Careers Library: Unconventional Collaboration to Boost Learning

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Abstract

The pressure on higher education institutions to produce employment-ready graduates is high, and academic libraries can contribute to this goal by collaborating with non-academic departments. The Georgetown University in Qatar library partnered with the Career Services Centre and the Alumni office in launching Careers Library programme that expanded on the idea of the Human Library by creating an online week-long event aimed at empowering senior students with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in professional life after graduation. This practice paper illustrates how the library can engage in broader activities beyond information literacy instruction and leverage alumni relationships to develop students' competencies. The collaboration proved to be beneficial and it fits well within the framework of library outreach activities. The value to the academic community is that this event can be easily replicated and it offers an easy way to draw on the expertise of alumni willing to give back to their school.

Keywords: Career Services; Human Library; collaboration; alumni

1. Introduction

Since higher education institutions are expected to develop students' employability as part of their mission, the public perception of the university's success is impacted by the job placement rates for recent graduates. Academic

libraries can play a vital role in supporting universities in this mission and in preparing students for future employment by extending outreach to campus extracurricular activities. Although traditionally libraries engage in collaboration with academic units, there is a great potential for academic libraries to partner with non-academic departments in developing programmes intended to enhance students' job-related skills. In the changing world, "libraries are no longer regarded as storehouses for books but as agents of change and vehicles of development" (Omeiza & Lanre, 2019) and a paradigm shift in library services is happening – from traditional information literacy instruction to a broader engagement in activities outside of the formal curriculum. Libraries innovate to stay relevant and look for opportunities to engage in broader outreach, which is in line with our strategic mission to advance learning, no matter if it happens inside or outside of classroom walls.

This practice paper provides an overview of academic library collaboration with Career Services and the Alumni office in the creation and implementation of Careers Library, an online week-long event connecting seniors with recent graduates for 1-on-1 career-oriented conversations. The event was held in the spring of 2021 at Georgetown University in Qatar (GU-Q), an international campus of an American university. The initiative offered a unique opportunity for the library to collaborate with departments that it rarely works with, and for seniors to connect with alumni and get encouragement, practical tips, and valuable advice to prepare for the real world. The article will describe the project, its challenges, and outcomes, and will explain how this initiative fits into the shifting dynamic of library services and adds value to the student academic experience.

2. Literature Review

There is an extensive body of literature describing library collaboration with academic programmes (Wilhelm, 2021). Hollister (2005) noted that library outreach is primarily aimed at teaching faculty while non-academic units are often overlooked. It is more an exception than a rule to see Career Services and libraries working together on common projects.

In recent years though, there was a positive shift towards library collaboration with student services programmes. The 2003 research of Loyola

University New Orleans replicated Charlene Abel's study of 1992 in measuring collaboration between librarians and career practitioners and concluded that "although the need for collaboration is still recognized, the level of cooperation has changed little" (Quenoy & Orgeron, 2003) whilst it was expected that technology would give an extra boost to partnerships. More recent studies record a greater level of collaboration with non-academic departments and indicate that Career Services is among the top three units to partner with, right after the Writing Centre and Students Affairs (Wainwright & Davidson, 2017, p. 127–128). In some places, such collaboration is prescribed by university strategic plans (Lafferty, 2019), which certainly facilitates sustainable partnerships. Yet, the body of literature on such collaborations is scarce and often presents case studies from business libraries (Pun, 2019; Song, 2007; Wilhelm, 2021).

Collaborations between academic libraries and Career Centres that are reported in the literature vary from university to university and their interactions are as distinct as the institutions themselves. Wainwright and Davidson (2017) mentioned that it is generally a library space that attracts and offers opportunities for such collaboration. The library's lack of affiliation with any specific department makes it a popular and sought-after venue to host exhibitions, career events, internship planning sessions, and meetings with the career staff.

The traditional way for libraries to support Career Centres is by developing career-oriented collections and offering workshops. There are several mentions of such collaborations in the literature, however, collection development is often "haphazard" (Quenoy & Orgeron, 2003), and happens either on request (Pun, 2019) or as a one-time project in collection renewal. Since nowadays career-related materials are predominantly in electronic form, librarians create LibGuides (Lafferty, 2019; Lin-Stephens et al., 2019; Pun, 2019) or, as in the case of Purdue University, a campus-wide career wiki (Dugan et al., 2009) to highlight resources that would benefit students on the employment preparation path. In these cases, Career Centre becomes a partner in promoting and sharing this information with campus stakeholders.

