A Makerspace, Teaching Studio or Wellness Center? The Role of Libraries in College Innovation

By Jeffrey R. Young   Sep 26, 2019

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This article is part of the guide ***EdSurge Live: A Town-Hall Style Video Forum.***

Libraries have long been central to college campuses. In fact, one way colleges have measured their greatness has been to boast about the size of their library collections. (Harvard wins on that metric, with 18.9 million volumes. Yale is close behind at 15.2 million.)

But now that so many materials are digital, is a book count the best way to measure a library's impact? And how have libraries become central to new efforts to remake the college campus for the information age?

These were some of the questions discussed this week during the latest installment of EdSurge Live, our series of online discussions about big topics in higher education. Our guests were:

- Steven Bell, associate university librarian for research and instructional services at Temple University, which recently opened a glitzy new $175-million library on its campus.

- Emily Drabinski, critical pedagogy librarian at the Mina Rees Library at the Graduate Center, CUNY

Listen to the conversation below, or read a transcript of highlights, lightly edited for clarity.

EdSurge: So what is the best way to measure a college library's value these days? In this digital age I'm guessing it's not the number of books anymore.

Emily Drabinski: I don't know. But accumulation of wealth seems like a poor measure. Harvard and Yale are essentially hedge funds with some educational extracurriculars attached. I don't know how innovative I find that, or how compelling I find it. I guess my question would be: Why is it necessary to measure it?

A lot of us believe that the context in which we operate means that we can't take our inherent value as enough. But I wish I lived in a world where the value we provided was what our users said was valuable about us, which sometimes is just a bathroom and an outlet.

Steven Bell: We count things like books and how much money we pay for staff and investment, because that's what's easy to count. Those are the sorts of things that deans like to take to the top administrators so we can say, "This is how we compare to others." And this is something we grapple with quite a bit. How do we show our value?

I think one of the things we're trying to emphasize more are the stories that we can tell about how we're making a difference for academic departments, individual students and other academic support offices that we work with.

Colleges often face controversy when they renovate their libraries and move more books off-site to storage facilities and use the space for other needs. What are some innovative ways that people are using library spaces these days?

Bell: That's part of the dilemma that we face. If you want to have a library that's all books, and you have all your books on site, that's fantastic. In the case of our library, we would have probably had to spend another $50 or $70 million to build the building big enough so that we could store two or three million books on-site, and plus have all the space that we wanted. So we had to make some really tough decisions, and we certainly did consult our community members to see what their thoughts were.

We tried to do a blended approach. We have a remote storage site that's not far away, and we have our oldest materials that very rarely get requested. So that seems like a fairly safe way to handle those materials. But in the building itself, we do have an automated storage and [robotic] retrieval system that holds up to about 1.5 million books, but it compresses them into this space that's 10 times less than what you would need if you had even compact shelving for all those books.

The thing that it enabled us to have was a much more expanded scholar studio for our makerspace, our innovation center, our virtual reality studio and visualization studio. And it allowed us to have a new graduate and faculty space that they never had before.

Drabinski: Everything you're describing, Steven, sounds amazing. But when I think about having to do that in a CUNY system—we're dealing with incredible austerity. It's so dependent on resources and options and opportunities that are so far outside of your control.

Bell: And when it comes to these kinds of innovations, what is really challenging for the library right now is that we need to keep a foot in the past, and part of ourselves in the present, and thinking ahead to the future. Everybody who's here now thinks the building is for them. And that's true to a certain extent. But the buildings are also for students three generations from now. This building is going to be here 75 or 100 years from now.

So if you built the kind of infrastructure that people want right now, it's probably not going to work very well for people in the future. For example, a lot of students are coming in and saying, "Where are the desktop computers?" There's no computer lab in this building. We're going with a total laptop share system that's like a bike share for laptop computers and portable batteries.

