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Mental Note: Sometimes Even “Library” Is Too Much Library Terminology for Non-Librarians

by Kathy Watts

“Information has value, and the right information has enormous value.”¹ So wrote author Neil Gaiman in a 2013 article affirming the importance of libraries and librarians. Like most librarians, I am thrilled when I hear someone outside the library profession expound on the virtues and significance of libraries. But my excitement at reading such support reveals an expectation that many outside the library community have a limited understanding of its worth. In the spirit of countering such unawareness of the value of libraries, last fall I presented a talk at a non-library academic conference. And it was a fail.

I was eager to share the many ways libraries can support diversity initiatives on college campuses, so I presented at a conference designed to help college administrators, faculty, and staff examine curricular and co-curricular ways to advance diversity and inclusion practices on campus. I framed my talk around select points from The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL's) Diversity Standards. I summarized research that demonstrates how libraries improve student retention and academic success, the ways implicit bias can creep into our instruction and our web sites, how our collections can engage students with the rich history of their own culture as well as uncover for them the contributions from other cultures. I prepared some interactivity and group discussions and... very few people came. So few, in fact, that my plan for several discussion groups quickly became a plan for a single discussion group, since there were just enough people there for just one. Small as it was, however, I enjoyed the more casual interaction allowed by a small group, and I tried not to feel awkward as I was videotaped presenting to a mostly empty room.

Afterward I wandered the halls and looked into some of the other presentation rooms. They were full. So much for my “No one comes to presentations right after lunch” rationale. It was time to examine why my talk missed the mark for the attendees. Why



didn't they come? I think it was because I used the word “library” in my talk title.

The campus roles of those who did attend my talk were revealing: they were faculty library liaisons, except for one attendee who was a publisher. In other words, most of the attendees already worked directly with the library on their campuses. Clearly, my title didn't communicate what I wished to communicate. My target audience were staff in student services, teaching faculty, diversity officers, anyone on a college campus concerned

about a student's whole college experience. Using the word “library” in the title was apparently the wrong hook to get people at a non-library conference to my talk. But that begs a few questions: Why did the attendees think the library wasn't relevant to them? Does this reveal a perceived library silo that still exists despite a library staff's best effort to eliminate it? Why would the library not be seen as an essential part of an important campus-wide issue?

My experience reinforced what I had discovered during my research preparing for the presentation: the majority of the research and writing on how libraries impact student retention and success, especially for underrepresented student groups, is found primarily in library literature. We librarians are presenting our important research to each other, and in so doing are providing ourselves with excellent evidence to present to stakeholders. However, the onus remains on us to disseminate that information – to university administrators, corporate boards, or local communities and voters. Librarians and library staff have made exceptional progress communicating our services, our stories, and our value to patrons. For some libraries, academic ones in particular, a challenge remains to communicate our essential and unique contribution to the campus environment, academic support, and individual student success.

Just last year ACRL developed a statement, with accompanying posters, on the value of academic libraries. The purpose of the

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statement is telling: to assist librarians and library directors to develop the necessary “talking points,” based on research published in library literature, to communicate their value to academic leaders. Note that the statement is not aimed at potential patrons. It is aimed at academic librarians’ colleagues.² Similarly, ALA’s Libraries Transform campaign’s “main idea” is to focus “less about what they [libraries] have for people and more about what they do for and with people.”³ Both campaigns shift the description of the value of libraries from what we have to what we do, from “We have lots of information” to “We get you the right information.”

My conference talk would have been greatly improved if I’d thought through these two different advocacy campaigns. Part of my title was “making it personal,” attempting to communicate how our collections, service, signage, instruction, and web pages should, wherever possible, reflect the intellectual and cultural heritage of all our students. Where I failed was to make the presentation personal for the conference attendees: communicating to them how the library impacts their niche of campus. Even though I am conscious of limiting “library speak,” this experience brought home to me in a tangible way that, despite my best efforts, I am still often talking past those whom I most want to communicate with.

I’d love to make Mr. Gaiman’s statement my library’s motto, because it communicates succinctly a problem most people encounter – too much information of varying relevance – and immediately provides a solution – getting the right information the first time. Lots of information is something a library has; getting people the right information is something the library does for people. Communicating the difference is communicating the value, the importance, the impact of the library. 📖

Endnotes:

Gaiman, N. (2013, October 15). Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming>

Malenfant, K. (2016, August 1). ACRL issues statement for communicating library value to academic leaders. *ACRL Insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/12257>

American Library Association. Libraries Transform Campaign. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/libraries-transform-campaign>

would come flying in.

The night of the multimedia event, I got the room set up and waited. A lot of people arrive fashionably late for programs, so I wasn’t nervous at the “15 minute to” mark. A couple showed up. Hooray!! We waited for a few minutes past the starting time and... that was the audience, two people. The show must go on, as they say. As the show went on, 3 more people showed up! The hard work paid off and the program went swimmingly, no technical difficulties, the audience was engaged and we had fun. There were three more programs and I still had high hopes.

After the big event, two people were signed up for interviews. I was looking forward to sitting down and listening to some stories. The day before the first interview, the patron cancelled. Now, with two programs done, I was starting to think this wasn’t a fit for the community I served, and I started to lose hope. The next program on the calendar was the tech program, showing patrons how to use the StoryCorps app. I wasn’t worried about the attendance at this program because we have faithful regulars who show up every week, sometimes not even knowing the topic. We had five people for the tech class. Had everyone in the county decided to take a vacation that week??? I was a bit distraught. With only one person signed up for an interview, I thought it would be my luck they would cancel. Or maybe I hoped for that instead, so this little mishap of a program would be over already.

The last day of interviews, the patron called up and asked to bump the time to accommodate the bus schedules. Ok, it’s still on, no worries. Five minutes past the appointment, no one. Ten minutes past, still no one. Fifteen minutes... she’s here. Woohoo!! I sat down with her and we began the interview. We laughed, we came close to tears and we swapped stories. It was amazing to connect with this stranger on so many levels. It was like listening to the podcast episodes, but so much better. This made it all worth it -- 40 minutes of communicating with someone about what was important to them and being willing to share their story with me and then the world.

After some months in the rear-view mirror, it’s still hard to tell what could have been done better, differently, or if it was just a dud. I’d like to try it again at some point, swap out stories, find a new location, build up the idea in the community more beforehand or form partnerships with other groups in the community. I grew by having this program and have a building block for even better programs next time. 📖