Beyond Typical Library Partnerships: Intersecting with the City

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Abstract

This essay is adapted from a lightning-talk presentation given at the most recent annual conference of The Workshop for Instruction in Library Use (WILU), held at the University of British Columbia, May 30-June 1, 2016. The conference theme was *Intersections*. The presentation and essay highlight the emerging library partnerships between Laurentian University's McEwen School of Architecture Library and various groups in downtown Sudbury, Ontario that are leading to expanded services and positive community engagement.

Keywords

Library partnerships, Workshop for Instruction in Library Use (WILU), architecture, architecture school, community engagement

Background and Context

As the embedded librarian for Laurentian University's new McEwen School of Architecture in downtown Sudbury, Ontario—a ten-minute drive from the main university campus—I have been well positioned to develop library partnerships with various groups in the city. These partnerships energize and extend information literacy and enrich teaching and learning.

“It Takes a Village”

Not unlike the inception of many academic libraries, the school's founding Director and several faculty members donated titles from their respective personal libraries, as a foundation on which to build the nascent architecture collection. Likewise, in conjunction with the school's grand opening in 2013, community members, including professional architects, donated architectural, urban planning, and fine arts materials. And while donations can be the bane of many librarians' existence, in this instance they were welcomed. This gesture has built goodwill and directly benefits students and faculty.

Sarjeant-Jenkins and Walker's (2011) study shows a surprising dearth of partnerships between public and academic libraries in Canada. This has not been my experience,

perhaps in part because I am currently serving a second consecutive term on the Board of the Greater Sudbury Public Library and I recognize the benefits of cooperation.

Fortuitously, the McEwen School of Architecture is a five-minute walk from the central public library. The public library staff annually come to the school and stage a “Pop-up Library” for each first-year class, highlighting aspects of the public library’s collections and services that might capture the imagination of design students (including e-zines like *Dwell* or a makerspace with a 3D printer) and providing the opportunity to sign up for a public library card. The central public library’s Mary C. Shantz Local History and Maps Collections (including historical, satellite, planning, and zoning maps) have been particularly useful. And while the Laurentian University Archives on the main campus houses pertinent historical materials, the specialized collections at the public library, its vicinity to the school, and its long hours of operation are attractive to busy design students.

The city’s Planning Services have informally partnered with the School, and, indirectly, with the architecture library. Last year, a faculty colleague who was writing the syllabus for an Architecture & Ecology course met with the GIS Librarian from the main university library and me (as Architecture Librarian) for an information gathering session at City Hall with city planners and GIS staff. City staff shared valuable resource information and personnel leads relevant to the course, including local ecological approaches to city planning and the development of sustainable neighborhoods, and an overview of the city’s GIS, Surveys, and Mapping services. Stemming from this discussion, staff members from the Coalition for a Livable Sudbury and the District Health Unit, as well as the GIS Librarian, were invited to speak to the class, enriching content. Subsequently, I have developed a network of city planners whom I can contact for research purposes and who can guide me in the acquisition of key local planning documents to make available through the architecture library.

The Sudbury Art Gallery, located steps from downtown, has been a willing partner. Last year, as the school’s Director developed a syllabus for the delivery of a Canadian Art & Architecture course, I contacted staff at the gallery and asked if our students could use their fine arts library collection. Not only did they freely welcome our students, they allowed me to borrow materials of select artists from the collection and provide access to these materials through the architecture library, extending our fine arts collection during the winter semester.

The mandate for Laurentian University’s McEwen School of Architecture is to be bilingual (French and English), and tricultural (i.e., English-Canadian, Franco-Ontarian, and First Nations). The architecture library supports this mandate by purchasing English, French, and Indigenous materials relevant to the school’s curriculum. With regard to the local Indigenous population, author Saarinen (2013) notes in his publication *From Meteorite Impact to Constellation City* that “there are approximately twenty reserves situated within 300 kilometers of Sudbury’s radius” (234).

The school’s commitment to draw on Indigenous cultures locally and beyond, particularly in relation to the design of contemporary buildings, is realized, in part, by

Indigenous architecture faculty and local First Nations Elders, the latter of whom circulate through the design studios and the library several days each week. As a learning community, we are positively influenced by their participatory presence, the ideas related to material culture that are raised, and the sustainable designs that evolve.

For example, half of our second-year students designed, built, and launched a birch bark canoe. This was a design-build studio project guided by Anishnabe craftsman Marcel Labelle. As personal relationships develop and knowledge deepens the library is positioned not simply as a repository for collections but as a catalyst for discovery and creation, especially as the Indigenous faculty and Elders share their collective wisdom, stories and crafts within the school, and beginning this fall, in a new architecture library.

Conclusion: Broader Implications and Assessment

Given that I am currently the only librarian serving the needs of an ever-growing student and faculty population, it makes sense to reach out and make meaningful connections with like-minded individuals and groups in the city's downtown core. My strategies for partnership are not groundbreaking, but rather reflect natural synergies within Sudbury based on location, common or intersecting missions, and the general goodwill of citizens, staff, and businesses (particularly architectural firms).

Those with whom I partner understand that, while the initial investment of time, expertise, and material donations directly benefit the library and its users, in the long term the community should reap the benefits of the students' range of knowledge as they contribute to the community as designers and professional architects. I recognize that the subject-discipline of architecture lends itself well to partnerships in the city where there are ongoing discussions about the built environment, but I am confident that this library partnership model could be adapted successfully in other academic libraries and with other disciplines, such as business.

How might I further or enhance partnerships in the coming year? I would like to

- Continue to foster the partnerships that I currently have, not stretching myself too thin.
- Given the bilingual nature of our program, seek out relevant French partnerships.
- Employ social media in some capacity, highlighting the effectiveness of these partnerships.

References

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