We'll have kiosks in most of the academic buildings on campus, plus the library. So the idea is you don't have to bring your laptop to campus—although many students do—but you can borrow one at any kiosk, and return it to any kiosk on campus. The library is the first [place] at Temple to implement this type of system. If we had to spend enormous amounts of money to put in the data jacks and electrical wiring for hardwire desktop computers, do we really think that students 20 or 30 years from now are going to be using them?

[Audience question] Many university college students are experiencing significant amounts of anxiety. Do you see libraries as having an important role in designing spaces for cultivating and enhancing student wellness? Examples would be low- or no-tech study areas, mindfulness spaces, et cetera.

Bell: We do know that many of our students are suffering from mental-health issues, anxiety and stress. [I see that someone in the chat] is mentioning having therapy, petting zoos, stress relief sessions, special spaces for mindfulness. I see plenty of examples across the academic library world where we're doing that.

At Temple, we have wellness centers, a crisis team and all those sort of things. But maybe this is something that we want to try. But if we do, it's a trade-off: we can't hire a librarian, or there might be other things we can't do. That's always a tough call, but maybe we should experiment.

Drabinski: Having space where people can sit and do their work is important and useful. But what's causing that anxiety? Are there other broader-scale [policy] interventions that we could be participating in that would reduce some of that anxiety? [Perhaps we could also focus on] things like working for fully-funded higher education, working for full-time, not [adjunct] faculty, so that students are able to reach their professors.

This is an excerpt of the full discussion, which also explores open-education resources, what to do about students who don’t want to go to a library and other related topics. You can listen to the entire conversation here***.***

Keith Curry Lance

"Last Lecture" Remarks about the

Current Status and Future of School Librarianship and School Library Research

I was very flattered to receive an email from David Loertscher in May 2019, asking me to share some thoughts about the current status and future of school librarianship and school library research. As I am not, and never have been, a practicing school librarian, the only reason I could possibly merit what they are calling "luminary" status is by having been involved in so many school library impact studies since the 1990s. Nobody could have been more surprised than I was that the 1992/93 study, The Impact of School Library Media Centers on Academic Achievement—aka The Colorado Study—would launch a new, long-running line of quantitative research about school libraries and standards-based test results.

As most well-informed on the topic know, I was not doing anything original. I just happened to come along in the right place, Colorado, and at the right time, the 1990s, to have the opportunity to fulfill, as best I could, a vision articulated by Professor Mary Gaver of Rutgers. If she had lived and worked in an era that included desktop computers with high-powered statistical software as well as ubiquitous state-mandated, standards-based testing, I'm sure she would have done the research herself. Ironically, while most of us understand the profound limits of standards-based testing—not to mention the devastating toll it has taken on U.S. public education—it is a simple fact that a quarter-century of impact studies would not, and could not, have happened had it not been for the ubiquity of such testing and the high stakes put on their results. Except for their ubiquity, the data necessary for the research would not have existed. Except for the high stakes, nobody would have cared enough to bother funding research like ours.

It did not take me and my colleagues long to figure out why so many folks were clamoring to have us conduct replications of the Colorado study in their states. As human nature dictates, everyone likes to think their situation, their community, their state is unique. Something that might have been found to be true in one state might or might not be true in another state. Thus, many felt a need for a study that related the contributions of school libraries and librarians to their state's test results.

Before going any further, I want to acknowledge another reality: my colleagues and I were not the only people conducting such research. We've certainly done more such studies than anyone else; but, others have contributed substantially to this line of research, and many of them have improved upon our work—mostly, those who spent less time tooting their own horns about it. So, know that I acknowledge and appreciate that, while we may have been the most prolific research team devoted to this topic, we were, and are, by no means the only one.

