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Feature

It's Not Just for Public Libraries

An Academic Library's Journey to Become a PA Forward Star Library

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Over 200 libraries across the commonwealth participate in the Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA) PA Forward Star Libraries program. Only five of those are academic libraries. While it may seem like PA Forward initiatives and its Star Library program are only for public libraries, academic libraries offer an array of programs related to the literacies. This article describes how the Seraph Foundation Learning Commons at Pennsylvania College of Health Sciences supported each of the five basic literacies with current and new programming to earn silver star status.

Over 200 libraries across the commonwealth participate in the Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA) PA Forward Star Libraries program. Only five of those are academic libraries. PA Forward is a 21st century literacy initiative which "was conceived to give voice to what the library community already knows, and what other states throughout the nation are already recognizing: With the right support, libraries are ideally positioned to become the community centers of information, technology and learning that will fuel educational and economic opportunity for all our citizens" (Pennsylvania Library Association, 2018). The work libraries do is framed through five literacies that everyone needs to succeed in life — basic, information, civic and social, health, and financial. The Star Library program recognizes libraries that are committed to providing programming that supports each of the literacies.

Libraries wishing to become a Star Library begin with basic steps to spread awareness about PA Forward and begin branding marketing materials to earn a bronze star. You then earn silver stars by offering programming to support each literacy. Once you've earned silver stars in the literacies, you can do additional work to help spread awareness about PA Forward and refine your programming to earn your gold star.

While at first it may seem like PA Forward initiatives and its Star Library program are only for public libraries, academic libraries already offer an array of programming related to the literacies or team with other groups on campus to sponsor programs related to the literacies. Some of the programming that supports these literacies constitute high impact educational practices. With this in mind, the Seraph Foundation Learning Commons at Pennsylvania College of Health Sciences (PCHS) set out on its Star Library journey in 2017 at the same time staff were engaged in a concerted effort to develop and refine programming to support the holistic growth and development of our students. The

Learning Commons earned it bronze and all silver stars, and we are working on achieving gold star status. What follows is a description of each PA Forward literacy and how it is supported by our programming.

Basic Literacy

Although we assume students have basic literacy skills by the time they get to college, these skills may not be at the level required to be successful in college. In fact the National Assessment of Educational Progress survey shows that in 2015, 72% of twelfth grade students performed at or above the basic reading level; only 37% performed at or above proficient, and 24% scored below basic. In 1992, the percentage of twelfth graders performing at or above proficient was 40% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Clearly colleges need to provide ways students can increase basic literacy skills. One such way is with a common read or common book program.

At PCHS, the Learning Commons spearheaded the common book initiative. Our inaugural common book program kicked off in fall 2017, and the book was chosen by a committee led by the Learning Commons and consisting of Learning Commons staff and English faculty. We made the decision to tie the theme to the National Library of Medicine traveling exhibit we hosted in fall 2017 (it was also the first year for hosting the exhibit, and we now have exhibits booked through fall 2020). PCHS also hosts an annual Distinguished Lecturer, and in 2017 the Distinguished Lecturer Planning Committee decided to tie the theme of the lecture to the common book and National Library of Medicine exhibit. The College's alumni relations department also worked with the Learning Commons to host an alumni common book discussion led by a librarian during the fall 2017 homecoming. Faculty members have begun integrating the common book into their courses, and the Learning Commons will begin hosting its own book discussions in fall 2018. All of these cross-departmental tie-ins to a central theme will continue, and this creates a cohesive direction for campus events and helps the campus community engage in a high impact practice — a common intellectual experience (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2018).

We began the common book initiative prior to beginning our Star Library journey, and then we realized this initiative and events hosted by the Learning Commons supported basic literacy.

Information Literacy

Information literacy is the literacy that most clearly applies to academic libraries. Many institutions are engaging in assessment initiatives to show the correlation between information literacy and grades which then correlates to retention and graduation. In fact the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Assessment in Action initiative found that instruction as well as database access, use of books, and use of other resources led to "higher levels of academic success (i.e. GPA, course grades, retention)" than for students who did not utilize these resources and services (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2017, p. 1).

Although information literacy skills are necessary for college success, it can be difficult to get faculty to devote class time to information literacy. Because of this time crunch, PCHS librarians have been working on other ways to reach our students outside of traditional information literacy instruction sessions; one way we do this is by hosting research parties. The idea of research parties came from the experiences shared by two Penn State Abington librarians (Hunter & Riehman-Murphy, 2017). At PCHS, we strategically time multiple research parties throughout the semester to coincide with due dates for assignments that often lead to a high number of research appointments. To maintain a party theme, the event is not held in a computer lab but instead is held in a room with computer access; we bring iPads, and students are encouraged to bring their devices (which they often do). Snacks and library giveaways are provided, and each party has at least one librarian present as well as at least one English faculty member and our learner support specialist. This allows students to get help from everyone in one place, at one time, rather than scheduling multiple

appointments. It also encourages peer learning and collaboration. Our education librarian planned to implement research parties after learning about them at ACRL Baltimore, and we realized they were a creative example of information literacy for the Star Library program.

