Out in Left Field: The Benefits of Field Librarianship for Studio Arts Programs

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I have been the art and design field librarian at the University of Michigan since January 2002, and I have been pleasantly surprised at how well field librarianship works. As a field librarian, I do not work in my library. Instead, I work in the building that houses the School of Art & Design. In a typical day I have a great deal of interaction with students, faculty, and staff. I encounter student artwork in the galleries, hallways, and grounds on a daily basis. I am acutely aware of the activities that are taking place in the students’ lives, such as receptions, orientations, and curriculum issues. I am constantly communicating with people either face to face, over the telephone or via e-mail. I also witness how much energy and commitment it takes to run a school of art and design. Because I am involved with both the library and the School of Art & Design, I can be strapped for time, but the interaction gives me a broader perspective about what is happening and how the library and the school interrelate. There are many reasons why I believe field librarianship is an idea whose time has come.

Field Librarianship Defined

Field librarians do not work in a library. Instead, they work most hours in an office located in the department or school they serve and have no (or minimal) physical collection on site. A field librarian is usually part of the university library system, but may also be jointly appointed by the library and the department or school they serve. Additionally, a field librarian may work some hours, typically reference desk hours, in the library. An alternate name for field librarian that may be found in the literature is college librarian. A similar concept is called the Information Center Model that focuses more on the idea of the librarian’s office in the department rather than on the librarian. Seamans and Metz describe the rationale behind the field librarian/college librarian concept as follows:

Although the library had long assigned departments to individual librarians and asked the departments to appoint faculty liaisons to the library, the previous model was library-centric. The new program was designed to become user- and college-centric by taking the services out of the library and placing them into colleges.1

There are several field librarians in institutions across the United States. The University of Michigan has three field librarians, one each in the areas of art and design, women’s studies, and classical studies. The University of Southern California has field librarians in the areas of social work and education. Virginia Tech has the longest standing program, with field librarians in the areas of arts and sciences, social sciences, human resources, business, education and human development, and agriculture.

My office is located in the Art and Architecture Building on the North Campus of the University of Michigan. The School of Art & Design has approximately thirty-five tenured or tenure-track faculty members and about forty-five supplemental faculty. There are roughly 700 students, primarily undergraduates.

The collection of art and design books is located in the Art, Architecture and Engineering (AAE) Library, formerly the Media Union Library, across the street from the School. Besides serving the School of Art & Design, this library also serves the other schools on the North Campus with an integrated and diverse collection. There are additional libraries on the University of Michigan campus that have art and design materials, most notably the Fine Arts Library. This library serves primarily the History of Art Department in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, which is completely separate from the School of Art & Design. The university also has a film/video library, a graduate library, a special collections library, and many other libraries of potential use to art and design students. All students have access to most library collections on campus.

Benefits to the School

Art and design students are an eclectic bunch, and as artists they incorporate a world of ideas into their work. I have found that being ‘out in the field’ has helped me to better address their interdisciplinary needs. Some questions can be answered right from my office with my trusty Internet connection; others require me to comb the printed materials in the AAE Library. Sometimes I need to refer students to other librarians or libraries on campus. I believe that my answers to these questions might be somewhat limited if I worked in the traditional model of a branch library, surrounded by a rather limited collection of art books, since I would have a tendency try to find things available in-house. Without an on-site collection, however, it is expected that much of what students need will be available in another building on campus. We are no longer limited by a building, and we come closer to the realization of a “library without walls.”

In addition to meeting interdisciplinary needs, field librarianship has helped me ease art and design students’ fears about
libraries themselves. Students typically do harbor some fear of libraries (this has been documented in several articles). Qun G. Jiao and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie looked at the relationship between library anxiety and learning modality. They found that students with visual orientations were more likely to have barriers with staff (they see librarians as intimidating or too busy to help) and affective barriers (feelings of ineptness about using the library). Other reasons that artists experience library anxiety may include the fact that most libraries are not set up to deal with people looking for primarily visual information. In addition, students working in studios may feel that they need to clean up before entering a library. In our particular situation at the University of Michigan AAE Library, books are kept on compact shelving, making it difficult to browse shelves. The library is also filled with a large population of students in non-art-related disciplines.

