

Beyond Library Walls: Embedding Librarians in Academic Departments

Tobie Matava¹
Social Sciences Librarian
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
tmatava@iastate.edu

Dan Coffey
Languages and Literatures Librarian
Iowa State University
Ames Iowa

Jeffrey Kushkowski
Business and Economics Librarian
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

¹corresponding author

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Abstract

Today's academic library provides resources that users can access library information both physically in the library and virtually from academic offices. This increasing availability of online access means that information resources are no longer confined within library walls and librarians need to rethink how their constituent's information needs are being met. Embedding librarians in academic departments and programs is one way to expand library services within this new information landscape. This article describes the background and process for embedding librarians and provides case studies from three librarians who successfully embedded themselves in academic departments.

Beyond Library Walls: Embedding Librarians in Academic Departments

As E. Stewart Saunders pointed out in 2007, “The internet and Google have changed the information landscape (p. 21)” Recently the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that over 72% of respondents who have access to the internet reported relying on the internet rather than the library for their research needs. (Estabrook and Rainie, 2007) How has the increasing reliance on information technology and online sources changed the landscape of librarianship?

According to Dewey (2007) over time, many in the academic community have come to view the library as a distinct identifiable space, however a closer look at the development of today’s academic library reveals that the space we define as a library is constantly changing. Information resources that began as small faculty generated departmental collections were eventually merged and placed in a single location, creating the traditional campus research library. Along with the move to a singular defined space, the responsibility for collection development was also transferred away from the faculty/researchers to the professional librarian. The result of all this movement according to Dewey is that “Librarians are in the business of research support but, on most campuses, have little direct contact with research centers” (p. 9). This is a critical problem for many academic librarians.

While the library as a clearly defined and identified space on campus plays an important role within the academic community, that role and the role of the librarian is ever changing. Today’s academic library provides a space for social interaction, access to technology, and a place where students and scholars are encouraged to come together, share ideas, and work collaboratively on projects. While providing this space contributes to the vitality of the campus community and supports research needs, we must continue to adapt to the new realities of the

21st century library. The increasing availability of online access to information means that information resources are no longer confined within library walls and libraries need to rethink how their constituent's information needs are being met. Embedding librarians in academic departments and programs is one way to expand library services within this new information landscape. Placing reference librarians within academic departments builds helps us “gain deeper insight into what our customers are doing and how they will use the information we provide.”(Shumaker, 2009) It also increases library visibility, helps insure that we understand our community's information needs, and provides new opportunities for collaboration.

What is an embedded librarian? As Freiburger & Kramer (2009) point out, while the terminology is fairly recent, the concept of having an embedded librarian has existed for quite some time. As early as the 1970s medical librarians joined with clinicians and researchers in the field in an effort to learn about the information needs of those constituents. Since then, many different types of organizations have implemented some sort of embedded librarian program. The specific character of those programs varies based on the needs, size, and culture of the organization, but the location of the librarian, is one of the key factors associated with an embedded librarian program. In addition they,

. . . formulated a concept of embedded library services that involves much more than the transfer of traditional library operations into new physical and virtual locations. Rather, it involves focusing on the needs of one or more specific groups, building relationships with these groups, developing a deep understanding of their work, and providing information services that are highly customized and targeted to their greatest needs. In effect, it involves shifting the basis of library services from the traditional, transactional, question-and-answer model of

reference services to one in which there is high trust, close collaboration, and shared responsibility for outcomes. (Shumaker & Talley, p. 9)

According to Kesselman and Watstein (2009) “bringing the library and the librarian to the user, wherever they are . . . is at the forefront of what it means to be *embedded*”. They also suggest that “integration and collaboration” are two important aspects of embedded librarianship. In other words, the goal is to place the reference librarian right in the middle of where the information is needed and by doing so increasing the likelihood that librarians will be better integrated into academic departments creating new opportunities for collaborative scholarship and communication (p. 385).

Iowa State University (ISU) was founded as one of the nation’s first land grant colleges. Today, as reported on the Iowa State University web site, we are among the top quarter of all public universities with nearly 28,000 undergraduate and graduate students and close to 1,700 faculty members. Many subject librarians at Iowa State University struggle with finding ways to work collaboratively with our departments and programs. In order to best serve the needs of our faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students we must develop a clear understanding of their research and information literacy needs. Embedding librarians within academic departments is one way the university library has decided to bridge the gulf between library and departmental faculty members. The fact that ISU librarians have faculty status has helped with this process. As Bartnik (2007) points out, “That provides us with entrée into levels of collegiality not afforded staff. . .” (p. 4). Currently three librarians spend a few hours each week holding office hours outside the library walls. In the case studies that follow, each of us explores our unique experiences developing, implementing, and carrying out ISU’s embedded librarian program.

Case Study: Department of English

The English Department at Iowa State University houses programs of varying terminal degrees in literary studies, linguistics, technical communication, and rhetoric. It was during a discussion with a colleague who is a literature professor that we came up with the idea of having the appropriate subject specialist librarian keep office hours in the English Department building. This practice started in the Spring of 2008; for two consecutive hours per week, I used the office of the aforementioned professor.

