Reaching Out and Giving Back

Academic Librarian Works with Grade K–12 Students

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Sometimes the biggest impact an academic librarian can have is with students not yet in post-secondary education. This outreach librarian describes the joys and struggles in connecting with kids before they even think about university, and the type of long-lasting inspiration it can bring.—*Editor*

To start my story about this particular outreach endeavor, I think it helps to know a little bit about me and where I came from. I grew up in a very small town in western Massachusetts, the youngest of five children. Although my parents wanted us to do well in school, it was not something that they strongly encouraged. My mother had finished high school, and my father had only completed the 7th grade. So the idea of continuing with school after graduation was never really brought up in my home. After high school, I spent a few years working in retail, during which time I became close friends with someone who was applying to college. Her parents were both teachers, and for her, continuing education beyond high school was not a question. At one point she started to encourage me to think about applying to college. Sometimes, she would even lure me out under false pretenses of fun, but instead we worked on my college essay. My mother's only concern was that I apply somewhere close to my home town, and in the end I only applied to one school. Fortunately, I was admitted to the University of Massachusetts (UMass), Amherst, where I earned my first degree. I would not know it until years later, but I was what we would now call a "first-generation, low income student," of which I am very proud.

Fast forward many years of work and schooling later, and I am the student success and outreach librarian at my alma mater, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In my role I have many other duties "as assigned." One additional temporary duty was to cover for my supervisor on a faculty senate committee, the Undergraduate Education Council, while she was on leave. At one particular meeting, a newly hired member of campus was brought in to speak. She was hired as the assistant provost for diversity. One of the things she mentioned as she spoke was that she wanted to reach out to the local communities and work with area children to promote college or university as an option after high school. She was so passionate about this project, and it really resonated with me. After the meeting was over, I rushed over and introduced myself. I told her that I would love to help her in any way I could. I explained my background and how something like this may have helped me when I was younger.

About a month later, I was included in an e-mail from the director of marketing and community relations at the UMass

Center in Springfield, Massachusetts. She had received my information from the assistant provost for diversity. The UMass Center is like a satellite campus for the University of Massachusetts's system. It offers classes in various subject areas where working professionals can have a more convenient location while they advance their studies. She was interested in having my help with the College Matters for U program. This program, started at the center in October 2014, works with students from the Springfield public schools in grades K–12. They come to the center and learn about science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) careers and are exposed to the idea of continuing their education after high school graduation. The program had representatives from other parts of campus, like nursing and business, but they had never had a librarian participate before. I was thrilled to be asked to be involved in the program and immediately replied that I would love to help. I knew I could contribute in several ways: I wanted to encourage some students to consider librarianship as a career, at the same time removing some of the stereotypes of librarians and libraries. I also wanted to let them know how much assistance was available through the library and to encourage them to use library services and resources more.

I really wanted to do something fun and interactive and get the kids excited. At the very least, I wanted to plant the seed that college could be an option for them. I consulted the Kids' College Almanac: A First Look at College,[1] which was very helpful. It gave me insight to the things that younger students, grades K–8, may not know about college. It was good for background information, some of which I didn't even know. I also used the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and K–12: US Bureau of Labor Statistics websites.[2] These were helpful, especially the Bureau of Labor Statistics's Occupational Outlook Handbook, for finding information on careers, salaries, and necessary schooling.[3] Lastly, I reached out to teacher friends via Facebook to see if they had any ideas for programming or exercises that might work. I received some helpful information that inspired some of my initial programming.

My programming for the high school group has changed very little since the beginning (figure 1). These students seem to come in to these sessions already having an idea of a career and plan to attend college or university. For this group, I really focused on how libraries and librarians can help them be academically successful and how to work smarter, not harder. At the end of the program, I showed them the Occupational Outlook Handbook, which was a big hit. I asked for volunteers to share what career they may want and showed them how they could see things like what the pay and schooling are for each. Apparently after I left they spent their lunch break looking at the site.

