This article was adapted from the June 2011 edWeb.net webinar “Earning Recognition: If You Build It, Share It!” The webcast is available at the Using Emerging Technology to Improve Your School Library Program community’s landing page at <http://edweb.net/emergingtech>
It is no secret that since the fall of 2008, fiscal managers have been making tough decisions. The trend is consistent among economic sectors, including education. In their efforts to stem budget shortfalls, school administrators and business managers are cutting programs and eliminating teachers. School librarians in particular are struggling in this new environment. Even where positions remain secure, school librarians are juggling an increasing number of responsibilities as a byproduct of staff cuts and added duties. School librarians in more acerbic conditions are facing reassignment, teaching in multiple buildings and/or student populations, or outright attrition.

Fostering Optimism

Keith Curry Lance and Linda Hofschire published a preliminary study that drew correlation between school librarians and student achievement in reading (2011). While Lance has fastidiously researched and published on this topic for decades, it has never been more critical to disseminate his message: Well-staffed school library programs increase student achievement. But we can’t rely on a handful of experts to demonstrate our worth. We, as professionals, know that we make a difference. We have a collective responsibility to prove it.

It is a challenge to doggedly strive for programmatic recognition in this economic climate. Implementing instructional reform, often equated with rocking the boat, is not high on the list of priorities when administrators are touting for the next position to cut. But there are subtle ways in which school librarians can garner the kind of evidence they need to demonstrate their impact on teaching and learning. Those in particularly dire situations should take heart. The most abysmal conditions offer the greatest capacity for growth and innovation. This is a fundamental principal in Clayton M. Christensen, Michael B. Horn, and Curtis W. Johnson’s book Disrupting Class (2008). Growth, measured against a given baseline, is all one needs to establish a program’s success. Clearly the first step is to establish that baseline.

Establishing Priorities and a Baseline

The road to recognition starts with documenting the school library program and, where possible, student learning. When I first joined the New Canaan (CT) High School faculty in the fall of 2001, our library program was weak. In our first superintendent’s report, we wrote, “We’ve made great strides, and we should be right on track by 2009.” In a follow-up phone call, we were asked if the “2009” was a typo.

Back then, our first goal was to build a partnership with our faculty, then engender a school library learning culture among students, and finally to focus on literacy. That took three years. In hindsight, it is hard to fathom that literacy came last, but at the time, sequencing those steps in that order seemed critical. Without faculty collaboration and student participation, we could not do the rest.

Setting Realistic Goals

Regardless of a school library program’s standing on the spectrum of successful programming, it is important to set incremental goals for growth. Realistic goals are best—those that involve factors over which school librarians have enough control to influence change. For emerging programs, this can include the number of collaborations with teachers, the number of classes visited, circulation statistics, the number of professional development programs offered through the school library, collection analysis statistics, and
Assessing Skills That Matter

Assessing fundamental information and communications skills from Michael B. Eisenberg and Robert E. Berkowitz’s Big6 is a good next step. Google forms and free survey tools are helpful for this. Assessing incrementally—a few skills at a time—increases learner participation, and embedding assessments into pathfinders helps to disseminate the assessments expeditiously. As instructional objectives move higher up Bloom’s taxonomy, so do the measured criteria.

AASL’s Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs (AASL 2009) recommends that library programs teach students and faculty to effectively use information and ideas. These encompass the more concrete Partnership for 21st Century Learning skills (see <www.p21.org>), but also more intangible Learning4Life (L4L) processes, like thinking, creating, sharing, and growing (see <www.ala.org/aasl/guidelinesandstandards/learning4life>). Curiosity is also worth measuring, but it is more a habit of mind. This is what needs to be embedded and assessed to demonstrate 21st-century teaching and learning.

Here are some questions to consider when establishing benchmarks. Does your program help learners do the following?

- Ask the right questions?
- Make the right decisions?
- Demonstrate digital citizenship?
- Use their right brain?

If the answer is yes, how do you demonstrate it to others? If not, how can you integrate these objectives? Can you think of examples where this is happening for kids? Can you collect exemplars of this? Is an assessment already in place? If so,

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do you have access to the results? If not, can you work with a classroom teacher to build an assessment?

For example, is there a way to assess how students are organizing information? Joyce Valenza refers to this as content curation, and recently referenced a number of online tools (Scoop.it, LibGuides, Delicious Stacks, LiveBinders) to facilitate and assess student learning in this realm (Valenza 2011). Buffy Hamilton also writes about online tools (Evernote, NoodleTools, Symbaloo, Netvibes) for students to use as information dashboards (Hamilton 2011a, 2011b).

