

Campus Collaboration from a Martial Arts Perspective

Michael Perini (mperini@gmu.edu)
George Mason University

Introduction

Thinkers have been applying longstanding martial arts philosophies to a variety of professional genres for years, particularly in the business realm. Where these ideas find less traction, though, is in the field of education, specifically higher education, as some of the philosophies operate better in the boardroom than in academe. However, much of the experience associated with martial arts provides an alternate prism to view conflicts and difficulties within higher education and, specifically, for my purposes, in libraries. This discussion draws on my experience as a martial artist as well as my theoretical and experiential learning in higher education and academic libraries in order to expand the conversation on collaboration.

My perspective on collaboration is largely influenced by two independent factors. First, I am a researcher in an academic library's reference department, but I am not a librarian. I perform many of the same tasks as librarians, though collaborative opportunities sometimes are difficult to obtain either within the library or in exterior departments because I am not a librarian. As well, I am a doctoral student in my university's higher education program. However, I am a part-time student, not privy to teaching assistantships, internships, or other prospects available to full-time students. In essence, despite having associations with various campus entities, I tend to operate outside established silos. This enables me to consider issues from a unique vantage point.

The second factor affecting my outlook is my background in martial arts. At my college's freshmen orientation, there was a club fair that featured several martial arts teams. On a whim, I signed up for the Taekwondo team and entered into the martial arts hobby (and later profession) that now has encompassed aspects of my entire adult life. Within two years I began coaching

some of the other competitors on the team and ultimately attained the rank of black belt. I ended my collegiate experience as the Head Instructor of that college team and after graduation sought employment in the greater Washington, DC area. I continued my instruction in Taekwondo and since have attained the rank of 4th *Dan*, or Master, and also trained in a variety of other arts, such as Karate, Boxing, Judo, Muay Thai, and most prominently Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. The diversity of training benefits my understanding of all the arts that I have trained in and, again, allows me to consider challenges from a different perspective.

Along the way, I earned two academic masters degrees (one in Higher Education, another in History) and I am working on a doctorate in Higher Education. However, I have never adhered to one discipline or way of thought, either in the martial arts or the academy. As a result, my perspectives on how I view day-to-day professional problems have been molded by this somewhat interdisciplinary approach. While I certainly am not an authority on any of the discussion that follows, these preceding words are meant to give a brief background of my personal stance and hopefully elucidate some understanding of the prospective outlook on collaboration within the academy.

Collaboration?

A major issue afflicting many departments in higher education, including the library, is campus collaboration, or perhaps more accurately, the lack thereof. Research requires the proliferation of partnerships among campus entities,¹ but obstacles to cooperative projects persist. Jamie Lester, Associate Professor of Higher Education at George Mason University asks "Why are there so few partnerships between student [services] and academic affairs? There is no single answer; rather, we must acknowledge that organizational life in higher education pulls us



apart rather than together.”² While no single, defined reason may be pinpointed, there are certainly a few that warrant comparative discussion.

Part of the problem has to do with culture and the real or perceived silos that are manifest on and around collegiate campuses. Victor Arcelus, Dean of Student Life at Connecticut College, states, “Cultural differences between the divisions, as well as the real and perceived differences in the deeply held values and beliefs about students and their education, hamper the pursuit of cross-divisional partnership.”³ Essentially, instructional faculty consider their role in the education of the student more relevant to the students’ complete learning outcomes than those experiences offered outside the classroom, and even within the libraries.

How might departments address these divisions? First, acknowledge the mission of the university. Arcelus states further, “Despite the differences between academic and student [services], they share a critical common goal—advancing student intellectual and personal development.”⁴ Fostering better understanding of how this development is accomplished from both sides and is paramount to overcoming gaps between the campus entities.

This acceptance also needs to occur among the varieties of departments within the organizations as well. In terms of academics, I experience a division whenever I spend time in a class filled with primary or secondary educators. When I tell other faculty or students that I teach credit-bearing courses in Taekwondo, I almost always receive the dismissive “Oooohh...,” so as to question the legitimacy of the instructional experience—and these educators are usually in my same academic department!

Similar hierarchical partitions occur in the libraries on a day-to-day basis as well. Like it or not, academic departments often view libraries as a service entity, lumped in with university life, advising, and other student services departments. Part of this stems from the notion that librarians at our university are considered professional faculty, non-instructional, non-tenured educators. As such, they find an une-

qual playing field with the tenure-track and instructional faculty,⁵ despite similar professional expectations such as publications, presentations, and service. Such divisions also occur, then perpetuate, between the librarians (and other administrators in the libraries) and the classified staff. We are all here for the same mission—the education of the students—but so often the perception of the individuals’ purposes diminishes the efficacy of the returns.

