Collaboration Is Key for a Respected Library Leader

Chris Haeffner has been in the business of teaching for over 20 years. She has served as both an elementary and middle school librarian, and is currently the Director of Library Media Services for Lincoln Public Schools. Chris has also served as an adjunct professor of Young Adult Literature at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, preparing pre-service librarians to model and teach critical thinking skills and to be thoughtful and inclusive curators of library resources. Active in Nebraska’s professional organizations, Chris has served as a board member for both the Nebraska School Librarian Association and the Southeast Library System.

Q: As 21st-century library programs go, yours is considered a leader. How did you get there and become a leader?

A: My dad built every stick of furniture in our house as I was growing up. My mom crafted and quilted and concocted extraordinary Halloween costumes. I married a man who can listen to the sounds of a sick engine, download a manual and tinker with it until it is fixed. By luck or design, I have been surrounded by makers. As a result, when I walk into each new library program, my instinct is always to experiment, tweak and build a program that is continually growing and changing.

Partnered with that, I am incredibly lucky to work with 21st-century library leaders who are truly visionary, who model continual growth and who give me permission to take risks and fail without judgment.

So while I am proud of the library programs that I’ve helped to build, design and re-invent, I know that much of my success as a leader can only be attributed to the good fortune of having great leaders and role models whispering in my ear, encouraging me to make bold decisions and helping me to recognize my voice as a leader.
Q: In your opinion, what sets a traditional librarian apart from a 21st-century leader?
A: I believe our very best librarian leaders are those who are constantly reinventing themselves. They look at changing curriculum, changing school culture and the changing needs of teachers, students and families, and they challenge themselves to recreate their library programs from quarter to quarter, year to year. And while 21st-century library leaders chase innovation, the focus is never change simply for the sake of change. They study their school communities, reflect on the best ways to serve students and plan with intentionality how to infuse inquiry, creativity and critical thinking into all their instructional and program design decisions. The difference between 21st-century library leaders and traditional librarians is that our 21st-century library leaders make themselves and their library programs indispensable. They are the change agents, models of professional learning and fearless innovation.

Q: Is there a moment when you knew you became a leader? What was the “aha” moment?
A: Surely not my first year, but early on, I realized that my program would only change and grow if I took responsibility for it. Transformation doesn’t happen by accident. Innovation won’t grow without intentionality. If I wanted to be a librarian who was essential to the learning in my school community, I had to do the work. It wasn’t so much a moment as a mindset, but I believe I became a leader when I decided that the library programs I worked to build would be instructionally stronger, more collaborative and more essential to the students I serve than they had ever been in the past.

Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?
A: None of us can transform our library programs on our own. For all our grandiose ideas, our success is dependent on an investment by students, teachers, administrators and families. The key is to find the right champion for the right idea or innovation. I have all kinds of great ideas kicking around in my head, but until I find the key collaborator who is willing take the leap with me, my great ideas won’t gain any traction.

I believe 21st-century library leaders must have great marketing skills. They need to know their audience, gauge market demand and be willing to adapt and improve on their ideas until their audience is sold. It takes a healthy balance of tenacity, positive relationship building and realistic expectations.

Finally, great library leaders know how to tell their stories and share their successes, paving the road for future innovation and change. I’m not a natural horn-tooter. I don’t brag about my kids on social media or hang awards on my walls, but if I’m not trumpeting the success stories happening in my library programs, then no one except my champions and collaborators will know the great things happening there. If we want our administrators, teachers and community members to support our 21st-century library programs, they first must know about the incredible teaching and learning opportunities that our library programs provide.

Q: What lessons did you learn from the journey? What’s been the most difficult part?
A: I’ve found that in this business, librarians continually must prove their worth. Exhausting as this becomes, with every new batch of teachers and every fresh set of administrators, our calling demands we advocate for the necessity of our library programs again and again. While this is frustrating, it also serves as a springboard for invention. How can we market our programs better? What services does our community really need us to provide? At what point does our instruction collide with the curriculum, and how do we leverage our common goals? What I’ve learned is that the answers to those questions change with lightning speed, and I have to remind myself that sometimes I have to go slow to go fast. I’m never done moving forward.

Q: Words of encouragement for a struggling librarian who wants to transform his/her program? What ideas can you share?
A: Despite what social media and the glossy magazines might lead us to believe, transformation doesn’t happen overnight. There is no magic “thing” that transforms a library program, with one important exception – collaboration. Developing positive relationships with teachers, administrators and parents in your school is by far the most important thing a librarian can do to change the trajectory of their program. To move innovation forward, a librarian is lost without champions with whom to collaborate.