On the partner's invitation, academic libraries also provide occasional support through workshops by teaching students how to leverage library

resources when conducting market, industry, and company research or preparing for an interview and job presentation (Albarillo, 2016; DeHart, 1996; Lafferty, 2019; Song, 2007). However, several authors noted that such workshops are not well attended if they are not part of a required course.

In addition to developing career collections and offering workshops, some other forms of informal collaboration happen due to personal contacts and include training career counsellors in using library databases, on-site consultations with the team, participation in Career Affairs programmes, attending meetings with industry representatives, and setting a booth at Career fairs. Such collaboration is seen as low priority and irregular when it is not part of strategic priorities.

The literature suggests that librarians explore new avenues and become more active in promoting our educational role and forming partnerships with non-academic units. We identify potential campus partners that are strategically aligned and actively cultivate opportunities to collaborate and share expertise. Career Centres are now perceived as key allies. It is not always clear to campus partners, but the academic library can add value to students' learning experiences and contribute to their future job placement success. Empowering students with career research skills, offering them resources for finding a job, training for tests, or building soft skills are the ways that the library can prepare students for the next phase: employment, graduate studies, business venture, or other kind of life journey. Partnership with the Career Centre aligns well with the library's strategic mission. It increases the visibility of library resources and helps to attract students who normally do not think of libraries outside of academic coursework (Hollister, 2005). Such collaboration "strengthens the quality of services for each entity and provides greater access to information for students" (Quenoy & Orgeron, 2003, p. 10).

The present case suggests an innovative approach to collaboration with Career Services. We go beyond the traditional concept of career resource sharing and co-curricular instruction into offering students a unique way to connect with alumni as resources for career preparation support. Based on mutual interest in developing students' employability through this project, both the library and the Career Centre contributed to the empowerment of students, and ultimately, to organizational success.

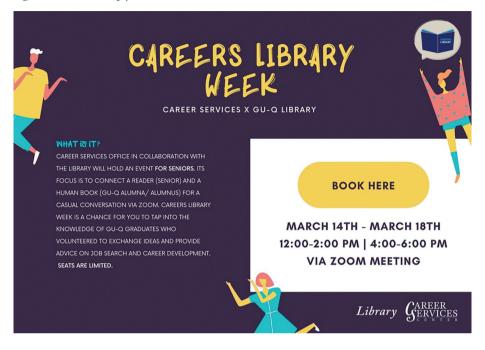## 3. Careers Library Collaborative Project

3.1. Purpose

Careers Library, a new outreach project aimed at students seeking career support, was launched March 15th–18th, 2021. It was offered only to university seniors, who are about to enter the job market, so they have concerns distinct from other undergraduates. The purpose of the event was to prepare senior students to be successful in their future job search and increase their employability. Careers Library was inspired by the concept of the Human Library. Applied in the university setting, the event's focus was to promote the dialogue related to career success instead of the original concept – reducing bias and prejudice. In this project, we created a safe space for a conversation between a "reader" – a senior set to graduate, and a "human book" – a GU-Q alumnus, for an exchange of ideas, sharing of experience, and career advice.

3.2. Design and Implementation

The collaboration between the library and the Career Services Centre started two months before the event. The initiative came from the library, so the onus of developing the concept and explaining the benefit was on the librarian. The goal of the project was to empower seniors with knowledge and useful tips on job search and career development. After buy-in from the Career Services Centre, a meeting was held to brainstorm ideas and discuss the desired outcomes, the choice of participants, dates, and logistics of the event. We agreed to run a pilot project as an experiment. The GU-Q Alumni Office was contacted to help us identify a cohort of alumni to serve as "human books". As a satellite campus of a US university, Georgetown University in Qatar is relatively small, accounting for about 400 students, and so far, it has graduated 700 students since its opening. The Alumni office came up with a list of 25 past graduates that were a good fit for our pilot: 2–3 years of a successful career in the areas of future professional aspirations for seniors, a good balance of subject expertise, and an equal representation of gender.

