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# Fab Collabs: Educators Share Tips on Creative Collaborations

By Patricia J. Murphy | Sep 11, 2023

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“If you want to go fast,” the African proverb says, “go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” That spirit of community is at the heart of many classrooms and libraries. We spoke with three educators about the “hows” and “whys” of their collaborative efforts and the far-reaching effects.

Aside from Lisa in *Corduroy* and Peter in the *The Snowy Day*, **Becky Guerrero Clesen** doesn't recall other characters who looked like her in the library or schoolbooks she read as a child. That's why Clesen, a former ESL/Dual educator and current library program specialist at the Arlington Heights Memorial Library in Arlington Heights, Ill., researches, discovers, and delivers a diverse lineup of cultural and recreational presenters and programs for toddlers to tweens, and collaborates with teachers to help them find books and resources that match their students' backgrounds, interests, and needs.

Clesen's help often takes different shapes, from sharing about the library's school outreach program, where teachers can fill out forms to get curated book bags delivered to their schools; and setting up library tours for local schools or homeschool students; to using her ESL/Dual Language teaching background and library experience to give book recommendations for classroom instruction or to supplement school and classroom libraries.



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From l.: AHML library program specialist Becky Guerrero Clesen and AHML youth services supervisor Lynne Priest sharing a picture book.

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“Recently, we had preschool teachers come in who were working on a unit about life cycles, and they wanted to know about the best and latest fiction picture books and informational books,” Clesen said. “Sometimes we pull the books right then and there, or do this later, and then let them know when they can pick them up at the drive-through.”

Clesen believes these personal interactions fuel a valuable collaboration with lasting results. While she learns what the teachers’ specific students’ needs are, the teachers learn about the right books for their students, the latest resources, and relevant library programming that will benefit their student’s academic needs, and help them find books that will change their reading lives.

“Together, we discover that we can’t do this alone. No one has all the pieces or the answers,” Clesen said, “And, when we work together, we can help peel the onion and get the resources educators need to teach their students, to help them love reading!”

**Elaine Vickers**, a children’s author and a chemistry professor at Southern Utah University in Cedar City, knows the elements of successful collaborations. She and her colleagues make conscious efforts to collaborate throughout the year. These projects begin as early as their first back-to-school gathering. “It’s always nice to come together at the beginning of the school year and to get back to work!” Vickers said.

This work includes developing courses, planning labs, and refining lessons. “We may be teaching different sections of the same lab, but we’re doing some of the same experiments,” Vickers said, “so, we’re always communicating throughout the year [about] whether we need more of this or that solution, sharing if a part of an experiment didn’t work, or if we tried something different and it worked better.”

Vickers finds that their collaboration works even better when students see it in action. She says that it’s not unusual for her to ask questions or seek the advice of a colleague in front her students during a lab if it’s not going as expected. “This shows my students that learning isn’t a binary thing where professors have all of the answers and students are the only ones learning,” Vickers said, “but that we’re figuring out things altogether.”

While she hasn’t seen students directly respond to these interactions, she’s hopeful that they will sink in, open up lines of communication, and help adjust her students’ expectations and mindsets. “I want them to expect that things aren’t always going to go perfectly,” Vickers said, “and, if/when there are others who are doing the same experiment or working toward the same answer, then why don’t we collaborate and work for the best outcome for everyone?”

Vickers asks her students to read a book of their own choice—not a textbook—and make an appointment to talk with her about the chemistry they have found in their book. “I want kids to discover on their own that chemistry is everywhere,” she said, “and to encourage them to use the library if they don’t already. That’s the hope.”



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From l.: professors Dr. Guizella Rocabado, Dr. Jessica Pullan, and Dr. Elaine Vickers.

**Margarita “Margie” Longoria** has always loved reading, books, and the library. She spent countless hours as a child in her local library reading books and talking to librarians while her mother studied to become a teacher. This passion continued as she taught English, earned her library degree, and took over the librarian position at her school, Mission High School, in Mission, Tex.

Being both a teacher and a librarian, Longoria knows the importance of teachers and librarians working together to lift each other up and to create a community of learners. As an English teacher, Longoria was known for creating literature study lessons across the curriculum—for the math, science, history, and gym teachers—so they could help enhance their students’ reading and learning experiences and join the fun.



Margarita Longoria believes two essential parts of collaboration are open ears and hearts.

“The first book I did this with was *Twilight*,” Longoria said, “I realized early on while teaching English that it can be hard to get kids to read—especially when they are experiencing problems at home. Reading wasn’t always at the top of their lists. So, I’d pick books that I loved and that I knew I could make them want to read.”

Longoria also wants all of her students to want to come into the library, “so, my main goal—and the thing that I must do—is to make sure that everyone feels welcome,” she said. She does this in a variety of ways, which includes collaborating with her ninth grade teachers to develop a “Welcome to the Library” orientation program for their new students each year. “Prior to school opening, we meet to discuss what we will address for the new school

year,” Longoria said. “It’s different every year because the world is changing so fast.”

During the orientation, Longoria and her teachers outline desired behaviors, from entering the school and the library properly to following the rules, and also discuss what students might expect in the next four years. The faculty also talk about what the library offers, and preview critical lessons where students will learn more about digital literacy and internet safety and etiquette. “Some of these lessons we didn’t have a few years ago!”

As the school year marches on, Longoria is available year-round for all manner of collaborations to enrich curriculum and increase student success. One area of special interest for Longoria and her English and history teachers is developing best practices for students researching and writing papers, such as proper notetaking, accurate citing of resources, and discerning between truth and misinformation. Another interest of Longoria’s is helping teachers get the books they need for instruction and their classroom libraries—and offering reading advisory to students.

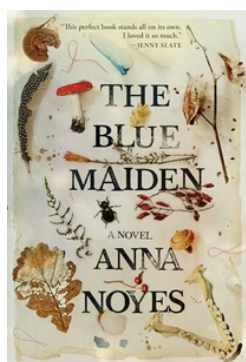
“It’s all about having your teachers feel supported, knowing that you’re a friend—and an advocate—for what they’re doing in their classrooms,” Longoria said. “Ultimately, it’s about supporting teachers so they can help their students have meaningful learning experiences and go on to live successful lives.”

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