

Librarian Role and Embedded Librarianship

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Library integrations into Canvas have been critical for getting librarians added to the learning management system (LMS) for online courses. However, this does not have to be limited to online courses. It is relevant for any course that have students interact in a significant manner with the LMS. This chapter focuses on Penn State's embedded librarian program within the LMS, with a particular focus on the librarian role created within Canvas. There was significant intentionality built into the embedded librarian program to make the program, technology, and overall strategy work together. This program can scale to any size institution. In this chapter, we will discuss the best practices gained from coordinating embedded librarians in the online environment regardless of school size and online presence.

Best Practices

- **Start at the program level.** With all of the focus on scaling and maximizing reach across the entire institution, it is refreshing to see a deep connection to students, instructors, and the course content.¹ However, this means that there is no way you can meaningfully embed in as many courses as might request an embedded librarian. Starting the embedded librarianship conversation at the program level builds a relationship with the program head, allows you to focus on one or two courses that will have a high impact for both you and the students, and situates your embeddedness

in the entirety of the curriculum sequence.

- **Value collaborations.** Embedding should not be a one-pony show. Even if you have a small number of librarians, you have partners in your instructors, course authors, technology staff, and others that are relevant to your institution. You should really think of an embedded librarian program as a partnership, not a solo endeavor. And on a practical level, before you commit to a program or course, make sure that you have a librarian available and interested in embedding in that area.
- **Start lightly, dig deeper.** When you start exploring all of the options for embedded librarianship, it is easy to become overwhelmed and attempt to do too much too soon. There is nothing wrong with starting the relationship lightly and building over time. As an example, a librarian at Penn State became embedded in a political science course. The first semester, she posted helpful links to a discussion board and offered to conduct individual research consultations for students. Three semesters later, she is now engaging with students in a required discussion activity and creating helpful videos for the students. This emerged through familiarizing herself with the course content, developing a shared understanding with the instructor, and pointing out needs and gaps in students' information research skills.
- **Respect your limits, respect your expertise.** You have limits in the amount of time you can devote to a course. This directly influences the types of embedded integrations that should be

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developed. You might not have time to develop a thorough assignment that you grade. That is okay! Choose quality integrations that work for you. The other boundary you should establish is in your expertise. The last thing to do is force a threatened conversation. Emphasize how you can be an asset to the course while respecting and valuing the expertise of the instructor or faculty member. A culture of respect is essential to develop an effective program.

- **Ask questions.** Whether you are an expert at using an LMS or a complete novice, ask questions. It is easy to think you're an expert and stop asking questions, but that leads to complacency. Think and proactively ask questions before communicating with students during the semester. For example, you might think that students should be communicated with through announcements, but the instructor utilizes email over announcements. To make the experience consistent for students, you should communicate in similar ways to the instructor of record.² This creates consistency of course design. If students have to manage communication from multiple forms and locations, it increases both their frustration and the chance that they will miss important information.

How to Get Started

When you decide to begin in earnest an embedded librarian role or program, there are good first steps to help you on the road to success. The first is to conduct a SWOT analysis.³ This is an analysis that looks at the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of starting an embedded librarian program. Consider your local context when conducting this analysis. Figure 6.1 provides an example of a SWOT analysis. You can go much deeper than this, but it provides a foundation to conduct your own SWOT analysis.

The second thing is to immediately start thinking about metrics. One of the common requests when starting an embedded librarian program is showing the impact of the program, especially when the traditional mode of instruction has been one-shots. You will see a reduction in the number of courses reached, but the engagement will be deeper. Plan assessments and summary reports that will be provided. Consider giving some form of assessment and report to your

