

Getting to Know Your Academic Community; the Approach of New Science Librarians Figuring It Out!

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Abstract

McGill University is steeped in tradition; it is a large research-intensive university founded in 1821. Like many universities, McGill has undergone a significant hiring process in the last couple of years to fill librarian and faculty positions that are being left vacant by retiring academic staff. This has created a strange culture, whereby new librarians are expected to introduce innovative ideas while trying to familiarize themselves with their academic community. In addition, the new librarians must struggle to find ways to break into the predefined relationships between long existing departments and the libraries and librarians that serve them.

McGill Library consists of 13 branch libraries, each with its own unique subject specific collection and history. Macdonald Campus Library provides service to the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and the Schulich Library of Science and Engineering serves specific departments of the Faculties of Science and Engineering. Before our arrival bibliographic instruction was not a significant part of the teaching programs in either faculty. Professors are often reluctant to give up class lecture time, many feeling that the courses have been taught without the help of librarians, and therefore why should things change.

Introduction

Once the excitement of finishing off that MLIS subsided, the reality of finding work stepped in and we became one of the many graduates pounding the pavement looking for work. The idea of working for a prestigious university such as McGill was not fathomable since we had no professional library experience. Therefore, when we went for the interviews, Natalie Waters at the Schulich Library of Science and Engineering, and Anna Stoute at the Macdonald Campus Library and afterwards received the calls asking: “Can you start tomorrow?” our immediate response was: Start to do what? This paper will discuss ways in which two new science librarians with a mandate to increase instructional sessions and promote library services/programs were able to effectively outreach to faculty and students in two special libraries within a large university library system.

Welcome to Schulich Library of Science and Engineering and Macdonald Campus Library

The Schulich Library of Science and Engineering serves a student population in engineering of approximately 2400 students, of which 277 are graduates in various engineering disciplines (Biomedical, Chemical, Civil and Applied Mechanics, Electrical & Computer, Mechanical, and Mining, Metals and Materials Engineering). The library also supports the Faculty of Science’s physical sciences departments (Atmospheric & Oceanic, Chemistry, Computer Science, Earth & Planetary, Physical Geography, Mathematics & Statistics and Physics). Enrolment numbers within the Faculty of Science are close to 5000 students, however the majority of students are within the departments of psychology and biology, which is served by the Life Sciences Library, and the remaining are users of the Schulich Library. (Admissions Recruitment and Registrar's Office (ARR) McGill University 2006)

In addition to traditional research done at the departmental levels, the Schulich Library also supports various research institutes associated with the Faculties of Science and Engineering, such as the Centre for Intelligent Machines, an inter-disciplinary research group within the Faculty of Engineering, and the Global Environmental and Climate Change Centre within the Faculty of Science, which is not only inter-disciplinary, but also a multi-university centre studying climate change. These institutes provide a venue for faculty to develop their research further while sharing their knowledge with students. Students benefit from closer ties with their professors and have the chance to develop applicable skills while studying.

Macdonald Campus Library, then known as Macdonald College Library, opened their doors in 1907 to the students enrolled in Education, Agriculture and Household Science. The library is affiliated with the Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences and is located on Macdonald Campus in Ste-Anne de Bellevue. Some of the unique features of the campus are the Macdonald Farm, Morgan Arboretum and the greenhouse facilities. Macdonald Campus Library is the only McGill library not located on the main campus in downtown Montreal. Eventually the library was moved from the Herzberg building to the Barton building which is actually a renovated barn. In the early 1990s it was finally decided that the campus would no longer be referred to as Macdonald College, but rather Macdonald Campus.

Agriculture is a highly interdisciplinary science, and this is reflected in the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. The faculty includes the Institute of Parasitology, the School of Dietetics and Human Nutrition, six departments that focus on agriculture, food and the environment. Interdisciplinary research centers, such as the Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment, Centre for Host-Parasite Interactions, Avian Science and Conservation Centre, and the Brace Centre for Water Resources Management (Haddad, Stoute, and Waters 2006). Macdonald Campus Library serves a smaller population than Schulich Library. For the university year of 2005, the total number of enrolled students, full and part time was 1, 380.

Familiarizing Yourself with the Structure of the University and Library

In the 1990s McGill University Libraries was scarcely hiring due to a shrinking budget and few retirements. From 1993 to 2001, the number of librarians dropped from 85 to 59 (Groen 2001). However, by 2001 the hiring and budget freeze started to melt thanks to an increase in funding, including the “Contrat de Performance”. The Contrat is provided by the provincial Ministry of Education to the University, who decided to share a 6.4 million dollar portion of it over 3 years with the libraries (Groen 2001). In 2002, the third and final year of the Contrat de Performance, 7 new librarians were hired (Groen). It was in this time that as new librarians we entered a period of change which has continued today.

