

INTERVIEWS AND DIALOGUE

Understanding the Role of FYE Resource Centres

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Dr Tracy Skipper is Assistant Director for publications at the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. She holds degrees in psychology, higher education, American literature, and rhetoric and composition. In addition to her writing and editorial work, she has served as a student affairs administrator and taught writing at college level. Her most recent work is the edited collection, *What Makes the First-Year Seminar High Impact? Exploring Effective Educational Practices*.

Introduction

Lebo Mosebua from the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) conducted an interview with Dr Tracy Skipper from the SANRC's U.S.-based partner organisation, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC). Dr Skipper is the assistant director for publications at the NRC. Given the leading role of the NRC in holding and disseminating resources and information about the First-Year Experience (FYE), the SANRC sought ideas about how the NRC's resource centre was built and how it is maintained. This interview focuses on the importance of resource centres, and provides information on how resource centres operate as well as on how to successfully establish one.

Mosebua: Please give us some background information about the NRC and how it was set up, with particular reference to the 'resource' aspect of the centre and how these were gathered.

Skipper: The NRC is housed within the University of South Carolina (USC). It was established as an independent unit in 1986 with a small grant from the state department of higher education. The Center was established under the auspices of an academic programme, the University 101 course at the USC. This academic programme was

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designed to help students entering the university learn how to be successful students and to feel connected to the university. This spurred a series of conferences focusing on the first college year or the initial transition to college.

At the time of the Center's founding, one of the initial goals was to create a literature base on the first year of college. Our initial efforts focused on the founding of an empirical journal, now the *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, and a newsletter focusing on practice. Monographs or books exploring curricular and co-curricular initiatives to support student learning, development and success came later. Those longer publications also looked at groups of students who might be more at risk in the college environment, for example, students with disabilities, non-White students, students who come from economically deprived backgrounds, students with prior military service and LBGQT students.

In the early 1990s, the NRC began looking at the transition out of college, what is called the senior year, and the second college year because we recognised that students were facing some unique challenges during those transition points; the Center has also looked at students who transfer from one institution to another – a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in U.S. higher education. The Center also began to connect with educators in other parts of the world to see how they might come together from sometimes very different educational contexts to address common problems experienced with helping students make a successful transition to higher education.

Additionally, one of the other aspects of our efforts that began early in the Center's history was that we launched a national survey to look at the first-year seminar course – essentially an inventory that described the goals, structure and administration of these courses at institutions across the U.S. That agenda has expanded to include landscape studies of initiatives for sophomore and senior college students and a student-level survey exploring peer support roles. International partnerships are also evident in the International Survey of Peer Leaders (Canada, U.K., Australia/New Zealand and South Africa).

So, I mention these three strands of our work – publications, meetings or professional development events, and research – because I think they are central to how we have defined ourselves as a resource centre. We certainly provide resources through our publications and research. We also see the creation and nurturing of networks of professionals who connect via our conferences and other professional development events or through our electronic email lists as an important resource.

Mosebua: Is there a difference between a resource centre and a library? Do they both serve the same purpose?

Skipper: Yes, in the sense that both might serve as a repository for information, libraries and resources might serve similar purposes. In my mind what distinguishes one from the other is that the resource centre – at least as we have conceived it – is more than just an archive or collection of content on a given topic. We are actively engaged in the creation of that content.

The definition gets fuzzy, especially in U.S. institutions, as we see libraries taking a more active role in curating content – which certainly has a creative function. We are also

seeing some university presses being moved under the direction of libraries, which blurs those lines a bit and, as I mentioned earlier, I see the professional networks that we enable as being an essential part of the “resource” that we provide.

Mosebua: Since the dawning of the digital age, the library has been transformed in its utility and role due to rapid technological advancements. How has technology influenced the way in which the NRC, traditional libraries and resource centres operate?

