Academic Libraries and Writing Centers: Collaborations at US Public Research Universities

Mary K. Bolin

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries; San Jose State University, mary.bolin@sjsu.edu

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Abstract

The websites of 71 US research universities were the source of data on the relationship of academic libraries and campus writing centers, which provide support for developing written communication skills. All 71 institutions have writing centers, generally administered by the academic success operation, the English department, or a college such as arts and sciences. Just under half (n=35) of the institutions have a writing center located in the library. In 16 of those institutions, the library is the only location of the writing center. The general issues of academic success and "library as place," as well as the space that was gained by weeding and storage of print collections, has led to this and other opportunities for collaboration between academic libraries and other campus units, part of the ongoing transformation of library organizations and their programs and services.

Keywords

academic libraries, writing centers, information literacy, public research universities

About Author

Dr. Mary K. Bolin is a full-time Lecturer in the SJSU School of Information and an Emerius Professor in the University Libraries at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln, where she served as Chair of the Technical Services Department and as a Catalog and Metadata Librarian. She is an Emeritus Fellow of the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities. She completed her PhD in Education in 2007. Dr. Bolin is one of the founding editors of the peer-reviewed electronic journal *Library Philosophy and Practice*. Before returning to her home state of Nebraska in 2004, she spent 17 years as a faculty member in the library at the University of Idaho.

In the past 15-20 years, academic libraries have explored both collaborations with other campus units and the idea of "library as place." After several years of declining gate counts, the replacement of print with electronic resources, and the rise of remote services such as chat reference and Ask Us, libraries began to think once again about the functions of the library as a place to gather for study, leisure, discussion, and collaboration. The reduction of print collections created new spaces, and many libraries explored the concept of an "information commons" that included services and offices of units outside the library, such as IT support. This same period has seen the flourishing of student and academic success services, part of an institutional effort to strengthen undergraduate education, revamp core curricula, create support for first generation students, and bring together support for writing, research skills, time management, planning, and so on.

One common and fruitful partnership has been that of the library and the writing center. Writing is a fundamental skill that is critical to academic success. The need for students to write well is an interdisciplinary concern and one that is shared with the library, whose information literacy mission can be seen as including some aspects of writing, e.g., citation, use of research sources, and avoiding plagiarism. Writing centers are widespread on campuses and may be administratively housed in the English Department, student success services, a college such as arts and sciences, or other areas. Those administrative units have developed partnerships with academic libraries to create spaces where faculty or student writing tutors can meet with students to help with research papers and with writing skills in general. In the past two decades, writing centers thus began to be located in library buildings, either as their main or only location or as a satellite. This collaboration is a good match for the library's mission in areas such as information seeking, information literacy, and reducing academic dishonesty. Basic information literacy instruction by librarians has often been targeted at freshman composition courses and is frequently organized in collaboration with the English department. Furthermore, the library's long opening hours and general accessibility are other reasons that this partnership has been successful.

In the time since this collaboration began to be common, has it persisted or declined? Data was gathered from a group of seventy US public research institutions. University websites were the source of information on whether the university has a writing center, where its administrative home is, whether there is a library location, and whether the center also offers online appointments. The results showed that just under half (35) of the 71 institutions had a library writing center location, and 16 of those had the library as the only location. This shows the persistence of the trend and the potential for further collaboration.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused most institutions to switch to mostly or entirely online services, but institutions are switching back to in-person services, and all or most will probably offer in-person services (probably in addition to virtual appointments) at some point in the near future. The data on location is presented without regard to whether institutions are presently offering in-person service.

Academic Success

In the 1990s, colleges and universities faced pressure to re-evaluate the role of teaching, to give greater value to teaching skill, and to become more "student-centered." This included recognizing and accommodating multiple learning styles and reassessing the roles and relationships of students and teachers. Universities began to use the phrase "teaching and learning" to describe the activities of faculty and students in the classroom and other learning environments. This led many institutions to establish campus teaching enhancement units that provided support to faculty in their efforts to become better teachers. McDaniel, James, and Davis (2000) describe this process at one state university, where faculty and administrators, "analyzed retention … evaluated physical space ... and evaluated student services." The university then created "a single student services center" that combined "Academic Support, Career Development, Student Counseling, and Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition."