Assessment becomes more complex as programs evolve. Developing programs can rely on quantitative data to demonstrate growth, but the process is trickier when measuring higher-order thinking. Situational or scenario-based questions are helpful. Student interviews and conferences are effective. Recording responses on handheld mobile devices (from MP3 players to tablets) can be instrumental toward this end. Participatory media provide engaging platforms for rich (and documented) discussions with not only classmates and teachers but other stakeholders too—thus enriching the dialog with more varied points of view.

Leveraging Web 2.0 Tools

At New Canaan High School, which is a free-range media school, we’ve used Twitter, paired with Paper.Li, a Tweet aggregator that organizes
Tweets with a common hashtag into an easy-to-read (and grade) online publication. We also use Facebook groups for peer review. Watching students use the platform emboldens us to add contribution, collaboration, continuity, and growth to our research log rubric. (Examples of these and other lessons taught via mainstream participatory media are available at <http://bannedsites.info>.) Peer review teaches students to accept and embrace their shared responsibility in the teaching and learning process.

Lifelong learning sounds like a cliché, and it presents a serious challenge for assessment: “Can you check back in with us from your deathbed and let us know if we taught you to love learning your whole life?” But surveying alumni is a great way to measure a program’s impact. This is where social media are especially powerful. Once students graduate, their e-mail addresses change. Families often move, and/or forfeit their landline phone service. The only way to reach alumni is via social media. Typically, a graduating class will form a Facebook group for all members of that class. The group expedites communication about things like dances, yearbooks, senior t-shirts, outings, and group activities. Students often remain in those groups long after graduation. It is simple enough to ask a member to push out a link to a survey, questionnaire, or invitation to a face-to-face focus group when grads are home on break.

Our contact time with students affords us a chance to model good teaching and learning. The beauty of the twenty-first century is that contact time is not necessarily face-to-face time. In fact, online communication expands our instructional reach and our opportunities to assess learning.

To earn recognition, a program must foster an environment where everyone is a teacher, a learner, a producer, a contributor—one where digital and emerging technologies are embraced, where expertise is attributed democratically, where learners connect beyond physical boundaries. We can provide students with nontraditional responsibilities, and even reverse our teacher/student roles.

One idea is to have students curate multimedia resources to create a “NextBook,” a replacement for a traditional textbook. (That term was coined by New Canaan High School senior Hunter Van Vehgel.) Another flipped lesson might involve asking students to design assessments for an assured curricular experience—encouraging their focus on embedding creativity, innovation, problem solving, and higher-level thinking into the rubric. Students can then vote to select one (or more) assessment for the group to use.

**Shifting the Paradigm: Students as Teachers**

Teaching collectivism is a challenge in the 19th- and 20th-century school structure in which most educational facilities seem to be stuck. Schedules, classrooms, desks, chairs, and print textbooks are all designed for the individual, not collective, benefit. Even one-to-one initiatives neglect to teach students shared responsibility. (I anticipate reader protests to that remark, but it is one-to-one.) Getting students to feel like they are members of the teaching and learning team requires a serious paradigm shift. But challenges provide opportunities. Finding ways to embed and assess collaboration and teamwork will help promote that change. If the school library program can stimulate collectivist thinking and convince students to morph from passive to participatory learners, its visibility will increase exponentially.

To help students with this transition, we should encourage them to publish to real audiences their original ideas about what matters to them—preferably to audiences beyond the school community. This focus on a real audience increases student accountability and raises the bar on student performance. It helps them become better communicators, and it involves others in the assessment process. The school library has always been the place where students learn about the outside world. Tradition, the connection transpired intellectually, through books or film. Now, students (should) have ample opportunities to connect with the outside world. (Schools are not necessarily encouraging these encounters.) The school library program naturally lends itself to orchestrating these connections. It is still the school library’s responsibility to connect students with the outside world; only we now live in a more reciprocal world. Connection is a two-way street. It is no longer enough to consume information; learners must contribute to the collective information pool. School librarians can and should play a role in facilitating that.

