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Strategies for success

Since 2008, the University of Michigan (UM) Taubman Health Sciences Library (THSL) has officially been a part of the Partners for Excellence program of the Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This program, established in 1985, provides students and teachers with an opportunity to partner with local businesses and organizations on projects of interest to the community.¹

As part of this partnership, two librarians collaborated with an AAPS High School Health and Wellness teacher to develop an elective class on public health issues. This elective engaged high school students in preparing a research paper on a topic of their choosing. Students shared their work through various modalities that included oral presentations to the class and to the community, a poster presentation, and a public service announcement. The course provided academic health sciences librarians with the opportunity to assist high school students with research training typically reserved for university-level students.

This article describes this collaboration and examines successful strategies to forge and enhance similar educational library-community partnerships. Content created as part of this course, including teacher materials and student work, has been made available for viewing online.

The public health elective

As in college, the students selected for the course had to meet stringent criteria. In addition to completing an application form, applicants were required to obtain two letters of recommendation from their teachers.

After being interviewed by both the teacher and a counselor, members of the class were selected from the applicant pool.² The class requirements consisted of each student selecting a specific research topic; writing a final research paper with at least five main references; contacting an expert on the topic; and making an oral presentation to the other students in the class, to another high school class, as well as to a group of teachers. At the end of the semester, the students were to produce a PowerPoint presentation and a public service type of announcement on their selected topic. The librarians were instrumental in all aspects of the curriculum: guiding in the selection of the students' research topics, facilitating their contact with expert UM faculty, and attending the final presentations to offer valuable feedback.³

The librarians' role in the public health elective

The librarians gave a presentation to the class covering tips on choosing a topic that was neither too broad nor too narrow and one that the students would be interested in. The presentation also provided guidelines on conducting research and explained the differences between books and journal ar-

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ticles, when to use each, and the appropriate way to address copyright issues. Specifically discussed were the fields of epidemiology, biostatistics, and environmental health with their subsets of research, delivery systems, and health policy. The background of public health was described as well as its impact on the health and well-being of diverse populations locally, nationally, and globally. The historical example used to emphasize the importance of broad prevention in a population was the discovery of the small pox vaccine with the resultant elimination of this dreaded disease throughout the world through the efforts of public health workers. The librarians presented the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's list of the 20th century's ten great public health achievements in the United States.⁴ Still another aspect of public health involves health disparities among certain disadvantaged or marginalized groups. Since there have been important advances in public health with many more expected in the future, it was pointed out that the

students will have opportunities to take part in these areas if they choose a career in the multifaceted field of public health.⁵

Both the teacher and the librarians were acutely aware of how libraries and digital resources can play a crucial role in a students' education and the fact that consequently libraries have been adjusting access to their collections according to the ubiquitous use of, and reliance on, electronic media. Realizing that much of the content of higher education is absorbed outside the classroom, nowadays libraries and librarians have had to adapt to the needs of the new Net Generation of students. Generally speaking, these are the students who have grown up with video games, computer games, and multimedia environments. Rather than reading instructions or listening to didactic lectures, these students prefer to venture into unknown educational territory by themselves or in groups of their peers. However, as familiar and as comfortable as they are with technology, Net Generation students do not necessarily

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know how to select the best online resources to maximize their educational activities. On the other hand, librarians are much more likely to do research by searching a variety of specific databases to make sure that they have located the best possible sources. These two contrasting styles of research played an essential role in the collaboration of the high school teacher, the class, and the THSL librarians. The librarians thought that it would be best to first introduce the students to the basic elements of searching online resources and then to allow them to continue on their own until they needed further assistance.^{2,6}

A class field trip was planned and coordinated by the teacher and the librarians, and, on an appointed afternoon, the class members and the teacher arrived at THSL to familiarize themselves with the library and its resources. First, the librarians conducted a hands-on computer session in the library's classroom. They demonstrated how the students could locate the best available information on their chosen topics, both online and in the UM collections. Afterwards, the students toured the library to view the layout and to familiarize themselves with the building's environment.⁷