Along with the effort to improve teaching and rethink faculty-student relationships came the recognition that students were often unprepared to meet the demands of higher education curricula. That led to the redesign of core curricula, with the revamped curricula emphasizing broadly-applicable skills such as writing and other forms of communication. It also led to more prominence for student services offices, and sometimes an administrative realignment to bring student services together with academic affairs.

Student services operations began to create academic success centers, sometimes called student success centers. Those centers offered services and instruction on study skills, curriculum planning, academic writing, time management, and other skills that would lead to success for students. Writing centers predate academic success centers. They represent the most basic element of academic success that cuts across disciplines. The writing center has become a widespread feature of academic success operations, but it can also be seen as a model for the tutoring, individualized instruction, and collaboration among disciplines that are characteristic of academic success efforts. The library also practices tutoring, one-on-one instruction, and an interdisciplinary approach, which creates affinities between libraries and writing centers, and makes the library, and information literacy, foundational for academic success.

Library as Place

The discussion of "library as place" arose in the early 2000s as a response to declining gate counts and the growing reliance on networked electronic resources that could be accessed remotely. The use of print collections declined sharply, and academic libraries also felt pressure, like other academic units, to become more evidence-based and data-driven and to create assessment measures that would help shape user-centered library programs and services. The assessment of the print collection and its use (or lack thereof) led many libraries to consider aggressive weeding or storage of little-used material and the repurposing of the space that had been taken up by those print holdings. MacWhinnie (2003) describes the creation of an information commons as a means of combining access to "information resources, technology, and research assistance." Nitecki (2011) proposes a model

for assessing library space, emphasizing the importance of, "aligning library space with the role of the library."

Space has always been at a premium in academic libraries, but just as the removal of card catalog cabinets made way for things like computer labs, the removal of print collections made way for collaborative space for students and for services that are not traditionally thought of as library services. The removal of print, however, is and was not without resistance and angst. Some librarians had a (print) collection-focused view of library services and viewed the removal of print as the dismantling of what makes the library a library. Teaching faculty who had not been seen in the library for years suddenly claimed that browsing the stacks was something they did daily and something that was utterly vital to their work as scholars. There were genuine questions about the role and use of print and the best approach to weeding the print collection. Some angst was relieved by the availability of compact storage facilities as well as regional shared repositories, particularly for periodical volumes.

Libraries found ways to overcome some of this resistance and most large academic libraries have done substantial weeding of print in the past decade, but the controversy over this issue uncovered something more basic: the question of what a library is or should be. Most librarians would probably agree that a library is not simply a building that houses a collection of resources. The idea that a library is a kind of warehouse is objectionable to librarians. If we grant the idea that a library is not (or is more than) its collection, then we are left with the question of what it is. This article does not attempt to answer that question. Clearly, the answer develops and emerges continuously. But the present environment of collections and resources has allowed us to consider the library as an organization that occupies space and exists virtually.

Traditionally, academic library space has been occupied by collections, by areas for direct user services such as circulation and reference, areas for processing material, and offices and workspace for librarians, staff, and administrators. The largest areas by far were those for collections, which require load-bearing floors and room for users and staff to shelve and retrieve material. There has always been space for users to read and study as well, often including group study rooms.

Review of the Literature

There is a great deal of literature on academic success, library as place, writing centers, and academic library collaborations with writing centers and other units. This literature review is limited, and only includes some of the most interesting and relevant research on these topics.

The literature on academic success efforts in colleges and universities includes Burton (2013), who advocates for collaborative learning as a path to student success, and who emphasizes the role of a student success center in helping to achieve that. McDaniel, James, and Davis (2000) describe the creation of a student success center at a state university, while Osborne, Parlier, and Adams (2019) assessed the impact of academic success efforts on student learning. Smith, Baldwin, and Schmidt (2015) view student success centers at community colleges as drivers of a change in institutional focus from access to success. Sullivan (2015)

examines the role of tutoring in academic success. Additionally, the library's role in academic success is further explored by authors such as Courtney (2009), who examines varieties of outreach and collaboration in academic libraries, including partnering with K-12 education and various activities that support academic success. The literature on the academic library's changing position within colleges and universities is described by Cox (2018), who finds many opportunities for collaboration with other campus units and supporting academic success.