Visit Knowledge Quest Online at www.ala.org/aasl/knowledgequest to view Essential Links relevant to the theme of Futurecasting, including a link to the June 2011 edWeb.net webinar, “Earning Recognition: If You Build It, Share It!” that this feature story was adapted from.
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Win-Win: Expanding Students’ Worldview While Advocating for Libraries

Last spring, district librarian and technology specialist Shannon Miller from Van Meter, Iowa, won the Connecting People Shorty Award for the impact she’s had on her community and the creative ways she’s used the social Web to connect people (Shorty Awards 2011). Miller uses Twitter, Skype, and blogs to connect her learners with experts from around the globe and to crowdsourced for innovative instructional collaborations. This recognition demonstrates the impact of linking geographically isolated learners with the rest of the world. In the fall of 2010, Miller met John Schumacher, the librarian at Brook Forest Elementary in Oak Brook, Illinois. Since then the two school librarians—one isolated professionals in their schools—developed a co-teaching partnership in spite of the 337-mile distance that separates them. Their collaboration is documented in their shared blog Two Libraries, One Voice (Miller and Schumacher 2011). Connecting students with other teachers and learners achieves at least two objectives. Most importantly, it is a necessary step toward empowering 21st-century learners. But it is also easy to document, and thus a simple way to demonstrate the value of school libraries and librarians to the entire learning community.

Popular 21st-century learning models (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, Learning4Life, and ISTE NETS) share common elements. They recommend that educators encourage students to think outside of the box, be curious, push boundaries safely and respectfully, practice responsible risk-taking, construct new knowledge, and forge multiple paths into new territory. Ewan McIntosh, who is regarded as one of Europe’s foremost experts in digital media for public services, stated in a keynote at Alan November’s 2011 Building Learning Communities Conference, “We don’t need problem solvers, we need problem finders” (McIntosh 2011). Students need to construct a new world with amorphous tools and information. Twenty-first-century school librarians need to guide students toward that end.

Crowdsourcing Advocacy

Measuring learning is essential. But publishing the impact of instruction on student learning is what saves jobs. Documenting our work and progress has never been easier. Social media facilitates transparency and advocacy beyond our 20th-century imaginings. Whether school librarians perceive themselves as digital natives or immigrants, documenting and publishing how school library programs cultivate learning is now a fundamental component of the profession. Writing is only one vehicle for publication. We have so many others: video, audio, photography, art, animation, and music all make for engaging alternatives to writing. The obvious obstacle to publication is time. But there is no rule that mandates that school librarians themselves document the program’s success. In fact, nothing is more compelling than having learners articulate the program’s impact.

Many tools can help demonstrate the school library program’s impact, and they take very little time to use. Surveys, blogs, digital bulletin boards like Wallwisher or Posterous Spaces, video interviews, Twitter and companion publications like Paper.Li, polling software like Poll Everywhere, animation tools like Vokki and Xtranormal are just a handful of the tools available to document learning. The Daring Librarian, Gwyneth Jones’ blog, is a rich resource for dynamic and engaging applications for these and other learning and publishing tools. She compiled a list of her favorites in her “Gadget A–Go–Go” presentation for the 2011 ISTE conference. Joquetta Johnson also featured a formidable list of engaging online resources in a Tl Virtual Cafe webinar last spring (Johnson and Jones 2011).

Guiding Teachers into the 21st Century, Too

It is not enough to teach students to effectively use information and ideas. We also have a responsibility to support faculty learning. Many school librarians facilitate professional development workshops in their districts and beyond, but few keep a running schedule of all their professional-development offerings. Embedding a simple Google Calendar in a website or blog lends itself to that task. Participant testimonials and praise from standard professional development evaluation forms can be incorporated into calendar entries. Organizing workshop resources online allows participants to revisit not only the material, but helps them also remember who taught it. Online presentation archiving portals like SlideShare and SlideBoom make for easy retrieval. We index our presentations in our school library management system,
so patrons can readily access them through the online public access catalog. An extension of this service is to offer that cataloging service for all the district professional-development sessions. Ask workshop facilitators to upload content to the Web and forward the link. Serving as the professional-development archivist is a low-maintenance strategy to encourage the faculty to perceive school librarians as a professional-development resource.

Maintaining Our Focus

At its core, our job hasn’t changed much. We still teach learners how to interact with information. What’s changed is how hard it is to keep our jobs in this economic climate and in the face of misperceptions about modern developments on the role of school libraries. Part of our job now includes bridging the gap between industry failures to standardize e-tools and our learners’ need for standardization (i.e., citing websites, accessing e-books, database navigation). If we just collect, organize, preserve, and disseminate in all the traditional ways without adapting to the current information landscape, we risk losing our jobs or worse—causing others to lose theirs. Excellence is the standard to which we must aspire. Awesome school librarians save jobs. Save a school librarian. Rock your learning community.

Sharing Successes

Share successes! Keep a distribution list of local media outlets and contact them often. Online dailies are desperate for stories, and they love featuring students. Maintain an online photo collection and share the link with the press. Reach out via social media. Facebook, Google+, and Twitter are excellent platforms for sparking conversations about success. Communicate with parents and administrators regularly.

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Works Cited:


