

Looking Beyond the Special Library Community for Solutions

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Introduction

As a special librarian for the past 15 years, I have relied on my special librarian peers through the Special Library Association (SLA) for assistance, ideas, and camaraderie. Over the past three years I have broken the unwritten rule that other specials have all the answers I need. Initially on a whim, and now more proactively, I've expanded my librarian circle to include all types of librarians. This has made a tremendous impact on my special library, my career, and my value as a librarian.

These interactions have opened doors to me of which I was previously unaware. Not only have I learned a great deal, but have also brought to others my "special" insight, that will make their libraries stronger as well.

In this paper I will provide you with how and why I got involved in both public and school libraries, as well as with my regional library system and state-level interactions. In sharing some of what I learned, as well as what I brought to these library organizations, it is my hope that you will be inspired to get involved with librarians in different library types. I believe that in doing so, you will add a new dimension to yourself as a librarian.

Background

Aside from a brief stint as a children's room page during my high school years, my entire library career has been at [Praxair, Inc.](#) With 2007 annual sales of \$9.4 billion, Praxair, Inc. (NYSE:PX) is a global, Fortune 300, company that supplies atmospheric, process and specialty gases, high-performance coatings, and related services and technologies. The company also designs, engineers and constructs cryogenic and non-cryogenic supply systems.

During the early 1990's I was hired to create a library for an R&D division of the company. In 1998 the library took on an expanded corporate-wide role and customer base. Over time, our Library Services staff grew to meet the needs of the expanded user base. Praxair's Library Services currently has libraries in two facilities in the U.S., as well as significant virtual

library services accessible through the corporate Intranet. We currently serve approximately 1500 employees, with a worldwide potential customer base of 28,000 employees.

Public Library

As you might expect, I am a user of my community library, the [Indian Prairie Public Library District](#). For years, I never told any of the staff there that I was actually a librarian; I enjoyed simply being one their patrons and letting them help me the same way they help everyone else. I was always impressed with their knowledge as librarians and strong customer focus. Further, for the last 10 years I have also been an avid user of the youth services department, as instilling a love of libraries in my daughter has been an important aspect of my child rearing.

In 2004, I happened to notice in the library newsletter a call for new trustees for the library board. With little real thought, I decided it was something I could do. I just assumed that since I had several years of library experience, surely I would have something to contribute to the board.

So began my campaign, which was a wonderful experience in itself. It turned out to be a contested race that year, with six candidates running for just three seats on the board. By the end of the campaign, I had already learned a great deal just from going through the process, however, I was elated when I did win one of the seats.

I did not realize how much I would gain from my interactions on the board. During the first few months on the board, as I became more involved with the public library, I quickly came to realize that I was probably learning more than I was giving! Further, much of what I was learning I could apply to my own library at Praxair.

Few of us special librarians have a library or staff as large as a public library. The public library often deals with many of the same types of issues as we do with respect to management and administration, but generally on a much larger scale.

For example, shortly after joining the board, I became involved with the Policies Committee. The policies and procedures at the public library are extremely important and at Indian Prairie, they are very thorough. Reviewing and editing these policies was enlightening. It prompted me to take a closer look at our policies at Praxair's library. My staff and I have since edited and added to them, and I review them annually to ensure they are still pertinent.

During my second year on the Indian Prairie Library board, we were immersed in strategic planning. Many discussions and brain storming sessions took place with the stake holders, such as community members, staff and other board members. These conversations helped us redefine the purpose of our community library. We developed a new vision and mission statement, as the direction of the library had indeed changed over the years. During this exciting time, I could not but help to transfer ideas from these sessions into my special library. Many of the changes that affect the public library, such as changing populations and new

technologies, affect us too. My staff and I at Praxair had some fruitful discussions among ourselves, as well as with focus groups of Praxair employees, about how to ensure we are aligned with the [Praxair vision](#), and how to better meet the needs of our internal client base.