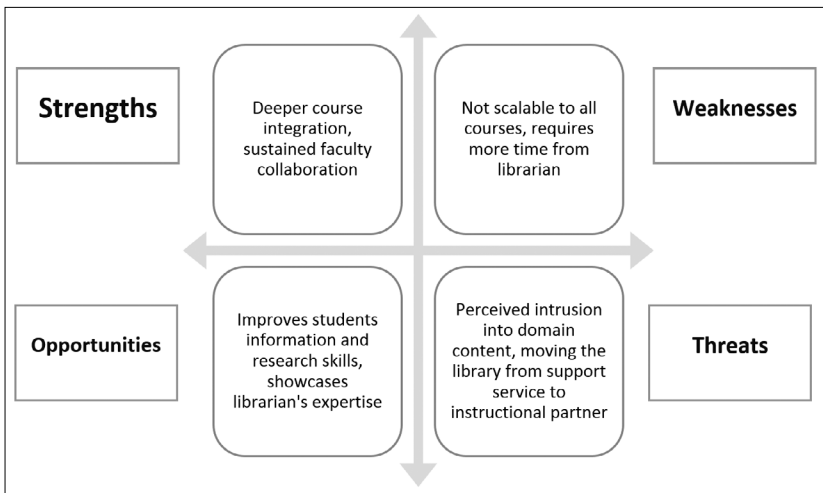


Figure 6.1
A SWOT analysis.

partners. With a high-touch model of engagement, you must justify the value of the time investment.

When creating an embedded librarian program, you need to arrive at a solid definition of what it means to be an embedded librarian. There seems to be a misconception that you can be embedded in thirty-five courses. That was not how embeddedness was approached at Penn State. Our course integration started at the program level and was carefully cultivated in order to choose classes in which the librarian will have a high impact. What does high impact mean? For this program, it means a course where external research is expected and where students are expected to wrestle with more advanced information literacy concepts.

Weaving together numbers and stories helps to present a cohesive narrative of the impact you are having. It is much simpler to get a number of students reached and talk about impact in that way, but numbers woven with stories of student success create a more meaningful and memorable metric. The ideal report is where stories can be generated from numbers.

Assessing the Program

The final piece of the program after scoping and focusing is assessing. If you coordinate an embedded librarian program among multiple programs and courses, consider assessing overall programmatic outcomes. However, if you are a librarian embedded in a few courses, then the assessment should occur at the course level.

The main difference between these two levels of assessment is that the higher level of assessment does not focus on specific course objectives, but rather looks at impact of multiple courses in consideration

of the entire program. At Penn State, this is accomplished through a summary of course guide use, a student survey, and an instructor survey. In addition, midsemester communication occurs with everyone involved in the program to gain formative feedback. All of this is used to make iterations on the embedded librarian program. At the course level, individual learning outcomes should be assessed. Consider sending a report to your individual faculty letting them know the expected outcomes of your embeddedness in the course. Some aspects to consider at the program level have to do with awareness of the program and how the students interacted with their librarian. At the course level, assessment should involve your targeted learning outcomes.

Librarian Role

Students, especially distance students, typically have no conception of the physical structures within the university. Students who are on campus have buildings associated with services and the ability to ask their roommates and friends for information about different services. Distance students have websites, online communication, and phone calls to help them learn how the university works. This is insufficient for truly making their university experience the best it can be.

Despite needing to go to places like the billing and finance or course registration page, the vast majority of distance student interactions with their university occur through the LMS. This is how students complete their coursework, interact with peers, and build relationships with their instructors. As evidenced by the increase of use of our LibGuides, placing the library directly in Canvas has increased students' use of library resources and created a place for distance students to direct their attention.

However, while the embedded librarian program was already in Canvas at this point, there was no clear way to contact the librarian. Librarians could be labeled as student, instructor, teaching assistant, designer, or course administrator, but none of those terms adequately describe what the librarian has been designed to do in the course. Without a role of librarian that can be visible in the course list, it is on the students to identify that person as their librarian and make the connection. We discovered that several other universities had a librarian role in Canvas, including the University of Michigan. The team was able to get a list of privileges that the librarian had at Michigan in order to start the conversation at our institution.

As you are probably considering now, we had to think about how this would work at our institution. Due to the complexity and focus on risk compliance, we were unable to immediately create the role with

the help of the IT department and distribute it university-wide. Instead, the role was eventually created through a year-long collaboration with the registrar and the learning management system team.