As a member of the English Department listserv, I was able to send weekly messages reminding department members of my presence. The listserv is populated by faculty members, instructors, and graduate students – undergraduate students are not included. Therefore, for undergraduates to be aware of and make use of the presence of an embedded librarian, they would have to be notified and encouraged by their instructors. This happened in a few cases. On many occasions, motivated students informed of my presence stopped by during my office hours to go over their research problems with me. In some instances, all that was needed was reassurance that they were on the right track; in other cases, my meetings with the undergraduates took the form of an instruction session where I would show them relevant indexes that they hadn't considered, and advanced techniques for finding materials in those indexes.

Faculty members also responded to my presence. There were a few who would come on a somewhat regular basis, mostly to talk about their book-length research projects and how to make sure they were exhaustively covering literature on their topic. Often, as well, they would be coming for help to try to locate an elusive incomplete citation. Other, mainly newer, faculty members would stop by to get a sense of the workings of the library; they would have requests for journal subscriptions or book purchases, and would want to know the proper procedure for

putting course materials on reserve. The numbers of people affiliated with the English department that would visit me during the office hours has increased substantially since the inception of the program in Fall, 2007. During that semester, I averaged about one person per every two sessions. In Spring 2008, the average number of visitors exceeded the number of sessions, and since then, I've averaged at least two visitors per session. Among these numbers, I count those who contacted me as a direct result of the office hours being advertised and who came to see me at a different time, since the embedded librarian project was still crucial in getting those people to come to me when they normally would not have done so.

One of the very interesting outcomes of the “embedded” experience is that, for almost every two-hour block I spent in the English department building, I would get an email from someone in the department (usually a graduate student, and this formed the basis of my contact with grad students), saying that they wouldn't be around during my office hours, and asking if they could meet with me at some other point during the week. This led to what is thought of as a normal in-library in-depth reference consultation, but it never would have happened without the reality of the out-of-library “embedded” office hours.

Case Study: College of Business

The library has had an embedded librarian in the College of Business since the spring of 2009. Prior to 2009, contact with students in the College of Business was done by phone, email, chat reference, and appointments at the University Library. Aside from traveling to the College of Business to do class presentations and meet with faculty, there was no regular face-to-face interaction with the members of the College. Time constraints in the classroom precluded a large number of class presentations. The College of Business, founded in 1984, had an undergraduate enrollment of enrollment of more than 3800 and a graduate enrollment of 280 in fall 2009. The

College offers a standard undergraduate business curriculum, along with both full- and part-time MBA program. A Ph.D. in Business and Technology began in the fall of 2009. The College also offers a joint masters degree in Seed Technology and Management with the Agronomy Department which is taught completely online and enrolls students from around the world.

In late 2008, I talked with our English subject specialist and found out that he was embedded in the department. I contacted the Dean for the College of Business and proposed that I spend four hours per week at the College of Business having office hours. My rationale for doing this was to provide greater visibility for the Library in the College of Business and provide better service for members of the College. The office hours would be structured as walk-in hours, with the understanding that individuals could also make appointments for a consultation.

I received a response almost immediately and arranged to start office hours in January of 2009. I routinely contact faculty and staff to let them know when the office hours occur. My marketing efforts included periodic emails to faculty and staff alerting them to the office hours, emails to departmental library liaisons, and a dedicated library resource page for the College of Business, using Libguides™ as a tool for providing subject-based content. I also use Meebo™ as a chat client – during and outside of office hours, and have a chat link on the College of Business library resources page.

The response to office hours has been a slow but steady increase in the number of reference queries, both in person and electronic. During Spring 2009, I averaged 1-2 queries per week; during fall 2009 that average increased to 3 queries per week. Faculty and graduate students appreciate not having to walk across campus to see me at the library, and being in the building has the distinct advantage of allowing faculty and students more immediate response to questions.

My experience being embedded during spring 2009 resulted in further initiatives aimed at increasing the Library's visibility in the College. The feedback I received from faculty indicated that they were concerned about the ability of their graduate research assistants to find library materials. I asked about starting an orientation program for new research assistants that would provide them with basic knowledge about library resources and services. The Associate Dean responded by implementing a mandatory orientation session for new research assistants starting with the Fall 2009 class. That class, in turn, has resulted in more information requests from graduate students.

One component of the graduate orientation program included developing a resource guide for the College of Business. The ISU Library has used Springshare's LibGuides™ software to create subject guides for about three years. Generally guides are developed for individual departments, classes, or subject areas. I developed a guide for the College of Business in September 2009 (coinciding with the start of the Fall semester) and arranged for it to be placed on the College of Business page, where it is easily accessible to patrons. The guide includes a toolbar, using software from Conduit.com, developed so the students, faculty and staff could access library business resources directly from their desktops. This guide has proven to be very successful. It was among the top-10 ISU Library guides for 2009, despite not being developed until September 2009.