Another area we at Praxair have really improved upon since my tenure on the public library board began is in marketing our services. Indian Prairie Library has a comprehensive marketing plan, and once I saw this, as well as looked at all the ways the public library promotes itself and advertises, I realized this was an area that definitely could stand improvement at Praxair. My staff and I created a marketing plan that has been in place for the past two years. We have made many changes to how we think about marketing our library. We have had excellent success with our new marketing, enough to fill another session all on its own.

I would be remiss not to mention the additional people skills I have acquired while on the public library board. It has enhanced my teamwork and leadership skills. Participating on a public board is like no other teamwork experience I have ever had. The typical team at Praxair, even a cross-functional team, is generally “on the same page”. Not so with a group of elected citizens coming from all walks of life.

Shortly after getting to know the administration of the Indian Prairie Public Library, I invited one of the reference librarians to come to Praxair during one of our monthly “Lunch & Learn” sessions. He provided the employees at my facility with information about the databases and other resources that our employees can use. He also showed everyone how to access their own home public library throughout the state of Illinois through the Internet. As a result of his visit and presentation, my staff now think to use the public library more to meet our business information needs, and at least a few of our employees have been using the public library. It was really a win-win opportunity for both Praxair and public libraries, as it not only provided our employees with more high quality information opportunities, but also advocated on behalf of public libraries.

Special librarians have much to bring to the table at the public library. Not only do I bring a fundamental understanding of libraries and librarianship to the board, but I bring the corporate mentality. Since many special librarians are always on guard for the survival of their library, we tend to have a different outlook than any other type librarians. We don't have a choice but to be on top of our game. If we fail at this, we risk the closing of our doors. Many specials not only accept or embrace change – we make change! This is not necessarily true in the other library environments.

State-Wide Library Interactions

During my first year on the public library board, I went to a few workshops on how to be a trustee. At one of them, I met another special librarian who told me all about [Synergy: The Illinois Library Leadership Initiative](#). It is a year-long program sponsored by the [Illinois State Library](#) and the [Illinois Library Association](#), and its purpose is to develop state-wide library leadership. After I looked into this program, one thing led to another, and I became a part of the Synergy 2006 class.

Its vision statement in part states, Synergy is “...*ensuring new, successive opportunities and life changing achievements for the Illinois library community*....” Each year the program brings together 30 librarians from every sector of librarianship for intensive, year-long work. Deep bonds are created with all types of librarians at Synergy, and my experience was no exception.

As a result of this program, I was inspired to submit an abstract for the Illinois Library Association’s (ILA) annual conference in 2007. My paper was selected for presentation in October, 2007. Subsequently, I have been asked to participate in two panel discussions at the 2008 ILA conference next September. These opportunities to share my knowledge have been wonderful and have stretched me professionally.

Another outcome from my year-long involvement with librarians around the state is the phenomenal network I now have of all kinds of librarians. For example, last year when we considered a redesign of one of our Praxair libraries, I made field trips to academic and public libraries in the area that had recently gone through renovations. What wonderful ideas I came away with, many of which would work perfectly in a special environment! Yet, visiting beyond the scope of other special libraries is something I never would have considered just a couple of years ago.

Regional Library System

During the summer of 2006, I learned that there was an opening for a special librarian on the Advisory Board of the [Metropolitan Library System](#) (MLS), my regional library system. As I was full swing in Synergy at the time, I took the opportunity to get involved. The Advisory Board consisted of several library directors: 9 public, 2 academic, 2 school, and 2 special. Our charge was to advise the system director of the needs from our sector’s point of view.

This experience also proved to be very insightful, as our monthly meetings were filled with discussions of issues librarians face in every sector. For example, I heard issues in the public libraries that I was able to share with the director and other board members of Indian Prairie Public Library. Likewise, I was sharing with these librarians the exciting changes we were making at Praxair’s Library Services. I was hearing the news from school and academic librarians, as well as other specials. I was creating a network of all kinds of different librarians and found myself frequently connecting ideas and information between them. I found this experience so invigorating that I wrote an [article](#) about it for SLA’s Illinois Chapter newsletter, [The Informant](#).

