Adapting Operational Strategies in Academic Librarianship to Better Support Block Schedule Curriculum Delivery

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Abstract

Academic librarians in institutions that offer block schedule curriculum delivery develop specific operational strategies tailored to the fast-paced, intensive nature of teaching and learning within the block system. This article examines some of these strategies, focusing on updated approaches to information literacy instruction, the adoption of a new model of collection management, and reprioritization of professional development efforts.

Introduction

Efforts to increase the appeal and the marketability of higher education drive universities to explore innovative approaches to teaching and learning. To this end, some universities adopt alternative models of curriculum delivery. One such model is block schedule curriculum delivery, also known as the block schedule or the block system, in which students engage in one course at a time in a highly-focused and time-accelerated format.

Block schedule curriculum delivery allows students to engage in one course at a time, enabling students to apply themselves wholly to one academic endeavour at a time. Studying in a block schedule, students do not struggle with competing demands on their time and attention, freeing them to engage more deeply with course concepts and content (Muscat & Thomas, 2023; McClusky et al., 2019). Institutions offering a block schedule quantify positive results stemming from the alternative method of curriculum delivery. At the University of Montana Western, the implementation of the block system resulted in measurable improvement in traditional metrics of institutional success, such as retention and graduation rates (Southern Utah University, 2019). Southern Cross University in Australia reports the benefits of studying within the block system from a student perspective. Assessments of student feedback quantify improvement in both student satisfaction and student engagement in block courses delivered in-person and in block courses delivered online (Goode et al., 2023). With an increased number of institutions experimenting with a block schedule curriculum delivery and reporting positive outcomes, the block schedule is garnering global attention. A documentary film, "The Block Plan," was awarded the title of "Best Film" at the 2022 Helsinki Education Film Festival International (Hayes, 2023).

Existing research on the practice of academic librarianship specifically applies to libraries operating within the traditional semester system. Best practices specific to librarianship within the block system are to be determined, but as more institutions engage in block schedule curriculum delivery, conversations regarding the practice of librarianship within the block system become more robust.

Colorado College implemented a block system in 1970, and it stands as an exception to the newness of block schedule curriculum delivery. Librarians working in institutions that are newer to the block plan can look to Colorado College for guidance and inspiration on how best to identify and meet the unique needs of block system teachers and learners. In its vision statement, Colorado College's Charles L. Tutt Library acknowledges the uniqueness of academic librarianship in the block system. "Tutt Library's vision is to be one of the finest liberal arts college libraries in the country, responsive to the distinctive rhythms of the Block Plan and rooted in Colorado College's sense of place" (Colorado College, 2024).

Efforts to identify and respond to a rhythm vary among institutions; however, the commencement of these efforts is beginning to reveal some commonalities in impacts of the block system on libraries. Academic librarians are in the initial stages of restructuring traditional approaches to the practice of academic librarianship to better meet the unique needs of campuses engaged in block schedule curriculum delivery.

Operational Strategies

Upon transitioning to the block system, libraries largely report increased usage of the library facility as well as library resources and services. "...The bulk of the student body is wrapping up projects, assignments, papers, and labs, or studying for finals at the same time, putting simultaneous pressure on library facilities" (Weddell, 2017). An Instructional Technologist at Colorado College described the pace at Colorado College's Tutt Library, "The library is resource intensive. One day at CC is like a week on the semester system, so we have to have the resources and high availability to accommodate the students" (Weddell, 2017). A student enrolled in a First-Year Experience course at the same institution described his library engagement, "We use the hell out of Tutt" (Weddell, 2017).

Those who work in block institutions do struggle with the increased workload created by the demands of the block system (French, 2015). Libraries are impacted by significantly increased workloads in the block system. Student employee schedules that were once issued twice a year must be created eight times a year. Reserve collections that were assembled twice a year will require almost daily attention. Requests for instruction sessions will increase and will be submitted with far less notice. If the transition to the block system was not preceded by an increase in library staff, budget, or facilities space, the increased workload on librarians necessarily triggers an evaluation of existing operational strategies, defined as the concrete plans that guide daily processes and resource management.

Colorado College administration equipped the library with necessities to accommodate increased usage. A major library renovation modernized the building, upgraded technology, increased square footage substantially, and doubled seating capacity (Wedell, 2017). However, the renovation came decades after the implementation of the block system. While librarians should advocate for capital improvement projects and increased budgets, significant changes in operational strategies are more feasible to implement in the short-term as they fall squarely within a librarian's scope of influence. Upon transitioning to a block system, librarians may find it beneficial to examine the operational strategies guiding information literacy instruction, collection management, and professional development.

Information Literacy Instruction

The American Library Association defines information literacy as, "the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning" (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015). The positive correlation between library instruction and student success (Rowe et al., 2021) positions information literacy instruction as one of the most valued services provided by academic librarians.