Another peculiarity of the series of impact studies concerned the fact that we—first a team based in a unique library research center at a state library agency, later a team of private consultants—were the ones conducting them. Why, one could be forgiven for wondering, weren't those studies being conducted by library and information science scholars at universities that confer ALA-MLS degrees? I think there are two answers to that question. At the time and perhaps still today, LIS programs, generally speaking, did not, and still don't, employee as faculty many people with advanced quantitative research skills. Surely, there have always been some; but, relative to other fields, such as education research and public administration, surprisingly few. While it is surely an over-simplification, I have joked for years that I built a career on being a number person in a profession full of word people. Another very important factor, I believe, was the funding available for such research. It took 3 years and 3 attempts to obtain funding from the U.S. Department of Education for the first Colorado study. Almost all of the other impact studies in which I was involved were funded by state library agencies, either directly or via grants to, or contracts with, statewide library or education organizations. To put it mildly, they were not big-budget projects, particularly compared to what it would have cost for qualified academics to do them via their institutions. You see, there is this little thing called "indirect cost." Practically all federal grants, whether for research or anything else, involve handing over a substantial percentage of a project's funding to the sponsoring institution. Indirect cost is rationalized as helping to pay for the university's overhead—the involved faculty member's office space, computer and Internet access, office supplies, postage, phone bill, etc. Whether or not you buy that rationale is immaterial; the bottom line is that it bleeds off a big chunk of the available funding for something other than the project at hand. My best guess is that very few academics, even if they did feel qualified to undertake such research, could have afforded to be as generous with their time as they would have had to be, given what little would be left of a modest research grant after paying indirect cost. In short, the only reason so many state impact studies were conducted is because we were able to conduct them on a relative shoestring.

Perhaps you have wondered why someone hasn't done a national school library impact study. The answer is a simple one. There is no available data about national testing results with which to assess student achievement across state lines. If you know about the National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP, tests, you may question this claim. Permit me to explain. Young and innocent as I was at the outset of my involvement in this research, a national study using NAEP data seemed the obvious way to go. One study, covering the whole nation all at once. Easy-peasy; mission accomplished. No. Believe it or not, when I contacted the National Center for Education Statistics back in the late 1980s, when our first study was being conceived, I was surprised to learn that, in fact, district level results, never mind school level ones, on the NAEP tests were not available to researchers like me. Not under any circumstances. Thinking aloud, after confirming that such data did exist, I suggested, with regret, that I would have to take the more laborious route of surveying individual schools and asking them to report their local NAEP results to me. To my shock and consternation, the person on the other end of the line notified me, in no uncertain terms, that such a move would be subject to prosecution. So, believe it or not, that's why there has been no national study of school library impact based on NAEP scores—at least, involving my team. Devoted as we are to this research, we were not willing to risk fine or imprisonment for it. Besides, it probably never would have worked to compile the data in such an ad hoc way, as we would have had no way of assessing the accuracy of the reports.

I doubt there is anyone, particularly in academic circles, who will disagree with my opinion that quite enough school library impact studies replicating and improving upon the work we began in Colorado have been done. Of late, in fact, some have expressed concern that the extant school library impact studies do not meet the supposed "gold standard" of education research, which is large-scale, controlled, randomized trials, or CRTs. Everyone who knows anything about the terms correlation and causation knows that they mean different things: all correlation does not reflect causation, though all causation involves correlation.

There's just one problem with the notion that only one methodology is appropriate for all research questions. It isn't true. Simply put, it is not possible, practically speaking, to conduct a true CRT, a controlled randomized trial, to prove indisputably the impact of school libraries and librarians. Simply having a librarian or not having a librarian, or a librarian with a certain skill set, or a librarian using a certain pedagogy—even if it could be controlled randomly—is never going to be a fair test of the impact of a school librarian or what they bring to the job. It's not the same thing as taking or not taking a purple pill. A school librarian or a school library program is not a distinct, autonomous, self-contained thing apart from the rest of a school; to succeed, it must be part-and-parcel of a school's culture. Having or not having a librarian is unlikely to matter if a school's schedule does not accommodate their work with students and teachers. Having or not having a librarian is unlikely to matter if a school's principal does not mandate, create, and sustain an inquiry-based teaching and learning environment in which a school librarian's contributions can be made effectively. The impossibility of conducting a meaningful CRT is the reason we conducted the kind of studies we did. They were not, as they are often unfairly and inaccurately characterized, purely correlational. They also involved numerous control variables, particularly poverty, to take into account alternative causes that might have explained away school library impact. And, in later years, we supplemented our quantitative research with qualitative assessments to determine if school administrators, teachers, and librarians themselves associated library contributions with test results. An interesting note about those assessments is that librarians—who one might have thought would over-estimate their own value—in fact were quite modest. Generally, teachers rated the librarian's contributions more highly than the librarian did, and, in turn, administrators rated the librarian's contributions more highly than teachers did.

