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# The Importance of Library: Outreach Opportunities for the Christian Librarian

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# The Importance of Library

## Outreach Opportunities for the Christian Librarian

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Success in life and academics requires students learn how to carefully select and use information. In addition to traditional reference interviews, librarians also have the opportunity to plan timely and engaging programs that will help students learn how to successfully engage with information in a relevant way.

As a librarian in an academic institution, I am increasingly concerned by the onslaught of books and articles that bemoan the current state of intellectual inquiry and intelligence of our nation's people. After reading the works of Carr (2008), Shenkman (2008), and Jacoby (2008) I feel more than a little uneasy with the direction our nation is heading. What is a concerned citizen and alarmed information professional to do? Is there an opportunity for me to play a role in the reclamation of intellectualism and critical thinking amongst the students who attend the college where I work; in other words, can I make a difference?

I have the privilege of working with a group of gifted, God-loving young adult men and women on a daily basis. These students are making life choices of the utmost importance; they are negotiating life by asking questions of faith, self-worth, and profession. I care for these people as individuals and am concerned with the direction they will lead our society. They are, after all, the future agents of Godly change for this nation and world.

As an information professional, I am well aware of the breadth of resources available and the continual onslaught of information from a wide variety of reliable, and not so reliable, resources. All of these messages and social norms, whether positive or negative, founded or unfounded, come together to influence and direct us. Part of the ongoing educational experience is about learning how to take that information and critically examine its validity. What is more, one must also be able to compare new knowledge against their current understanding of the world and determine whether or not their beliefs work with or against these cultural and intellectual understanding of life. It is only when a person can find information and interact with that information in a productive way that he or she can be an active and productive leader in our society. As an educator in a Christian institution, I have high hopes and prayers for our students; I want each of them to become a God-fearing agent of reconciliation in our society and world. This is a lofty goal and I must do my part in helping them learn how to engage with information in a proactive manner.

I believe one of my roles in this growing process is to provide relevant and thought-provoking programming in the college library. The American library has a history of being both a safe place for inquiry as well as a place citizens can come to learn about the world around them (ALA website). Our library should be a safe place free of grades and judgment where students can find the information they need to continually evaluate their opinions and beliefs. Without this opportunity our students may "run the risk of deifying [their] own opinions" (Shier, 7). Our students should engage with the culture in a way that is constructive to their life choices and faith. A successful citizen and believer is able to "compare new knowledge with prior knowledge [or beliefs] to determine the value added, contradictions, or other unique characteristics of the information" (Standard 3 Number 4). Once this evaluation takes place, the individual is better equipped to either defend or support their stance in an intelligent manner.

As Christians we often come up against new and sometimes theologically dissonant information. I want students to learn how to handle this situation; programming in the library provides someone to help him or her "determine whether the new knowledge has an impact on the individual's value system" while taking

the necessary "steps to reconcile differences" (ACRL, Standard 3 Number 5). An intentional, well-planned library program can help this happen. We can provide information on and a forum for discussion of a number of topics affecting our culture and explore these issues from our specifically Christian worldview. Once the topic is chosen and we present quality information, we can enlist the help of willing faculty and staff to help talk through these issues with the students in a non-graded, unintimidating environment. The library can present information on a particular social topic, facilitate discussion on that topic, and help the student come to a fuller "understanding and interpretation of the information through discourse with other individuals, subject-area experts, and/or practitioners" (ACRL, Standard 3 Number 6).

This dialogue is important because it is only when "a belief system has been internalized through the process of experiment and involvement" that it becomes a reality the student can live out; "[w]hen one has not struggled to gain something, it does not take much to give it up" (Wilkens, 9). Most importantly, when students practice these steps: finding information, accessing its validity, discussing it with knowledgeable individuals, and either rejecting or accepting that information; they grow into adult leaders who can intelligently converse with our culture in a productive manner. Pat Shrier and B.J. Oropeza point out in "Practical Theology: A Bridge Across the Divide?", that "[w]hile scripture is certainly our foundational authority, it does not provide a set of pat, off-the-rack answers to every conceivable situation a Christian will encounter. In such situations, it is useful to have at our disposal a variety of structures or methods that remind us to carefully consider the important historical and current factors as we craft responses that faithfully express God's will" (141). Practicing information literacy skills is one "method" that can help students as they move on in their professional and personal lives.

What does a successful program require of the planning librarians? One example from a previous experience is a program our library hosted on censorship. The librarians determined ALA's Banned Books Week would be a good opportunity to discuss the difference between *self-selection* of materials and *government- supported* censorship. Planning began. First, a librarian compiled definitions of censorship, government documentation concerning the legal aspects of censorship, and examples of censorship in action. This information, along with several internet resources and books from the collection, was put together as a presentation in the main floor lobby of the library. Next, a librarian approached several professors on campus to ask them to participate in a panel discussion and share with students how their Christian Worldview informs their professional position on information.

The make-up of the panel was a librarian, an English professor, an Education professor, and a professional journalist and Communications professor. After each individual had an opportunity to share, the students and staff in attendance were free to ask questions. In addition to the panel planning and the lobby display, a librarian was also responsible for advertising the event (posters, announcements in chapel and in the student and faculty staff newsletter, Facebook event invitation, etc…) and obtaining the snacks to share prior to the panel. This program was a success not only by numbers but because students learned about censorship and engaged in conversation that helped them verbalize their beliefs and the reasons behind these beliefs.

I am encouraged by the opportunities I have in my professional capacity to help students find and engage with information. I am thankful to have the privilege of helping people interact with one another and our nation's culture in a constructive and well- thought manner and encourage each of you to be aware of the opportunities you have in your day to day activities. ✥

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