Being inside the school, I can act as a bridge between the school and the library and help to relieve some of these fears. I make it a point to take people over to the AAE Library personally. I help to demystify it by letting students and faculty know that they are welcome. I explain to them that, although compact shelving is not great for spreading out in the stacks and browsing, they are welcome to take entire shelves of books to a table for browsing. I let them know that this is their library too and that we are delighted to see them using the materials. As a field librarian they see that I am devoted to their school. This information helps negate those assumptions that librarians are intimidating and too busy.

I develop a much more personal relationship with students and faculty. When they meet with me they understand that I am there to serve them. I do a lot more follow-up than I would normally be doing at a typical reference desk. I see students and faculty in the hallways and ask them how their projects are coming along; this inevitably leads to further discussion and exploration.

I enjoy working one-on-one with faculty and students, and I find that being in their building makes it easier to do this. I can go to a faculty member's office, or the faculty member can bring a laptop to my office (we have a wireless network throughout the building). I find that students are somewhat reluctant to come to my office at first, just as they are about visiting faculty during office hours. Once they come, however, I will often see them repeatedly.

My continued presence keeps the library alive in the minds of students and faculty. For example, people often walk by and gaze at the new book jackets displayed outside my office. They will then come in and ask me how they can find that book or ask if I could order a catalog that they saw at a recent exhibition. Students may see me in the hallway and be reminded of some information they are having trouble finding and ask for help.

Not only do people find it easier to contact me about their needs and desires, I am much better able to judge what will be needed. I know the curriculum better from being part of faculty meetings and student discussions. I find it easier to sit in on classes and get involved with what actually is being taught, rather than trying to guess with second-hand information from course descriptions, syllabi, and hearsay.

I feel accepted as part of the School of Art & Design. Even though I am doing the same things I would have done as a regular librarian, the students, faculty and staff view me differently.

To demonstrate how much they have accepted me, last year I was able to serve on the School's staff retreat planning committee. I am warmly invited to, and accepted at, all types of social gatherings—show openings, holiday parties, birthday celebrations, and even staff bowling night. I try to take as many opportunities as I can to get to know the people with whom I am working.

Benefits to the Library and Librarian

Field librarianship is valuable to an art and design school, but such a position also provides many benefits to the library system. One major benefit is a reduction in costs.

Unlike a branch or departmental library that requires duplication of resources with the central library, the field librarian model has no local collection but uses existing collections from other units. Operational costs, such as departmental library support staff, are also reduced. The AAE Library has twenty-four hour access, which would be impossible for a departmental library to provide. The AAE Library also allows access to sophisticated computing facilities and provides a secure area for special collections.

Equipment costs can also be shared between the department or school and the library. For example, all of my office furniture and supplies are provided by the School of Art & Design. I also use the copiers in the school. On the other hand, the library provides my computer. I have found it useful to have some of my software supplied by the library and other software supplied by the school. Since my office is located in the School of Art & Design, this alleviates office space problems for the library. Although every department has space issues, I was fortunate to get a well-placed office in the student services area.

In addition to benefiting the school and the library as a whole, field librarianship also benefits the librarian. For example, travel funding is typically limited in libraries. Being connected with a school allows me the possibility of applying for funding from two different pools. Most of the travel funding I receive is still from the library; however, I have asked for, and have received, funds for travel from the school. If a clear benefit is evident, there is generally a willingness to consider the funding. In my case, I am interested in expanding the artists' book collection in the AAE Library. Many professors in the school feel that this would be an extremely useful resource for them and their students. I was encouraged by one of these professors to ask for funding to travel to Chicago to see the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection. The dean was very receptive to this idea and did not hesitate to pay for this trip.

