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Success through Community: Engagement at Grinnell College Libraries

Research supports the important role that engagement has in student success in higher education, and libraries can be an important focus for student engagement. They can offer programs emphasizing experiential learning, which help students to make personal connections with knowledge and to create a feeling of community. In collaboration with students, libraries can provide active learning opportunities within the collections. Through readings and events, libraries can create an avenue for students to add their own voices to the scholarly conversation.

This chapter details several activities undertaken by the Grinnell College Libraries to increase student engagement. Those activities include student-curated exhibits, events at which students read their own creative and scholarly works for a community audience, a peer mentoring program, ways to engage students in making decisions about how the library is run, and activities that create a feeling of community for diverse students and increase students' awareness of diverse cultures. The result is an enriched learning environment, an increasingly strong and vibrant sense of community, and students who are fully engaged in their own educations.

A Brief Introduction to Grinnell College

Grinnell College, founded in 1846, is a private, co-educational residential liberal arts college located in central Iowa. Its 1600 students come from all fifty states and many foreign countries. It has a student faculty ratio of 9:1, and most classes have fewer than twenty students. Grinnell College sees itself as a community of scholars where all students are encouraged to learn by researching questions of their choosing, and many Grinnellians go on to become professional scholars: on a per-capita basis, Grinnell College is 7th among all colleges and universities in the United States in sending its graduates on to earn Ph.Ds (“Grinnell College Fact Book” 36).

Instead of core requirements, the center of a Grinnell education is intensive mentoring of students. This mentoring begins with the First-Year Tutorial, the only class that all Grinnell students are required to take. The Tutorial is a one-semester seminar where students work with their tutorial advisor to explore a topic of mutual interest. Close mentoring continues through the four years as students work with their academic advisor to shape an individually-crafted liberal arts education.

The College’s Strategic Plan (“Grinnell College Strategic Plan” 21-22) highlights another signal aspect of a Grinnell College education, inquiry-based learning. Inquiry-based learning “is experiential and discovery-based; it is grounded in engagement with original sources and evidence; and it challenges students to develop their capacities for collaboration, analysis, creativity, and communication as they learn to participate as members of the broader scholarly community” (Fyffe, Francis and Chenette). The Grinnell College Libraries play a crucial role in helping students and faculty identify, acquire, and contextualize the primary evidence that is the foundation for inquiry-based learning.

Why Focus on Engagement?

At a teaching-focused liberal arts college such as Grinnell, an academic library cannot achieve excellence in a vacuum; it can only excel to the extent that it contributes to educational excellence at its institution as a whole. A typical definition of excellence in undergraduate education is providing an educational program that results in the most successful outcomes for the largest possible range of students. This, then, leads to the question, what does an institution need to do to enable as many of its students to succeed as possible? Entire books and shelves of white papers can and have been written on the subject, many of which are summarized by Pascarella and Terenzini and by Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek. Despite all of this research, as both Pascarella and Terenzini and Kuh et al. note, institutions can influence, but not control, whether or not their students succeed. As Pascarella and Terenzini explained:

“One of the most unequivocal conclusions . . . is that the impact of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on a campus.... This is not to say that an individual campus’s ethos, policies, and programs are unimportant. Quite the contrary. But if, as it appears, individual effort or engagement is the critical determinant of the impact of college, then it is important to focus on the ways in which an institution can shape its academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement” (Pascarella and Terenzini 602).

The research generally shows that students who are more engaged – that is, who are more “involve[d] in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on a campus” –

are more likely to complete their degree (Astin) and to earn better grades (Carini, Kuh, and Klein). Thus, the more libraries can encourage student engagement by, for example, encouraging students to attend library-sponsored readings and talks, to read their own works at these events, to come together with other students outside of class to talk about things they have learned, to listen to students from different cultural backgrounds, to interact with faculty outside of the classroom, to tutor their fellow students, and similar activities, the more likely those students are to succeed in college.¹ Some research has indicated that students of color benefit even more from engagement than white students. For example, Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea found that students of all races and ethnicities earned better grades and were less likely to drop out if they were more engaged, but that the effects of engagement were larger for Hispanic and African-American students.

Engagement is an area where academic libraries can have a substantial impact even when acting independently, although a larger institutional collaboration around engagement certainly helps. The remainder of this chapter discusses programs through which the Grinnell College Libraries, acting alone and in collaboration with other units on campus, encourage student engagement.

Engaging Students as Teachers

Tutoring or teaching one's peers is an important aspect of engagement—one that has obvious benefits for the students being tutored, but even more so for the tutors (Mahlab). In a curriculum based on inquiry-based learning, there are countless opportunities for students to

¹ This list of engaged activities is based on the questions on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a survey developed by George D. Kuh and others at the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University.

guide their peers through the learning process. The longest-standing example of peer mentoring at Grinnell is the Science Learning Center, which embeds twenty-five peer mentors into introductory science courses every year. At Grinnell, even introductory-level science classes are taught in an inquiry-based rather than a lecture-based format: by the end of the semester, students are expected to formulate an original research question, gather data, and analyze and present the data. Each science peer mentor is assigned to a course section. They sit in on all of the classes, hold optional twice-weekly discussion groups outside of class time, and help guide students through the process of doing original research in science.

Inspired in part by the experiences of the Science Learning Center, in 2009 the Grinnell College Libraries launched a peer mentoring program that offers forty-five students annually the opportunity to teach their peers about information literacy. This program has two components: a small number of highly-trained Reference Assistants (RAs) provide advice at the reference desk, but all students working at any of the four public service desks in the Grinnell College Libraries are trained and empowered to provide basic research help.

Reference Assistants (RAs) provide peer mentoring on topics drawn from the Libraries' information literacy curriculum. The RAs staff the reference desk from 10:00 p.m. to midnight five nights a week, and each RA also works a weekly ninety-minute afternoon shift in order to come in contact with all the librarians, staff members and students who are only in the library during daytime hours. One of our goals in designing the RA program was to create "desirable, meaningful" positions for students, and one of the ways in which we do this is to give the RAs a leadership role in the Libraries' outreach program. The RAs, working in collaboration with librarians, develop newspaper ads to promote library services, post library news and research

tips on the Libraries' Facebook page, advise on the content and design of our homepage, and hang posters around campus highlighting library events and resources. They even created a presence for the Libraries on Grinnell PLANS, our own student-developed campus social networking system.

When we began our RA program, we also started training the more than forty students working at the Libraries' four public service desks to help patrons with basic information inquiries and to refer them to librarians as needed. We provide an interactive training session to all new public desk employees, and offer support and follow-up throughout the year. The types of help we expect these employees to offer their fellow students go beyond searching the library catalog and requesting interlibrary loans to the use of subject guides, databases, and other research tools. We also help them to develop an awareness of their limits, knowing when and how to refer the patron for further help. We found that not only are our student employees engaging at a deeper level of service than typically offered at a circulation desk, but they report that this training has helped them in their own research.

In the fall of 2010, two semi-private consultation spaces were constructed on Burling's first floor to in part to facilitate peer-to-peer mentoring. Each accommodates up to five people around a table, with power and data. These spaces have been used as "offices" by the Writing Fellows, students who are employed by the College's Writing Lab and embedded in writing-intensive classes to help students develop their writing skills. Having a semi-private space in which to meet with students allowed the Writing Fellows to hold "office hours" in the library, during which students could stop by to get one-on-one help with their writing assignments.

Engaging Students as Curators

Allowing student workers to curate exhibits in the Libraries enhances those students' engagement in several ways. It encourages the students who work in the Libraries to synthesize information that they have learned in various classes and on the job and to apply that knowledge in a manner that is very different than the typical term paper or class presentation. Students are often able to explore topics or writers of interest to themselves; sometimes they choose topics that are connected to their academic pursuits, and sometimes they choose topics they have always wanted to know something about but haven't had time to explore. Curating an exhibit also gives students an opportunity to work closely with library faculty on an area of interest to the student, since close mentoring is an important aspect of student-created exhibits. For example, librarians work with students on selecting exhibit topics, creating the supporting materials, writing blog entries for the Libraries' Book Review Blog, and updating the exhibit page on our website. The combination of independence, public display, and recognition while working closely with a library staff member makes students an integral part of the libraries and their services, while providing them with professional-level experience that builds on the information literacy skills and the disciplinary acumen they are developing while at Grinnell College.