The discussion of "library as place" includes consideration of general trends in libraries and higher education. An early study by Feret and Marcinek (1999) reports on forecasting activity to predict trends and needs for staffing, training, and resources for academic libraries in the 21st century. Nitecki (2011) explores the relationship of library spaces to the role and mission of the library and the shape of library services. Bailin (2011) recounts the views of students on the role of the academic library as part of a remodeling project, including the need for collaborative and study space. Collins (2014) gives examples of reimagined library spaces and the benefits to users, and students' use of the library as a learning space is recounted by Cunningham and Tabur (2012), who find that students do this even when they do not have to come to the library to use collections and resources. Delaney and Bates (2015) urge academic librarians to continue to examine their roles and relationships and to find new collaborations. Gardner and Eng (2005) report on the changing needs of Millennial students and how libraries can respond to them, with the issue of generational change continuing to be important for library programs and services.

Furthermore, trends and issues for the 21st century academic library are explored by many authors and organizations. Shoid and Kassim (2012), who examine learning organization disciplines and their effect on organizational learning in academic libraries, are generally relevant to the topic of organizational transformation, of which collaboration is a part. Likewise, work by Jantz (2017), which examines research library vision statements and their relationship with innovation, is pertinent to this discussion. Budd (2005) describes organizational, administrative, governance, staffing, and collections in academic libraries and the changes that are taking place in the 21st century, while Campbell (2006) ponders the transition from print to electronic collections and the implication for the role and mission of academic libraries. The move from collection-centered library organizations and facilities to a model where relationships, collaborations, and services are the focus is described by Latimer (2011). This transformation is also discussed by Michalak (2012), who examines the evolution of an academic library organization and culture to meet the needs of the current learning and technology environment. Specific advice on shifting the collection paradigm is provided by Spitzform and Sennyey (2007), who look at demand-driven acquisitions (now very common) as a solution to underused library resources. Gayton (2008) depicts the social and communal aspects of academic libraries, finding that social approaches (e.g., cafes) are a means of combating falling gate counts and declining collection use. Early research by MacWhinnie (2003) explores the emergence of the information commons as a focus for library facilities and services in a collaborative

learning environment. Silver (2007) describes the use of collaborative spaces in an academic library with 70 percent of space devoted to collaborative learning.

A number of authors have recounted experiences with library/writing center collaborations, including Brady, Singh-Corcoran, Dadisman, and Diamond (2009), who partnered with composition teachers to support writing and composition skills along with information literacy. Epstein and Draxler (2020) describe a library/writing center collaboration that paired students with writing tutors as a way of strengthening library support for academic success, while a collaboration in which librarians trained writing tutors in information literacy skills and instruction and worked together in shared office hours or reference desk staffing is described by Ferer (2012). A survey of 157 colleges and universities performed by Todorinova (2010) found that 94 percent of institutions had a writing center and 44 percent of those had a library location. Only 23 percent had collaborations beyond the shared location. Utter (2018) describes the integration of the writing center into the academic library, with both a physical location and collaboration between librarians and writing center staff. Zauha's (2014) exploration of the library/writing center collaboration as an aspect of information literacy instruction is an important aspect of this discussion. She describes a relationship that goes beyond the convenience of the library as a meeting place for students and tutors.

There is a great deal of research on student-centered learning. Brooks, Fuller, and Waters (2012) describe changes occurring to all campus spaces, including new models of teaching and learning and virtual spaces. The case for student-centered learning is made by Kaput (2018), who describes learning that is individualized and acknowledges different learning styles. Lightweis (2013) examines student-centered K-12 teaching as a pathway to academic success in college, while Wright (2011) looks generally at student-centered learning, including faculty-student relationships and ways of implementing this approach.

