

Urban Academic Library Outreach to Secondary School Students and Teachers

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Abstract

The Mervyn H. Sterne Library at the University of Alabama at Birmingham is located in an urban area and therefore receives traffic from the community, particularly area schools. We encourage visits from these schools in order to promote information literacy, higher education, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and we recognize the importance of the library in the development of responsible citizenship, education, and culture. Since we encourage students to develop research skills before they attend college, we collaborate with area secondary schools on projects, papers, and activities by providing research instruction and support both at the schools and in the library. This article explains the need for University collaboration, how Sterne Library integrates itself into the schools through classroom instruction and teacher workshops, and how we organize and conduct the instruction while promoting the Alabama Virtual Library, a group of online databases available to all students, teachers, and citizens of the State of Alabama.

Keywords: Library outreach programs, high schools, academic libraries, library services, library instruction, bibliographic instruction, university and high school collaboration

Introduction

The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) is an urban public university that spans 80 city blocks of the largest city in Alabama. Located in the center of the state, UAB has an enrollment of 17,281 and employs 18,808 (University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2008). The Mervyn H. Sterne Library is the main research library at UAB and supports all undergraduate and graduate programs. UAB also has a

health sciences library, Lister Hill Library, to support the programs of the medical center.

UAB's mission is "to be a research university and academic health center that discovers, teaches and applies knowledge for the intellectual, cultural, social and economic benefit of Birmingham, the state and beyond" (University of Alabama at Birmingham, n.d.). To support UAB, Sterne Library's vision is "As UAB's major academic research library, the Mervyn H. Sterne Library should be the information portal of choice supporting the informational needs of the University community through the innovative use of technology by knowledgeable and friendly professionals" (Mervyn H. Sterne Library, n.d.). As illustrated in both UAB's mission statement and Sterne Library's vision statement, UAB resources are not limited to those directly affiliated with the University but include those of the Birmingham community and the state.

The UAB community includes not only the students, faculty, and staff of UAB, but those who live in the Birmingham Metropolitan area. Five percent of Alabama's population lives in the City of Birmingham, and almost 25% of the state's population lives in this metropolitan area (Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The Mervyn H. Sterne Library is open to the public and while circulation privileges are primarily reserved for UAB faculty, staff, and students, anyone can come in and use the resources. Since it is open to the public, some Birmingham residents view the Mervyn H. Sterne Library as a public library, and many of these residents are high school students.

A report in *The Birmingham News* emphasized the discrepancies in resources between urban schools and suburban schools, noting a relationship between test scores and poverty (Leech, 2004). Many students, both from affluent local schools and poorer city schools, have utilized Sterne Library resources. While Sterne Library had always allowed these students in and given them equal use of the resources, in 2002, Sterne Library began an active outreach program. Three changes occurred around this time to prompt an organized program. First, librarians noticed that more and more teachers were sending their students to Sterne Library to use the resources. Frequently, on the weekend, reference librarians would find themselves repeating the same basic information about forming a search and using databases over and over to students from the same school. Second, in 1999 the legislature of Alabama began funding the Alabama Virtual Library, a group of online databases available to everyone in the State. It was brought about through a combined effort of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, the Alabama Department of Education, the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education, the Alabama Supercomputer Authority and the Alabama Public Library Service (Alabama Virtual Library, 2002). With the Alabama Virtual Library available to students, teachers were less likely to accept general Web sites as sources for students' research. Finally, in 2001, Sterne Library

hired a reference librarian with a background in education. This librarian had experience teaching at middle school, high school, and college levels and was excited about the opportunity to collaborate with area schools.

Sterne Library's outreach efforts now include active participation with Birmingham Metropolitan Area middle and high schools. Due to outreach efforts, the number of students and teachers who attend formal library instruction has increased from 264 in 2001 to 908 during the 2007/2008 school year. This article explains how Sterne Library integrates itself into the schools through classroom instruction and teacher workshops, and how we organize and conduct the instruction while promoting the Alabama Virtual Library.