Librarians in block schedule curriculum delivery institutions face a familiar challenge in providing information literacy instruction. The strong reliance on the one-shot model of library instruction carries over to the block system. The one-shot model of library instruction refers to the practice of providing one library instruction session in a classroom setting. "One of the major arguments for the one-shot is that more students get exposure to library services, resources, and information literacy skills; but, with the knowledge that the one-shot is less likely to impart deep critical thinking skills and generally assumes that students are equal

learners, is it possible that the one-shot actually does more harm than good?" (Bastone & Clement, 2022, p. 780). The problematic nature of one-shot instruction is widely acknowledged by academic librarians. To mitigate the weaknesses of the model, librarians leverage the length of the semester to identify students or classes needing additional librarian support, taking time to understand what support is needed, and providing additional instruction or opportunity for guided practice.

The limitations of one-shot instruction become magnified in the block system due to the significant reduction in time allotted for behind-the-scenes mitigation work. Instead of relying on personalized interventions that persist throughout a semester, the one-shot instruction sessions can be bolstered in the block system with a flipped classroom model, embedded librarianship, and strengthened electronic resources.

Flipped Classroom Model

In a flipped classroom, students engage with preparatory materials, such as readings and video lectures, prior to class. Front-loading students with background information allows instructors to facilitate active learning experiences during face-to-face instruction time.

Academic librarians look to the Association of College and Research Libraries' Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education as the foundational guiding document for information literacy instruction. The latest revision of this document includes a nod to applying the flipped classroom model to library instruction. The document prompts librarians to, "Look for workshops at your campus teaching and learning center on the flipped classroom and consider how such practices could be incorporated into your courses. What information and research assignments can students do outside of class to arrive prepared to apply concepts and conduct collaborative projects" (ACRL, 2015)?

This method of instruction, also popular in semester systems, is even more relevant to the block system. John Weldon, block system faculty member at Australia's Victoria University advises, "A flipped-classroom approach allows you to turn the classroom into a place of active exploration where students make, break and debate rather than sit and listen" (Weldon, 2023). Applying the flipped classroom model to one-shot library instruction entails providing students in advance with high-level conceptual information regarding information literacy as well as providing them with concrete instructions for institutional authentication and navigating database interfaces. When students can come to class knowing why they are to engage in research and how they are to engage in research, librarians are able to devote class time to facilitating the valuable guided research that enables students to accomplish their tasks-at-hand.

Embedded Librarianship

Embedded librarianship describes an approach to meeting user needs that involves librarians working within user groups located outside of the physical or digital parameters of the library (Delaney & Bates, 2015). Academic librarians generally recognize the wisdom in meeting users where they are, but they struggle with spending time and expertise in places where usage data are difficult to capture. If efforts expended outside of the library aren't quantified in ways that are recognized by campus funding authorities, the library may suffer from degraded perception and decreased support.

Regardless of the clear risks to the perception of the library, students in the block system are better served by librarians willing to join their user groups. The goal of embedded librarianship is to create presence and increase responsiveness at student touchpoints. An example of embedded librarianship is including librarians as instructors in learning management system courses and empowering students to quickly alert librarians to pressing information needs. Librarians can embed themselves in classrooms and in other student forums so that students can conveniently alert librarians of information needs including needed follow-up to instruction. This approach allows librarians to be closely integrated into the curriculum, providing support at critical moments and tailoring instruction to fit directly into the timelines of the student user groups.

Strengthen Electronic Resources

Developing self-paced modular online learning resources, such as video tutorials and research guides, is another strategy to bolster information literacy efforts within a block system. These resources allow students to access information literacy content as needed, outside of formal instructional sessions, accommodating the time limitations and varying schedules of students. These resources also empower faculty to facilitate information literacy instruction in the absence of librarian availability.

A collection of high-quality abundant electronic resources that supports information literacy instruction is useful in the semester system but becomes critical in the fast-paced block system. Using a responsive creation tool, such as SpringShare's Libguides, allows librarians to quickly revise and update existing electronic resources. At minimum, a block system institution is best served by a persistent Libguide for each discipline offered by the university and for each course that is offered widely, such as developmental and introductory writing courses. Individual course Libguides should be created for all faculty members who request a tailored electronic resource. New faculty are particularly receptive to including library electronic resources in their instructional materials and librarians can reach them by presenting the possibilities during new faculty orientation programs. All faculty should be made aware that librarians are available to collaborate on the creation of course Libguides or other electronic resources meant to strengthen information literacy instruction.

Collection Management

Traditional practices governing the management of a library collection don't prove useful to a block system institution. Supporting a block schedule necessitates the creation of new operational strategies that include embracing a new model of collection development, rightsizing the collection, and allowing for the circulation of instructional materials.