Change from a Martial Arts Perspective

Acknowledging the existence of divisions is easy; effecting change in spite of them is rather more difficult. Academics in higher education push for change through collaboration. In hopes of addressing changes, Arcelus suggests that, “institutions should dissolve the deeply entrenched division of labor between faculty (attending to students’ intellectual development) and student [services] (focusing on students’ social and emotional development), acknowledging... [that] intellectual development does not happen exclusively in the class and social and emotional development does not happen exclusively out of class.”⁶ Excellent. Cross-departmental partnerships will solve the issues facing our campuses and everyone can operate on a highly productive level. Right?

Unfortunately, collaboration is obviously the hope, but not often a likely reality, in part, because of ego. One of the unspoken terms in many analyses on the existing divisions is in fact “ego.” Ego may be manifest where individuals, either faculty or librarians, spend a significant amount of time and effort attempting to establish themselves within their profession. As a result, sometimes it may be difficult to partner with others who may be regarded as having a lower standing. Ego may also get in the way of hearing constructive criticism from others.

This happens all the time in martial arts. I teach Taekwondo, which is a leg-intensive, traditional martial art featuring many jumping or “flying” kicks and it is often criticized as impractical. Instructors become defensive when someone points this out, again because a lot of time and effort have been devoted to the mastering of the art.⁷ Critics are hitting at a personal level, and if

the practitioner is a school owner, then the matter may become professional as well. When I teach any of the jumping techniques or head kicks, I make sure to preface that they may not have as practical a use as some other kicks. Imagine standing in a crowded bar that might have drinks spilled on the ground. Defending oneself in this situation by using these jumping techniques simply will not work.

However, instead of denigrating other martial arts that have accounted for these realities in their techniques, I merely incorporate sensible training into my own classes. I have my colleagues who are wrestlers and grapplers come to teach because they have valuable experience and information that will benefit the students' learning. Collaboration makes practical sense.

The same can be said for librarians. Libraries and their librarians often have several options for outreach and interaction with students on campuses, such as sponsored lectures, roving reference, and in-class instruction. If a librarian is achieving success in these areas but is still not gaining a collaborative foothold, then diversify the skills and options, like a Taekwondoist learning grappling. Take faculty-librarian collaboration, for example. Due to varied responsibilities of librarians at different institutions, librarians do not always express their professional abilities through publication.⁸ This likely contributes to the misinterpretation of the role of the librarian around campuses. A tenure-track faculty member has to publish. An easy way for librarians to gain their attention, if not respect, is to do the same. The success of this suggestion, however, ultimately becomes the responsibility of the librarians and the directors or deans of the library to make the campus community aware of this production.

There are also options for partnering with students. Speaking as a part-time doctoral student, none of my curriculum focuses on publication and I do not have the apprenticeships available to full-time students, yet my post-graduation job likely will require substantial publication. Publication services and copyright information are available in my library, but if I did not work in a library, I would have no idea that they existed simply because there is not much communica-

tion between my department and the library. This is a missed opportunity for librarian-student collaboration that could be addressed through workshops, office visits, or even simple Infoguides and department listserv emails. Collaboration opportunities are available; we just need to diversify our means of finding and taking advantage of them.

Conclusion

The point of this brief discussion is that collaboration and change of perception on collegiate campuses is difficult. Yet these challenges mimic difficulties in other avenues of life. Collaboration is just one facet of the librarian's job that may be revitalized by the application of interdisciplinary thought. Solutions and opportunities are abundant. Sometimes all we need is to view situations from alternative perspectives.

Endnotes

¹ Kristin K. Janke, Katherine A. Kelley and Suzanne R. Soliman, "The Power of Many: Building Capacity for Assessment through Cross Institutional Collaboration," *Assessment Update* 25, no. 1 (2013):1-16.

² Jamie Lester, "Supporting Intragroup and Intergroup Dialogues: A Model for Collaborative Campuses," in *Contested Issues in Students Affairs: Diverse Perspectives and Respectful Dialogue*, edited by Peter M. Magolda and Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing LLC, 2011), 80.

³ Victor J Arcelus, "Transforming Our Approach to Education: Cultivating Partnerships and Dialogue," in *Contested Issues in Students Affairs: Diverse Perspectives and Respectful Dialogue*, edited by Peter M. Magolda and Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing LLC, 2011), 64.

⁴ Arcelus, "Transforming Our Approach," 72.

⁵ Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), "Guidelines for Academic Librarians without Faculty Status," *College & Research Libraries News*, 73, no. 3 (2012):161-2.



⁶ Arcelus, "Transforming Our Approach," 63.

⁷ Scott Shaw, "Thoughts on the Modern Martial Arts" (1998), accessed April 13, 2013, <http://www.scottshaw.com/martialarts.html>

⁸ Alain R. Lamothe, "The Importance of Encouraging Librarians to Publish in Peer-Reviewed Publications," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 43, no. 2 (2012):156-167.