Literature Review

Previous articles have addressed outreach efforts to area schools. The role of the university in urban areas has been discussed by Lee and Jenda (1998) and McNamara and Williams (1991). Lee and Jenda (1998) note that the public university should serve its scholarly world and state citizens, and the role of outreach is to emphasize the importance of the academic library to the university and society. McNamara and Williams (1991) state that while public universities may encounter difficulties when opening their doors to the public, they must be viewed as "universities 'of the city'" with responsibilities to the city population (p. 57). Schneider notes that university outreach works best in smaller cities (2003). Russell, Robinson, Prather, and Carlson (1991) state that academic libraries' "collections are strong; their facilities are usually accessible to handicapped individuals; their online bibliographic databases are accessible to many who have no affiliation with the institution; and the public perceives libraries as free for everyone to use" (p. 27). In many cases, urban academic libraries are treated by the community as a branch of the local public library.

Use of academic libraries by high school students has been written about since 1962 with a study conducted by Craig and Perrine surveying 500 high school students in Houston, Texas (Craver, 1987). Craver attributes the upswing in academic library use by high school students in the 1960s to curriculum changes and an increase in the school-age population. Other authors, such as Kenney (1989) also emphasize the stronger demands on secondary school studies. McNamara and Williams (1991) state that with upgraded education programs, the urban university library becomes an extension library for secondary students. Advanced classes need more resources than the school library may have. LeClercq (1989) points out that for the "twenty percent minority taking Advanced Placement English, history, biology, or chemistry, the collections [of high school libraries] were totally inadequate" (p. 13). Secondary school libraries also may lack the funds for collection development that academic libraries have. A survey conducted by Islam and Murno (2006) found that

the average age of a school library monograph collection was twenty years, with an average publication date of 1983. They also found that only 5.11% of the book collections were published after 2000 and 63.69% of school library collections were between 15 and 54 years old (they do not give statistics on the number of collections between 6 and 15 years old). Maxson, Wright, Houck, Lynn, and Fowler (2000) surveyed high school teachers and found that two of the top ten issues were declining resources and increasing demands. They also reported that teachers said the school library resources need updating. School libraries also tend to collect books rather than journals (LeClercq, 1989). McNamara and Williams (1991) outline the priorities of school libraries and the reasons for their small collections. A lack of funds can also affect school libraries by schools not being able to hire professional librarians as media specialists (Burhanna & Jensen, 2006). Increased curriculum demands coupled with fewer school funds means students must turn elsewhere for research resources, and the centrality of the urban academic library makes it a natural choice.

Another reason that secondary students are encouraged by their teachers to use an academic library is to acquaint the students with the university library environment. Joseph (1991) believes that the best way to eliminate library anxiety is for students to become acquainted with the library. She believes that attitude is more important than ability and students should be taught to “think about libraries and librarians in a way that increases their receptivity to learning” (p. 112). Other authors maintain that high school students feel overwhelmed or intimidated by an academic library (Daniel, 1997; Jesudason, 1993; Joseph, 1991; Ury, 1996a). Daniel (1997) believes high school students see an academic library as “an unfamiliar environment with an enormously increased resource base that is far more complex, less helpful, and more demanding than they had ever anticipated” (p. 56). Goodin (1991) found in her survey that “Learning to see the librarian as a resource is perhaps the most transferable skill acquired by students” (p. 35). Whether the students are college-bound or not, becoming comfortable with a resource they use and those who can help them utilize that resource is seen as a valuable tool in the literature.

Universities encourage visits from high schools because it benefits the university and the library. The university benefits because library outreach acts as a public relations tool (Beaumont & Hallmark, 1998; Campbell, 1992; Cosgrove, 2001). The library benefits because when secondary students attend an introduction to research in the library, they do not compete with university students for the attention of staff (McNamara & Williams, 1991). When students have some experience researching in the academic environment, they can transition to scholarly research more easily. Many authors have written about the benefits of bridging the gap between high school and college by introducing students to advanced research methodologies before they arrive on campus as a first year student (Campbell & McCulley, 1992; Carr & Rockman, 2003; Jesudason, 1993;

Kester, 1994; Smith, 2002; Ury, 1996b). Craver (1987) suggests that academic and school librarians should “formulate joint standards for library assignments, identify acceptable levels of library/research proficiencies, and decide at which grade levels to introduce them” (pp. 63-64). Jesudason (1993) recommends collaboration between school and academic librarians in order to avoid instruction duplication. Ury (1996b) offers ten suggestions for collaboration between high school media specialists and college librarians, and Smith (2002) lists ten things that high school seniors should know about college libraries. Generally, authors have noted the skills that are needed of high school students once they are in college. Several articles address the complaint that high school students are not prepared for college work (Daniel, 1997; Islam & Murno, 2006; Jesudason, 1993; Kester, 1994). Students who receive an introduction to a college library end up benefiting from this instruction. Goodin (1991) conducted pre- and post- library instruction skills tests and found that library instruction increased students’ knowledge of college library information. She also found that students who received instruction felt more confident at the academic library and were not as frustrated. Daniel (1997) notes that the stress over a multitude of choices causes students to select any resource, so instruction provides them with a research strategy. Library instruction gives high school students a road map to follow so that research does not seem overwhelming or random.