An invitation letter then was sent to the selected alumni in mid-February with a one-week deadline to reply. The five alumni that responded were
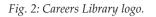
Fig. 1: Careers Library poster.

enrolled in the project. The alumni volunteers filled in a Google form, where they provided their "book" name and a short description, and also indicated availability for two-three half-hour time slots for the week of March 15th.

The promotion of the event was completely digital, consisting of a website and email announcements. The Career Services office created a web catalogue of "books" (https://sites.google.com/georgetown.edu/careerslibrary-week/home), designed e-posters (Figure 1), and contacted Communications to ensure media coverage.

The University graphic designer created a custom logo (Figure 2), which was used persistently for the event's communication.

A week before the event, the librarian and the Career Centre counsellor held a briefing session for alumni via Zoom. We let the "books" meet each other, explained the project goals, structure, and logistics of the event, presented the

Fig. 2: Careers Library logo.

rules of behaviour and left ample time for Q&A. The same day, March 7th, seniors received an email inviting them to participate in the event as "readers", and to check the online catalogue of alumni and reserve a half-hour appointment with a "book" of their choice. Only one meeting per student was allowed due to the limited number of alumni, so we opened only ten spots for "readers". A Google calendar was created with slots available for reservations, and the whole event happened online due to Covid restrictions. Each bookable slot had a unique Zoom link that was emailed to participants three days before the meeting together with behaviour guidelines. The week-long event was launched on March 15th, and each alumnus had two meetings booked with seniors. One of the organizers joined each meeting for the first minute to make introductions, and then logged off but stayed on call to assist in case participants ran into problems.

Since each student has a unique career aspiration, we planned for an individual pairing of students with alumni. "Books" offered personalized advice on job opportunities in their professional sectors and gave tips on preparing for an interview. They also highlighted skills to put on a CV and advised on how to leverage academic experience to the needs of recruiters.

3.3. Evaluation

At the end of the Careers Library week, participants were contacted and asked for feedback. A Google form was used to evaluate the organization and outcomes of the project as well as to learn about students' information needs and concerns in terms of preparedness for the job market. The feedback form comprised eight questions, a mix of closed-ended questions for participants to rate their experience on a 5-point Likert scale, followed by four open-ended questions to elicit more detailed comments from "books" and "readers" on the reason they decided to sign up for the event, important things they learned during the conversations and improvements they wanted to suggest for the future programme. Half of the alumni and 60% of seniors submitted their responses. Later, the librarian met with the Career Centre counsellor to discuss the feedback and assess the project's success and failures. The quantitative and qualitative data was analysed to understand participants' sentiments about the event, determine factors of success and obtain actionable insights.

The findings confirmed that the pilot was a worthwhile initiative that had a beneficial impact on the participants. Except for a few constructive comments related to the logistics of the event, the overall feedback was very positive with a high-level satisfaction. Students' supportive comments included: "Great initiative!", "Thanks for this opportunity, I really appreciated my chat with the alumnus!", "Thank you for organizing this valuable event." From the survey, we learned that "Talking with someone who has been through the process", "Similarity to the career path that I will be undertaking", and "Understanding their career experience and the method through which they found themselves a stable career" were the primary motivators for students to participate in the event. Seniors also commented that topics on how to find the career that's right and how to reach out to potential employers and companies, "expand market base for jobs", "navigate the senior year at Georgetown" and pursue post-grad opportunities were of utmost importance to them as "readers". Students expressed appreciation when alumni suggested useful books and articles to read. From the feedback, the library gained valuable insights into the information and skill development needs of seniors and promptly sent a link to an e-document connecting students with relevant information on resources, test preparation materials, and useful services for future reference. Even though the connection between seniors and past graduates was at the heart of this programme, the library capitalized

on the opportunity to "sow the seeds" at a time when participating students were driven to learn about library resources and services. It is hard to measure what materials they used, but it was the right time to publicize the content intended to meet their needs.

