

# Foreword

Academic librarians (as well as librarians of all types) are premier learners. We learn in our daily work through interactions with students, faculty, administrators, and each other. We also learn from our collections, be they print, electronic, visual, or audio. In recognizing that learning, as well as imparting knowledge, is key to successful higher education, librarians have been well ahead of the curve.

Sarah Pedersen's *Learning Communities and the Academic Library* provides a history and analysis of the learning community movement in higher education and examples of academic librarians' involvement in learning communities ranging from structured, credit courses to more informal arrangements within courses. The author also provides an in-depth examination of information literacy teaching at The Evergreen State College, which gives a fascinating insight into Evergreen's curricular work.

This book is a much needed addition to the thinking about learning communities and information literacy initiatives that will help academic librarians understand the potential impact of learning communities on services and collections. That potential is great with opportunities for the learning community movement and values to help academic librarians as we interact with students, faculty, and each other in new and focused ways.

The idea of the learning community, taken in a broad sense, is a powerful concept (Reichel 2001). It helps librarians and other teachers understand the higher education shift in emphasis from teaching to learning. It also encompasses the idea that learning is a process that is strengthened when learners understand their own learning styles. Learning as a process is fundamental to libraries with their role in sharing ideas, providing information and data, and preserving knowledge for the long term. Librarians are also essential in helping students evaluate information by deciphering what sources are unbiased, valid, and based on expertise.

In working with students today, librarians are in the front lines of facing the challenge of helping students accept that learning is not just a quick and easy process. In today's fast-paced, ever changing technological world, students believe that everything, including background for the longest research project, can be found and assimilated in fifteen minutes. Like other faculty, librarians have the unenviable task of helping students realize that it takes time, thought, analysis, creativity, and just plain hard work to author a significant paper or website.

The focus on students that the learning community idea emphasizes is crucial. This approach also helps academic librarians in their collaboration with faculty on campus. Learning communities give librarians an opportunity to collaborate with faculty in the development of the curriculum, in design of assignments, and in encouraging and supporting interdisciplinary teaching and research. As faculty move from their traditional roles as experts to facilitators of learning, the library and librarians take on renewed importance. In the past, many faculty looked to the library only for their own or their graduate students' research needs; now, faculty are also likely to look to the library for models of using technology and experiential learning.

Librarians are creators of learning environments, physical and virtual. In the past, the library's study areas centered on individual reflection and learning. In the last few years, a new emphasis has been put on collaborative spaces in the form of group study rooms, information commons, and furniture geared to group use of computers and other resources. The library building has evolved into a user- and service-oriented space which provides for individual and collaborative learning. Librarians have also created virtual environments with online catalogs and web sites that encourage exploration and learning. The learning environments created by academic librarians, both physical and virtual, provide intellectual hubs for the campus.

The concepts and values promoted by the learning community movement apply well to academic libraries as organizations. We know that there has to be continuous learning in our work or we would have been buried long ago by computers and other technology. Staff development for all personnel in the library—faculty, staff, and student assistants—is crucial to meet the needs of today's students, faculty, and administrators. Learning community values also allow all of us in the library to recognize that we do not know everything, but that we can learn. The learning community that librarians become part of to benefit students also can define how we interact with faculty, administrators, and each other.

Pedersen's monograph will be useful to academic librarians in every aspect of our work. The understanding of the learning community movement and the examples of how academic librarians have integrated their educational role with learning communities are essential for understanding the role of academic libraries in higher education.

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