Skipper: One of the things that we are seeing in libraries in the U.S. – whether we are talking about local, public libraries or college/university libraries – is that as resources are converted from print to digital, the physical space of the library is being transformed. No longer a space for quiet, independent research and study, university libraries are being transformed into true academic meeting places, a centre for reflection and inquiry, and a marketplace for the exchange of ideas. Public libraries are also taking spaces once occupied by books to allow for community gatherings, maker spaces, and social support functions. Libraries are becoming really vibrant centers for individuals, community growth and development.

I think the National Resource Center is really no different. For years, we maintained a physical resource library, and an occasional visiting scholar would make use of that library. But for the most part, it was inaccessible and as more resources became available electronically, it really didn't serve much purpose for folks in our network. So now, we are much less about being a repository of static materials and more a space (both intellectually and physically) for the exchange, interpretation, and advancement of those ideas into practice writ large, into other settings, to affect change, to impact policy, and to advance the larger research agenda. Technology has also broadened our community, making it much easier to exchange information and ideas and share the process of inquiry across countries and the globe. It also is a means to invite the numerous people who fall under the umbrella of FYE work into the movement.

Mosebua: Please briefly highlight some of the major challenges facing libraries and resource centres globally. For example, what are some of the challenges facing the NRC in its work?

Skipper: The information explosion of recent years – so much, so easily available that people may not see the value of the library; they no longer need the library to access information. I think resource centres are challenged by this as well – there are just so many players in the marketplace, and it becomes increasingly difficult to have your message heard. However, libraries and resource centres have an increasingly valuable role in curating that information and helping people evaluate what's out there. At the same time, the sheer volume of information can make effective curation challenging – it requires robust, dynamic technological infrastructure – we're trying to figure out what's the best use of our resources with respect to this moving forward.

As a resource centre, we're not a membership organisation – we're constantly having to re-establish and solidify members of our constituency. Technology obviously helps with this, but getting the information to people who can affect change at all levels

(researchers, practitioners, academic leaders, and policy-makers) is a perennial challenge. One of the ways we've managed this has been through forging partnerships with other entities that 'own' smaller pieces of the larger first-year experience, student transitions, and student success landscape – National Orientation Directors Association, National Academic Advising Association, National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, American College Personnel Association, and John Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education among others. We've also created partnerships with regional and international groups focusing on these issues. The goal – and often the challenge – is to create partnerships that are collaborative rather than competitive.

Mosebua: A resource centre actively seeks to share the information that it contains. What steps have been taken by the NRC to ensure that its resource collection is accessible and widely used by all?

Skipper: While we have some infrastructure support from the University of South Carolina, we are largely self-funded, which means we have to charge for many of our publications. But we are sensitive to those costs and do make an effort to offer resources where we can at no cost to researchers and practitioners who are invested in this work.

For many years, we printed and mailed a practitioner-focused newsletter. To control costs, we moved to an electronic format but it was not highly subscribed or read. We ultimately made the decision that it was more important to provide this forum for sharing information about practice than it was to receive a steadily declining income from the publication. A couple of years ago, we moved this to a hosting platform that makes it easier for readers to share individual articles from that publication.

We have been offering our journal in print and online for seven or eight years now and recently started offering online only subscriptions, which makes it more attractive for many libraries – especially those in international markets. We've also entered into some limited licensing agreements to make the journal more accessible via inter-library loan and as part of some international consortia deals.

With respect to our books, we are way behind the curve in offering e-books. Part of that has been the difficulty of negotiating contracts as a unit within a larger educational institution. We released the first one last year and added five more recently. This will make them more available and at a lower price point for our readers. With regards to the research produced by the Center, we provide access to executive summaries on our website. As a team, we are engaged in making presentations, disseminating that research to a number of different audiences. We make those presentations available on our website. In addition, we solicit and make available presentation materials from sessions presented at the conferences we host.

So we really have a good bit of information available, but as I mentioned earlier, curating that information, putting it into a dynamic, searchable framework, is challenging. That is one of the things we are currently working on – creating a framework that will make that information more readily searchable and therefore accessible to people.

Mosebua: What advice can you give to the SANRC as it continues to develop its own resource collection?

