

Beyond Library Space and Place: Creating a Culture of Community Engagement Through Library Partnerships

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Abstract

Academic library faculty and staff can be active partners in campus initiatives for community engagement. This article documents the development and operations of a Center for Service-Learning within the Library at Indiana University East, a medium size regional campus of a major public university in the Midwest. It provides information that may be useful to assist academic libraries in transitioning into expanded service roles within their constituent communities.

Keywords: service-learning, community engagement, community service, academic library roles

Collaboration is a key to enhanced library role in learner engagement

Collaboration among campus and community partners can transform courses into active learning experiences and help students become civically-engaged citizens. Academic library faculty and staff can play a key role in facilitating a process that connects college faculty with service-learning projects that are infused across the curriculum. This article documents the development of a Center for Service-Learning (CSL) within the Indiana University (IU) East Campus Library. It provides information that may be useful to other libraries to transition into expanded service roles within their constituent communities.

A Center for Service-Learning in the Library?

Academic libraries continue to fulfill new and dynamic roles that reflect their commitment to informing and preparing students for a world outside the halls of academia. In the classic report *Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space* published in 2005 by the Council on Library and Information Resources (<http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub129/pub129.pdf>), they ask the still-relevant question “What is the role of a library when it no longer needs to be a warehouse of books and when users can obtain information without setting foot in its doors?” Diverse perspectives stimulated readers to think about the services and roles of the library with an emphasis on the importance of the “library as place—or base—for teaching, learning, and research in the digital age” (CILR, preface).

Discussions turned into actions as libraries responded to the need for enhancing relevance to the learning communities they served. They created information commons, learning commons and makerspaces. The “library as place” movement prompted additions of game tables, more comfortable seating, additional group study space, coffee kiosks and even full-service cafés. Digital natives have come to expect wireless connections, interactive white boards and 24/7 service. But to get to the heart of education, to proactively facilitate engaged learning, libraries need to be in a position of partnership with campus constituents and the community they all serve. This can be accomplished through Centers for Service-learning hosted in library spaces, with library staff serving as integral members of a service engagement team.

Nutefall (2011) in *Why Service Learning is Important to Librarians* notes that service-learning centers and academic libraries are ideal partners. They both help build curricula, and as the partnership evolves so does the “mutual understanding” and provision of the “knowledge” needed (p. 2). In discussing service learning and engagement in the academic library, Herther (2008) asserts that it expands and deepens the librarian’s role with both faculty and students—in effect creating a new type of “social contract” between the libraries and our users.

Service-learning represents the core values of the mission of academic libraries, including democracy and social justice, diversity, promotion of multiple perspectives, building a foundation for lifelong learning, developing and applying real-world skills, and commitment to social responsibility. Service-learning provides students with the opportunity to work with people of diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds who share mutual goals. Student learning outcomes include exploration of their roles in the workplace through community engagement, enhancement of critical thinking skills, and increasing understanding of diverse individuals. Service-learning is a collaborative effort, in keeping with the learning partnerships academic libraries seek within the community of higher education.

At Indiana University East in Richmond, Indiana, the Campus Library partners with the Center for Service-Learning to develop and diversify the opportunities for service engagement to encompass a variety of academic pursuits.

This article uses the IU East Campus Library as an example to provide relevant information in the exploration of service-learning partnerships between academic libraries and all academic units on campus. It includes highlights from a literature review that provides the context and rationale for the library's involvement in service learning, and answers the questions of what, why, and how academic libraries can be fully involved in vital education to help students grow into community-minded citizens.

Service-learning 101 and the connection to campus libraries

The basic concepts of service-learning are explained well as the "5Cs" that Giles and Eyler developed and elaborated in their book, *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning* (1999). The 5Cs are *connection, continuity, context, challenge and coaching*.

Connection eliminates the artificial separation between the learning arenas of the campus and the community and helps establish more authentic (i.e., real world) learning-by-doing. The service-learning philosophy at IU East presumes that an academic library is an integral partner in the campus learning arena.

Continuity establishes learning as a lifelong process built from both on- and off- campus college experiences. Students develop understanding through encounters that challenge their beliefs, values and knowledge. At IU East, we educate a range of students, including direct from high school, working adults returning to school, transfers from community college, and first-generation attendees. The campus library provides a central location for gathering diverse individuals who have the unifying goal of serving the community.

Context necessitates using knowledge in adaptive ways as students develop strategies to process complex issues. The library academic partner can be useful in this realm, providing information literacy skills to assist students in finding facts and exploring ideas to develop their thinking from multiple perspectives. It is an opportunity to work in tandem with faculty in an effort to integrate research skills into the curriculum in a more comprehensive way than is possible with one-shot library instruction sessions.

Challenge is a central dimension of learning that occurs as new experiences impact students' intellectual and emotional development. Growth occurs as students use information to problem-solve and answer questions, conflicts and dilemmas within their community service experiences.

Because challenge without adequate support can overwhelm or stymie learning potential, Eyler and Giles (1994) identify coaching as an important component for effective service-learning. This *coaching* responsibility can be fulfilled dually by faculty and librarians but does require flexibility to recast

academic roles.

Using the 5Cs as a framework in which librarians and faculty plan service-learning opportunities results in an interconnectedness of theory and practice, while using the specific expertise of each individual involved.

Service-learning and information literacy improve student learning outcomes

Research studies since 2000 have documented the benefits of service-learning for increasing students' critical thinking skills (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007; Conway, Amel, & Gerwing, 2009; Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). Spiezio, Baker, and Boland (2005) note the importance of information literacy for increasing students' abilities to analyze and synthesize information, with a consequent benefit of applying logical decisions to situations they encounter in their service-learning experiences. Riehle and Weiner (2011) concur that when students apply information literacy skills to real-world situations, they gain enhanced understanding of issues.

