

Mary Catherine Santoro, Clinical Instruction and Outreach Librarian, RUC Library
Nomination Narrative - Award for Administrative and Professional Excellence

I think I first articulated what I now consider to be my professional philosophy at about 7:00 one morning, lying in the floor in front of a Christmas tree at a medical conference at the Hotel Roanoke. I was lying in the floor because it was the only way to get the right angle for a photograph of the library's mascots, who are a pair rat skeleton Halloween decorations. When one of the other attendees asked me what in the world I was doing, I told her it was impossible to be an outreach librarian and take yourself overly seriously. And I have realized that that statement is, in fact, at the very core of how I approach my career. I take my job seriously, I take the library users and their questions and needs seriously, I take my commitments to the university and my colleagues seriously, but I cannot take myself over seriously and thrive in my job.

I believe that this approach – a willingness to be occasionally ridiculous, a refusal to see things as “not my job” because they’re somehow beneath me, a goal of creating engagement and connection, a determination to put the needs of library users first – has truly served me well. I am often the very first contact that RUC students have with their library, at their orientation session. Striving to create from that moment a rapport makes it clear to students that the RUC Library is a place that they are welcome, and that it is here to help them. In addition, as the instruction librarian at RUC, I am most often the member of the library staff students see in their classrooms (whether in person or over Zoom). I am acutely aware that my demeanor, knowledge, presentation, and ability to connect with students can make the difference in their wanting to use the library and its services or not. Given how critical library use and the willingness to ask for help and support are to being successful in college, this is certainly not a responsibility I take lightly.

Receiving the email that I had been nominated for this award was so unexpected and humbling. I work with such amazing people, here at RUC and on the main campus in Radford, and this is such an amazing expression of support. I take so much pride and gratification in the opportunities that working for RUC has provided me.

I have genuinely loved working with the AP Senate, where I am currently serving as the Parliamentarian. I was elected two years ago, as the first representative from the RUC campus. In that capacity, I've been given the ability to actively seek ways to create collaboration between our two campuses. I get to serve not only as a voice for RUC but also as a voice *to* RUC, facilitating communication in both directions and getting an opportunity to work closely with colleagues on the main campus. In addition to serving as the Parliamentarian and on the Executive Committee, I've served on several ad hoc committees. I'm probably proudest of the work we did last year to create, distribute, and report on the first AP Faculty Morale Survey.

Coming through the Jefferson College merger and the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced for me just how importance communication and connection is, even while the latter has radically shifted the ways we use to achieve them. Increased reliance on virtual meetings, asynchronous instruction, and social media to continue the feeling of community we have with colleagues and students. As the Clinical Instruction and Outreach Librarian at RUC, I've worked over the last two years to find ways to shift what had been in-person events to virtual equivalents – for example, last year the RUC Library was not able to celebrate Women's History Month by hosting a celebration of women authors in the library (as we had in 2020, just before the shift to online classes). Instead, we asked 31 members of the RUC community – students, staff, and faculty – to select a quote from a famous woman. We then created a series of social media posts highlighting the quotes and shared one to the library's Facebook and Instagram accounts each day. Despite our inability to safely gather, we still created an event that involved bringing the RUC community together.

As it becomes safer to gather, the RUC Library has an ambitious plan of in-person events this semester. As the librarian responsible for outreach, I am the one who plans, organizes, and oversees these events. We had 98 people attend our “Caffeination Station” event in February. We have planned several new programs we have never done before (such as evening trivia nights) and we continue to have programming on our social media accounts (including posting plans for Black History Month and Women’s History Month).

The pandemic has naturally had an impact on our ability to collaborate with organizations outside of Radford University, but I have been fortunate to have some. Last Spring, I was honored to be invited to speak at George C. Marshall International Center in Leesburg, Virginia, on Women’s Education During the Late-19th and Early-20th Centuries. More recently, the RUC Library was able to partner with the Virginia War Memorial for their Salute to Veteran Patients project. With other groups and organizations across the Commonwealth, we contributed cards signed by students and staff to be sent to Virginia’s Veteran Care Centers. Given the relationship many of our students have with the Salem VA during their clinical rotations, it was particularly gratifying to be able to send 93 cards to them.

Collaboration within the Radford University family – both between departments at RUC and between campuses – is equally important. I have been honored to be able to serve on conduct boards and to be one of the members of the search committee for the new Dean of University Libraries. I also served as the RUC liaison for last year’s Climb to 25 fundraising campaign, helping to promote the newly established RUC emergency fund to colleagues and raise awareness and support for it. I have worked with other departments at RUC, in particular with Student Affairs, and with student groups to help promote their events and projects, especially on social media. This recently involved participating in a panel discussion with a several Occupational Therapy students and their professor who were designing an anti-stress program for their fellow RUC students, and then taking our library mascot rats to stage a meeting of the group and share it on social media. I have also been fortunate to be involved with internal library committees, such as faculty outreach, that span the two campuses.

I also believe that informal forms of outreach and collaboration are critical to the building of a successful community. I am fortunate at RUC that many of the people I do outreach to are in the same building I am. Elevator rides truly do offer opportunities to check in with students or faculty, to encourage them to attend library events and programming, or to remind them of library services. Before the pandemic, I found that one of the most effective means of outreach was to bake cookies, take them around to faculty offices, and (while I was there) learn about what the library might be able to help them with. In the fall of 2020, when we returned to the building, I switched from baked goods to homemade masks. I’ve made and given away almost 1500 cloth masks, most of them to colleagues at RUC. Again, this activity has allowed me to interact with faculty and staff, and continue to build that sense of community that so defines a successful university.

I am grateful that I get to work at a place as engaging and supportive as Radford University Carilion, and indeed, as Radford University as a whole. My colleagues have done such a wonderful job creating a place where students can be successful, and I am honored to be a part of it.