4. Lessons Learned

Carrying out this low-stakes event benefitted both the Library and the Career Centre. The collaborative initiative was well received by the participants and succeeded in accomplishing its goal. Careers Library "readers" came voluntarily and were proactive in seeking information and soliciting career guidance that would make them more competitive in the job market. The library staff managed to reach out to seniors that rarely step into the library and proactively market relevant content to them. Greater awareness of students' information needs will be used to offer additional workshops to current students on the topics of interest. The Career Centre found a new creative way to carry out its mission, and for alumni, it was a great opportunity to give back to their alma mater and offer assistance that was well-received and appreciated.

Moreover, the pilot results back up the findings of the US academic libraries' survey that affirmed the top three benefits of collaboration with non-academic departments: "broader awareness of library services, a positive reputation, and a better ability to break down campus silos and build relationships" (Wainwright & Davidson, 2017, p. 122). The Careers Library project has undeniably strengthened the library's reputation, built connections with senior students, put the library in close contact with campus non-academic units, and allowed librarians to contribute to career education programmes.

The major lessons learned from this initiative were:

1) Expanding library outreach beyond traditional information literacy instruction and developing an extracurricular project in partnership with another department was advantageous. Focusing on students' needs helped both parties to fully engage in the collaborative project from the very beginning. Career Services' help with planning and logistics, their input on the event organization, assistance in setting

participants' expectations, and lead in the marketing campaign were invaluable in making the pilot successful.

2) Including the Alumni office in the pilot was also beneficial as they helped to leverage the alumni network in finding suitable "books" for senior students.

3) Starting small paid off. Our objective was to learn how to put the event together and what would be required before going large-scale. We set attainable expectations for a two-month timeline to prepare and run the Careers Library. It was of no cost to both departments but required other resources. Time constraints were probably our biggest challenge. Although, it is not easy to fit a new initiative into already busy schedules, creating a project plan, setting deadlines, and keeping a regular line of communication was essential in accomplishing the tasks and running the programme.

The survey findings confirmed the usefulness of the initiative and highlighted areas for improvement. In the future, the number of participants should be increased, although limiting the "book" count to 10 alumni is sensible. It was also suggested to bring professionals from industries proportionate to the number of students in each major. Since alumni from business and consultancy fields happened to be booked first and fast, including more of them in the "book" catalogue could be taken into consideration. Starting the work on the project at least three months before the event would be necessary to give enough time for advertising and other preparations.

For future events, the same format: virtual 1-on-1 meetings (30 minutes each) spread over a week and two meetings per alumnus, is suggested. Offering the event online carries the convenience of connecting with graduates who are dispersed around the world. However, there is an advantage to an in-person briefing session for the alumni who are in town as it enables them to reconnect, rekindle a sense of belonging to the university and enhance the joy of giving by being part of the cohort that shares advice and wisdom with seniors.

5. Conclusion

As academia continues to evolve in the 21st century, it is crucial for the future of academic libraries to extend outreach and actively engage in collaborations with campus partners. For academic libraries to stay relevant, "the librarian's

instructional efforts should not stop at the "classroom door" (Song, 2007, p. 320). The Careers Library event is a perfect example of the library's proactive approach to seeking and cultivating collaborative opportunities beyond information literacy instruction. Our project fits well into the framework of library outreach and contributes to students' academic experience. Providing more diverse programming is an important step in educating the whole student. The case of the library collaboration with the Career Services Centre proved to be a positive experience, as it made other stakeholders see the library as an innovator and affirmed our role as a strategic partner to non-academic campus constituencies. The Careers Library initiative aligns well with the ACRL Plan for Excellence (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2022) "to promote the impact and value of academic and research libraries to the higher education community."

The Georgetown University in Qatar library has built a powerful partnership based on the mutual goal of preparing students to be successful in their future careers. The programme emphasized shared knowledge, and even though the major guidance came from alumni, the library played its part by directing students to the right tools and collections helpful in their pursuit of knowledge. Learning about student information needs helped the library decide on additional workshops to offer, and also, turned Career Centre staff into library advocates promoting relevant library services to their clientele.

The success of such an extra-curricular service opportunity should not be overlooked. The event can be broadened to include students from other years of studies, and hopefully, the programme can be easily replicated in other academic institutions.

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