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Topic 5: Alternative Roles

Embedded Librarians

What it means to be an embedded librarian can depend upon who is providing the definition. Freiburger et al (2016) noted that “The term ‘embedded’ is used in various ways across the library literature” (p. 388) and cited examples from medical librarians providing clinical support, to academic librarians participating in virtual classes, to those “embedded in a particular course in the curriculum” (p. 388). Many corporations have librarians embedded within specific teams or departments, though often “librarian” is not part of their job title.

The embedded librarian’s roles and responsibilities vary from setting to setting. Within an academic environment, librarians serving online students can “host a discussion forum in an online class, record video tutorials, host synchronous online workshops, [or] create a library page within the learning management system” (Allen, 2017, pp. 252–253). According to Allen, “The highest tier of embedded librarianship involves collaborating with faculty on designing courses and degree programs that incorporate library resources and information literacy skills” (p. 253).

In their look at a medical practice, Brahmi and Kaplan (2017) wrote that the embedded librarian is “an integral research team member who attends the morbidity & mortality and difficult problem sessions . . . and local conferences and observes certain surgeries” (p. 211). At Facebook, Brendon Thompson provides knowledge management services to organize research for that company’s marketing science team.

Whichever form it takes, embedded librarianship comes with several advantages for librarians, their team/project mates, and the organization. Allen pointed out how in academia, “it puts instruction at the point of need and might reduce the need for face-to-face instruction and reference desk assistance” (p. 253). Wu et al (2013) explained how faculty at a university health science library, seeking to improve an online graduate course, wanted an embedded librarian for their “unique perspective of the students’ specific needs for literature, research, and writing skills. Additionally, an embedded librarian would enable faculty to focus more on teaching the nursing content of the course” (p. 323). Brahmi and Kaplan (2017) noted how embedded librarians can “Identify grant opportunities and assist in the writing of grants” (p. 211)—a boon to non-profits of any type.

Thompson said, “where I’ve probably been most successful is when I’ve been an embedded librarian” (Megaridis, n.d.) and believes that this is because of the extent and depth of learning the embedded librarian must gain in order to be able to understand the job’s specific topic or program, and because of the visibility it gives the librarian among colleagues within the

organization—or as Thompson put it, “I get to sit alongside people that are building and also kind of be in their ear day to day and in their face day to day.”

Freiburger et al (2016) echoed Thompson’s sentiment in writing that embedded librarian “Liaisons are considered part of the community, and locations within the colleges have given them the advantage of visibility” (p. 389). In this way, being embedded is a form of marketing for special librarians and their services. The embedded librarian program at one health services college “can be viewed as an extensive marketing campaign” according to the authors, who concluded that because of the program, “faculty and students now have a better understanding of the range of services offered by the library and of the expertise of the librarians” (p. 395).

Establishing an embedded librarianship is not without its challenges. These include getting the buy-in of organizational leadership (including proving that the time and effort required to establish the program are worth the investment), making the intended audience aware of the librarian’s services, getting those audience members to actually use the services (inertia can be an obstacle here), and, once it’s underway, proving the value of the program in order to keep it running. Fortunately, as more embedded librarians share their stories and more organizations realize the benefits, there are an increasing number of successful models to point to for proof and to mine for best practices.

References

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