Other reasons colleges and universities benefit from outreach to secondary schools are a desire to increase retention of college freshmen (Burhanna & Jensen, 2006), to bridge the gap between college and high school (Campbell & McCulley, 1992), to promote positive attitude formation (Joseph, 1991), to help with behavior problems (Kudlay, 1999; McCulley, 1992), and to help make first generation students comfortable in college (McNamara & Williams, 1991). Whatever the reasons, students benefit from using an academic library and learning how, when, and what resources suit their research needs.

Methods of collaboration ranged from a workbook designed to help students use the OPAC (Everhart, 1996) to having university learning communities work with secondary students (Gresham, 1999). Craver (1989) notes four types of cooperation efforts: school and academic library collaboration, scheduled high school student visits to academic libraries, instruction to high school students by academic librarians, and selected academic library service availability to high school students enrolled in advanced coursework (p. 96). Kemp (1986) delineates several models of academic library outreach such as high school visits, working directly with high school students, providing privileges for special groups, working with schools on the local or state levels, and providing materials for high school students. Margaret Tabar (2002) explains how media specialists receive information from the academic librarians but conduct the instruction themselves. Several authors have outlined partnerships between high schools and colleges that have worked (Beaumont, 1998;

Burhanna, 2007; Burhanna & Jensen, 2006; Carr, 2003; Craver, 1988; Gresham, 1999; Maxson, 2000; Nichols, 2001; Pearson & McNeil, 2002; Tabar, 2002).

Outreach at the Mervyn H. Sterne Library at the University of Alabama at Birmingham: Contacting the Schools

Although Sterne Library was already being used by area high school students, in order for students to utilize their research time beneficially, the library needed to promote its services. Many schools knew that students could use Sterne Library, but they did not realize that the librarians would make themselves available to conduct introductions to researching. As instruction became more formal and organized, teachers and librarians also noticed the benefits of having another voice tell students how to select sources that are reliable.

Sterne Library began actively to encourage visits from schools in order to promote information literacy, higher education, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. We recognized how important the library is in the development of responsible citizenship, local education, and culture and saw where we could help. We wanted to create goodwill with area schools that were already sending their students to us along with creating new relationships with schools that were not. We hoped that the weekend librarians who frequently found themselves inundated on Sunday evenings with secondary students requesting basic information on search strategies would have fewer basic questions so that students' time at the library could be spent perfecting their research rather than beginning it. Being centrally located, UAB is the university of choice for many Alabama students. We also recognize the importance of information literacy and hoped promoting it to the community would help create a more critical-thinking populace. Finally, as noted in Craver (1987), Kenney (1989), and McNamara (1991), curriculum changes and higher standards in secondary schools were causing school systems all over the country to rely on university libraries, and Birmingham systems are no different. Therefore, librarians and administrators at Sterne Library found it advantageous to increase its outreach services to area schools.

Sterne Library has been a presence in the public schools by attending in-service (training to help teachers develop their skills) and professional development days since the late 1980s. In 2005, the Reference Librarian for Instruction and Outreach and the Reference Librarian for Education began sending letters of introduction to area media specialists, principals, superintendents, curriculum specialists, curriculum resource coordinators, technology coordinators, and teachers who had previously sent students to Sterne Library, and we continue to send these each fall as reminders of the outreach services. These letters include a *School Library Visit Checklist*, also available online at <https://www.mhsl.uab.edu/ref/schools.html>, that

provides information on using the library, along with links to parking and eating at UAB. These letters also include an offer to conduct instruction at Sterne Library or at the schools.

From these letters, the librarians receive requests for attendance at professional development meetings and requests for instruction. The Reference Librarian for Education also keeps in touch with area school administrators and attends other local school system events, such as receptions and meetings. We find that the best way to promote ourselves and underscore our commitment to collaboration and education is direct contact with these teachers, media specialists, and administrators.

Teacher Workshops

Face-to-face contact with teachers, media specialists, and administrators is important in emphasizing our commitment to the community; we are more than just a name on a letter. When asked to speak to a group, the Reference Librarian for Instruction and Outreach and the Reference Librarian for Education collaborate on the event. They first determine who the audience will be, how many will be in attendance, the overall theme of the day, and available presentation technology. From this information, they develop an outline of the presentation along with appropriate handouts.

The content of workshops varies depending on the request, but workshops are usually one of three types: informational, instructional, or inspirational. Informational workshops provide information on the services available at Sterne Library for schools. These workshops contain basic information about the library, its collections, and services to the community. They also explain the information on the *School Library Visit Checklist*. In an informational workshop, librarians discuss requirements for schools visiting the library, general policies, and what teachers can expect out of a visit. We offer to visit the schools to conduct an introduction to research, and we explain in informational workshops how to arrange librarian visits. Informational workshops describe the nuts-and-bolts of our services for the community.

Instructional workshops demonstrate new ways to use material already available to teachers and students on the Alabama Virtual Library. These workshops explain the finer points of research and new ways teachers and media specialists can incorporate the Alabama Virtual Library into their classroom. The Reference Librarian for Instruction and Outreach and the Reference Librarian for Education are both state trainers of the Alabama Virtual Library. In an instructional workshop, we may outline ways to use the timeline in a literature database or how

to utilize visual searching. Instructional workshops motivate teachers to use the Alabama Virtual Library in new ways.

Inspirational workshops present methods for using other free tools. Since many schools in Alabama are not wealthy, free tools can benefit the educator. In these workshops, we point out good, reliable resources for educators. Previous inspirational workshops have been on Web resources specific to a subject and on using tools such as wikis, blogs, and podcasting in the school library.

If we are not asked to present at a workshop, we always ask whether we can have an exhibit table at the event. As an exhibitor at a meeting, we set up a table with a display containing information about our library services to the community. Several librarians staff the table to answer questions.

Regardless of the type of event, we make sure that school systems know we are interested not only in our university students, but also in their secondary students. We always prepare for our audience and determine what they will need out of Sterne Library. Handouts are a necessity because of the number of events usually going on at once during professional development days. We bring sheets that describe our services and outline our rules, and we bring plenty of business cards. We put our names and contact information on every sheet so that as the material is passed along, we can ensure that everyone knows how to get in touch with us. We also share in the excitement at in-service days. Frequently, professional development and in-service occurs in August, when everyone is looking forward to the school year. We use that enthusiasm as a way to show the teachers, media specialists, and administrators that we, too, can help them make the school year exciting.

Research Instruction

Sterne Librarians offer to host students at the library or to go to the students' classrooms. The option the teacher or media specialist chooses depends on the amount of time they have, the ability to get buses, the number of students and classes they want to attend sessions, and the level of the classes.

Instruction at the Library

The teachers who choose to bring their students to the library are often teachers of advanced placement (AP), international baccalaureate (IB), honors, or other special programs. Frequently, in addition to access to scholarly material, these teachers want their students to get the "feel" of an academic library. For AP, IB, honors, and other special classes, Sterne Library allows guest cards to be issued to the students.

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Before the students arrive, the school contact will have faxed or e-mailed a list of students to the librarian who will be conducting the session. This list is then given to the Head of Circulation for approval. Once approved, guest cards are made for the students so that the librarian can pass them out at the instruction session.

It may not be an easy task for a teacher to organize a field trip to the library; they must schedule a bus and get permission forms, and the students miss other classes. Therefore, it is important that the librarian, teachers, and students use their time wisely. Prior to the session, the reference librarian (usually the Reference Librarian for Instruction and Outreach) and the teacher have met to discuss the assignment, requirements, guidelines, and the number of students attending the session. The meeting does not need to be in person but can be over the phone or via e-mail. Between the meeting and the instruction session, the librarian and the teacher stay in contact in case of any changes. The librarian creates a handout designed specifically for the students and their assignment. This handout usually contains a list of relevant databases, Library of Congress subject headings, and possible search terms.

On the day of instruction, the librarian meets the students and teacher at the front of the library to make them feel welcome. During instruction, the librarian includes strategies for forming and conducting a search using the local catalog and selected databases. The librarian also covers the layout of the library and how to locate materials organized by Library of Congress call numbers. The librarian also provides plenty of handouts because students can be overwhelmed by their first visit to a college library; the handouts provide reminders of what they have been told. For AP, IB, and honors classes, it is advantageous for students to meet the subject-specialist librarian.

Students also need to know how to get assistance with research once they leave the library. Sterne Library provides research help to all patrons online via e-mail and instant messaging, over the phone, and in-person, and the librarian emphasizes that anyone can use these services. After the session, the librarian makes herself/himself available to answer any questions. Frequently, the teacher incorporates an hour or two of research time into their field trip. Finally, the librarian thanks the teacher for bringing the class and thanks the students for coming.

Instruction at the School

Sometimes it is difficult for teachers to organize a field trip to the library because of time or cost constraints. In these cases, the librarian may be asked to visit the school to conduct instruction. The procedure is very similar to that for classes that come to Sterne Library. The teacher and librarian meet before the session to discuss

the assignment. The librarian must determine whether the instruction is to include university resources or only material available to students through the Alabama Virtual Library. The librarian must also make sure that the school has the appropriate audiovisual setup for instruction.

As with instruction at the library, from their conversation the librarian creates a handout specifically for the students, their assignment, and the materials available to them. The handout will contain appropriate databases and keywords for searching. On the day of instruction, the librarian includes strategies for forming and conducting a search using agreed-upon resources. If the students are to visit the library, the librarian will go over the layout of the library and how to locate materials organized by Library of Congress call numbers. Again, handouts are important so that the students will be able to recall the information at a later time. The librarian welcomes students to use the university library and informs them of the various ways to obtain research assistance. After the session, the teacher might want to set up a time for the students to visit the library on their own, such as a night or two during the week. During these nights, the teacher must be at the library and the librarian is available to answer students' questions.

Evaluation

While the outreach program has not been formally evaluated, we have anecdotal evidence that the program is effective. One of the most telling measures of our effectiveness is that teachers continue to bring their schools back every year. We also hear comments from the teachers about their students' progress. During instruction, we evaluate how the students react to us in the classroom. Another measure of our effectiveness is that we see the same students in the library, and these students will often seek out the librarian who conducted their session. Nevertheless, these anecdotes are few and are frequently heard and forgotten rather than written down; thus, we need more data-driven assessment.

Beginning in the spring of 2009, formal evaluation will commence in the form of a Zoomerang survey similar to the one that we send to UAB faculty for whom we conduct library instruction. This survey will ask the teacher questions about the content of the session (The librarian discussed resources that I felt were important for my students; The range and amount of material presented in the library instruction class suited the student's level of research experience and skill), changes in students' behaviors (After the library session, the students have a better understanding of the differences between a free web-based resource, such as Google, and a web-based library database, such as Academic Search Premier; The library instruction session(s) introduced new techniques or resources to my students), and the quality of students' work before and after the session (Was there evidence that your students were using more appropriate research sources in assignments after

the library instruction session?). Hopefully, with solid feedback, we will be able to create a program that is even more effective.

Conclusion

Much is written about the impact that academic libraries can have on area secondary schools. The Mervyn H. Sterne Library at the University of Alabama at Birmingham finds it advantageous to work with schools and assist them with their research needs. Collaboration can have its downfalls, such as the financials of the program or overextending the staff. We discovered that the costs are few and include the price of letterhead, paper, giveaway pencils, and the mileage on the librarians' cars when they go off-site for instruction. Staffing is not a problem, either, because we have a full-time Reference Librarian for Instruction and Outreach and all reference librarians are committed to instruction. Interacting with high school students helps us understand our incoming students and their research needs, so the collaboration is mutually beneficial.

We foresee that this collaboration will be more necessary with the current economic status of public schools. With public schools and their school media centers receiving fewer funds, students and teachers will rely more on local public and academic libraries for the students' research needs. This school year, already, we have received more requests for instruction than we did the entire 2007-2008 school year.

Whether we are talking to students about how to create a search or telling teachers about the services we offer, we are promoting our library, information literacy, and higher education. Hopefully, in continuing this relationship, we will be able to improve the critical thinking and research skills of students who will then bring their knowledge back to the community.

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