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Making a Difference to the K-12 Community:

How a University Library Reaches Out
by Evelyn Barker

Today's education literature is rife with these terms: "achievement gap," "college readiness," and the similar "college preparedness."

Numerous articles address the issue of "bridging the gap" between high school standards and college readiness. Rarely, however, are libraries mentioned in these articles. How can academic libraries help bridge the gap between high school and college? At the University of Texas at Arlington Library, we actively reach out to primary and secondary schools to introduce students to the resources of a university library and to guide them in finding, evaluating, and using information effectively. Through this outreach, the UT Arlington Library promotes UT Arlington to prospective students; demonstrates the valuable role libraries play in the educational process; and increases ways students, teachers, and librarians work together to create, manage, and use information resources.

Issues with Our First Year Students

To gain understanding of our first-year students, I informally asked our public service librarians and freshmen English instructors four questions: What are the big problems we see with incoming first-year students; what do we expect students to know from high school to college; what are students doing well; and what is the one thing we wish we could tell first-year students?

Instructors commented that students do not want to deal with longer sources or sources that are not full-text online, they do not realize that these are skills they will use their whole lives, and that students want to Google everything.

Librarians noted that students lack awareness of databases, are not aware of specialized subject encyclopedias, and cannot decipher a citation.

On a positive note, all librarians and instructors said that the one thing they wanted students to know was

that librarians are nice and want to help.

When I tried asking our current university students these questions, most said that they had not gone to the library much in high school and that they mostly used books, not databases. I also conducted an informal survey of high school students who visited the library by asking them to list, in their own words, what they liked and disliked about their library. A frequent response in the "Like" column was the amount of information libraries contained. A top dislike was the difficulty of finding that information in the library.

Here, therefore, is our "readiness gap." On the one hand, you have students who do not go to the library in high school, and, though they love the information, they find the library difficult to use. On the other hand, you have librarians and faculty who are irritated that students cannot read citations and want to Google everything.

What is UT Arlington Doing to Address This Gap?

Over the last five years, our most frequent guests have been high school juniors in the International Baccalaureate program. The International Baccalaureate (IB) Program, which differs from Advanced Placement or Dual Credit programs, is a rigorous course of study modeled after European educational systems. A key component of the IB program is a 4,000 word extended essay that students begin in their junior year. This essay requires in-depth research using resources not found in most school or public libraries.

A teacher or, less often, a librarian will arrange a visit through me. I typically schedule visits for at least two hours, but some teachers request all-day sessions lasting five or six hours. When a class comes, we may give them a tour of our main library. I like to tell students about things that differentiate us from their high school or public library, like

being open 24 hours, having a Starbucks on the first floor, and having specialized subject libraries. Next, we will go to a computer classroom and conduct a library instruction class geared to their subject area. A typical class will include when to use books vs. articles, how to use our catalog, and which databases are suitable for their needs.

After instruction, the students are free to search the databases and identify books relevant to their topic. The UT Arlington Library allows guests to check out a maximum of five books for 21 days. As for databases, we do not allow off-site access to guests, but they may return to the library on their own and request a 24-hour computer pass.

There are, of course, issues regarding these visits. IB classes range in size from 30 students to over 100, and the classes are getting larger. First, I must reserve enough computer classrooms around campus to accommodate the group. When a group comes, we must walk to different buildings for instruction and then provide volunteers to lead them from the classroom to the libraries to check out their books.

Second, I must find volunteer library instructors and guides. As I am the only person who specifically works with K-12 schools, I must beg, bribe, and besiege others to help. Fortunately, UT Arlington Library has a strong commitment to information literacy, customer service, and library instruction, so any problems with finding volunteers arise more from scheduling conflicts than from unwillingness.

Third, visits impact other areas of the library like Access Services, which must make and enter all the guest library cards and deal with the rush of students checking out books at the end of the visit. Checkout lines may have 20 people queued. Reference, too, must handle the brief, but intense, influx of students who are completely new to academic libraries. The Library's regular patrons, our students, tend to regard the visitors with either indifference or amused tolerance.

We all know the difficulty of assessing one-time instruction sessions; however, teachers continue to bring their students back year after year and tell us that these sessions make a difference in the quality of their student's papers. One teacher commented, "My students consistently remark on how our day at UTA makes a college library and the staff seem much more accessible. I think that pays off in enormous dividends when they go to college." Another wrote, "I am not sure how the students would complete this [IB extended essay] assignment without the UTA library. Most of the topics are beyond the scope of a public library or our school library."

Primary Sources from UT Arlington

While instruction is an important component of our K-12 community outreach, it is not the only one. UT Arlington Library provides curriculum content through its Special Collections library. Texas students study state history in both 4th and 7th grades, and the holdings of Special Collections are particularly well suited to support the curriculum since they focus on the history of Texas, Mexico, and the Southwest.

The Library distributes primary source materials from Special Collections through its web site and through an educator loan kit program run by the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History (FWMSH). The loan kits use artifacts, reproductions, photographs and games to teach topics like pioneer Texas or the Civil War. For the Texas pioneer kit, UT Arlington Library contributed a copy of an 1864 diary that records a trip from Boerne, Texas, to Matamoros, Mexico, and copies of money printed during the Republic of Texas era. For more information about the kits, visit http://www.fwmuseum.org/educate/pdfs/GeneralBroch0809.pdf. Special Collections promotes its wonderful cartography collection through Cartographic Connections (http://libraries.uta.edu/ccon/), a site which offers a selection of digitized Texas and Southwestern maps dating from the 1500s to the 1900s. Researchers can search for maps by date or by keyword. Many of the maps include lesson plans which correspond to the TEKS standards.

Why We Work with K-12 Audiences

All of the above-mentioned activities take up time and money, leading some to question whether these

costs are worth incurring for a group that is not the primary customer of academic libraries. I argue that the costs are justifiable for several reasons.

First, outreach to primary and secondary audiences is part of the mission of the Information Literacy (IL) department at UT Arlington Library. IL works with first-year students through freshman English courses, university orientation, and college preview days. By extending our outreach to the K-12 community, we hope to introduce our future first-year students to the goals of information literacy (i.e., finding, using, and evaluating information effectively), thus helping to bridge the gap between high school and college.

Second, we are challenging students' assumptions about libraries. By hosting visits and research days, we give students the opportunity to evaluate their preconceived ideas about libraries being too boring, too unwelcoming, or too unnecessary. Academic libraries have significant differences from school and public libraries, and we want to educate our future students about our unique traits.

Third, hosting visits and offering lesson plans to teachers promotes UT Arlington to the community. Often, a university can exist as a completely sepa-rate entity from the city in which it resides, but UT Arlington wants to be partners in its community and be relevant to citizens in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

Conclusion

Speaking personally, I can encapsulate the rewards of working with K-12 students by relating an encounter I had with a sixth grade girl from a disadvantaged school. The girl's class visited UT Arlington Library for Banned Book Week and I presided over a lively quiz-style game using a classroom response system (clickers). The young students animatedly discussed censorship and argued hypothetical situations. At the end of the visit, as I handed out souvenir pencils and bookmarks, I heard a girl say, "When I grow up, I want to come to UTA." Looking at her face, alight with wonder and new-found knowledge, I knew that, for her, we had succeeded in presenting a positive image of libraries, of UT Arlington, and, more generally, of college. By welcoming K-12 students to our library, we help to bridge the gap between grade school and college and develop the foundation of lifelong learning.

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