Defining and Redefining Outreach to Special Populations: Stop over thinking it

(Slide 1) When I entered graduate school back in 2009, the major theme throughout my training was the long-tail and echoing resonance of librarians needing to adapt to the changing environment in which we practice. At that time, we were still dealing with the increased importance of digital literacy, and the changing information landscape. Today, despite comfortably embracing most new technologies, skills, and literacies, we live in a time of constant disruption and, I argue, an artificial impetus to change. I remember reading essays by former ALA president Michael Gorman decrying the coming of the "Blog People", laughing at his conservatism, and wondering if the profession was as forward-looking as I had been told. I think the intervening years, I have seen, read, and heard more than enough to understand that librarians are indeed forward thinking, creative, and invested in the future of the profession. I wonder, however, if Gorman was, as much as I hate to say it, right. Do we as a profession have a tendency to jump too far too fast? I obviously cannot answer this question for anyone but myself, and this is what I intend to present to you today. Through this presentation, I hope to illustrate how the tendency to dig into a disruption model can set our practice outside of the need from our users.

(Slide 2) The University of Maryland, like other large universities has been developing ways of allowing students to form cohorts and communities of learning by creating programs that focus their attention on a particular discipline and provide a shared living space through a residential hall specifically for that program. Making a large school a little smaller. Living, you see, and *learning*. UMD currently has 19 programs across a very wide spectrum of project, research, and commitment levels. As you can see from the names of these programs, they range from community humanitarian projects, humanities projects, areas within the fine arts, cyber

security, and advanced engineering and biomedical research. As the outreach librarian, this clustering creates an interesting challenge in creating any semblance of standardized programming —an early goal in this project. Additionally, each of these groups requires a different capstone, thesis, or some other culminating project —each with little relation to another. One group, for example may have as its final requirement a group-humanitarian trip with a reflection journal as the final project, while another group requires a deep and thorough scientific justification for the application of a new medical device complete with a market analysis and a working prototype. Finally, each of these groups differ in the coursework required and therefore each students' time within the group is dependent on this structure. Some groups require about 2 years of part-time coursework, for example, while others require a full four-year commitment and are structured almost like graduate-level benchmarks.

Given this broad spectrum under one banner, it was difficult to approach a these programs with any sort of unified programming. (Slide 3) My approach to any project like this, however, starts with breaking everything into base parts. While the programs themselves varied quite a bit, there were elements that could be isolated. These specific elements would then be the foundation on which to develop outreach ideas. Firstly, each of these programs supplanted the standard university-introduction course that other students are required to take. Within each of the living and learning programs, early coursework would cover basics of time management, scheduling, and other study skills. That said, however, the libraries have a foothold in the UNIV100 course, the standard course for general students, but we did not have a presence in these specialized offerings. Secondly, each of these programs is residential and has, as a common element, the courses, faculty, and fellow-students being self-contained. Thirdly, despite the

variance of the projects and requirements, each group has at its heart a capstone research experience.

(Slide 4) With these elements set aside, I began to develop what I called a "service template" for these programs that would both satisfy our larger instruction goals as well as fit the specific needs and makeup of these Living and Learning programs. It was important to me in developing these goals to hew as closely to the aims of the Living and Learning project as possible. In other words, my guiding mission in developing this outreach programming was to find the areas of connection between both the library's mission and offerings, and those of the university's Living and Leaning program.

The first step, however, was out of my office and into the offices of the programs. I've found in my experience as an outreach librarian, that the most important activity we can take is that casual first step over to a program or department so administrators can get to know you as a person as well as a librarian. I'm not going to spend much time on this section as it amounts to a strange lesson on how to make friends, but the main idea is to find as much common ground as possible. One thing that I learned from these conversations was that the administration was not typically given much guidance on how to run these immense programs, which was helpful as I learned that there was some flexibility in what we could do, and that they would appreciate the help I could provide.

As I mentioned above, the push for new and better was sitting at the back of my mind — that plus the anxieties and imposter syndrome feelings of the first year at a new job. Back in my office I concocted a multi-stage, two-year, outreach and development plan which added an increasing level of service to an increasing number of living and learning programs throughout this two year process. I was applying a growth model as if I was seeking investments from these

groups. This is actually an important point that I will return to, in libraries we are often directed towards profit models for program development, but without the actual accrual of funds, growth becomes quickly unsustainable as the project scales. That all said, the plan was carefully developed alongside my partner, the head of the teaching and learning services department, and was approved up the line. The first steps of this program would be to offer an introductory workshops aimed at first year students, an advanced research workshop aimed at the students nearing their capstone project, and a block of office hours set aside where I would provide research consultations in their residential building.

I presented my plan to the programs I believed I had developed a good relationship with and the ones that I was most interested in working with. Out of that initial list, I started working with the groups Design, Cultures, and Creativity and Honors Humanities. We worked out a scheme for me to offer 2 workshops and provide office hours for the students in their residential buildings. As with the program initiatives established in their values and mission, it was my hope to be there for the students where and when they would need the most help. Students within the honors college have a high course-load and often many extracurriculars and therefore I wanted to find a way to be helpful for these students in a direct way.