The librarians' expertise in the area of public health issues enabled the topics selected to be focused on pressing issues in public health while being extremely relevant to these students of high school age. The subjects chosen reflected not only problems that the students felt their peers are deeply concerned with, but also broader, more global public health issues, such as obstetric fistulas suffered after childbirth by women in Africa. Other topics included distracted driving; the stigma of teen pregnancy; depression among gay, lesbian, and transgender teens; and teenage alcohol abuse.⁸⁻¹³

Lessons learned

The librarians were able to assist the teacher by exposing the students to multifaceted and important research techniques for their future as they moved from high school to college studies. In addition to locating generally appropriate material after they had chosen specific topics of personal interest, the students learned

to make additional choices by selecting the very best resources for their specific purposes. Through interaction with librarians and because of the high expectations set forth by the teacher, the students became conversant with the standards of university-level research and thus became better prepared for postsecondary education.² By taking part in this course, the students learned how helpful librarians can be in assisting them with finding library resources, a lesson that should serve them well as they continue their education. At the very least, they will have developed the sense that librarians are approachable and can point out resources that may not be self-evident. Finally, the individuals in this class learned a good deal about the many aspects of public health careers both through conducting their own research in this discipline and through listening to the presentations of the THSL librarians, public health experts, and their own peers.

Conclusion

This cooperative effort of the health sciences librarians with the teachers and the high school students in the Health and Wellness class took place outside the walls of the library and outside the traditional role of librarians. The teacher provided the basic idea along with the structure and context of the course, while the librarians, contributing their expertise in finding information, did their part in supplementing, expanding, and deepening its potential for the students' continuing education. The librarians and the teacher concluded that each had played an essential role in establishing the groundwork for the class members' subsequent educational ventures.

It would not be an overstatement to declare that this elective in public health provided additional skills and information that the students could use to participate more fully in the future of the 21st century, in subsequent schooling and workplaces, and in their personal lives. The synergism and success of this collaboration can serve as a model for other librarians to use in forming partnerships that are beneficial to students, teachers, local school systems, and the librarians themselves.

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Notes

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(continues on page 667)

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Find balance by disconnecting

Though disconnecting from the busy information world every once in a while may strike some librarians as anathema to the bread-and-butter work of libraries, this shouldn't come as a shock. Libraries enjoy a long history of being refuges from the busy outer world.

Libraries can be islands of solitude in this hyperconnected world, and books afford their readers the unique opportunity to be alone in the quiet study of a single, coherent text. The contrast between reading Web pages on the Internet and the pages of a book is quite clear. As William Powers notes in his book *Hamlet's BlackBerry*, one of the unique features of book reading is the narrowing of the focus away from outer stimuli, and into the focused train of thought required to follow a discrete narrative.¹ Similarly, in his book *The Shallows*, author Nicholas Carr points out that reading Web pages and surfing for information taxes the brain's decision-making abilities more than book reading does, which can leave the reader overloaded. However, reading static texts allows one to go into deeper states of concentration, into almost a meditative state. Where the Web demands constant attention to stimuli, books create a more receptive state of mind, one in which thoughts and information can be allowed to "steep" before being acted upon.²

Exploring the natural world—surrounded by the elements, the weather, and various fellow-creatures—also affords opportunities for discovering the power of disconnecting. For example, a good friend of mine is planning to hike a portion of the Appalachian Trail. Though he won't have instant Internet access at his fingertips, he'll be far from disconnected from the world. He'll actually be immersed in a world of information coming from the natural environment around him, such as the changing moods of the weather and the conditions of the trail ahead. On the trail, he'll have to rely on his senses to get around safely and to find a suitable camp. The

hike will be a test of his backpacking ability, and it will also surely give more balance to his life, as he "unplugs" from the busy world.

Here are some more ways to disconnect:

- Leave your cell phone at home for a day.
- Take an "Internet Sabbath": disconnect your Internet-connected devices for a weekend.
- Take a walk outside.
- Paint, draw, or play a musical instrument (by yourself or with others).
- Spend time with your favorite pet; research shows that spending time with animals can have a positive impact on your well-being.

Conclusion

Living an authentic life involves balancing your professional and personal life, so that one doesn't dominate the other. I've found that listening to my inner voice and disconnecting every once in a while has helped my professional life grow in unexpected ways. However, what works for me, may not work for you. So, take a deep breath, turn off the computer, follow your hunches, and walk out that door.

Notes

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