Skipper: We often have to make sure that we are offering options for the dissemination of resources that fit with the promotion and reward structures of our constituents. Journal articles and conference research presentations are what is meaningful to professors and researchers. The ability to share (either through presentations or newsletter blasts) “star programs” and build reputational capital for institutional successes is important to campus leaders and administrators. The chance to gather practical advice and suggestions for developing and implementing programmes is important to practitioners and directors. Make sure that things are called what they need to be called to be professional ‘feathers in the cap’ or CV entries for the range of professionals in your constituency. That often requires supporting a range of resources at different levels of rigor and for different purposes.

Regardless, we have created systems for peer review for all our publications, even for pieces that are not expressly research publications. Our conference proposals are also peer reviewed. Peer-reviewed publications are more highly regarded than editorial-reviewed publications. Again, I think this also takes some of the onus off the resource centre to be the expert on everything, especially when those reviewers have been carefully vetted.

Mosebua: Who would you say are the likely partners and collaborators for a centre such as the SANRC?

Skipper: We have an apparatus in place for editing, designing, publishing, and distributing publications. Many of our collaborators don’t have that; instead, they offer access to content expertise that we believe is valuable to our network. Find the collaborators who can help you fill in the gap. If you are not ready to take the lead in producing a publication, who can you partner with to make that happen?

Mosebua: The majority of books found on local bookstore shelves are imported from the U.K. or the U.S. and as such, are highly taxed and hence prohibitively expensive. What would you say are some cost-effective measures which can be undertaken to ensure that books are easily obtained and made accessible to users?

Skipper: Certainly e-books and digital journal repositories are important tools in the dissemination of books and journals. Putting these materials in libraries also ensures a more democratic and widely accessible means of sharing information.

Mosebua: How can the SANRC/NRC encourage scholars and practitioners to use the information available in the resource centres? Furthermore, how can they be stimulated to get involved in research initiatives that contribute towards the advancement of FYE resources?

Skipper: Scholars and practitioners have to be aware that the centre is there – the SANRC can exploit social media platforms to push out information on new resources and also have a mechanism for readers to receive content alerts. The SANRC can adopt a similar approach to the NRC. Our editors regularly host sessions at conferences where

discussions are held on the various publishing options available through the Center, as well as what makes a good submission for the various venues. The submission and review process is also discussed.

We send out direct invitations to people – I just returned from a conference on Tuesday. My editor and I will go through the conference programme and send personalised invitations to select presenters asking them to submit to our publications. Sometimes, they will be directed to our journal. Sometimes, they will be directed to a newsletter. It's time-consuming, but it serves the dual purpose of both making them aware of our resources while also potentially generating new contributions. We engage members of our network as reviewers for our journal, electronic newsletter, and for book proposals and books. We've been hosting a research grant for a number of years – we offer direct support for the kind of research we would like to see. Going back to my earlier response, it's important to host a variety of venues or opportunities for dissemination to engage the broadest possible network of collaborators in this work.

Mosebua: How can libraries and resource centres solicit feedback in order to improve on content and accessibility to information?

Skipper: The NRC periodically conducts readership surveys, especially for practitioner-focused newsletters; a range of questions are asked to help in determining whether the Center is hitting the mark. Additionally, the NRC has made use of data analytics collected online to learn more about how are publications are being read. We also use our advisory board as a sounding board, especially when seeking new directions.

Dr Skipper provided important points of information for a developing centre such as the SANRC, which aims to make FYE materials and resources widely available to all in the FYE community, and indeed all higher education professionals. While resource centres are different from libraries, they have an interrelated function of ensuring that resources are available and accessible. Dr Skipper highlighted the importance of technology, and the need to utilise available tools such as social media and other innovative ways to ensure that stakeholders are reached. She emphasised the need to have a holistic view of the functioning of a resource centre and to take this into account when implementing a repository that will be of practical use to the FYE community. It can be concluded that resource centres play an essential role in growing the FYE community and ensuring the growth of FYE as a well-developed field of study.

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