

**Ingredient X: Fostering Interdepartmental Relationships Using
Library Instruction and Programming**

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Abstract

Academic librarianship is a field that asks its practitioners to continuously stretch their skills and push their limits. Yet while the job requires flexibility, the institutions in which we work are frequently rigid and siloed. Not only is this evident between individual departments spread across campus, but even library departments. This article follows the attempts of two librarians at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to forge a meaningful, collaborative, and mutually beneficial relationship with another campus department. Using collaboration theory as a framework, the article aligns the principles of collaboration with the establishment of an embedded librarian program and a student support program at UL Lafayette. The work demonstrates that through increasing adaptability, forming personal connections, and prioritizing shared missions, true collaboration can be achieved, which establishes a symbiosis that elevates and amplifies library initiatives.

Keywords: undergraduate research experience, collaboration theory, academic librarianship, interdepartmental relationships, library outreach, library instruction, embedded librarianship

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Edith Garland Dupré Library (EGDL) has served students and their research needs long before the University's Research 1 Carnegie Classification in 2021. In addition to the research support provided by EGDL, the University's Quality Enhancement Plan established in 2020 created the Student Center for Research, Creativity, and Scholarship (SCRCS). SCRCS is the central hub for the implementation of the Advance Student Research Experience Pathways Program (ASRE Pathways). Pathways focuses on developing research skills and experiences for undergraduate students. Conveniently nestled in the front entrance of EGDL, SCRCS attracts an interdisciplinary array of undergraduate students. Due to its proximity both physically and academically to the library, EGDL librarians were presented with a valuable opportunity for collaboration.

Using Gajda's (2004) collaboration theory as the framework for analyzing the authors' concerted effort at building a relationship with SCRCS through the implementation of various programs, this article will act as an informal case study in interdepartmental collaborations. While certainly grounded in extant practices in academic librarianship including embedded librarianship and student engagement, this text focuses primarily on the case of EGDL and SCRCS and thus will focus on the history of and between the two departments in lieu of a formal literature review.

Building a Relationship

Before the fall of 2023, only two EGDL librarians were shouldering the weight of a small but thriving embedded librarian program. With limited staffing to increase synchronous instruction, the instruction team set out to build its asynchronous services

through embedded librarianship. This would increase the visibility and reach of the library by providing asynchronous support with a librarian embedded directly in a course's online activities. But there was one problem: EGDL faculty had just voted to dismantle its defunct subject liaison program in favor of a rotating faculty outreach group. Subject librarians being the most natural path to embedding in courses, the team was unsure of how to fill this gap without effectively re-instituting a subject librarian program it had just decided did not work for the library.

At the same time, SCRCs was launching the ASRE Pathways program, (or simply, Pathways). As part of the university's Quality Enhancement Plan, Pathways was a means to formalize the research experiences, course-embedded and co-curricular, students and faculty at UL Lafayette already engaged in, as well as encourage the growth of more. Much like an honors program, students elect to participate in Pathways and promise to fulfill certain curricular requirements and research-focused tasks, such as attending and presenting at conferences, attending SCRCs-administered workshops, and working on faculty research projects. Upon completion of the program requirements, students receive a designation on their transcript indicating their participation in a research-intensive undergraduate program.

That fall semester, SCRCs launched the Pathways program with students from five majors eligible to enroll: architecture and design, biology, history, psychology, and chemical engineering. This presented the perfect opportunity to make progress on two library goals: (1) to forge a working relationship with SCRCs and (2) to increase EGDL visibility through course-embedded librarians. The first principle of collaboration theory

attests that “collaboration is an imperative,” meaning no one organization can fully realize its mission on its own (Gajda, 2004, p.67). Thus, not only did the authors intend to form a working relationship with an outside department, they needed to. Moreover, Knapp, Rowland, and Charles (2014) suggest focusing embedding efforts on “high value” courses, so targeting course-embedded undergraduate research experiences seemed to be a strategic move (p. 136).