(Slide 5) I forgot obtain permissions from our IRB early in this project, so I'm not technically allowed to share my data with you, that said, no humans were harmed during this project and I'm not going to be presenting the specifics, so I think I'll be okay. I ran the office hours for two semesters. For both programs I was given space to set-up and the graduate assistants helped me spread-the-word using their normal communications with students to urge them to visit me. Most of the time, however, I was sitting and twiddling-my-thumbs. I had a small number of students visit the office hours and these sessions were great. I was able to sit

with these students one-on-one for at least an hour and work through their research questions, develop research strategies, and help define their overall project goals. I was lucky to gain the blessing of the program administrators in that they trusted me to help guide their students in a robust way. As a humanist (which is the other side of my life), I was especially happy to help the Honors Humanities students and a few unfortunate/ fortunate souls were even working on topics within my research areas, so they got more than they bargained for, surely. The office hours were a great opportunity for me to work very closely with the students and have a real hand in the goings-on within the department and according to the assessment I was running, the students were mostly happy with the service. The problem was, however, very few students showed up. This wasn't sustainable as an outreach model because while there may have been some value in offering it, the cost was too high to keep it going, at least on my own.

Whenever I talk to colleagues or scan through the outreach and instruction literature, the same conclusion tends to follow: programmatic and administrative support but students don't care. This is a known-issue for most outreach librarians. How do we convince busy 20 somethings to stop having fun and come read with us for a bit? There is a moment of reckoning, I think for all of us in this field when we realize that not everybody is built like us. Char Booth sets this out very nicely in her terrific *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning* by describing this problem as a "curse of knowledge." As educators, we value and hold dear a whole litany of beliefs, interests, and goals that the majority of students will not, at this stage in their development, truly consider. Some will, most won't. This notion coupled with our internal drive towards the new and the better leads to burnout rather quickly. As Fobazi Ettarh (Fo – Baz- e) et-tar) recently wrote, we are in a profession with constant job-creep, low pay, and high-internal pressure for change. It is this last point that I think I can address with this project.

At the end of the last semester, I reflected on my 2-year plan, my assessment of the programs, and on the future of the various partnerships. While I was running the programs for the above-mentioned Living and Learning programs, I was also planning and developing new partnerships, new programs, and additional service elements to include in the increasing robust service template. I was pushing hard to improve, to change, and to innovate service beyond, as it happens, what the users actually needed. This was an internal pressure —meaning both personal and within the libraries— brought on by fear of decreased relevance; a fear I believe to which we can all relate. Approaching this project, I brought with me the baggage from other projects that often suffered from the problem of diminishing returns. The more effort the libraries put into developing and maintaining a partnership, the less real partnership we would get back. Therefore, to combat this, I was attempting to find ways, through new service, of staving off this inevitable point, the unfortunate nexus of effort-over-returns.

(Slide 6) To close the loop on the initial program cycle, I met with the Living and Learning administrators to discuss the results of my assessment project looking at the workshops and office hours. What became clear in this conversation was that they were mostly interested in more traditional library instruction and services. I had been pushing for new and better services, when I should have been focusing on improving what was already in-place. The problems were two-fold: 1) the types of programming, with an emphasis on data management, visualization, and various aspects of data storage practices were, essentially, handled elsewhere 2) they saw the value of the library being the more traditional skills we help teach. In other words, they understood the value of the libraries for the students, but they didn't want us to expand beyond more traditional confines. This was obviously a little frustrating as I, along with many other librarians want to move beyond what we often think of as rather rudimentary practices. That

said, this was a valuable lesson in seeing our role from the users' perspective and one I think is worth discussing with fellow outreach librarians. Thinking again about Char Booth's notion of the "curse of knowledge," I had assumed that the users were as tired of the same traditional library services as I was. This was not necessarily the case. With this information, I have changed the service template to reflect the successes of the project as well as the needs of the departments I'm working with. The emphasis now will be on increasing the branding of the partnership by having a more robust presence in the groups' webspaces including their main webpage and learning management system, providing a variety of workshops directly tailored to the specific programs and involving subject librarians with diverse specialties, and being available for student consolations without directly providing office hours.

There are two common approaches to outreach for programs like this. One is to have fun-events in the library to increase awareness of the building and services and the other is to develop targeted academic programming. This is something of a personality test as outreach librarians tend to fall into one or the other category. Personally, I fall on the side of boring academic programing and this is admittedly sometimes a fault. A mistake in either approach, as I see it, is the fall into the innovation and disruption trap as a result. I mentioned Michael Gorman at the beginning of this talk and I'm bringing up his name again as a device to recall the conservative framework I was outlining above. While assessment and accountability are vitally important in our ever-expanding portfolio of duties, we should use the opportunity that reflection and evaluation provide to ask difficult questions such as: Who are the innovations for? Do we push ourselves to remain relevant to our users, or as a result of an internal competition? While the results of this particular experiment are singular and cannot be extrapolated far beyond the context I've outlined, I think it's important as we look towards developing and defining outreach

goals, to question the true value of various partnerships, programs, and initiatives and to question

the motives that lie behind the push for improvement.