

Courtney Fuson and Jenny Rushing

Climbing out of the “Ivory Tower”

Conversations between academic and school librarians and teachers

Instruction librarians at Belmont University see all freshmen twice in their first semester in two general education courses. The purpose of the courses themselves and library instruction is to help freshmen make a seamless transition to college. Many, if not most, freshmen at Belmont are ill prepared for the level of research required in the two courses, which require them to make intentional use of substantial sources, take an informed position on a complex topic, and carry through an argumentative thesis.

A 2006 study by the Educational Testing Service confirmed what librarians already knew. Results from their ICT Literacy Assessment test revealed that only 13 percent of the high school and college test takers were information literate.¹ In response, a new focus on K–16 information literacy planning has emerged.

One solution appearing frequently in the literature and recommended by the AASL/ACRL Task Force is collaboration and outreach between school and academic librarians.² There are some well established outreach programs already, perhaps the most well-known being Kent State’s Informed Transitions.³ But outreach can happen at all levels, no matter how large or small the academic library or budget may be.

Librarians at Belmont University, a small, private, liberal arts university in Nashville, Tennessee, have built relationships with local school librarians through a program called Library Conversations@Belmont.

It is an outreach program that can easily be modeled and adapted for any academic library.

Library conversations@Belmont

While some outreach programs are based on tours of academic libraries and even classes for high school students, this was an unrealistic goal for Belmont, which only had seven librarians on the faculty. Instead, the program focused on building relationships with area school librarians. Belmont librarians shared their experiences with the information literacy skill level of Belmont freshman, as well as professors’ expectations and assignments for freshman research. One goal was for school librarians to be able to apply the information to their own library instruction or, if they did not have an information literacy plan in place, for them to use the information to bring teachers and administrators on board. Another goal was to simply provide a forum for school librarians to share and learn from each other.

Luckily, a program was already established on Belmont’s campus that the librarians could adapt in order to meet these goals. Conversations@Belmont is a program sponsored by Academic Outreach that links the College of Arts and Sciences with public and independent schools in the middle Tennessee area. Each semester events are held in a variety of subject areas and are hosted by faculty from various departments. These free events typically consist of dinner, a speaker or panel, and a lot of lively conversation about a topic pertinent to the field. Because Academic

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Outreach sponsors the program, they also handle all the logistics, from sending out e-mail invitations to schools, booking the room, and arranging and paying for the catering. The librarians select the topic for the event, present or arrange for speakers, and moderate the conversation.

If you feed them, will they come?

The first Library Conversation was held during the spring of 2006. Although dinner was included free of charge, the Belmont librarians wondered if anyone would be interested in attending such an event, especially on a weeknight after a long day at school. An invitation went out with the simple title “Preparing High School Students for Academic Research,” and within a few weeks 60 people had registered. Participants were mostly high school librarians, but some middle school librarians also attended. Some brought teachers with them, and other English and history teachers found out about the event and came on their own. The interest level was much greater than anticipated, and registrants commented on topics they would like discussed. Those topic ideas included comments such as:

- I would like to discuss a sequential (freshman to senior) approach to developing research skills in our students.
- How to prepare high school students to do college-level research; how to introduce a research unit to high school students
- Technology Topics: Internet 2, how podcasting and blogging can be or are being used in education, alternatives to Google, etc.
- Motivating students; promoting enthusiasm in the research process; encouraging students to dig deeper for their own learning.

The interest in establishing relationships between school and academic librarians was immediately apparent. Local school librarians jumped at the opportunity to get together in order to share and learn. Some even drove over an hour to attend the event. Belmont did feed them, but they would have come regardless because they were hungry for collaboration.

But what will we talk about?

Another initial concern of the Belmont librarians was that they would have nothing to talk about. Not having any experience in school libraries themselves, they wondered what they would have to offer. The first two Conversations were led by Belmont librarians and described Belmont’s information literacy program and the two freshman general education courses, First-Year Seminar and First-Year Writing. Belmont librarians shared some of the weaknesses in freshman research skills that they and professors most commonly saw in these two courses. Weaknesses such as the “reporting syndrome” (students summarizing information in report form rather than posing meaningful research questions and analyzing and synthesizing information from multiple sources); the lack of critical evaluation of sources, especially from the Web; and the inability to apply information to form complex arguments came as no big surprise to school librarians, rather these weaknesses reinforced that school librarians share the same challenges as academic librarians when it comes to teaching information literacy skills. Some school librarians appreciated knowing they were on the right track.

Belmont librarians also shared actual research assignments required in the two courses to demonstrate the level of research freshman should be prepared for. The school librarians were then able to take the assignments back to their administrators, teachers, and even students to emphasize the importance of teaching and learning information literacy skills. Although many school librarians have been working to implement information literacy plans for years, many reported they had greater success with support and documentation from a university.

In an effort to be truly collaborative, after the first two Conversations a call went out for volunteer presenters from this new community of librarians. So many people responded that presenters were lined up for the next year of Conversations. The school librarians were eager to share what they were doing, often on their own, as the sole librarian at their

school. Presentations included “Teaching electronic citations with NoodleTools,” “Using a school archive to teach information literacy skills,” and “Facebook Generation: Marketing the library to a socially networked society.” Presentation topics were selected based on feedback from previous attendees, so topics were always relevant and well received.