Until that time, the relationship between EGDL and SCRCs was cordial at best. Issues between the two departments of funding and space made for a tenuous beginning to what could have been a fruitful partnership. With such an increase in funding and attention being poured into SCRCs, to increase EGDL visibility and success would undoubtedly mean forging a positive working relationship with the department. With a mission and a pitch, the instruction team met with SCRCs in the fall of 2023 to gain more insight into the Pathways program and discuss possible options and approaches to a collaborative relationship.

The offer was this: each and every course in a Pathways curriculum would receive a librarian embedded in their course. The director was enthusiastic, but the strained relationship between departments remained prevalent. Even when provided with template materials, the director failed to prioritize our initiative and advertise it appropriately. So, the team shifted to another, more direct approach.

The following spring, the EGDL instruction team recruited one reference and two technical services librarians willing to stretch their skills into instruction. Each librarian was provided with an embedded librarian toolkit that included contact information for

faculty teaching on the Pathways curricula, a template for offering services, and a week-by-week lesson plan for providing asynchronous instruction alongside the course's contents. The goal was to make these added duties as seamless as possible to encourage cross-department participation throughout the library. It would also standardize the quality and style of our embedded offerings, which would begin to form the program's reputation.

Rather than rely upon SCRCS, each of the five participating librarians became responsible for contacting faculty in their assigned programs. This effort resulted in three librarians embedding in six courses. Whereas embedded services were previously only utilized by UL Lafayette's nursing department, the library's reach spread to three totally new departments. While this reflected a less than 10% success rate compared to outreach effort, the team was strongly encouraged by even this small foothold.

Moreover, SCRCS noticed these efforts. Where in the fall, the director was enthusiastic but trepidatious, by the following year, the instruction team was the recipient of consistent shoutouts and requests for further collaboration. In fall 2024, when Pathways expanded from 5 eligible disciplines to 27, the small team was able to stretch its reach farther than ever and its embed success rate improved from 7% to 11%.

This continued growth would not have been possible without the Pathways program providing the team its own readymade pathway to outreach. The curricula they developed removed the intellectual labor of developing an action plan and provided a framework for expanding the embedded program at a manageable rate. Attaching efforts to another program also meant the team was never alone, and Pathways has now become almost

synonymous with the library. Marshall and Wagner (2019) propose student research as a threshold concept—concepts that are transformative and not only require but induce seeing the world around you in a new light (Meyer & Land, 2005). Through this program, the library has injected valuable insight into undergraduate research experiences and hopefully made an impact on their transformative efforts, as well as improving the perception of the library across campus.

This collaborative effort has increased visibility for both departments' missions and services, resulting in a mutually beneficial partnership that lays the groundwork for other such relationships. Knapp, Rowland, and Charles (2014) recommend “thinking strategically about relationships and positioning the library as a problem-solver and a resource,” a reputation the instruction team now boldly boasts (p. 136).

Yet, the embedded librarian program did not stand on its own. As part of the university's mission to increase undergraduate research activities, SCRCs provides funding opportunities made to incentivize the pursuit of research for undergraduate students. Two EGDL librarians (the authors of this article) pursued these funds for library programming that supports undergraduate research. With this endeavor, the commitment to supporting and collaborating with the Pathways program and SCRCs was doubled. Thus, DUPRExPATHWAYS was born.

Building a Program

With the departmental connection established, the team could now focus on one of the most quintessential aspects of our jobs: creating stronger ties with our students. The Pathways program provided a ready-made group of students who have already committed

to a curriculum of intensified undergraduate research. To two librarians conditioned to limited time with primarily lower-level classes, this was an incredible opportunity.

