I was the first person called on to speak. Standing up in front of my chair, I felt a little nervous. I spoke for less than five minutes, reiterating the points I had made in my letter. I closed by asking the board to reinstate the librarian position. My speech was not memorable, but the school board members listened, and I sensed they were impressed that I had taken the time to come to the meeting. Twelve other people spoke after me; not one person spoke in favor of eliminating the position, and everyone added a different perspective to the arguments to retain the position. I felt honored to be a part of this group and was impressed by their articulateness. Several parents spoke up, including a mother with children in the middle and elementary schools, who talked about the connection between active school library programs and students' high academic performance. Another Bloomsburg University employee spoke, noting that all but one or two of the 14 Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) universities were located in school districts with high school librarians, and that if Bloomsburg Area School District eliminated theirs, then Bloomsburg University would join this small group of universities located in a school districts without high school librarians.

Three of the English school teachers were in attendance as well, and one of them emphatically stated that they did NOT have the time to teach students what they needed to know in college about information research. All three were opposed to the elimination of the position. One of the school district's elementary school librarians spoke, too, saying that she was not prepared to teach high school students 21st-century information research skills. Finally, Allison Burrell, the librarian from the neighboring Southern Columbia Area School District, spoke about how her district had eliminated its elementary school librarian position after a retirement and assigned her the additional responsibilities so that her position was now that of a combined high school/elementary school librarian. The board was interested in her testimony and asked several questions. She said that providing programming to several schools was not working well for their students, who got short shrift at both the high school and elementary levels.

After the comment period ended, I listened for a time as the board moved on to other business. Then Jennifer leaned over and told me that the vote would not come for at least another hour and suggested I leave. I

asked her to let me know the outcome and then slipped out of the room. As I drove home, I wondered how the school board members would vote. Would they do the right thing and vote to retain the high school librarian position? Later that night, around 9 p.m., I received a text message from Jennifer. As I began to read her message, I braced myself for what I thought would be bad news. It was incredible! The school board members had voted unanimously to reinstate the position. I was thrilled! Of course, my cynical self began speculating what would go wrong next. Indeed, there were some last-minute skirmishes, but I am happy to report that the school district did hire a permanent high school librarian.

What I Learned

So what are the takeaways from this story for me and for the reader? There are several. The first is that persistence pays off: I give credit to Jennifer Bates for her persistence in contacting and asking different people to speak to the school board, as well as speaking so articulately (and often) herself. Her efforts, in my opinion, resulted in an impressive show of support at the final meeting, which changed the outcome of the vote.

The second takeaway for me (and a sobering one) is the need to be aware of how we are perceived in our communities. How sad that the librarian who was retiring was perceived as merely running a study hall. Did she know this? Did she care? What might she have done differently?

A third takeaway is that information literacy develops incrementally and that librarians in public, school, and academic libraries all play an important role in young people's literacy development, from school age into adulthood. Knowing that the work of school librarians has an impact on my work as an academic librarian is what made me want to speak up. Students come less prepared to college if they have not participated in a school library program.

Fourth, in the category of lifelong learning, we academic librarians can learn from our colleagues in both public and school libraries. Public librarians, the good ones, know how to communicate with their communities, town councils, and funding bodies. They are politically savvy in a way that many of us academic librarians are not, and we can learn from them. School librarians, the good ones, have fully embraced their role as tech-savvy teacher-librarians, a role many of us academic librarians have yet to embrace. School librarians actually are leaders in their institutions, incorporating 21st-century information literacy skills in curriculum design.

Finally, as I've gotten older, I realize that people have more influence than they think they do. We tend to think that what we do will not matter because, after all, what can one person do? But your presence and participation in conversations has an influence. This is true whether the conversations occur within your institution, within the community where you live, or within a professional community of librarians, such as the Pennsylvania Library Association's PA Forward initiative.



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PA Forward

PA Forward is a grassroots initiative to support librarians in their efforts to communicate more effectively with their respective communities. As is nicely stated on the PA Forward website,

Libraries have moved far beyond just being book repositories. They're agile institutions serving real-life needs. Libraries can be key to powering progress and elevating the quality of life in PA by fueling the types of knowledge essential to success: Basic Literacy, Information Literacy, Civic and Social Literacy, Health Literacy, and Financial Literacy... Those who work at or with Pennsylvania's academic, public, school, and special libraries already know that... [L]ibraries have been at the center of Pennsylvania's communities, providing the critical connections.

Now it's time to let the rest of Pennsylvania know—and ensure that libraries take their rightful place as leaders of a vision that requires a unique combination of new technology, community access, and commitment to learning (Pennsylvania Library Association, 2014a; 2014b).

PA Forward provides opportunities for academic librarians to join the Pennsylvania library community conversation and do some lifelong learning ourselves. There are ideas for starting conversations within our communities on the PA Forward's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/paforward) and the PA Forward Toolkit page (www.palibraries.org/?Toolkit), especially the "PA Forward Best Practices for Literacy" database.

I would like to close with something Eileen Kern, past president of PSLA, said to me after the Bloomsburg Area School District School Board's decision to hire a high school librarian to replace its retiring librarian. As we were discussing the outcome, she reflected that she is more and more convinced that librarians should *not* be advocating for school libraries in our communities. This gave me pause, and I asked her to explain. She replied, "Conversations are the key to having community members understand how school libraries are important to not only academic achievement but to the community at large."

I think this is a profound observation that applies to all types of libraries. Ultimately, the stakeholders who fund libraries will not be convinced alone by arguments and studies offered by librarians to prove that their work is essential. The stakeholders also need to hear from individuals in our communities, including parents, students, educators, employers, and others, about the urgent need for librarians and libraries in 21st-century American society.

Editors' correction: 8 December 2014

An earlier version of this article listed an incorrect link to Linda Neyer's letter to the Bloomsburg Area School District.

References

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