The programming for the younger groups, grades K–8, did not go as smoothly. For my first ever program, which was a combination of 4th and 5th graders, I came in very prepared—or so I thought. I brought a spinning wheel that I use for other outreach events, thinking the students might find

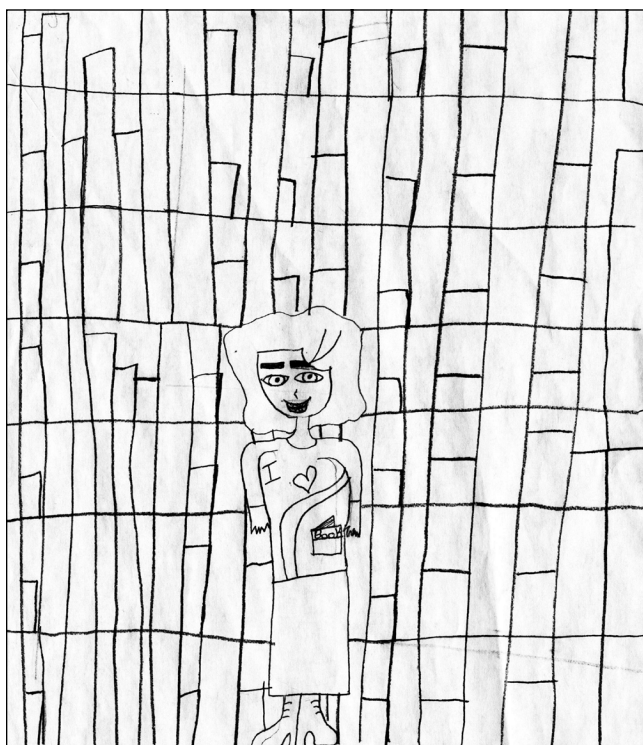**Figure 1.** Presenting the program to a group of high school students

Figure 2. The spinning wheel of STEAM

it fun (figure 2). It had categories for the different STEAM fields for which I had created cards with questions, mostly using information I had found from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. As I watched the previous presenter, I realized that the questions and answers I had prepared were probably too mature for this age group. For example, I thought learning how much money a surgeon makes would blow their minds. I realized they did not really understand the concept and value of money, so if I had said a surgeon makes $20,000 a year, rather than the $208,000 they actually do make, the students would have been just as impressed.

The rest of the session went by in a blur. I don't remember much, but I do remember improvising. I had the students spin the wheel and tried to make up questions on the spot from the research I had done. I do still remember the kids in the front row, looking very bored and "judgy." I left feeling very crushed but undaunted. I knew I could do better next time and perhaps more importantly, I learned how to think on my feet and go with the flow.

For the next sessions I changed up the format and left the spinning wheel at work. For a few sessions I brought in

Figures 3. A typical student drawing of what they think librarians do

Figure 4. The problem with the pictures and herd mentality

Figure 5. Not surprising, the picture of the librarians with books is always the popular choice

paper and crayons. I would talk about my job and what I do at the library. I had them then draw what they thought my work or office looked like (figure 3). As you can probably guess, there were a lot of books involved.

So again I adjusted my programming. I really wanted the students to see us as more than just books. This time I had six large pictures of librarians, and I started my presentation talking about libraries and librarians. I then put the pictures around the room and asked the students to look at all the pictures and then stand next to the one they thought was a librarian. Of course one of them had books in the photo, while the others were not as obvious. The problem was that students seemed to suffer from herd mentality, and they would all end up at the same picture (figure 4). Even if they tried to stand next to a different picture, at the end they would often move to where everyone else was (figure 5).

I strained to figure out what else could work. I tried to remember back to when I was a young shy student and what would have been an exercise that would have appealed to me. I also consulted with family members who were around that age. I finally came up with the program that I basically still do—although I do change and tweak things often, sometimes just to keep it fresh for myself but also to ensure that any repeat students won't see the exact same presentation.

I start off the program by introducing myself and showing the students where I work. At twenty-eight stories, the W. E. B. Du Bois Library is very impressive, so that helps to get their initial attention. I then ask them what they think of

when they hear the words *librarians* and *libraries*. I don't use the word *stereotype* as they may not be familiar with it, but I want to uncover what their preconceived notions are. (I have now added at the end the caveat that Ms. Vadnais will not be offended!) This is always a fun and enlightening exercise for me. Not surprisingly, books are always the most frequently mentioned characteristic. Common comments regarding librarians, include "shushing," "glasses," "old," "grumpy," and "mean." On the other hand, they also sometimes mention "kind," "smart," or "helpful," which always make me swoon. When asked about libraries, the students inevitably mention "quiet," "boring," and "books."