Civic and Social Literacy

This literacy focuses on providing patrons with "the knowledge and skills they need to improve their lives, to participate and contribute effectively to their communities, and to connect with one another through discourse" (Pennsylvania Library Association, 2018). Essentially you are giving people the tools to be informed citizens who participate in democracy. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education released a report encouraging colleges to place a greater emphasis on civic engagement and education. Colleges across the U.S. are examining ways they can integrate this civic engagement into their campus culture. Libraries can use this literacy to engage with campus high impact practices such as diversity initiatives and service learning in addition to providing voter registration and other programs to help people be informed and take part in our government (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2018).

Because PCHS is a health science-focused institution and government heavily influences the healthcare industry, the Learning Commons was able to support this literacy by hosting the National Library of Medicine traveling exhibit Surviving and Thriving: AIDS, Politics, and Culture. This exhibit focused on how politics influenced the acknowledgement and treatment of AIDS and helped impress upon our students the need to be informed citizens who are actively involved in civic duties such as voting and advocating for the health and safety of their patients. In addition to the poster exhibit, we provided handouts on HIV and AIDS, and we teamed up with a faculty member in an Introduction to Sociology course for student poster presentations. This faculty member modified an existing assignment to have her students look at various local community groups and how they are impacted by AIDS. Students created posters and displayed them alongside the National Library of Medicine exhibit in the lobby outside of the Learning Commons and at the College's Distinguished Lecturer event.

National Library of Medicine traveling exhibits are popular, and you often need to book the exhibit at least one year in advance. We booked the exhibit for 2017 in 2016, and in 2017 we realized it supported civic and social literacy. Because the exhibit theme differs each year, it won't always support this literacy. We are looking at other programs we can create to continue to support civic and social literacy.

Health Literacy

Health literacy is not just about finding credible health information; it is also about managing your own health and wellbeing. According to Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, and Wilens (2015), mental health problems "are very common among college students," with the most prevalent being anxiety (para 1 and "Prevalence," para 2.). Numerous reports published since then point to anxiety issues becoming more prevalent as students are increasingly juggling work, school, and family demands. Academic libraries recognize that students are stressed, especially during finals week, and many of them take part in "Stress Less Week" events to help calm students. It's easy to combine these events with helpful information on stress reduction, test preparation, and study skills.

The Learning Commons has participated in its campus Stress Less Week by offering a "Taking the Stress out of Finals" workshop in the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters. During this workshop, students were provided with strategies to stay organized and productively prepare for finals in addition to learning about guided imagery and meditation to calm test anxiety and relax.

This initiative was planned at the same time we began our Star Library journey, and we realized it supported health literacy.

Financial Literacy

According to PaLA (2018), "Forty-one percent of U.S. adults give themselves a grade of C, D, or F on their knowledge of personal finance". A National Financial Capability Study confirms this perception. According to Farber (2016), the 2015 study "estimated that that nearly two-thirds of Americans couldn't pass a basic financial literacy test…Worse, the percentage of those who can pass the test has fallen consistently" since 2009 (para 4). With college comes the freedom to sign up for credit cards, manage bank accounts, and take on student loan debt. Considering the aforementioned statistics, it's no wonder students have a difficult time handling this new financial freedom.

Financial literacy is the only literacy for which the Learning Commons programming was fueled by the Star Library program. We created a financial literacy LibGuide, obtained Money Smart Week handouts, and worked with our Campus Life, Student Services, and Human Resources departments to bring in speakers who presented on general financial literacy, responsible education funding and loan repayment, employer tuition reimbursement, and retirement savings.

Closing

The PCHS Learning Commons Star Library journey is proof that academic libraries already offer programming to support the literacies; thus you can brand your programming as a PA Forward literacy to be united in the statewide initiative. If you are looking to develop programming, the literacies are a useful guide to create programs that are not only interesting but also give students tools to be successful after college. And you don't have to do this alone — partner with other departments across campus to provide programming with maximum impact that does not place an undue strain on staff. If you are not sure where to start with program planning, check out the PA Forward Commons on the PaLA website for information and examples including those described in this article.

> Since writing this article, the Learning Commons added civic engagement programming to further support civic and social literacy. The PCHS Learning Commons also completed additional bonus actions and was granted gold star status in fall 2018.

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