

## Relational Librarianship @ Your Library

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In his *Atlas of New Librarianship*, R. David Lankes quotes librarian Jessamyn West saying, “When people have an information need, they’ll always ask people they know before they ask a librarian. The trick is making sure that librarians are some of the people they know.”<sup>1</sup> We believe that really getting to know the people in our communities — students, faculty, staff, and visitors — and building relationships with them are key components to their success in the library.

Here, we’ll offer some examples of what this “relational librarianship” looks like in our libraries (the Drew University Special Collections and Archives and the Vanderbilt University Divinity Library), and then open the floor to hear how you all build relationships with your communities.

### STUDENTS

At Vanderbilt, we have a “personal librarian” program, based on Yale’s program, where each member of the library staff is matched with a group of incoming students, makes contact with each of the students individually, and meets with them to introduce them to the library. In this way, each student’s personal librarian becomes a familiar face — an actual person they know, whom they can visit or email when they have a question.

At Drew, we make sure our special collections area is welcoming and inviting. It’s important that students feel comfortable in order to dispel “archival anxiety,” and understand that the library is *their space*. Harsh rules and signage tend to keep students away, whereas flexibility and hospitality encourage involvement.

In both libraries, we find that hiring student employees and getting to know them personally results in forming additional liaisons to our communities. Students who learn the library well and have positive experiences with librarians become invaluable advocates and evangelists for the library.

### FACULTY

In collaboration with the scholarly communication team at Vanderbilt, the Divinity Library constructed faculty bibliographies toward the purpose of developing the institutional repository. This work had the additional benefit of making us more closely acquainted with the work of each faculty member, and establishing lines of communication with them. Looking at the faculty’s published work helped us get a clear picture of their research, which will help us to build our collection more effectively and better serve their information needs.

The special collections staff at Drew surveys the upcoming semester’s course offerings during registration each semester and identifies courses with subject matter that correlates with artifacts in the special collections. We then contact each faculty member with a personalized email inviting them to consider using our collections for

their course and offering to host their class at the Archive Center. We provide a session on the basics of archival research, bring a showcase of relevant materials for the course out of the vault, and encourage the faculty to speak to course projects while the archival materials are available for viewing.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DISCUSSION**

Here are some of the ideas that were shared by those gathered about how they get involved in their communities and how you might also create relationships that will foster engagement with the library:

- Auditing classes
- Social media
- Working with faculty to incorporate library collections into coursework
- Valuing work-study student employees
- Personal librarian programs (weekly email with research tips)
- Attending on-campus events
- Library open house
- Making library space hospitable
- Serving as point-person for LMS
- Tech training clinics
- Involvement with faculty syllabus and curriculum creation
- Informal conversations
- Office hours in common areas
- Game nights and events (Humans vs Zombies, Ghost Story Night, dog therapy)
- Librarians working the circulation desk
- Customer service training for all staff

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Relationships are hardly programmable. They are formed by actual people putting in the time and work to get to know each other and create a safe and welcoming environment in which the work of asking questions and pursuing learning can take place. This challenge is ultimately worth it because it makes for more capable researchers, more relevant collections, and an overall better academic atmosphere. We thank you for the ideas you've shared, and hope that these and the ones offered in our experiences might inspire you and encourage you to work toward a culture of relational librarianship in your library.

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### **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 83.