In May, 2007, a slot opened on the MLS Board for a special librarian. I ran in an uncontested election. Now that I sit on this board I have an even stronger understanding of the regional library systems in Illinois. I am interacting with yet another set of librarians and trustees and still furthering my depth of library knowledge.

As a board member, I have spearheaded an initiative for sustainability in an era of ever decreasing government funding. This is an exciting opportunity to help our system continue and improve its offerings to all types of libraries, include our Praxair library. And, it's an exciting opportunity for me to use my leadership skills.

School Library

During my daughter's early elementary years I wanted to volunteer at her school in some capacity so I could see what really goes on at the school, and also be "seen" by my daughter, so she felt that her mom as part of the scene too. This situation is a real dilemma for full-time working moms. The solution I chose was to take a half vacation day one morning per month during the school year and volunteer at her school library. Even though I was not spending this vacation time solely with my daughter, I made sure to set the schedule such that I volunteered there on the days her class went to the library, so she could see me there. This provided her with the excitement that her mom was there and I am hopeful that the volunteering I displayed in this capacity will contribute to a philanthropic impact on her life.

I found it delightful to spend a morning each month shelving and watching everything going on around me. More importantly, I came to understand how valuable it is to have "library class" at the early elementary level. In reality, I was watching the early education of our future work force and our special library customers. Not only are the children learning how to find, evaluate and use various information sources, they are getting an excellent understanding about what information work is all about.

Conversations with the school librarians at my daughter's schools, as well as with other school librarians I met through the Synergy program, have provided me with a much better understanding of the value of having librarian instruction included in early elementary education. I have since become an advocate of legislation requiring an MLS librarian in every school in Illinois.

Discover the Benefits of Volunteering!

There are several ways you can become more involved with various levels of library activity. You don't have to jump right into a trustee position at your public library, for example. Getting to know the staff and talking about issues would be a good start. You may choose to volunteer in some capacity, such as through the "friends" organization. You may also find value in reading periodicals and blogs aimed at the public sector of librarianship. Further, the public library policies in your town library are public record, so you can peruse them any time. Of course, if you like to get right in the thick of things, run for the board!

If the idea of getting involved at the regional library system appeals to you, attend the system-sponsored events, such as workshops and classes. Learn more about their offerings and

start connecting with other local librarians. Ask your system director how best you can help further their efforts.

It doesn't matter if you have children in school; school libraries will be more than delighted to have your help. As there are many schools that do not have librarians on staff, you may be able to provide more for those students than you can imagine.

Summary

In summary, I would say that I have truly grown personally and professionally from these activities over the past few years. Praxair Library Services has benefited from the knowledge I have gained from these various library interactions. I have given personal time and energy, and hopefully have had a positive impact on each of these libraries and organizations. However, I am confident that have gained far more in return.

- I have become a better administrator of Library Services at Praxair
- My leadership skills have increased significantly
- The Praxair library now takes full advantage of state-funded resources and services provided through our public library and regional library system
- I now have a network of all kinds of librarians with whom I interact and can ask for advice
- Speaking opportunities to share my knowledge, both at regional library system and at the Illinois state library conferences have opened up for me
- I often find myself as an information link between librarians of different library types
- I provide an understanding of librarianship, as well as a corporate mindset, which is sometimes the unique flavor in the room
- Personal satisfaction has come from volunteering in my community and for our profession
- I have become an advocate for school libraries and librarians
- My daughter is gaining an early appreciation of the benefits of libraries and of philanthropic endeavors

Whether you take a few steps or a giant leap into the "other" library types, getting to know the librarians and environments, you will be rewarded. Guaranteed.