



Preserving Black Academic Library History

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant enables Library Alliance to tout successes

By Shaneshia R. F. Brooks-Tatum

With improved communications, Atlanta University Center's library is now a vibrant intellectual hub for students and faculty.

The success stories of more than 100 libraries participating in the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Library Alliance—involving institutions in 20 states, the District of Columbia, and the US Virgin Islands—are being captured through the Atlanta-based organization's "Preserving Our History" project.



Heeding suggestions from students and faculty, AUC's Robert W. Woodruff Library is transformed into a bright, colorful, and useful environment for all users.

The two-year effort is funded by a \$70,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded to the alliance in January 2011. The goal is to document and disseminate the alliance's history, highlight member success stories, contribute to the literature about libraries and HBCUs, and provide a model of collaboration for other libraries, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean.

The HBCU Library Alliance, a consortium that promotes collaboration among information professionals and excellence in library leadership, was established in 2002 and continues to provide an array of training and development opportunities for member institutions, including photographic preservation, reports, assessments, and leadership workshops.

So far, the project has documented nine success stories. Here are two of those stories: that of the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) and the Atlanta University Center.

Meeting academic needs

The University of the Virgin Islands has campuses on St. Thomas and St. Croix and serves more than 2,600 students. Established in 1962, UVI is the only HBCU—as well as the sole institution of higher learning—in the territory.

St. John, the northeasternmost island, has no college campus. UVI students who live there must travel to the island's westernmost port, take the ferry to St. Thomas, then take ground transportation (called "safaris") to classes, a trek that can last four hours each way. It is also expensive for students with modest budgets.

After he was inaugurated in March 2010, UVI President David Hall made it a priority to connect with students and community members in St. John as well as St. Thomas and St. Croix. "When I arrived at UVI, I committed myself to figuring out what the answer would be to this problem," Hall explained. He traveled to St. John to discover for himself the experiences of students and met with residents

to discuss other obstacles, including the lack of regular access to a library and quiet study spaces.

These discussions led to the establishment of a learning center on the island, the St. John Academic Center. UVI secured funding through an HBCU Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act grant from the US Department of Education. Tina Koopmans, UVI chief information officer, along with library and IT staff, developed a plan for the center and found a location in a major shopping area on St. John. The center, a redesigned gymnasium, set a new standard for academic centers: accessible and embedded in the contours of daily life.

Students can now take classes via videoconferencing at the St. John Academic Center, where a computer lab, a small library, and other electronic resources are at their disposal. The center has the capacity for multiple daily classes from a catalog of 43 offered each semester. While not a full-service campus, the center allows students to reduce their weekly travel between the islands.

With more time to study and less money required for travel, student enrollment increased in one semester's time. "We have seen an increase in our St. John student population from 37 to 47, and we are only at the beginning of this process," Koopmans reported.

"Many of our students arrive at UVI ill-prepared for college-level courses," explained Judith Rogers, manager of learning resources and faculty technology services. "The library provides unique resources and strategies to help students develop in the way that they should." The center plans to rotate staffing with librarians trained in information technology.

"The academic community is committed to St. John," said Provost Karl Wright. "It is in our strategic interest to serve all three islands, including St. John." In the immediate future, UVI plans to create an adult bridge program for returning learners and increase the number of course offerings.

Rogers acknowledged the importance of the HBCU Library Alliance in assisting with their library and campus goals: "Our librarians have been challenged to take on leadership roles to adapt to changing student needs, applying what they learn from the leadership institutes."

Plan it and they will come

The Atlanta University Center (AUC) Robert W. Woodruff Library serves the oldest and largest consortium of HBCUs: Clark Atlanta University, the Interdenominational Theological Center, Morehouse College, and Spelman College. With approximately 8,700 students and 700 faculty members, these institutions make up the Atlanta University Center.

Established in 1982 to enrich the academic environment of AUC, the library for many years was not fully integrated

into the community, largely due to communication-related issues, including lack of branding, inconsistent messaging, a dated and incomplete website, and inadequate visibility on the four campuses.

The disconnection between the library and the campuses was reflected by faculty and student references to the facility as “the” library as opposed to “our” library. This perception of the library lingered until 2002, when an external review panel produced the Frye Report, which made eight equally weighted recommendations for the library’s improvement.

Loretta Parham, chief executive officer and library director, explained that the focus on communications was first and foremost, because library leadership saw communications as the heart of the organization and the essential means of moving the library’s mission forward and into the community.

“It is because of communications that we were able to get funding, to have faculty and staff become familiar with our programming, and correct the misperception that the library had nothing to offer,” Parham explained. “Communications is a catalyst—the heartbeat of the transformation. At the time we were facing the challenge, we knew that we needed a very concrete plan. We were doing some of everything, and we realized that we needed more strategy and focus.”

In 2004, the library’s first strategic plan as an independent nonprofit entity was created under the guidance of Carolyn Hart, assistant director of planning, assessment, and communications. That same year, the library hired a communications manager.

Since then, AUC Woodruff Library has made great strides in its communications. It implemented four key strategies: strengthening visual branding, identifying key messages, creating outlets to effectively disseminate those messages, and reinforcing the branding and messages through various channels. The library also began partnering with members of the academic community by participating in monthly meetings on AUC campuses and actively engaging faculty and students.

The result was threefold: streamlined communications and programming, increased and improved visibility of the library, and cutting-edge marketing. “Our communications manager recently created a new library brochure featuring a QR code,” Parham said. “This use of technology in our marketing material is something fairly new to our library. It’s another innovative way that we’re communicating with the students and faculty we serve.”

Today, the library is considered an integral part of the academic community, offering an information-rich website, newsletters, and onsite locations for librarian visits. Faculty and students now understand how the library’s goals intersect with their objectives and recognize the library as their own.

Although communications materials and strategies have improved significantly, Parham believes there is always room for improvement. She suggests libraries develop a communications plan that will generate buy-in among staff and encourage widespread participation and accountability. Parham also recommends collaborating with other libraries.

“Within the profession, there are so many opportunities, and the sharing of information is central to our field,” Parham said. “Library staff can ask for examples of great communications ideas and advice from other libraries.”

When asked to describe AUC Woodruff Library now, Parham responded, “‘Centered’ describes the library’s place and opportunity within the academic village, as the heart of intellectual discourse.”

Other projects

The seven other HBCU libraries whose success stories have been documented are:

■ **Clafflin University, Orangeburg, South Carolina:** “Establishing a Successful Information Literacy Program,” a program focusing on students and faculty;

■ **Delaware State University, Dover:** “Supporting Effective Research with Standardized Subject Guides” for subject-specific resources;

■ **Fayetteville (N.C.) State University:** “Safeguarding Institutional History through Collaboration,” focusing on preservation;

■ **Savannah (Ga.) State University:** “Innovating to Ensure Excellent Customer Service,” which takes a holistic approach to innovation to ensure excellent customer service;

■ **Southern University and A&M College, Baton Rouge, Louisiana:** “Streamlining Library Service Points,” with librarians working across departments;

■ **University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Princess Anne:** “Creating Collaborative Study Spaces”; and

■ **Virginia State University, Petersburg:** “Preserving Black History and Training a New Generation of Archivists.”

For more information about the project and participating libraries, visit hbculibraries.org. ■



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