Several types of exhibitions are featured in the Libraries. Special Collections has two sets of cases in which they display items from the College and community archives and from the Libraries' rare book collection. Informal exhibit spaces are available throughout the main floor and the upper stacks of Burling Library, which are used for small to medium-sized displays of books from the circulating collection. These exhibits range from small displays of books on a

particular topic, to exhibits created in conjunction with campus symposia or visiting authors, to multicultural or historical author exhibits.

Recently, students who work in our media area put together posters and materials in recognition of the seventy-fifth anniversary of *Porgy and Bess*. Posters examined the performers, the controversy, and the history of this uniquely American opera. One student described her experience working on the exhibit:

“While working on the *Porgy and Bess* project, I learned about one of the most famous and controversial operas of all time, and also broadened my understanding of the time period as a whole. My project specifically focused on DuBose Heyward (the author of the original novel *Porgy*), the factors that influenced his writing, and the problems and issues involved in transforming the novel into an opera. I chose this topic because I thought it would be interesting to look into where the idea of the novel first originated and the atmosphere surrounding the author, especially with all the controversy associated with the opera. Through my research for this project, I learned more about the specific culture of certain regions in the United States, while also gaining insight into some of the social perceptions and conflicts during this era. This new information and material helped me expand and connect to some of the broader themes discussed in previous courses from my educational experience.” -Pun Winichakul '13 (Grinnell College Libraries 10)

Grinnell is fortunate to have a strong collection of primary materials in the history of the book, which will be significantly enhanced through a promised bequest of 450 sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printed books from a private collector. In 2010 the Special Collections department received an initial donation of twenty-five books printed between 1505 and 1695. The department mounted an exhibition and prepared a catalog of these books, curated by student assistant Tad Boehmer '12. The publicity surrounding this donation led to increased interest in our collection of rare books. During the spring semester, classes in three departments (English, French, and history) worked with the books from the exhibit and related material in Special Collections. Boehmer describes his experience of curating an exhibition in these words:

"I believe that these inquiry-based and 'hands-on' methods are more challenging ways to learn, but because of that they are ultimately more fulfilling for students and more stimulating educationally. The material is thoroughly learned from a variety of angles, as opposed to remaining two-dimensional when inquiry, curiosity, and first-hand experience are left out of the equation" (Fuson).

This is exactly the kind of learning Grinnell values. In fact, Boehmer's experience was highlighted on the Grinnell College website as an example of student engagement with inquiry-based learning (Fuson 2010).

Sarah J. Purcell, Director of the Rosenfield Program in Public Affairs, International Relations & Human Rights and Associate Professor of History, has also commented on the educational value of curating an exhibit:

"The opportunity to curate an exhibit offers students a chance to use research and writing skills in a very creative way with an incredibly interactive response. It is such a valuable intellectual challenge that also can enrich our whole campus community, as others can learn directly from the exhibit itself. Curating also offers select students a valuable pre-professional experience, since many of them subsequently pursue careers in archives, museums, and historical collections." (Grinnell College Libraries 11)

Engaging Students through Events

Attending extracurricular cultural events on campus is one aspect of student engagement, as is sharing one's own creative or scholarly work with an audience. The Libraries' event series offer students the opportunity to do both.

The signature event series in the Grinnell College Libraries is *Wednesday Nights @ Burling*. These programs, which are held in the Burling Library event space, highlight student work, faculty research, and community member accomplishments. In the spring of 2011 the series featured a presentation on "Earliest English Printed Books," which was a collaboration among the College archivist, an English department faculty member, and the director of the Libraries. The Grinnell College Libraries have a 1636 edition of the very first work to be printed in English, William Caxton's translation of *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (originally printed in English around 1474). The event encouraged students to view and learn about this and other early printed books from the collection. A bonus of this event was that it brought patrons into the

special collections and archives. More than one student was heard to comment, “Oh, I didn’t know that this stuff was here!”

