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Thoughts on the Regional Campus Library: Its Rewards and Challenges

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Thoughts on the Regional Campus Library: Its Rewards and Challenges

Have you ever considered working in or managing a regional campus library? It's no surprise that in a country as large as Canada, there are a number of universities and colleges with regional campuses, also called "satellite" or "branch" libraries. Ontario alone has at least 12 multi-campus universities, the majority of which maintain their own libraries. Although these libraries range in size from tiny one-room facilities staffed by a single library technician to mid-size buildings run by a number of librarians, they are all smaller, have fewer resources, and pose different opportunities and challenges than their single or main campus counterparts do.

Campus size

Campus size shapes the experience of working in a regional library. It's easier to develop connections with users when there are fewer of them, so librarians on smaller campuses tend to develop closer connections with more of the staff, faculty and students than do their colleagues on large campuses. The smaller setting and increased opportunities for one-on-one relationships create bonds between librarians and patrons. Not surprisingly, regional campus librarians often feel as if they are truly making a difference in people's lives.

The regional collection usually consists of fewer physical items, which can present its own challenge. Retrieving materials from the main library or via interlibrary loan means a delay in providing material to faculty and students. While electronic resources and specifically the growth in e-books have improved the availability of material, this isn't always adequate to meet information needs. The librarians must work at making sure that faculty and staff are aware of the resources and must facilitate access to those resources. Although this challenge is also faced at main campuses, regional campus patrons, rightly or wrongly, believe that they have inferior access to materials and services. This perception is an issue that regional campus librarians must contend with in their liaison and outreach activities.

Local partnerships can enhance both the library's holdings and the librarians' network. Public libraries make good partners. Numerous partnerships between post-secondary institutions and public libraries provide space and services to faculty and students, in some cases without the presence of a staff member from the institution. Additionally, library staff at a distance from their institutional colleagues can develop relationships with colleagues at public and special libraries in their vicinity.

Reference service

Although the majority of regional campus libraries offer the same reference and instruction services as their larger counterparts, they do so with far fewer librarians. A study in the United States showed that more than half of these libraries are staffed by one librarian or fewer; a quarter are staffed by two or three.¹ Regional campus librarians are therefore wearing many hats and performing a variety of duties, a reality that poses challenges but also provides valuable experience for new librarians.

Regional campus librarians may offer instruction in a wider variety of disciplines than do their main campus counterparts. While this can be challenging at the start, it greatly expands their knowledge and expertise. The diversity of responsibilities provides ongoing opportunities and rewards for regional campus librarians throughout their careers.

What's more, regional campus librarians frequently work longer hours at the reference desk than their colleagues in larger libraries do. This can make it difficult to balance all of their responsibilities. Working on projects can be challenging when students constantly need reference help, a situation that leaves few uninterrupted periods for sustained work. Librarians on small campuses worry that if they aren't available for help, students will be inadequately served. Yet work on projects and collection development will improve service and access to resources. Librarians

often acknowledge that closing the desk during the quietest periods of the day can provide time for other work with minimal impact on students.

At regional campuses, the reference desk is not usually staffed on weekends or during the evening. Librarians should be cautious about helping students after hours by answering email queries, a situation that can lead to working around the clock. To compensate for reduced service hours, librarians can adopt strategies such as creating online tutorials.

Connections with colleagues

Because regional campus librarians have few colleagues with whom they work directly, they often experience a sense of isolation. They don't have easy access to co-workers and must create opportunities to communicate with others. Keeping in touch – by visiting the main campus, phoning colleagues or emailing them – is vital. Using readily available web resources such as chat and video conferencing can increase the feeling of connectedness.

Although it may be challenging to find the time to do so, regional campus librarians need to participate in campus-wide committees and meetings in order to connect with other librarians and be an integral part of the institution as a whole. A “them vs. us” mentality can result when the lines of communication break down.² It can be tempting for regional campuses to believe that the main campus doesn't pay enough attention to its offspring, but it is important to recognize that everyone has many responsibilities and priorities to balance. Regional campus librarians, conversely, are not always aware of the issues on the main campus.


According to a *Library Journal* survey, although librarians in small institutions complain about colleagues undervaluing their efforts, librarians in large libraries grumble about bureaucracy and red tape.³ The daily lives of librarians in regional campus settings tend to be removed from office politics and less affected by inflexible systems. These smaller settings often foster greater latitude for new initiatives and innovative approaches.

Since workshops and training sessions usually take place on the main campus, regional campus librarians may not have the same easy access to professional development opportunities as their larger-campus counterparts. Even informal learning opportunities, such as collaborating with colleagues and bouncing ideas off one another during “watercooler” conversations, occur less often on the

regional campus.⁴ Librarians must make opportunities for collaboration and professional development a priority, and be supported by their institution.

Regional campus librarians are physically removed from the main library and are often at a distance from their supervisors, so it is particularly important for them to be independent and resourceful. The decision makers and problem fixers aren't always available for immediate assistance, requiring these librarians to display judgment in their handling of situations. Additionally, the limitations in space and resources, while possibly hampering them, also provide opportunities for innovative thinking.

Supervisors have a role to play as well and must not lose sight of their regional campus employees. Setting up a regular communication schedule can be helpful. Developing an awareness of regional campus issues is also important, as they affect the regional campus as a whole. This regular contact and awareness of issues creates a better understanding of the unique challenges of regional campuses. The supervisor can then raise regional campus issues during discussions, as appropriate, at the main campus to ensure decisions are more inclusive.

Although regional campus libraries can be challenging for those who manage or work in them, they can also be very rewarding. These small libraries foster resourcefulness, ingenuity and a sense of fulfillment. Good things do indeed come in small packages. 

Notes

1. John Brandt et al., “The Face of Regional Campus Libraries and Librarianship,” *Journal of Library Administration* 45, no. 1/2 (2006), p. 44.
2. Tim Bottorff et al., “Branching Out: Communication and Collaboration among Librarians at Multi-Campus Institutions,” *Journal of Library Administration* 48, no. 3/4 (2008), p 358.
3. John N. Berry III, “LJ Series ‘Job Satisfaction’: Great Work, Genuine Problems,” *Library Journal* 132, no. 16 (2007), p. 28.
4. Bottorff et al., p. 351.

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