Case Study: Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication

When I began working at Iowa State University during the Fall 2008 semester I was excited by the prospect of working with students and faculty. Coming from the National Library of Medicine, where my focus was on serials acquisitions, I looked forward to working face-to-face with students and faculty looking for information. My first year was filled with learning

about reference services and collection development for my new subject areas. As I became acclimated to this new environment it became obvious that there were barriers to overcome. I had to find a way to create relationships with the faculty that would help me understand their research and information needs as well as provide an opportunity for me to let them know the full range of services we had available at the library. I found that since online information resources were so easily accessible busy departmental faculty rarely found time to come to the library. So I went to them, scheduling individual meetings or attending departmental meetings to introduce myself. While those interactions went well they did not lead to ongoing collegial relationships or present the sort of information sharing encounter that I was hoping for. The ability to casually sit down and chat about their research simply did not exist. I began looking around to see what my colleagues were doing and learned about the Library's program with both the English Department and College of Business. After some additional reading about embedded librarian programs in general I realized that this would be an ideal platform to build the sort of give and take relationship with departmental faculty that would benefit them, their students, the library, and the university community as a whole.

I began with the Greenlee School of Journalism & Communication. Established in 1905 the Greenlee School offers one of the oldest journalism programs in the country.

Undergraduates major in either Journalism and Mass Communication or Advertising, and are required to supplement their journalism coursework with an additional area of concentration.

Graduate students can earn a Master of Science degree with either an applied or a theoretical focus. The school is currently developing a new Ph.D. program in scientific communication.

Back when budgets were more generous and fewer resources existed online the journalism school employed their own librarian. However, as budgets tightened and the need for technology

support within the journalism school grew the librarian position was transformed into that of an IT specialist. Although they no longer had their own librarian the school maintained its Reading Room and subscriptions to a few specialized resources that the University Library does not include in its collection. Many faculty members had previous experience working closely with a librarian; they routinely requested LibGuides™ for courses and invited me into their classrooms each semester for more in-depth bibliographic workshops. Shortly before the fall semester I approached the Director of the school about the possibility of holding office hours in the school's reading room. His response was immediate and enthusiastic. So beginning in Fall 2009 I scheduled office hours twice a week, for a total of four hours, in the Greenlee School Reading Room.

An initial email announcement was sent informing faculty of my Greenlee office hours and asking them to inform their students. The first semester was off to a very slow start. A few graduate and undergraduate students showed up, but I never did see any faculty members. In fact as spring semester began I considered cutting back those hours, but decided to give it a bit more time. Another email announcement was sent out to faculty. In addition, I made sure all the LibGuides™ created for Journalism and Communication studies course prominently displayed my reading room office hours and I wrote a short piece, titled "Embedded Librarians: Beyond the Library's Walls," for the library's monthly newsletter. Now as we approach the end of the spring semester I'm beginning to see results. Foot traffic has increased and faculty is peeking into my reading room office, but more importantly I am receiving new requests for classroom presentations and LibGuides™. For example, during Fall 2009 semester I held bibliographic workshops in four classes, but by Spring that number increased to seven, that's a 57% increase in just one semester. In addition my increasing visibility has resulted in more

students dropping by during office hours, writing to request appointments, or seeking email assistance. My next steps include working towards being integrated into graduate student orientation sessions, presenting more in-depth workshops that might be of interest to the entire school, and developing a way to evaluate the impact of my new embedded activities within the school of journalism and communication studies.

Case Study: Department of Anthropology

The Department of Anthropology is one of the newest programs on campus (founded in 1990). It is a small program with 7 faculty members, approximately 100 undergraduates and 20 graduate students. My office hours in the Department of Anthropology just began this Spring 2010 semester. My approach here was different because I already know and work closely with one faculty member. In fact, I have played an increasingly visible role in a few of the courses offered by this department and as a result the issue has been finding time to meet with all the students requesting assistance. I spend two hours a week in the department and still have many students emailing and scheduling appointments for more in-depth reference help on their final term projects. I've noticed that student's who make their way over to my library office once, often tend to come back for additional help. In addition, the time I've spent over in the department is changing the nature of my relationship with anthropology faculty members. Being in the department helped facilitate communication between us so I now have a better understanding of their research needs and in turn they are more aware of all the services the university library provides. Another benefit, in terms of collection development, is that faculty is more likely to pass on recommendations for our collection, and finally I believe the library is being viewed in a more positive light. Currently one of the anthropology faculty members and I are developing a collaborative project with the goal of increasing student information literacy.

The opportunity to spend time outside of the library and within the academic units for two of my subject areas has helped me to be a better, more responsive subject librarian. While I am diligently collecting statistics for my embedded experiences, my future plans include finding new ways to publicize my presence and developing some sort of an assessment tool.

Conclusion

As shown in this paper, both libraries and academic departments across the board can benefit from supporting an embedded librarians program. As the brick-and-mortar walls of the academic library continue to evaporate, and the information within is parceled out electronically with greater and greater frequency, it can only help to have a librarian positioned where faculty and students are searching for and evaluating that information: in the department buildings where professors work in their offices, and students walk the hallways.

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Examples of Marketing Efforts

College of Business Library Resources page: <http://instr.iastate.libguides.com/mba>

Journalism 201 Library Resources page: <http://instr.iastate.libguides.com/jour201>