The initial proposal was a simple one. Given the proper funding, the library would provide Pathways students with multiple research events throughout the semester. This proposed program was meant to expand upon the existing connection between SCRCs, the Pathways program, and EGD. The library would host multiple events during the Spring 2024 semester, exclusive to students enrolled in the Pathways program. Each two-hour event would provide one-on-one, undivided research assistance. The main goals were to offer low pressure interactions with faculty members to build the students' confidence in working more closely with professors, mentors, and future employers and to further present the Pathways program as exciting, beneficial, and achievable. The hope was also that by holding events in the library, usage of our regular library services might increase.

The proposed program was first titled VIPathways to highlight the exclusive nature of the events. Upon the acceptance of the proposal and a granted allotment of up to \$5,000 in funds, the team changed the name of the program to its current title of DUPRExPATHWAYS (DxP), which embodies collaboration using trendy language. Moreover, this change exhibits the second principle of collaboration theory: "collaboration is known by many names" (Gajda, 2004, p. 68). Today, this simple "x" indicates a crossbreed or collaboration between two entities. With the name solidified, the team started its brainstorming process, featuring meandering lists of ideas strewn messily across multiple whiteboards and many afternoons attempting to learn Gen Z lingo. Snacks, swag, and door prizes were planned strategically to best serve all of the Pathways students and provide

the highest level of encouragement for attendance.

Two major incentives were provided: good food and good prizes. The team made major orders for boxes of popular chips, cookies, and candies in bulk to last the entire semester. In addition to edible reinforcement, the team created back-to-school swag bags: pencil bags filled with notepads, pens, fidget toys, bookmarks, and the hosts' business cards to encourage students to contact their librarians directly with any research questions. Swag incorporated the DXP logo with the addition of self-printed labels on notebooks and pencil bags.

Kicking off the program was the Spring 2024 Welcome Back Mixer. The team chose the library's second floor as the event location, providing an ideal, open space for mingling, networking, and visibility. This was an evening event, which may have helped facilitate such a large number of attendees. Because this was the first event, the hosts wanted to provide multiple spaces for attendees to interact with other Pathways students, encouraging conversations across disciplines. Using items from EGDL's Library of Things, setup included a video game console and projection screen, a photo backdrop, food and drink tables, and a door prize display station. While one group of students snacked on pizza and candy, another group battled each other in a Mortal Kombat tournament. While promoting items available for checkout, the event also facilitated low-stress connections between ourselves and the students.

Over the semester, the program consisted of a total of six events. Each was marketed as a research-focused meeting with the ability for Pathways students to get individualized research assistance. Emails blasted to the students, with a focus on

marketing not only the specialized help but also the snacks and giveaways. While the incentives did help to grow interest in the events, the idea was also to create a student-centered focus that met their needs holistically. College students notoriously struggle financially, so students always left with leftover snacks and treats.

The research events allowed us to create face-to-face connections with the Pathways students. The hosts began to match names with faces, and the students consistently recognized their librarians as part of their network of support. Simultaneously, the program increased visibility of library spaces and services, build upon our existing relationship with SCRCs, and further grew an interdisciplinary cohort of bright minds.

Assessing and Continuing

With the first year of DxP nearly under our belts, the team felt ready to reflect and plan. The third principle of collaboration theory states, “collaboration is a journey not a destination,” so the hosts very much assessed the program from a standpoint of continued improvement (Gajda, 2004, p. 68). Across six events, the program hosted 154 attendees, many of which were repeat students with whom the hosts have now built lasting relationships. With only 68 students enrolled in Pathways at the outset of the spring semester—and knowing how difficult attracting attention and attendees can be, especially when establishing a new program series—the team considers this a huge win and have a lot of hope for the future of DxP.

At the close of the spring semester, a survey was conducted via email to all event attendees using Microsoft Forms asking nine questions:

1. Are you a student in the ASRE Pathways program?

2. [If no] How likely are you to join the ASRE Pathways program?
3. How did you hear about DUPRExPATHWAYS?
4. Select all DUPRExPATHWAYS events you attended [from a provided list].
5. Rate your overall satisfaction with DUPRExPATHWAYS events.
6. How important were DUPRExPATHWAYS events to your experience of the ASRE Pathways program?
7. How likely are you to attend DUPRExPATHWAYS events in the future?
8. What were your favorite parts of the DUPRExPATHWAYS events?
9. What suggestions do you have for future DUPRExPATHWAYS events?