Thinking in "last lecture" terms, there are a few other observations I would like to share with the school library community. I think of these as my "canary in the coal mine" thoughts:

First and foremost, it is time to realize the extent to which school librarians are truly an endangered species—at least, the kind of school librarians which so many seem to advocate for. National Center for Education Statistics data indicate that almost 20 percent of librarian FTEs disappeared between the Great Recession and the 2015-16 school year—that's less than a decade—and it's not even counting the jobs lost between the turn of the millennium and the recession, most of the previous decade. The decline continues; it is not—as some would like to think—rebounding. Undoubtedly, the meager data

we have is far from perfect. Most of its imperfections, however, suggest that the counts we have exaggerate the number of jobs that remain. The situations in which the NCES counts are known to be depressed are exceptions and outliers.

It's time to ask difficult questions about why jobs are being lost in such alarming numbers. As the saying goes, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, and expecting different results. For some time, I have been concerned about what usually seems to pass for advocacy. It hasn't seemed to make a lot of difference, at least most of the time. Advocacy efforts seem to kick into high gear whenever decision-makers announce that librarian jobs are going to be cut or at least cut back. To my mind, this is not the point when advocacy should begin. Indeed, it is the surest sign that, if any advocacy had been being done leading up to such an announcement, it was a failed effort. If advocacy had been done correctly and successfully, job cuts would never have been suggested. Anything that happens after such an announcement isn't advocacy, it's damage control. By definition, advocacy should be preventative in nature.

To the question--Why are school administrators choosing to cut or cut back school librarian jobs?—there is a simple answer: because they can. Until the mid 1980s, school librarians were mandated by the federal government. Over the next couple of decades, other mandates for the positions coming from state governments and accrediting agencies were also dropped. Since that time, we have been in an era of site-based management. State legislators and education officials at higher levels are still inclined to leave as many decisions as possible to local school boards, superintendents, and principals. And that is just the sharp tip of the iceberg.

We must face the true circumstances of school librarians today. Actually, not just those of librarians, but of everyone who works in public education. Over the past generation, public education has been restructured radically by a variety of powerful forces. Testing, the Internet, and the branding of online learning platforms as well as other corporate incursions have constrained severely what librarians—or anybody else—can do in a school environment. The time available for instruction is focused on what is tested almost exclusively. Those time constraints are exacerbated by the increasingly overwhelming ratios of students to teachers, students to librarians, and teachers to librarians. The school library establishment is still encouraging librarians to serve as collaborators with classroom teachers, despite the fact that the national ratio is about 75 teachers per librarian. In a few states, that ratio exceeds 100, 200, and 300 teachers per librarian. Librarians are also encouraged to be teachers of information literacy skills to students, despite the fact that the national ratio is about 1,200 students per librarian. In a few states, that ratio exceeds 2,000 students per librarian. For today's librarians to fulfill these collaborative and instructional roles is, for far too many, impossible in terms of both time and logistics. It is an achievement to pursue those kinds of activities at pilot project scale. As collaboration with teachers and instruction of students by librarians have been advocated, they are, by definition, high-touch activities. If there is a future in defining successful school librarianship in terms of these kinds of activities, they will have to be pursued in a different way.

When advocating for school librarians or trying to come to the rescue of those whose jobs are threatened, our messaging continues to promote unrealistic expectations about what is possible. Insofar as this is true, I believe school administrators are now “onto” us. They know that, all too often, we are promising more than librarians can possibly deliver under real-world conditions. Indeed, we are setting up librarians to fail, if they are fortunate enough to get the opportunity to try.