Overall, research indicates that students who participate in service-learning are able to contribute to a more robust scholarly dialogue. The library is well-positioned to integrate information literacy into courses when the Library serves as a campus clearinghouse for service engagement and library staff has regular opportunities to interact with faculty seeking service-learning opportunities.

How it happened at IU East ... integration of the Center for Service-Learning within the Campus Library

The library director at IU East teaches a course in children's literature and in 2009/10 was awarded a service-learning grant for students to create literacy bags. These were portable thematic units comprised of books and materials for activities, to be used in community schools and after-school programs. These resources would be housed in the curriculum center of the campus library and would be available for circulation to teachers and childcare providers. That successful foray into service engagement led to the library director having a role as a faculty liaison for service-learning. In 2012, the Center for Service-Learning at IU East was established in the Campus Library, in a space formerly used as a group study room.

Two library staff members were recruited to each have a part-time role. A support staff member works 29 hours per week as a campus/community liaison. This person is responsible for matching students with service placements and communicating with faculty about logistics and progress. The instruction coordinator allots 20% of his time to supervising the liaison, overseeing data collection, approving memos of understanding, and ensuring policy compliance.

The Center for Service-Learning receives 40-60 hours of

work-study allocations each semester, to hire students whose work will comply with the federal mandate that seven percent of a university's work study dollars be used towards community service jobs (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/fws/index.html>).

A service-learning faculty committee, inclusive of all local schools, serves as an advisory body. They assist in promoting service-learning opportunities within programs and departments, help communicate to faculty the importance of compliance with university and federal guidelines, particularly in regard to service with youth, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, and connect interested faculty with the resources and services of the Center For Service-Learning.

Integration of the Center for Service-Learning within the campus

The mission of the Center for Service-Learning at IU East is to promote service engagement as an integral component of a student's civic education and to facilitate campus connections with the regional and online communities we serve. The goals are to systematically collect, document, and report all service-learning activities generated through courses, projects and events by IU East, assist in the development of partnerships that improve community quality of life and enhance student learning, support faculty and staff development through sharing of research, best practices, and resources for effectively implementing community service and civic engagement, and actively participate in assessment of service-learning.

A resource guide (<http://iue.libguides.com/servicelearning>) serves as an online location to post opportunities, introduce faculty to service-learning, and house survey forms for reflections and data collected from faculty, students, and community partners. It is used internally by CSL/library staff and also as a public space to explain some procedures and logistics for implementing service-learning at IU East.

Library staff collaboration with faculty for service-learning takes various forms. Some faculty find a community partner, plan a project, and inform the CSL of their plans. Others come to CSL for ideas and to learn about community organizations that have requested students for specific projects. Service placements for each student in a class may be coordinated by the CSL campus/community liaison or a whole class may participate in a one-time event. Examples of service-engagement include nursing students' trips to a Native American reservation to provide health care, students in a composition course writing grants for a local non-profit they had researched and volunteered for, Spanish language and culture students creating activities for a Hispanic Heritage festival, online writing students partnering with local middle school students to share journal entries via a secure interface, history students creating displays at the local museum, and elementary education majors gaining experience in other teaching venues by doing service in local senior centers.

Building collaborative instructional teams

Academic library involvement in service-learning will of course take different forms, depending on what service engagement is already available on campus, what type and scope of collaboration exists, and whether there is faculty and administrative buy-in. To be realistic, there are time and staffing constraints. The most comprehensive policies and efficient logistics on paper don't always translate into compliance and practice. There will be faculty who do not even adhere to mandatory requirements such as students completing background checks prior to working with youth. But alignment of service-learning with the library mission of promoting civic literacy, in partnership with faculty, has beneficial outcomes that are worth the effort.

Tips for making it work

How can libraries effectively partner with faculty colleagues to facilitate community engagement? Academic library missions may be similar but stakeholders, organizational landscapes, strategic plans and commitment to collaboration can differ extensively. This list of suggestions may be helpful for academic librarians to begin reflection and planning about how to add a service-engagement role to library operations:

- Determine awareness of and expectations for service-learning by faculty, community partners, students and library staff
- Be familiar with core campus issues, focus, and the campus strategic plan
- Consider logistics in terms of campus and community context, which may include location, town relations, availability of student transportation, needs of community partners
- Frame the library-faculty relationship in terms that create mutual understanding and recognition of potentially new and evolving roles and responsibilities
- Recognize that motivation may be needed, such as course development grants or professional development stipends
- Ensure you have administrative support, in terms of space, staffing, and communication with faculty that service-learning is recognized as valuable in annual reviews and the promotion and tenure dossier
- Establish mutual goals through provision of memos of understanding for service placements
- Position the library as a clearinghouse of information and a comprehensive source of service opportunities

- Promote service-learning to faculty across disciplines through committees, workshops, training for individuals and groups, and targeted communication to faculty about specific service opportunities.
- Maintain a streamlined structure, including a primary contact person, delineation of responsibilities, and consistent contact with campus and community partners
- Assess individual, institutional and community impact through persistent and systematic data collection

A final “why do it in the library?”

The integration of service-learning as a function of academic libraries provides opportunities to advance curriculum development, form productive relationships with faculty colleagues, and provide direct impact to students. Libraries as a learning hub for the campus and the community are in a good position to promote and facilitate service-learning. Reading the reflections of students, faculty, and community partners is a gratifying affirmation of the impact of our efforts. As a student wrote, “*It is important to not be wrapped up in our own little world. We need to be aware and understand that there is more out there, people different from us, ways we can help our community.*”

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