"Just-in-Time" Model

The historical method of collection development, and the most predominant method in use today, focuses on the curation of a broad collection of materials pertinent to the disciplines offered by an institution. Subject specialist librarians identify quality information that broadly supports the disciplines to which they are assigned. Collection budget allotments are divided by discipline, often based on student enrolment in courses within the disciplines. The model results in broad coverage that represents the disciplines in the school with most of the resources being devoted to the disciplines in which most of the students are engaged. This collection development process relies on librarians predicting the future information needs of students

(Crawford et al., 2020). These large broad collections have come to be known as "just-in-case" collections.

In the 1990s, some traditional semester-system libraries began experimenting with a collection development model dubbed the "just-in-time" model (Crawford et al., 2020). The model was developed by university libraries that could not continue to curate broad collections due to dramatic budget cuts.

While the "just-in-case" collection model continues to best support the needs of many universities, the newer "just-in-time" model allows the focus of collection development to move from developing a collection that supports curricular materials to developing a collection of curricular materials.

In the block system, students need very specific materials, and they need them very quickly. A "just-in-time" model allows for greater responsiveness and flexibility in meeting pressing student needs. The funding formula that allots funding equitably in all disciplines is exchanged for a singular collections budget, placing greater onus on the librarian to spend funds in a way that is perceived to be fair in the long-term, but that allows for greater flexibility to meet short-term needs.

The block system presents the need for further notable deviation from traditional collection management practices. Allowing for the collection of non-textual library materials is paramount. Information objects, such as robots used in math classes or anatomical models used in physiology classes, may be held on reserve for in-library circulation only. Librarians also restructure workflow to allow for ongoing ordering, cataloguing, and processing rather than maintaining the traditional small number of orders within a year, usually submitted during winter and summer breaks. Understanding that faculty operate under a radically different workflow as well, librarians better serve faculty needs by creating mechanisms for materials requests which can be reviewed quickly and by developing processes for responding to requests with transparency about what the library can acquire and how quickly.

In supporting a block system library, librarians replace the exercise of predicting future information needs with the equally challenging tasks of identifying and supporting current needs.

Rightsizing

A library supporting a new curriculum delivery model will undergo rightsizing. Rightsizing is described as organizing information, "in the right format for the right stakeholder at the right time." (Adams et al., 2020). Rightsizing a collection doesn't imply that a collection will be downsized or that it will expand. Rightsizing results from evaluating the changing needs of the students under the new system and meeting those needs.

The rightsizing process will most likely not involve significant downsizing of the print collection. An emerging body of literature supports the retention of print resources that are available in multiple formats. Evidence suggests that print reading is positively associated with reading comprehension and knowledge retention (de-la-Pena et al., 2024). One of the most-researched populations of university students is first-generation students. First-generation students have a strong preference for print resources (Matthews & Johnson, 2023). Librarians

rightsize the collection in an evidenced-based manner which is a task that can be at odds with the aesthetic notion that modern libraries are paperless.

Circulating Textbooks

Most collection development management policies specifically prohibit the library from acquiring or circulating print textbooks. Although rooted in a long-standing practice of not infringing upon campus bookstore sales, there are a host of difficulties associated with circulating textbooks, including loss, expense, and the short life cycle of textbooks. Copyright regulations usually forbid ancillary materials that accompany textbooks, such as workbooks or assessment tools, to be reproduced. Despite the challenges of circulating textbooks, the print books that students need above all other books are print textbooks and students in the block system are well-served by a circulating textbook collection. A library budget is unlikely to support textbooks for all but putting at least one copy of a textbook on reserve for short-term in-library-use circulation best serves student needs.

To help mitigate the messy business of circulating print textbooks, librarians are uniquely positioned to champion the adoption and use of open education resources (OER), including electronic textbooks. To support the need for immediate and affordable access, librarians can actively curate and promote OER materials. Materials include textbooks, research guides, and scholarly articles that can be integrated into courses without cost or access barriers.

Whether it's textbooks on reserve or a well-curated collection of OER, libraries coordinate the effort to make textbooks more affordable (Ferguson, 2016). In the block system textbook affordability is the same issue that it is in the semester system, but the block system adds the component of the need for rapid textbook availability, which is an issue that the library is well-suited to address.

Professional Development

There is a pervasive notion amongst academic librarians that graduate school programs don't adequately prepare them for day-to-day job duties, creating a need for heavy reliance upon continuing professional development to meet basic educational needs (Wang et al., 2021).

