



*Column: Innovation in Libraries*

## Creating Space for Equitable Academic and School Librarian Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

Though both school and academic librarians are information science professionals tasked with teaching and supporting information literacy on their campuses, biases inherent in educational institutions create a hierarchy between the two groups. This divide creates inequity in partnerships. Using Tamarack Institute's Collaboration Spectrum Tool (2017) we seek more precise language to describe these partnerships to create conversations as equal colleagues rather than through the divide of secondary and higher education. As the outreach and education librarian tasked with building relationships with students and educators in our local K12 schools, we hope to reimagine our relationship with school librarians in order to strengthen libraries at all levels and support students in becoming proficient in information competency skills.

### KEYWORDS

School librarians, academic librarians, college school cooperation

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For both academic and school librarians, a dedication to improving all students' information literacy skills is a shared objective. Created by Islam and Murno (2006, p. 495), the crosswalk of the *Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education*<sup>1</sup> and the *American Association of School Librarians (AASL) National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*<sup>2</sup> exemplifies how both sets of librarians share the mission to help students develop information literacy skills. We also share many obstacles in fulfilling these instructional goals such lack of understanding of our role in instruction and limited resources for deeper collaboration with faculty. Academic librarians debate one-shots versus scaffolded lessons or credit bearing standalone courses just as school librarians debate fixed or flexible scheduling. Academic and school librarians must engage in outreach to build stronger collaborations with faculty, bring expertise to collection development, and balance best practices of librarianship with the needs and information seeking preferences for our patrons.

Despite these common objectives, there are rarely forums for academic and school librarians to meet and share. One exception is academic studies of school libraries, which are often initiated by academic librarians. In these studies, the relationship is often defined, consciously or unconsciously, by the systemic biases in education that prioritize the expertise of post-secondary educators over that of K12 educators, including school librarians. We invite academic librarians to join us in examining our assumptions about the skills and needs of school librarians so that we may approach collaboration from a place of respect for our shared expertise to create equitable partnerships.

## Background

As the new education librarian and the new outreach librarian at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), we, Lisa Cheby and Brianna Limas respectively, worked together to re-imagine the University Library's K12 outreach and school partnerships throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Lisa also supported Brianna in resuming library instruction services for Northridge Academy High School (NAHS), a high school built as a partner school to our university. In 2002, a shared use agreement between LAUSD and CSUN established a unique educational partnership that created pathways for innovative collaboration and shared resource use.

Prior to the program suspension necessitated by COVID-19, CSUN Library's outreach with NAHS had two main elements: 9th grade tours of the University Library, and 10th grade

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<sup>1</sup> Association of College and Research Libraries. (2000). *Information literacy competency standards for higher education*. American Library Association. <https://alair.ala.org/items/294803b6-2521-4a96-a044-96976239e3fb>

<sup>2</sup> American Association of School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology. (1998). *Information literacy standards for student learning: Standards and indicators*. In, *Information power: Building partnerships for learning*. American Library Association.

database and research instruction administered by a CSUN librarian. The teacher librarian at NAHS was also new and had limited experience partnering with CSUN librarians. After the sessions were delivered, we reevaluated this partnership to increase effectiveness and sustainability.

In researching other models, we found there was an effort at CSUN 10 years earlier to create a 9–12 collaborative information literacy instructional unit with NAHS (Martin et al., 2012). In the end the program did not continue due to lack of consistency in personnel at the high school, limited resources for the time and labor deep collaboration requires, and conflicts in how each institution was able to prioritize implementing the program. This experience was not unique in our analysis of other efforts to create collaborations between academic and school librarians. Even as academic librarians framed their work with school librarians as collaborations, in the discussion of their collaborations they acknowledge that the study designs need to create more space for leadership from school librarians over the schedules and priorities of academic librarians (Jackson & Hansen, 2006; Martin et al., 2012). Angell & Tewell (2013) write about a successful program between an International Baccalaureate Program at a Yonkers High School and librarians at Sarah Lawrence College. Their success is marked by a clear awareness of the time and labor investment required, and a willingness by the college library to commit that time and labor. In that commitment, adequate time for shared planning and goal setting with librarians, faculty, and administration from both institutions was incorporated into the process, contributing to a more equitable and, consequently, more successful partnership. This is consistent with Burhanna's (2008) article proposing academic librarians engage in a critical rethinking of how and why we partner with school librarians, focusing on how such partnerships support and extend what school librarians are doing and promote the university library mission, rather than with a mentality of needing to "fix" school library programs.

### **Theoretical Framing**

In analyzing our experience and research on school and academic librarian partnerships, we found a need to better define these working partnerships to be able to move towards more equitable work with school librarians. In discussing how to revise the instruction provided in 2022–23 academic year, Lisa, who came to academic librarianship through school librarianship, wanted to explore building capacity for library instruction in the high school through professional development rather than duplicating instruction provided by the school librarian. Brianna, as the outreach librarian, wanted to build on CSUN Library's existing K12 outreach program and evaluate how these sessions fit into a larger strategy for library engagement and information literacy instruction. Neither of us were comfortable with templates that reinforced the hierarchical system in education that privileges academia over the training and experience of K12 educators. Rather, we want to consider how to create more meaningful relations with NAHS and other local K12 schools and to build more equitable partnerships with school librarians in our community.