For the fall 2008 Conversation the theme was plagiarism. Two librarians and an English teacher, all from different high schools, presented on educating students about plagiarism, preventing plagiarism, and using Turnitin.com. This Conversation was one of the most successful and is a great example of the practical usefulness of this type of meeting.

Interest was so great for the spring 2009 Conversation that registration was capped at 80 and a waiting list was started. Titled, “Preparing for the Transition to College: Expectations for Freshman Research,” it was similar to the first meetings, but this time Belmont faculty teaching First-Year Seminar and First-Year Writing served on a panel, describing their courses, their assignments, their expectations for freshman research, and fielding questions from the audience. Other guest speakers from Belmont and beyond, such as the director of the Writing Center and trainers from Tennessee’s state virtual library program have already been suggested. There are still enough volunteer presenters and topic suggestions for many more Conversations to come.

They came, they talked, they kept coming back!

Feedback from the attendees has been very positive. One regular attendee commented,

we all appreciate Belmont’s efforts to keep communication between the university and secondary schools in the area open and ongoing. We always learn something new, but it is also affirming to our teachers and librarians that they are on the right track in their efforts to prepare students for post-secondary learning. Thank you very much!

Most attendees have expressed an interest in continuing the Conversations events (as evidenced by the strong registration numbers) and have expressed interest in attending other Belmont-sponsored professional development events. These events have not yet been scheduled, but the Belmont library faculty has received many ideas from attendees on what they’d like to do. The most requested events (other than more Conversations) are a summer workshop and a tour of the Belmont library for high school students.

These requests, coupled with the rousing success of Conversations@Belmont have presented their own challenges. Since the start of Conversations@Belmont, Belmont’s library has added only one professional librarian. While there are seven professional librarians on faculty, only four of them are able to be actively involved in Conversations@Belmont and related events. Because Academic Outreach does the bulk of the planning and the attendees are doing much of the presenting, the Conversations@Belmont dinners do not add much to the workload of the librarians involved. The events requested by the attendees, however, have proved to be more of a challenge. While the Belmont librarians are thrilled to have local high school juniors and seniors touring the library and learning how to do better research, the librarians also conduct almost 200 instruction sessions a year for Belmont students.

When the high school librarians began requesting sessions at the Belmont library in the spring of 2009, the Belmont librarians were excited and happy to accommodate those requests. They quickly realized that maintaining the current level of Belmont course instruction would take much of their time, leaving little time for the requested high school sessions. This is especially true of the fall semester. This is an issue that, while a nice problem to have, requires some significant staff to handle.

The summer sessions with local librarians and teachers would be more manageable for Belmont librarians, as they see fewer students in the summer. However, those sessions present their own challenges. Coordinating with county education departments to ensure the teachers

and librarians get the appropriate continuing education credits, scheduling the sessions, finding an appropriate space for the sessions, arranging presenters, and other details are all still being worked out. The Belmont librarians would like to make this happen, but the specifics are uncertain at this time.

Another challenge in extending the Conversations@Belmont beyond the dinner meeting is the limitations that are placed on Internet access at schools. While brainstorming options for continued collaboration, the Belmont librarians realized that many of the Web 2.0 options are unavailable to most school librarians and teachers while they are at work. Blogs, wikis, Web-based forums, Facebook, and other social networking sites are nearly all blocked by filters. An e-mail list was attempted, but was not the continuation of conversation that was hoped for. Because they are trying to avoid asking the participants to use their home resources for this, the Belmont librarians are still trying to find ways to continue the conversations virtually.

As this program continues to grow, there has been talk of collaborating with other middle Tennessee area universities to work with the school librarians and students. This would help alleviate some of the load on Belmont librarians and provide another college-level perspective for the students and librarians. There are quite a few colleges and universities of varying sizes in the Nashville area, both public and private. This could prove to be a very wide-reaching and beneficial undertaking for all involved.

Conclusion

Library Conversations@Belmont has been a tremendously successful outreach program. Belmont's efforts focused on school librarians and teachers rather than high school students themselves, but depending on the resources available and number of librarians on faculty there is certainly a need for and an interest in both types of collaboration. Many campuses have an outreach office or other programs already in place that librarians can take advantage of. Belmont offered a nice free dinner, but again, depending on resources available and the time of the event, snacks, a light breakfast, or even

a brownbag would still attract participants. Belmont's numbers and feedback from the surveys provide evidence that school librarians really value and appreciate outreach from their local universities. Many academic librarians are in a position to take the lead in K-16 collaborations, which will strengthen information literacy initiatives at all levels. Only a few months separates a high school senior from a college freshman. We have a lot to share and learn from each other!

Notes

1. A. Foster, "Students Fall Short on 'Information Literacy,' Educational Testing Service's Study Finds," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27, 2006.
2. AASL/ACRL Task Force, "Blueprint for Collaboration," www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/whitepapers/acrlaaslblueprint.cfm. Accessed 14 October 2009.
3. Kent State's Informed Transitions, www.library.kent.edu/highschool. Accessed 14 October 2009. *zc*

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