As recent graduates without previous experience being hired at McGill had a certain amount of prestige. According to McGill Facts for 2005-2006, the university “is ranked the top Canadian school in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* ranking of the world's best universities in 2005 and the only Canadian university in the top 25 in the world” (McGill University 2006). Working as library school students we often received formal orientation when starting a new job; therefore we assumed the same process would apply. However, this was not so. We believed this resulted from the transitional period McGill was experiencing when we joined, but according to Berry and Reynolds, very few large universities have formal training programmes set up for new librarians (2001).

The position at the Schulich Library was entirely new. I was not picking up where somebody else left off, leaving my position responsibilities somewhat ambiguous. One of my main tasks was to increase in-class instructional opportunities as well as the number of students attending library orientation sessions. Naively I felt that this would be a simple matter. Certainly all I had to do was contact the professors and they would see the advantage of having me come during their class time. Suspecting blanket emails were not welcome, I started asking opinions of how best to do this. I was advised not to contact the faculty individually, but to approach each department's chair; another librarian told me to approach the library representative. What was a library representative? It was assumed I knew there was a Schulich Library Advisory Committee on which sat a representative from each department we served. From another librarian I was told that I had better ask the other Schulich librarians to verify whether or not they wanted me to contact their departments. A resounding "no" made me understand that each department had their own methods to interact with the library, if at all, and that each liaison librarian had already established relationships that they did not want ruined by an overenthusiastic newbie. This left me with the task of increasing in-class instructional opportunities within the 3 departments I liaised with: *Earth and Planetary Sciences, Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences, and Mining, Metals and Materials Engineering*. Feeling I had amply questioned my co-workers I searched the library website where I finally found my specific department chairs and library representatives. This became the pattern for anything that needed to be done, a process of "self-orienting" (Berry and Reynolds 2001). From ordering books and electronic resources, to accepting book donations, a balance of asking other librarians and some website searching usually led to the discovery of the information needed.

As a new librarian at Macdonald Campus Library, my first objective was to familiarize myself with my immediate settings so I offered to help out in the various departments. I was fortunate to be working in a small special library, which provided the opportunity for me to work in circulation, technical services, and inter-library loan. Therefore unlike other McGill librarians I understood the day to day behind the scenes functioning of the library. According to Omidsalar and Young, informal orientation is defined as "unplanned and unofficially conducted by fellow workers" (2001), which in my situation went very well and proved to be very beneficial when having to deal with students. Though I knew my library structure and their function, I was unfamiliar with the organizational structure of the University. This proved to be difficult when reaching out to faculty; I did not know the proper channels of communication. Librarians need faculty support; this creates an opportunity to implement library instruction uniquely suited to individual class needs. Providing instruction for specific classes offers students information literacy within a relevant context therefore placing emphasis on the importance of proper research (Sanborn 2005).

The hiring gap meant that experienced librarians forgot that what were normal procedures to them, or obvious information, was completely foreign to us. “Everyone knows that” was, and still is, a prevalent assumption to break. This was not limited to the Library, but also extended to the structure of the McGill University itself: committees, Senate, the Board of Governors and the numerous acronyms for the dozens of committees that enable a University to function cohesively; all had to be deciphered. Berry and Reynolds refer to this as part of “the languages of your library” and offer tips to help new librarians learn these (2001). One useful tip that we had discovered on our own--reading all pages affiliated with departmental web sites. This approach created an opportunity for us to learn more about our respective faculty and their departments. Therefore, when meeting we were able to converse about their research and their information needs. Ultimately relationships were established which led to their support in library instruction programs.

Getting to Know Faculty and Their Students

The university and library structures were one challenge to overcome, but what of our duties at the reference desk, instructional sessions and collection development in the specialized fields we served? Neither of us had backgrounds in science. We needed to simultaneously learn about our disciplines as well as their major sources of information as we went along.

The departmental websites of the Earth and Planetary Sciences, Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences and Mining Metals and Materials Engineering offered a wealth of information on the courses given and the fields of research of each faculty member. Armed with a list of keywords I read introductory chapters of textbooks and encyclopaedia articles. I learned that the majority of the students in my departments were graduates. I found out when the departments held their graduate orientation sessions and asked permission of the coordinators of each session to attend. I was given the opportunity to introduce myself to the students and thereafter offer one on one help. The orientation sessions were usually given by a faculty member, who often then learned for the first time themselves that I was available to help.

After a few months, I noticed that questions concerning my departments were not always being directly sent to me despite my name appearing on our website as the designated liaison librarian. Believing it was because they did not know that I was the new liaison, I felt I should introduce myself and asked to attend their departmental meetings. Locknar and Vine suggest asking your supervisor to arrange your attendance to a faculty meeting (2001). At McGill, faculty meetings are very long, formal, and agendas are strictly followed. A departmental meeting is smaller and less formal. Nevertheless, many professors were baffled to see me there. They had not realized that one specific person was appointed to build the collection in their subject areas, nor offer instruction when needed. Simply introducing myself and asking them to send any requests my way helped me build stronger ties to the departments. This relationship had to be nurtured, for example, as soon as I receive a title request, I rush order the title; let the requestor know that I have ordered it, and finally let them know when it has arrived at

the library. Getting to know the power players is a strategy presented by Berry and Reynolds who also acknowledge that power comes in different forms (2001). Indeed, I found that paying particular attention to the library friendly faculty who were also key players in their departments, but not necessarily the most highly ranked, helped me feel more confident when approaching their less familiar colleagues.