Another event, co-sponsored by Intercultural Affairs, featured three students reading from their original poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. They invited students to “Relax and embrace the literary arts! (And refreshments!)” The Craft of Poetry class now reads their poems at a *Wednesday Night @ Burling* event every year, which provides the opportunity for students to publicly demonstrate their semester’s work. We also have regular “open mics” presented in collaboration with the Faulconer Gallery, the campus’s art museum. Locating the readings in the Gallery brings students into that space, strengthens the connection between cultural repositories, and creates an opportunity for active participation with those collections. *Wednesday Nights @ Burling* attract a diverse audience including students, faculty, staff and community members.

The Libraries are concerned about students’ academic development, but also about their well-being. Finals week is a time of intense pressure, and the campus looks for opportunities to help students respond to this stress in healthy ways. Study breaks are sponsored by a variety of campus groups, but the ones at Burling have become a much-loved tradition. The Library SEPC selects student groups—from a cappella singers to the campus comedy improv troupe and the swing dance society—to provide entertainment, while the library staff bake cookies and provide milk for students during this high stress period. Well over 100 students come through the library each evening for the cookies and the performances. Burling Library (the main library on campus) had its last major renovation in 1982, so the Libraries’ physical spaces are not always aligned with our current program. In particular, the

events area in Burling was far too small for the events being held there. Fortunately, a serials review and the subsequent cancellation of many print journals gave us the opportunity to remove a range of shelving in current periodicals. We were then able to expand the events area of the library into the periodicals space, which allowed us to outfit it with more tables for relaxation, group conversation, and more comfortable seating for our *Wednesday Nights @ Burling* series. The enlarged space can easily accommodate more than 60 chairs in an area where we previously squeezed in 25.

Engaging with Diversity

Research has shown that engagement around issues of diversity positively affects both students of color and white students. For example, research by Gurin, Dey, Hurtado and Gurin found that both white students and students of color rated themselves as more intellectually engaged and as growing more academically when they attended diversity-related programs or talked about diversity issues.

Grinnell College has a rich history of engagement with diversity. In November 1971 and February 1972, the Concerned Black Students, a recently-formed organization at Grinnell College, protested campus policies and atmosphere by taking over Burling Library, which at that time also served as the home of the College administration. This collective act of civil disobedience led to the creation within Burling of the Black Library, a collection of journals and books that focuses on African American history and culture.

A Wednesday Nights @ Burling event highlighted "The Black Library as History."

Students, faculty and librarians collaborated to explore the development of the Black Library and student responses to it throughout its history. They encouraged discussion of what the

Black Library means to them. Two of these students had earlier presented a display of "Performance Poetry": a commemoration of the library take-over and a site-specific dance performed near the Black Library to a montage of music and interview excerpts.

The Black Library is not the only collection in the Libraries to highlight diverse writers and themes. Originating with a request from the Latino and Latina student organization, SOL, the Latino Collection was dedicated and officially opened on February 14, 2000. With this collection, the library highlights newly acquired books by Latin American and Latino/a authors and those covering any aspect of Latino/a culture, whether North or South American, Central American, or Caribbean. All books eventually move from the Latino Collection into the general stacks.

Latino/a culture was also highlighted in a *Wednesday Nights @ Burling* event that celebrated Hispanic-Latino Heritage Month in September of 2010. This event, which featured poetry, history, and more, was co-sponsored by the Multicultural Leadership Council, Intercultural Student Affairs, the Libraries, and the Spanish Department.

The Libraries hosted events in honor of two other ethnic heritage months that academic year as well. In November of 2010, during Native American Indian Heritage Month, the *Wednesday Nights @ Burling* program presented first year student Lydia Mills, who talked about growing up within the Tlingit culture and the central place of the bear in her experience and in everyday Tlingit life. She provided fry bread she had prepared in her dorm to the entire audience, demonstrated beading, and led students, faculty, staff, and community members, young and old, in stitching miniature button blankets. In May of 2011 the Libraries teamed with the college's Asian and Asian American Association to celebrate Asian-Pacific American Heritage

month. Both events were accompanied by exhibits of books, one highlighting Tlingit and Native American culture and a set of several “mini exhibits” throughout the library featuring Asian-American authors and works on various aspects of Asian-American history.