This perceived educational shortcoming is another widely accepted concept in librarianship that becomes magnified in the block system. There isn't a class on academic librarianship in the block system, so librarians rely even more heavily on themselves to identify and seek out needed trainings. Three strategies that help librarians to prioritize and acquire the needed professional development are flipped collaboration, workshop prioritization, and reflective practice. In a normal semester schedule, librarians tend to correctly state that there isn't time for professional development. In the block system, there isn't time to skimp on professional development.

Flipped Collaboration

Collaborative Learning Committees and similar groups exist in pockets on most campuses. The groups usually facilitate high-level, often theoretical conversations. In traditional semester systems, librarians often decline to engage in such time-intensive opportunities, preferring to focus more on pressing duties. In the block system, however, librarians benefit from a deeper understanding of what faculty are teaching and how they are teaching. Like library instruction,

relationships with teaching faculty can be flipped to improve response times for and quality of support that has yet to be requested.

Victoria University's John Weldon includes team-based curriculum development in a list of considerations for teaching on the block. "Rather than academics being solely responsible for curriculum development, on the block, they become part of a design team composed of colleagues, professional staff, librarians and learning designers, which builds into subjects the kind of support and enhancement mechanisms that allow academics and the wider university to respond to student needs immediately and effectively" (Weldon, 2023). With the increased emphasis on teamwork, participating in higher level discussion forums such as Collaborative Learning Committees, helps to develop the relationships that underlie efficient cohesive curricular design teams.

Workshop Prioritization

Academic Librarianship is a field afforded an immense landscape of free or low-cost professional development opportunities. Upon an institutional move to a block system, librarians may choose to prioritize workshops on technology integration and instructional design. Faculty will look to the library to provide rapid course development support and to aid in disseminating electronic resources. These duties, traditionally the domain of IT staff, have shifted to the scope of duties of librarians. For librarians who didn't receive the needed training in their graduate programs, workshop prioritization can help them to upskill to better support instructional needs in the block system.

Most small institutions that embrace the block system won't already have an instructional designer under the library umbrella and may not have a systems librarian or a designated IT position to help with this support. Librarians are likely to be ill-prepared for the new nature of their practice. Organizational restructuring to adequately support the block system is likely to lag and librarians can prioritize their own professional development efforts to prepare themselves to meet new needs.

Reflective Practice

"In higher education, reflective practice has become a dynamic, participatory, and cyclical process that contributes to educators' professional development and personal growth" (Mohamed et al., 2022). Because the block system is also fundamentally dynamic, participatory, and cyclical, this particular self-led professional development is well-suited to the block system. After each block course concludes, librarians may participate in reflection sessions where they evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional strategies and support interventions. These sessions may include reviewing student feedback, assessing learning outcomes, and discussing experiences with faculty to identify areas for improvement. By engaging in structured reflection, librarians gain insights into how their support influenced student learning and how they can adapt their approaches for upcoming courses.

Potentially useful reflective practices include journaling, self-evaluations, and collecting statistics that may only be internally relevant in the library department. Reflective practices are useful in any library, but implementing the block system will trigger an elevated level of experimentation as librarians try to adapt to new demands by revising policies and practices. These experiments can be evaluated and tweaked after the end of each block rather than at the

end of each semester. Using reflective practice, processes can be evaluated and improved upon much more quickly in the block system than in the semester system.

Discussion

Libraries traditionally serve as the intellectual hub of a campus, and they retain that role when a university transitions to the block system. From inquiry to research to content creation to reflection, students potentially rely on the library at each step of the learning process. In the context of block schedule curriculum delivery, the library remains the focal point of a healthy campus. Colorado College's documentary about the block plan offers a visual testimony to the centrality of the library in a successful block schedule institution. Tufts library is featured prominently in the footage, depicting scenes of lively academic engagement and serving as the setting for faculty and student interviews. (Beasley & Hayward, 2021). The documentary exemplifies the centrality of the library in a successful and long-running block schedule institution. By examining and adapting operational strategies, traditional academic libraries can enhance their flexibility, responsiveness, and student-centeredness to retain the identity of the intellectual hub of campus.

Academic librarians working in block schedule curriculum delivery institutions recognize that traditional operational strategies aren't always conducive to best meeting information needs in a block system. At present, there is not a body of literature addressing the practice of academic librarianship in block systems, but librarians working within block systems are beginning to create networking opportunities to engage in robust conversations pertaining to the practice of academic librarianship within the block system. In 2024 the American Library Association conference featured a presentation dedicated to this topic for the first time (Kish, 2024).

With little data on which to draw, academic librarians are instituting new approaches to the practice of librarianship in areas where traditional approaches no longer effectively support campus needs. Research addressing the creation, implementation, and impact of these strategies is needed to construct an initial body of literature aimed to inform academic librarians as they develop and refine best practices in academic librarianship within institutions offering block schedule curriculum delivery.

Disclosures

This article is adapted from The American Library Association conference presentation given by Kish (2024).

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