In a 2020 study of collaboration and librarianship, Saunders and Corning posit that collaboration has been studied in-depth in various fields and is purported to be a core competency within library and information science, but the complexities of collaboration can be overlooked. In our case, as in the other studies mentioned above, we realized that we were using collaboration as a catchall term for any sort of interaction between the University Library and local schools or groups of educators. Tamarack Institute's *Collaboration Spectrum Tool* (2017) identifies seven levels of working relationships: compete, co-exist, communicate, cooperate, coordinate, collaborate, and integrate. Potential collaborators should assess expectations for where on this spectrum their interaction will fall and make sure all participants share expectations and choose the most appropriate working relationship for the need. For research projects or studies involving school and academic librarians, this framework could mitigate weaknesses seen in studies involving partnerships between school and academic librarians by generating discussion to clarify expectations and abilities to commit to time and labor. This could lead to more equitable and productive partnerships from design to publishing.

In using this to reflect on our work with NAHS, we were clearly at the cooperate level of collaboration where we provided instruction through discrete sessions. We feel our campus, in having a partnership with the high school, imagines there to be coordination and collaboration, maybe even integration. There are several questions we need now to consider. Should we strive to move from cooperation to the "longer term interaction" with shared goals and decision making that defines collaboration on the Tamarack spectrum? If that is not realistic, where in this spectrum is the best fit for the student needs and University Library goals in our partnership with NAHS? In our partnerships with supporting educators in the community, is collaboration possible or needed when communication and cooperation might be the most realistic and beneficial use of the University Library's resources and sufficient to meet the professional development needs of educators? Likewise, in working with school librarians, using more precise language to define our partnerships prompts us as academic librarians to resist the hierarchical relationships that often define how higher education perceives and interacts with our K12 colleagues.

### **Impact on Our Practice**

After resuming CSUN Library's K12 outreach in the 2022–23 school year, it became clear that our efforts would be better served by strategically adapting the program to strengthen our relationships with K12 teacher librarians and educators. One key shift was reconfiguring the University Library's Advanced Placement (AP) Book Borrowing Program, a stand-alone element of K12 outreach, into the High School Partnership Program (HSPP), to be a more inclusive program providing book-borrowing privileges for any high school student with a signed permission slip. The HSPP centers students' school library as their primary resource, recognizing the school librarian as an equal in information science expertise while offering access to our print collections. When schools request a library tour or research workshop,

Brianna engages the requesting teacher, librarian, or program coordinator about students' needs and interests, class curriculum, and goals for the visit. These conversations create opportunities for coordination and assessing the appropriate level of collaboration.

Our research and conversations with teacher librarians have also revealed new areas for development and improvement. For example, through our interactions with teacher librarians in the LAUSD system, we learned that our local public high schools have no budget to plan field trips for their students, including visiting the CSUN Library. This new knowledge prompted the HSPP and K12 outreach program to obtain grant funding to subsidize bus rentals and substitute teacher coverage. Recent conversations with K12 educators are informing the development of new experiential learning activities that connect with school curricula. Additionally, ongoing conversations with the teacher librarian at NAHS have become a springboard for innovative information and media literacy instruction sessions. These K12-University educator collaborations have fostered a stronger outreach program that aligns with broader library and campus goals to engage and recruit future CSUN students while centering school libraries as partners to the college libraries.

In February 2024, we co-organized an event with the California School Library Association's (CSLA) Southern Region to host a workshop and lunch with school librarians, funded by the Dr. Karin Duran and Richard Nupoll Endowment. In our commitment to break down barriers between academic and school librarians, the CSUN librarians facilitated discussions around common points of concern as instructors of information literacy and library engagement. We used the information competence assignments from a first-year introductory course, U100, as a launching point for our discussion about expectations for first year college students, how we as school and academic librarians are teaching the needed skills, and how we can better coordinate instruction. We also shared from both the K12 and college environments what obstacles we face in preparing students for college level research. Next, we brainstormed what stories we need to share about our work in our libraries to facilitate conditions that better prepare students, with a particular focus on opportunities for joint advocacy or publishing. To facilitate this part of the discussion, Cassandra Jones, a Teacher Librarian in Redondo Beach, shared logistical considerations conducting and publishing studies within a K12 school district. This type of one-day workshop was such a success when hosted by St. Mary's College of California, it has become an annual event to bring together school librarians and academic librarians (Vitale, 2023). We hope that CSUN could be a host of regular conversations for the Southern California region.

For the 2024–25 school year, we are working with LAUSD to host a teacher librarian professional development in the University Library. The LAUSD administrative coordinator, Kimberly Balala, who oversees Library and Textbook Services, reached out to Lisa in Spring 2024 about using the CSUN University Library for professional development. While the schedule and content will be planned by LAUSD administrators, we will be given time to meet

with the librarians to present opportunities for collaboration, instruction, and resources for public school students and staff, and to open space for dialogue as fellow librarians. Since the education librarian focuses on outreach programs for teachers (whereas Brianna focuses on outreach programs for students), Lisa will be the lead coordinator and be present to participate in the full program to learn more about school librarians' concerns, priorities, and strategies for addressing information and media literacy. The district administrative coordinator also hopes this might lead to similar partnerships with other local California State University Libraries based on this model created at CSUN. While the event coordination between two large institutions is complicated and slow, the potential to initiate dialogue between academic and school librarians is a necessary first step to more meaningful coordination and collaboration.

### **Conclusion**

By creating new, more equitable spaces to work with school librarians as equal experts in the field of librarianship and as instructional leaders, we hope that we can work to strengthen information literacy skills of students in our community, many whom may be future CSUN students. Our state chapters of ACRL and AASL could also be used to create spaces to share and discuss librarianship in our respective institutions. Through such discussions academic and school librarians can better appreciate the similarities of each other's experiences in the library and thus, improve the design of library instruction for students at both levels. With this understanding, academic and school librarians can support each other in promoting libraries at all levels and better serving our community's information needs.

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