On a personal level, I feel connected to the people I serve, and I have a much better understanding of who they are and what their needs are. I feel I can do a better job and get less frustrated. In turn, the people in the School better understand what I do as a librarian. In addition, I have been able to enhance my knowledge of art and design through attending lectures, visiting exhibits, and sitting in on classes. There is also the personal satisfaction in seeing student and faculty work and knowing that I had a small part to play in its manifestation.

Challenges

Of course, field librarianship is not without its own set of challenges. One problem is being physically separated from my...
colleagues at the library. It is very difficult in any institution as large as the University of Michigan to get to know one's colleagues. To help stay involved, I try to visit my host library at least once a day and engage in conversation with my colleagues. I also volunteer for as many task forces and committees as I can so that I may keep abreast of what is happening in the library and contribute the field librarian's perspective on issues.

Being apart from the physical collection can be challenging. I often rely on the Internet and online resources, but the print collection may still be the fastest and sometimes the only place to find things. It takes extra time to walk over to the library and get these resources, and sometimes patrons must be patient. By walking over to the library with patrons and by scheduling my time to work closely with the collection, I have been able to overcome this issue to some extent.

On the technical side of things, it can be frustrating to have a computer that is serviced by the library and software that is serviced by the School of Art & Design; it is difficult to know to whom to turn for help. I have had to be very persistent about my needs and have learned through experience who to contact for what problems.

Keeping in mind for whom you work is important for a field librarian. I have had some faculty members come to me lamenting about the library, and it can be hard to distance myself from the situation and see both sides clearly. There are certain things that the library administration may do that do not work perfectly for the School of Art & Design, but I need to support the library. I can work to change things for the better, but I must stand behind all of the library's decisions.

Time management is a big issue for me. Part of this results from the fact that I am committed to two departments, and I need to attend meetings and serve on committees for both the library and the School of Art & Design. It is a wonderful experience to be involved with so many great people, but it does take a lot of time. While I may not be able to serve on as many library committees as some of my other colleagues, it is important for the library to recognize my work commitment for both the library and the school.

At the outset I knew that the job of field librarian was somewhat open to interpretation and that I would have a significant say in how this position would manifest itself. As a result, I spend much time explaining the nature of my job. Even after nearly two years, I find that my librarian colleagues may misunderstand aspects of my position. Conversely, faculty and students in the School of Art & Design have quickly grasped what I do, and it makes complete sense to them. Students with whom I work are sometimes surprised when they find out that all departments do not have a field librarian.

**Recommendations and Future Directions**

For those who may be interested in starting a field librarian program, the following are some of the qualities that I think a field librarian should have to be successful. Many of these are qualities that one would find in any good librarian.

A broad background with experience using a variety of databases and reference tools will be very beneficial to a field librarian in a studio program. I worked for five years at a general reference desk, and this experience has been a tremendous asset to me. I can comfortably send an art student looking for medical information to Medline and other health databases, or direct a design student looking for business information to the appropriate resources.

In addition, good communication skills are necessary for any librarian, but they are essential for a field librarian. As a field librarian you are simply a person with an office. People will not necessarily come to you, as they might go into a library, without some prompting. You need the ability to self-advertise. Of course a field librarian in an art and design program will need to feel comfortable being around artists.

Finally, because field librarians will often need to finesse themselves between two distinct departments, a little political savvy is another important skill to possess.

Field librarianship is relatively new on the scene of academic libraries. I believe there will be a growing acceptance of this idea as word gets out that it works well, especially for certain subject areas, such as art and design. Many people are already showing a strong interest in the concept because budget cuts have placed a financial burden on traditional library models, and field librarianship offers a way to cut costs without sacrificing quality. Most people, however, seem interested because it makes sense and seems to solve some of the challenges that librarians have faced in the traditional situations.

As more field librarians communicate their positive experiences, I believe there will be a broader acceptance of the idea and growth in the numbers of field librarian positions. I also think that as more institutions embrace the idea, there will be a greater diversity in the areas that field librarian positions serve. It is to be hoped that more positions will be established in the field of art and design since these departments are particularly well suited for such a professional.

**Notes**


**Selected Bibliography**