The survey reached 130 students but received only 8 responses. As such, the team is also considering ways to improve assessment and response collection. Yet, the small response received still provided valuable information.

The team was able to determine that students discovered the programs from a variety of sources: professors, friends, email blasts, social media, and even physical flyers. Thus, a wide variety of marketing methods should remain in place. Every respondent rated satisfaction with events at a four or above when asked to rate satisfaction on a five-point Likert scale. Respondents remarked that the events were fun, encouraged de-stressing from their studies, gave them an opportunity to network with other Pathways scholars, and enjoyed working with the hosting librarians. Having received those last two points, the hosts were convinced that the model worked, achieving exactly the goals outlined in the initial program proposal.

Suggestions from respondents included hosting events in more visible areas of the

library, hosting specialized events for different disciplines, and creating opportunities for students to share their research ideas with each other. Every suggestion echoed an idea the team has already considered, providing encouragement and fuel to continue DXP into the next semester and apply for renewed funding.

The fourth principle of collaboration theory states, “the personal is as important as the procedural,” and after receiving numerous compliments, support, and appreciation from the SCRCs team, the team was reassured that the library’s relationship with SCRCs became not just a working one but a personal one (Gajda, 2004, p. 69). They were impressed by the quality of the programming, the breadth of its impact, and the feedback from students. When a new Request for Proposals was released by SCRCs the following year, the hosts were assured that if they wanted to continue the program, they could. Heading into a new funding cycle, the team considered the fifth principle of collaboration theory, “collaboration develops in stages,” and thus, how to sustain the program’s current impact and build it (Gajda, 2004, p. 69).

Whereas the program first started in a spring semester, when the team’s instructional load is lighter, how to keep DXP manageable during an instructionally busy fall semester was a valid consideration. The hosts pared down the offerings for regular monthly programming and returned the focus to research, offering monthly office hours where students could drop in, grab a snack, and chat research. This allows the hosts to amp up the “special” programming at the beginning and end of the semesters as well as focus on bigger ideas. Since SCRCs hosts an undergraduate research conference every fall, the team hopes to host a mini-conference in the spring. As the program grows in

impact and complexity, the partnership with SCRCs is strengthened.

Conclusion

The process of building DXP was a case study in developing and nurturing an interdepartmental relationship. While library faculty had previously applied for SCRCs's equipment grants, which grants funds solely for purchasing instructional tools, no one had ever applied for their faculty grant, which asks faculty to engage directly with students and support the department's mission of increasing undergraduate research activities. According to Gajda (2004), "collaboration has become both the vehicle...and a long-term outcome in and of itself" (p.66). Because EGDL librarians were willing to take a risk and stretch their duties and capabilities to include marketing, event planning and hosting, and effective student advising, EGDL librarians, and in turn the library, have gained a reputation as ones who get things done, who are creative, who are collaborators, and who are experts in actively engaging students.

The lesson here is to think well beyond what librarians can and should do—how we define the job. We all have unique expertise and special interests but are also incredibly multi-talented and creative. Enforcing the divide between departments and job descriptions could be keeping valuable opportunities for growth and connection from blossoming. The added support of one reference and two technical services librarians to the modest instruction team was invaluable for implementing EGDL's embedded librarian program. Because the team was able to offer services to the entire program and not just a fraction, the library won the trust and support of its partners at SCRCs. And while instruction and outreach frequently overlap and intertwine, the willingness of the authors

to stretch their skills and take responsibility for planning and executing an entire event series made the library more visible, accessible, and thoroughly bolstered the relationship developing with SCRCs.

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