We then move to the activity where I hand out paddles with a thumbs up on one side and a thumbs down on the other. I then show pictures of people and ask them to vote with their paddles, not their voices (figure 6). If they think the picture is a librarian, thumbs up; if not, thumbs down. This way they are not swayed by how other classmates vote, and it seems to help combat the herd mentality. After voting is done, I get an idea of what they think as a group. I then ask students on both sides to answer why they feel this

Figure 6. Voting in action. I love to see the enthusiasm, smiles, and even the teachers getting involved.

Figures 7a and 7b. The students always enjoy seeing the 3D printed items up close.

way. This part can have surprising answers at times. Once I even pretended to be so hurt I laid on the ground. Some of the answers I have received to the question of why certain pictures would not be librarians include, "They are only talking to old people," "That lady is too attractive to be a librarian," and "There are no books, or too much technology in the picture." I try and use pictures of librarians to highlight things that they may not think of. For example, one picture is of a colleague in the Dominican Republic talking to young students. I let them know that as a librarian you may get to travel. I let them know that librarians can attend conferences, and I share that I have been to Chicago, Ohio, and Tennessee for my job. I like to highlight that we are more than books, and all of us do really varied things.

My last slide is of a coworker that works in our Digital Media Lab which is our makerspace. The students almost

Figure 8. Showing the little threads on the Pikachu

always think that this is not a librarian or even a part of the library. I then show all of the technology that we have to support student learning along with a sped-up video of one of our 3D printers in action, made by one of our student workers. I let them know that, while in college, they could get a job at their library, like I did. I then pass around some 3D-printed items (figure 7), which I leave at the end: little 3D-printed Pokemon and other library give-aways (figure 8).

One of my favorite sessions was one of the earliest. I always tell the students that they can e-mail me. If I start getting a flood of e-mails from K–12 kids I may have to reconsider, but so far it's been a manageable number. While I was walking out after the end of the session, a young man waved me over. He quietly asked me to write down my e-mail for him on a piece of paper. He then looked up and said that he wants to be a librarian when he grows up. I was so caught off guard and elated that I floated out of there. I got out to the parking garage and realized that in my state of euphoria I had forgotten my bag and jacket in the center. When I went back in, the director of marketing and community relations for the center was surprised to see me, and I told her what happened. She was just as happy about the interaction as I was.

It has now been three years of working with the UMass Center, with a total of fifty sessions. That means I have presented to 1,250 local students, grades K–12. It continues to be such a special and rewarding part of my job. The chaperones get a survey to fill out after, and one wrote when asked about her favorite part of the day, "It was just giving our students the exposure and planting the seed that they too can go to college. I loved the presentation from the librarian and the many fields of interest one can have." Another chaperone wrote, "I would choose the library presentation as our students do not have access to a school library this year. The librarian's presentation was informative." These comments, along with the students' interest and enthusiasm, make me eager to continue to be a part of this program for as long as possible.

Luckily for me, the UMass Amherst Libraries value this collaboration as much as I do, and I do not see this programming ending anytime soon. I look forward to seeing some of these students as future UMass Amherst students one day. I often end the sessions saying that if they ever end up at UMass to come and find the purple hair librarian, as I will give them a personal tour.

I have come a long way from where I started. Some of it was luck, and some of it was through particular people I met along the way. I was extremely lucky that I had amazing people that helped me at pivotal moments in my life, which really helped me along my journey. I hope that the students I work with get something out of my presentations and experience. And maybe one of them will realize that because I did it, they can too.

References

1. Barbara C. Greenfield and Robert A. Weinstein, *The Kids' College Almanac: A First Look at College*, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: JIST Works, 2010).
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3. United States Department of Labor, "Occupational Outlook Handbook," 2019, https://www.bls.gov/ooh/.