At the Macdonald Campus Library I was following in the foot steps of someone who worked in the library for over 20 years, which was not an easy task. Luckily, my boss and co-workers were helpful with teaching me the ropes, such as daily responsibilities and questions asked when working the service desk. However, getting to know the faculty and students was another matter. Faculty were accustomed to my predecessor's approach to library instruction, and I did not want to rock the boat. For the first year at Macdonald Campus Library, I was referred to as the replacement. Disliking the title, I decided to take a more aggressive approach with faculty. I had to become part of Macdonald Campus, as Elizabeth Slazer states "librarians cannot simply talk about their importance to the 'learning community,' they must become a part of it, actively learning the skills needed to market their libraries." (Cawthorne 2003) It was time Macdonald Campus knew their liaison librarian and the services provided at their library. After attending faculty events such as the annual Christmas party; I realized informal settings were the best way to introduce myself.

Helping students with their reference questions permitted me to gain knowledge about the subject area. However, I was not familiar with the courses they took or their student life. After all, a key component to marketing is knowing your target audience (Dodsworth 1998). Remembering that as a student drinking coffee was essential to studying; I thought that a novel way to attract students to the library was to offer free coffee during the final exam periods. Serving coffee to students offered an inviting environment to sit and study; they would often stop at the desk and casually talk to me about their student life. I learned that many students were juggling one or more jobs, plus going to school. Displaying empathy for their situation provided an opportunity for learning, sharing and understanding (Macke 2005). The casual conversations provided more insight as to what they were studying and their information needs.

We both continue to learn more about our subject areas through contact with faculty and students; it allows us to answer questions more effectively and prepare for instructional sessions. Keeping the communication channels open with our clients has increased their awareness of our resources and their willingness to participate in library programs.

Making a Path of Your Own

Many professors in our faculties had not invited librarians into their classrooms since the days prior to electronic indexes on the web. Their perception was that the research can be easily done online and that students no longer needed library instruction. In their view, it would be easy for students to find items in the library catalogue, be they in print or electronic, and that electronic indexes could be intuitively understood. For my own approach to the faculty I served from the Schulich Library I decided to campaign individual professors who taught courses that needed research help. Every term at the reference desk I gather invaluable information that I then present to the professors to prove that their students need help. By talking to the students I not only uncover their research needs, but also find out which classes require library instruction. There are some clearly large classes that require paper writing and research of students who normally follow textbooks and lab manuals. I initially propose 30 minutes of their class time. One professor who teaches the mandatory research and communication courses to engineering students was so pleased with the increased quality of the papers submitted after the library instruction, that I now spend 1.5 hours with each of her sections, and she convinced a reticent professor to allow the same presentation in her class. This is a required course and now all engineering undergraduates have at least 90 minutes of library instruction in their 4 years at McGill.

At Macdonald Campus, changing my “don’t rock the boat” mentality proved to be very beneficial in the end; I was able to gain the support of many faculty members, and implement new programs for students. I approached the executive board of the Macdonald Campus Graduate Students' Society (MCGSS), and together we implemented a library orientation program for new graduate students. Getting MCGSS on board has provided direct contact with the new and returning students, which would have been very difficult to do without their participation. Another area of change was in the library’s advertising campaign, such “activities are often an integral part of academic library programs” (Nims 1999). The first year I relied on emails and posting flyers however this proved not to be sufficient in terms of promoting library programs and services. I noticed that campus newspapers were very popular amongst students; therefore I began using this media to advertise. Adding this component to the advertising campaign increased attendance, according to library statistics.

Ironically our naivety helped us to forge our own path. We were more open to ideas, always asking questions, and willing to address faculty and students perceived information needs. Our readiness to explore new ideas was the ideal approach for familiarizing ourselves with our clients.

Conclusion

Where are we today? Outreaching to students and faculty has definitely proven to be the best approach for increasing the awareness of service and resources available in our libraries. This does not mean that our job is done, because as liaison librarians the ultimate goal is to provide anytime, anywhere service to faculty and students. We are sure that librarians would agree that “in today's complex information environment, we have a greater responsibility to communicate the resources and expertise our libraries and librarians provide, both on our campuses and in society” (Association of College and Research Libraries 2006).

In retrospect, our experience has been positive. The hurdles we faced made us the well rounded librarians we are today. Our peers and faculty have been supportive throughout our career at McGill University. No doubt a training program would have accelerated our learning, but it may also have reduced the opportunities to speak frankly with peers, faculty and students enabling us to better meet their needs. At the end of the day, we are proud to be Liaison Librarians at McGill University!

Endnotes

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