Results and Discussion

The population for the study consisted of 71 public universities in the US, including the flagship "University of ..." and the land grant university that was created by the Morrill Act of 1862, if different. For example, in the state of Washington, the University of Washington is the flagship state university and Washington State University is the 1862 land grant, whereas the University of Illinois is both flagship and land grant. All are public institutions except for Cornell University, which is the only private land grant. California State University, Northridge was added to represent the very large California State University system. University websites were used to gather data on whether the university has a writing center and whether the writing center has a library location.

All 71 universities have a writing center, housed administratively in several places. In 20 institutions, the writing center is part of the academic success operation, in 19 it is found in a college such as arts and sciences, in another 19 in the English or rhetoric department, and with the remainder (13) found in areas such as the provost (academic affairs), teaching and learning, or undergraduate studies. There is no correlation in this data between the administrative home and the relationship with the library. Just under half (35) of the institutions have a writing

center location in the library. Sixteen institutions have a writing center whose only location is the library. Since none of the 35 writing centers located in the library are administered by the library, they are staffed by students or staff from academic success, the English department, the college of arts and sciences, an interdisciplinary writing and communication program, and so on. Many campus writing centers have been in existence for decades but may have been physically and administratively relocated as part of teaching enhancement, student success, and campus-wide written and oral communication programs.

All institutions offer virtual appointments, and because of the Covid-19 pandemic, some institutions currently offer only virtual appointments. That situation is not a part of this discussion.

Conclusion

This data shows that the trend of campus writing centers being located in academic libraries has become well-established and widespread, with some evidence of further collaboration on efforts such as information literacy. The brief investigation reported on here provides evidence that librarian's well-established collaboration with composition instructors for information literacy instruction has meant that writing center location and collaboration is a natural next step. The success of this collaboration also supports further organizational transformations for academic libraries. Libraries who have been willing to reduce the footprint of print collections were rewarded with the ability to use that space for new services and partnerships that are as much a part of the mission of libraries as collections.

Libraries were ready for the student-centered model of instruction. The library reference desk has always offered individualized instruction and reference desk staff are prepared for any question that appears. Services such as Ask Us and embedded librarians have gone further to focus on the individual needs of students and faculty, along with services such as appointments with a librarian for research assistance. Librarians can continue to be pioneers and leaders in student success and student-centered institutions if we continue to shift our focus from collections to a library that is focused on teaching and learning.

Further study on this topic could include other populations, such as liberal arts or community colleges. The degree of integration of writing and information literacy instruction, tutoring, and curricula is also worth deeper exploration and could be a natural next step for this research area. Zauha (2014) asks whether the library's relationship with the writing center is one of "[p]eaceful coexistence, détente, or active collaboration?" and states further that, if libraries ignore "the real opportunities for collaboration with writing centers, and by extension with other tutoring services on campus, we are missing a great way to breach the traditional boundaries of both the library and these services." Rethinking those "traditional boundaries" should be part of the ongoing transformation of both academic libraries and the institutions they are part of.

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Appendix

List of universities

Arizona State University
Auburn University
California State University Northridge
Clemson University
Colorado State University
Indiana University
Iowa State University
Kansas State University
Louisiana State University
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Michigan State University
Mississippi State University
Montana State University
New Mexico State University
North Carolina State University
North Dakota State University
Ohio State University
Oklahoma State University
Oregon State University
Pennsylvania State University
Purdue University
Rutgers University
South Dakota State University
State University of New York Buffalo
Texas A&M University
University of Alabama
University of Alaska
University of Arizona
University of Arkansas
University of California Berkeley
University of Colorado
University of Connecticut
University of Delaware
University of Florida
University of Georgia
University of Hawaii
University of Idaho
University of Illinois
University of Iowa
University of Kansas
University of Kentucky

University of Maine
University of Maryland
University of Massachusetts
University of Michigan
University of Minnesota
University of Mississippi
University of Missouri
University of Montana
University of Nebraska--Lincoln
University of Nevada--Reno
University of New Hampshire
University of New Mexico
University of North Carolina Chapel Hill
University of North Dakota
University of Oklahoma
University of Oregon
University of Pennsylvania
University of Rhode Island
University of South Carolina
University of South Dakota
University of Tennessee
University of Texas
University of Utah
University of Vermont
University of Virginia
Utah State University
Virginia Tech University
Washington State University