

Karen O'Grady

Embedded Librarianship

Why Getting Out of the Library Made Me a Better Librarian

2023: Every morning, I walk across my campus—past the library—and head to my office in our school of nursing. I greet my colleagues—none of whom are librarians—and we chit-chat about our work and our lives while we pour coffee or alert one another that someone brought doughnuts.

These morning chats are never about who's on the reference desk or last-minute instruction requests from demanding faculty. They are instead about our nursing students' participation in our campus flu shot clinics, or about an upcoming nursing licensure exam. These conversations are about what is happening in the school of nursing.

Naturally, I share a few things. I excitedly share my news of getting another essay published in *C&RL News*, or my nervousness about presenting at an upcoming library conference. My nursing school colleagues absorb these tidbits about my work, gleaning a little more information about librarianship each time we talk.

Sometimes I hear, "Hey Karen might know. Ask Karen." And I do know. Ask A Librarian is standing right there, scarfing doughnuts with my fellows, answering questions about all things library as we chat. Most of the questions are not matters any of them would journey across campus or compose an email to ask, but I happen to be right there, so they ask. These teachable moments are peppered throughout my day, every day.

I am the embedded librarian for the Hahn School of Nursing at the University of San Diego. I am surrounded by nursing faculty, staff, and students rather than by librarians. This has proven to be an incredible gamechanger for the way I see things.

Compare this to a librarian who must locate the correct classroom in an unfamiliar building to meet a faculty instructor, possibly for the first time. This awkward exchange might occur while a classroom of students looks on. The librarian must then deliver the one-shot that makes or breaks their reputation. They get just one chance to convince students to like them, to trust them, and to reach out to them for help. If the instructor happens to helpfully interrupt with one innocent but incorrect or discrediting sentence ("No they already know all that. Just show them Ebsco."), confusion and distrust result, narrowing the future possibility that students will ask the librarian for help.

In contrast, every student in my school knows me by name. I am often stopped in the hallway to answer questions ("Hey Karen, what time does the library close today?" or "Karen what does impact factor mean?"). Every correct answer I give increases my authority and builds trust. Students watch me answer their classmates' questions, and it emboldens them to ask me things they are too embarrassed to ask in a classroom setting. Knowing me and seeing me around makes it safe to ask me anything.

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Through these casual mini-lessons, this foreign animal called *librarian* slowly becomes an approachable, knowledgeable person. I am no longer some murky juxtaposition of an administrative assistant and whatever archaic version of their childhood librarian their minds conjure. What I do, what I know, and what I would love to help them with unfolds organically and is reinforced daily.

Being embedded allows me to understand the culture of nursing in a way that would remain invisible to me through the limitations of email, meetings, and those awkward one-shots. The small talk with my faculty around the microwave is priceless. I can help them with almost everything I hear them discussing. I keep an eye out for anything that relates to their research interests. I attend dissertations, panel discussions, and important ceremonies specific to nursing. I have attended faculty happy hours; I have volunteered with nursing students at community events; and I have attended birthday and holiday parties at faculty members' homes. How many liaison librarians can say that?

The magic sauce is simply being there, being near, being available and curious about everyone's background, their research interests, and the subjects they teach. I have learned so much about my discipline (which I see as nursing, rather than librarianship) because I am surrounded by it. I learn more every day about nursing standards, nursing education, and the minutiae of nursing *culture*. I learn about them, and they learn about me. It is a win-win for everybody.

Here comes the controversy. The longer I am in this position, the more I can't help but view the library and the librarians from across campus . . . the way everyone else sees them. This has been powerfully illuminating for me.

During my visits to the library, when I witness librarians speaking to people and to each other, I suddenly understand how *foreign* librarians can seem. I see with new eyes how walking into the building can be confusing and intimidating. I am struck by all the *librarianese* being tossed around but not explained—reference, holdings, ILL, non-circulating, embargo. This is a language spoken only by librarians. I of course speak this language, but no longer being surrounded by it, I can plainly see that others are not following.

These stark realizations have shifted my perspective immensely, and they are very valuable. I no longer take offense when students innocently ask me to proofread their papers, or when faculty express surprise that librarians have faculty status on my campus. Their questions make perfect sense to me given the non-library context where I spend my workday.

The further I get away from my campus library, the *more* helpful I am to my patrons. The embedded model switches everything around, so my loyalties lie more with helping my school's students and faculty rather than with defending my profession.

As liaison librarians are increasingly untethered from physical hardcover books, and therefore less required to stay anchored in the library building, I believe embedded librarianship is the future of library models. Information needs throughout campus are better served, strong librarian relationships with faculty and students are established, and everyone on campus gains a greater understanding and respect for the work librarians do.

2024: Ironically, since I wrote this essay in high praise of the embedded model, I have moved on from librarianship, due in part to the epiphanies I share here. I wholeheartedly believe that embedded librarianship could be the most progressive forward step for the profession since online catalogs, but a brave seismic shift must first occur in librarians' professional priorities and in their self-perception. ♪