Initially, the role was based on student privileges because there were concerns with FERPA and librarian access to student grades. On an individual course basis, it was up to the individual instructor to add the librarian as an instructor and give access to student grades. However, on the university level, this was a decision with significant implications. This was primarily due to scale. Shifting this role creation to the university meant that approval of such a role would give blanket access to a set of privileges assigned to anyone designated with that role. If you encounter this situation at your institution, think through the legitimate educational reasons why librarians need their own role and be prepared to justify your argument.

The initial role was similar to the student role. Librarians could post to discussion boards and observe the class, but had limited power otherwise. This created limitations, especially in classes where additional content could not be seen until students completed the first content. It was completely unreasonable to expect librarians to actually complete the coursework. The revised role was based on the teaching assistant role and has nearly all related privileges. The only privilege not present that some librarians will use is the ability to grade assignments. There are some librarians who are grading assignments, but there is a clear differentiation in that if you are grading assignments, you are no longer the embedded librarian but are coteaching the course.

Structure, Support, and Governance

We all juggle multiple job responsibilities and services within the library. Therefore, for a program to gain legs and become a long-term part of the strategic plan, it is important to develop a structure and governance around any new program. This was necessary for the embedded librarian program and the librarian role. There are three overarching steps toward achieving this balance.

The first is to gain administrative support of the program. If possible, send out initial emails with the support of your administration to librarians who you think would be a good fit for the program. Once you gauge interest, you can begin matching areas of expertise to programs and reach out to those programs. Everyone is juggling several different responsibilities, so they are more likely to participate in the program when it is considered part of the strategic plan of the library.

The second level of support should come through professional development opportunities. Just because

everyone has subject matter expertise does not mean that they also know best practices for online pedagogy or have previously interacted with your student population. In addition, there are multiple definitions for what constitutes embeddedness. At Penn State, a professional development course was created for librarians to take prior to becoming embedded. This course is self-run without a facilitator. Librarians can take it at any time and, unless they have prior degrees or a certificate in a similar field, are required to complete it.

Finally, the third level of support comes through a community of practice that formed. In the fall of 2017, there were fifteen embedded librarians. They were in a range of courses in disparate disciplines, and for many of them, it was their first foray into online teaching. It became clear that a community was needed in order to cultivate a sustainable program that people were excited to work in. This team meets monthly and spends half of the meeting talking about experiences and unexpected challenges in the courses in which they are embedded. The other half of the meeting transitions to a focus on governance. If programs do not become a part of a governance or policy plan, it is more likely that they will not persist beyond a pilot period. Therefore, steps have been taken to create standard language around annual review reports, an understanding of the intensiveness of the work, and a workload policy so people are aware of the time expected in this program. These decisions have been made strategically in order to increase the stability, support, and structure of the embedded librarian program, supported by the librarian role in Canvas.

Conclusion

The embedded librarian program is but one piece of the puzzle that has come together through our LMS integration. The other decisions and actions, such as placing guides and reserves directly in the LMS, have

created more holistic opportunities for the embedded librarians to engage with students. Regardless of how large or small your institution is, embedding librarians is a program that needs strategic thinking with a focus towards sustainability, stability, intentionality, and value added to the institution. A favorite professor used to say, “If you are going to make people come to a classroom, it better be because they can’t do the work otherwise.” For this program, I like to twist that to say: if you are going to add librarians to a course, it is going to be because they bring a level of expertise and support that cannot be accomplished through tutorials and written modules.

There are four pieces of advice to leave you with. Even if you do not remember everything from this report, take away these for a librarian role in your LMS: Determine the levels of access that your librarians need in the LMS and start that conversation early. Complete a curriculum map and identify areas with the most potential for a best fit. Reach out to your fellow librarians and gauge interest level. Complete program-level assessments with a focus on constant iteration and improvement. If you do these things, you will be well on your way to creating a high-quality embedded librarian program that improves experiences for instructors and students.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Tilley, *Personalizing Library Services in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
2. Selma Vonderwell and Sajit Zachariah, “Factors That Influence Participation in Online Learning,” *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 38, no. 2 (2005): 213–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2005.10782457>.
3. Robert G. Dyson, “Strategic Development and SWOT Analysis at the University of Warwick,” *European Journal of Operational Research* 152, no. 3 (2004): 631–40, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0377-2217\(03\)00062-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0377-2217(03)00062-6).