Advocates promote school librarians as people who plant the seeds for a lifelong love of reading, and who teach students how to think critically about information, to use a variety of resources on a topic, to use technology to share information, to assess the credibility of information sources, to collaborate with each other as inquiring, self-directed learners, and to be ethical and responsible digital citizens. The advocate’s position is, if you don’t have a school librarian, students aren’t going to be taught these important skills. Given the data we have, it seems obvious that school decision-makers must not buy this argument anymore. Perhaps some of them never did. English and reading teachers can foster the love of reading. Technology teachers can instruct students about how to use technology and be good digital citizens. And all kinds of teachers can contribute to teaching students about critical thinking and collaborative learning. Surely, school library advocates are true believers that certified school librarians can teach these skills best; but, there is little evidence in many states and districts that advocates have persuaded decision-makers to agree with them. We need a far more compelling case about what constitutes the unique contribution that can be made by a school librarian.

There is little evidence of genuine dialog between the school library establishment and the education establishment. Education decision-makers must make Solomon-like choices every year. It’s not just a matter of deciding to fund what they think is effective and defund what they think is not. In too many schools, principals face the necessity of cutting staff, knowing that whatever jobs they cut will disadvantage students and their teachers and, most likely, increase achievement gaps. The resources to support everything that is needed, everyone who can make a positive contribution, simply are not there.

And all the while, the proportions of districts and schools in which students and teachers have no experience of a school librarian at any school level continue to grow. How do we advocate for school libraries in the thousands of districts and tens of thousands of schools and for the millions of students who no longer have them—indeed, may never have had them?

What can school library advocates do in the face of such an overwhelmingly dystopian environment? I only see one hopeful option. We must face fully present reality, and somehow come to grips with its implications for the future.

What will that involve? Several existential questions need to be asked urgently to learn what is really happening behind the limited data we have:

1. How many jobs are truly being lost, and how many are changing beyond recognition, perhaps being combined with other positions, and reported differently as a result?
2. To what extent is school librarianship not so much declining as evolving into something else—or, more likely, multiple something-elses?
3. What is happening with students and their teachers in schools and districts where there are no longer school librarians? Is all of the work librarians claimed as uniquely their own truly not being done by anyone? Or, more likely, are various parts of it being done by others, or by some newly configured position no longer viewed as a school librarian?
4. What are the backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of decision-makers responsible for setting their schools and districts on these “brave new world” courses? How have those factors shaped and directed the evolution of school librarianship, if in fact that is what is going on?
5. And finally, what is the future of school librarianship going to look like? Can we ascertain enough about how it is changing for LIS programs, state library and education agencies, and school library advocates to re-tool themselves and re-focus their efforts sufficiently to equip the next generation school librarians or whatever their successors may be called?

In my opinion, it is probably a good thing that we are on the threshold of a new generation of school library leadership in the U.S. The field in which so many of us have worked for the past three to five decades is facing seismic, structural changes that will likely result in a profession very different in size, shape, and character than we have known. And none of this has happened, or is happening, in isolation. We are not a world unto ourselves. They are consequences of the whole public education environment being reshaped in ways that surviving librarians and their successors will have to cope with.

Actually, I hope this is more of a penultimate lecture than a last one. My colleague and fellow luminary Debra Kachel and I have designed a major study to tackle the above questions, and I believe both of us would like that project to be our professional swan songs. A great transition is now well underway, and, as there is shockingly little data about school libraries and librarians, the field is at a tremendous disadvantage to understand, let alone cope, with it. Much research needs to be done simply to understand present realities and foreseeable trends. Deb and I and the stellar team we have put together can answer such questions, and I believe the perspectives we bring to that work are valuable. Most assuredly, though, it will be for the next generation of school library leaders to decide how to act on what we learn.

Stay tuned. We aren’t quite done yet!