Not all of the diversity-related collections at Grinnell College are housed in the Libraries. Several student groups on campus, including the Stonewall Resource Center and the Concerned Black Students, have developed specialized resource collections around issues of sexuality, race, and other topics of concern. These collections are available for the use of all community members, not just members of these organizations. Grinnell College Libraries have been working to support the efforts of these groups by bringing to light their specialized collections. Since the resources are physically located in student houses and dormitories, it isn’t always obvious to people that these materials are available to them. During the summer of 2010, we added to our catalog the holdings of the Stonewall Resource Center (SRC), which has a small library to support GLBT students. In just a few weeks after adding these holdings, students connected with the SRC reported that they had seen more traffic and that visitors had mentioned seeing the titles they were looking for in the College Libraries’ catalog. We are encouraged by this and are now planning to add the collections of the Concerned Black Students to the Libraries’ catalog.

Engaging Students in Library Decision-Making

The Libraries have several mechanisms for engaging students in making decisions about how the library is run. There is a bulletin board located outside the library director’s office where anyone may post a question and receive a written response from the director. On several occasions, posted questions have sparked ongoing conversations among students and

library staff on the feedback board. The topics of these discussions have ranged widely, from furniture to whether the current library building should be replaced to perceived homophobia in the Library of Congress Classification System (LCCS). In response to these and other postings, the Libraries have made improvements to its facilities (such as adding bean bag chairs and computer tables to the second floor lounge and installing a beverage vending machine) and provided contact information at the Library of Congress for making comments on LCCS.

Another important venue for student engagement in the Libraries is the Libraries' Student Educational Policy Committee (SEPC). The SEPC is intended to give students a more direct voice in library operations and the library environment. The Committee provides a connection to the Student Government Association (SGA) through its SGA-appointed members. Kathryn Vanney, a previous SEPC member, describes the work this group does.

"In addition to our work responsibilities, student library employees are able to contribute to the life of the Grinnell College Libraries by serving on the Library SEPC (Student Educational Policy Committee). This group is made up of four elected student workers and two representatives from Grinnell College's Student Government Association. Together, we serve as a link between students and the Libraries. Responsibilities include giving feedback about library services, surveying students about librarians' professional performance for contract reviews, assisting in the interviews of prospective librarians, and planning events. For example, this year's SEPC is working with librarians to organize an informational panel for students interested in library and museum careers. Overall, the Library

SEPC facilitates communication between students and library faculty and staff, and gives its members a glimpse into the inner workings of academic libraries.” (Grinnell College Libraries 14)

Recently the SEPC added another dimension of engagement by hosting an information session on library and museum careers for one of our *Wednesday Nights @ Burling* sessions. They invited a panel of several Grinnell College librarians and art gallery director to share their insights into the opportunities and challenges of these fields. They also hosted another session, “The Library SEPC Invites You to Engage with the Art of Letter Writing.” An English professor and Grinnell's Letter Writers Alliance (a student group that promotes hand-written letters sent by mail) offered reflections on the allure of letters in literature and contemporary life.

The campus-wide student government has also taken an interest in how the Libraries are run, and the Libraries have welcomed their ideas. Every semester, the Student Government Association runs an initiative process that allows students to propose and vote on changes that they would like to see at the College. A recently passed initiative asked that the Kistle Science Library close at 1:00 a.m. instead of at midnight. After a half-semester trial in which Kistle stayed open later one night a week, the Science Library now remains open until 1:00 a.m. five nights weekly during the academic year. Similar requests have resulted in opening both Burling and Kistle Libraries at 7:45 am instead of 8:00, providing hot water and tea bags for student use, and extending loan periods for media.

Conclusion

The practices of individualized mentoring and inquiry-based learning permeate all aspects of college life and offer the Grinnell College Libraries opportunities to craft programs and services that engage students and faculty, enriching the learning and teaching that happen inside and outside of the classroom. Although it also presents a number of challenges and places heavy demands on the Libraries' collections and services, we are confident that we are making a difference in students' lives and in their success at Grinnell College.

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