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Embedded Librarianship at Purdue University Libraries

Tucked in the northwest farmlands of Indiana in West Lafayette, Purdue University is recognized as one of the nation's leading science and mathematics research universities. Spring rainstorms and a packed agenda greeted the 2008–2010 ARL Diversity Scholars when we visited the libraries April 20–21, 2009. Purdue University staff, librarians, and Library Dean James Mullins planned an exceptional program of guided discussions, presentations, and tours of the campus libraries. The team also offered an inside view of the institution's libraries and a fresh vision for how librarians can place themselves in the daily workings of campus communities.

One of the first workshops scholars participated in was a session devoted to embedded librarianship. This is a relatively new model of service delivery for libraries on academic campuses that continues to gain momentum. Embedded librarianship is a way of providing information support to students and faculty in a range of locations, with an array of formats and through various relationships. David Shumaker, one of the leading thinkers behind embedded librarianship, explains that this model is "embedded" because the librarian becomes a member of the customer community rather than a service provider standing apart."

In "No Fixed Address: The Evolution of Outreach Library Services on University Campuses," Phyllis Rudin traces the history of library services moving beyond the physical confines of the library, from the liaison model, out-posting and roving reference, to the eventual development of the embedded librarian model. While Rudin articulates embedded librarianship primarily through liaison, out-posting, and roving features, she also hints at something more. Rudin quotes Barbara I. Dewey, who asserts, "embedding implies a more comprehensive integration of one group with another to the extent that the group seeking to integrate is experiencing and observing, as nearly as possible, the daily life of the primary group."

Martin Kesselman and Sarah Barbara Watstein elaborate on the various roles that embedded librarians might perform:

- They are on research teams.
- They are in academic departments.



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- They are co-instructors in the classroom and in the online classroom.
- They play a major leadership role in pushing an academic co-creator model
- for scholarship and scholarly communication.
- In special libraries, they are deployed into the specific research areas of the organization.
- Finally, embedded librarians are in virtual worlds, collaborating with researchers worldwide. Embedded librarians are not in support roles, peripheral to these environs. Embedded librarians are, instead, integral to these environs as key players on research and instructional teams.

Purdue librarians shared with ARL scholars their embedded experience and demonstrated how they have artfully implemented not only the practice, but also the philosophy, of this approach to library service. Librarians at Purdue have embraced a varied and nuanced interpretation of embedded librarianship to fully adopt their role as partners in research and learning processes. For example, Purdue librarians:

- are part of the Black Cultural Center, maintaining a satellite library and collection at the center;
- participate side-by-side with faculty and students in conducting research and developing projects;
- collaborate on grants and participate with faculty in co-writing academic articles;
- serve as team members developing marketing plans with students and faculty in the business and agriculture departments;
- work with specific courses throughout the semester to help guide students' research and information seeking; and





- support students in the development of multimedia projects in a computer commons located in the undergraduate library.

What struck me at Purdue is that embedded librarianship is not just a set of practices, a configuration of staff, or an instructional model, but a guiding approach to the role of the library at a research institution. Embedded librarianship is about dynamic thinking, and in this way the philosophy of embedded librarianship at Purdue carries beyond the classroom and research site. During our two-day visit we participated in a number of activities with Purdue librarians, including:

- tours of undergraduate and business libraries;
- discussion of new areas of academic librarianship, including fundraising and new technologies;
- testimony about the promotion and tenure process;
- discussion and tours of special collections and archives, including a presentation by a librarian that works, in part, as an oral historian;
- discussion of academic research and access points for librarians within the research process; and
- meeting with the Provost and the Dean of Libraries

The spirit of embedded librarianship carried throughout each of these opportunities. These tours and sessions exemplified how librarians can, as Schumaker suggests, act as “members of the community” rather than detached service providers.

While this far-reaching implementation of the embedded librarian model might leave one wondering if librarians suffer an identity crisis or a detrimental blurring of roles, the opposite seemed to be the case at Purdue. Dean Mullins and his team are able to make this model work precisely because their roles as librarians are well defined. Librarians participated in these projects and courses as librarians: they were there to act as professionals skilled in the organization, acquisition, and evaluation of information and as teachers and mentors in these processes.

In “Librarians as Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry into Professional Identity,” Scott Walter summarizes the many common stereotypes of librarians and links these misunderstandings to the difficulty librarians face as

instructors in academic settings. Walter presents Herbert S. White’s argument “that academic librarians will need to make an informed choice about which professional identity to embrace if they are to remain relevant.” Walter highlights the need for librarians to embrace their roles as professionals, whether as teachers, information organizers, or researchers. The Purdue Libraries model provides one example of how librarians can activate this “informed choice” in their work as members of research institutions.

The example presented to the ARL Diversity Scholars at Purdue illustrates that embedded librarianship is capable of strengthening the tie between communities and librarians and ensuring that the role of the librarian is maximized. Embedded librarianship can help us think creatively, make connections, and build relationships. Just as Purdue University librarians are embedded in the campus community, the ARL Diversity Scholars were given access to the generous staff and librarians, and extensive facilities, of the campus during our visit. Furthermore, just as the embedded philosophy is infused in the culture of the Purdue University Libraries, the wholeheartedness with which we were hosted is another example of Purdue’s commitment to these principles. Supporting emerging professionals is an important part of helping to build the field of librarianship, and together at Purdue we forged new relationships, explored creative approaches, and continued the ARL initiative’s commitment to building an innovative and reflective group of librarians at research institutions.

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