

I Love My Librarian!

Award

Jessica Bell
Director of the Library and Instructional Design
MGH Institute of Health Professions
Boston, Massachusetts

Nominated by: Peter Cahn and Amanda Tarbet

When Jessica Bell started as the sole librarian at MGH Institute of Health Professions in 2008, she supported the information literacy needs of 5 graduate degree programs encompassing 81 faculty members and 835 students. In some respects, Jessica assumed a traditional role for a health sciences librarian. The MGH Institute, a not-for-profit, accredited graduate school, is affiliated with a large, integrated health care organization committed to education and research. In other ways, Jessica joined a startup academic community. The graduate school operated out of a single building in the Charlestown Navy Yard of Boston with an entirely virtual library.

Over twelve years, the MGH Institute has grown to offer 11 degree programs to 1,600 students taught by 120 faculty members. The hospital-based collection transitioned to a virtual library, and the MGH Institute opened a new physical library space. NIH-funded research faculty arrived and set up labs with postdoctoral fellows. Through all the expansion, Jessica has contributed significantly to the MGH Institute's ability to sustain its mission to prepare health professionals grounded in evidence-based practice and promote the creation of new knowledge that advances care of a diverse society. Faculty, staff, and students at the MGH Institute love Jessica Bell and encourage you to recognize her with the I Love My Librarian Award.

Improving the community

In Jessica's time at the MGH Institute, the landscape for information resources has grown more complicated while the constituents she serves have grown more diverse. When she received her MS in Library and Information Science from Simmons College in 2000, she could not have anticipated becoming expert in so many different health professions. With the addition of each new academic program, Jessica familiarizes herself with the profession's scholarly literature, research methods, and curricular elements. She partners with faculty to tailor services to their particular students' needs. One program director describes Jessica's valuable contributions to developing supports for mid-career occupational therapists enrolling in an online doctoral program:

“Over the past year, Jessica has gone beyond a typical consultative role to develop written and video tools to help students with topics such as understanding and searching background information, developing a search strategy, putting keywords together, revising a search, and implementing inclusion/exclusion criteria. In the first two weeks of the launch of the new program, students reacted positively to the appropriately tailored education resources for the working clinician, transitioning from fear of the library sciences to feelings of eagerness and confidence. In fact, some students have shared that the learning resources created by Jessica and her team were so concise and easy to follow that it made the option to re-watch and engage even more welcoming. Whether from a computer or mobile device while viewing from an office setting or commute over headphones, students have expressed Jessica’s work to be supportive of their transition back to the academic environment.”

--Sarah McKinnon, assistant professor and program director, post-professional OTD program

Another program director praises Jessica for working productively with faculty to introduce research skills to online students in undergraduate science prerequisite courses:

“As a collaborator, she worked with me and with two of our online instructors to craft additional instruction and support for students researching and writing case studies and lab reports for their course in Exercise Physiology. All online students have access to our librarians and library resources, but many of our online students are new to researching and writing in a scientific discipline. In this course in particular, students were struggling with paraphrasing accurately and correctly citing their resources. After some initial conversations with me, Jessica reached out to the instructors, and they revised the assignments to help focus the students. Together they created additional information for the syllabus that explained primary and secondary resources and provided examples of citations as well as providing a direct link to Jessica as a resource. There have not been any incidences of plagiarism in the course this semester.”

--Lynn Foord, director of the prerequisites for the health professions program

Health professions educators face mandates from accreditors, the public, and clinical affiliates to introduce learners to multiple competencies, resulting in content-dense curricula. Preparing health professions students to apply evidence-based diagnostic and treatment plans to their future practice is a primary focus of Jessica’s role. Through patient collaboration, she has succeeded in including mandatory information literacy instruction in 100 percent of the MGH Institute programs and advanced skills training in 60 percent of curricula. Two students expressed gratitude for how her support for evidence-based practice has enhanced their education.

“Jessica has gone consistently above and beyond for me throughout my time at the MGH Institute, and I am so grateful to have had her support! I admire her dedication to providing the most helpful, up-to-date, innovative, and evidence-based resources in the Institute’s library to assist in research across our community. She has met with our graduate program numerous times to support and strengthen our research skills and teach us about the extensive resources our library provides. Jessica always goes above and beyond to ensure student and faculty access to those resources, meeting with us individually

to support everything from APA format to research design and literature searches. I am very honored to help support this nomination, because I love my librarian, Jessica Bell!”

--Rachel Norton, master's in speech language pathology student

“I can share that my experience with Jessica has been excellent. I consulted with her in preparation for a scoping review paper, and she was so thorough in her sharing of resources, including which databases to target as well as checklists to keep in mind while writing the review. She also helped me come up with appropriate search terms and pointed me toward an online resource that helps teams create review papers. What impressed me the most was that even though she does not share my background in speech pathaology, she had done preparation before our meeting and was able to talk to me about my topic in a very thoughtful and informed way, which put me at ease. We even discussed the kind of impact that such a paper would have, and she seemed genuinely excited to help get the project off the ground. She offered to be a resource as the project moves into different stages and it was clear that she takes a lot of pride in helping students.”

--Marc Maffei, doctoral research fellow, Speech and Feeding Disorders Lab

In the past year, Jessica and her assistant director for library services conducted 37 instructional sessions for 1,780 students, consulted with 301 faculty and students on research projects, and fielded 618 reference questions. The impression that Jessica leaves with students is evident in the confidential exit surveys that graduates complete. On a scale where 5 is the most satisfied, all cohorts of graduating students in the past four years have rated the librarian between 4.4 and 4.7, among the highest scores for all academic support services. It's telling how many students mention her by name and add exclamation marks in their written comments:

- I am leaving the IHP with knowledge about accessing services and resources to help guide me in evidence-based practice. The seminars offered by Jessica Bell were extremely informative and helpful.
- Jessica Bell was a solo miracle worker for at least two of my three years—cannot thank her enough!
- Jessica is amazing! She is always available and goes above and beyond to help with anything!
- Whatever you are paying the librarians, it is not enough. They are amazing, and I've always been impressed with them.
- Jessica has been an incredible part of my education at the Institute.

Demonstrating leadership

When Jessica identifies a challenge, she brings others together to design and implement a solution. Like many librarians, she is keen to make the library more accessible to all users. Student exit surveys, the only official source of satisfaction data, do not provide the detailed feedback she would need to make improvements, so Jessica has pioneered user experience (UX) methods. Starting with the website, the point of initial contact for most users of the virtual collections, Jessica recruited a representative sample of students to participate in a series of card sorts to determine the optimum organization of resources. She used those results to conduct a “tree test,” a technique for evaluating the findability of topics on a

website. The finished website features the most-used databases on the home page and a collection of 100 LibGuides, which last year registered over 100,000 views.

Not content to limit her project to one institution, Jessica extended her project to learn how similarly sized libraries improved their user experience. She refined a list of questions and received Institutional Review Board approval to conduct a national survey. After obtaining a contact list of all academic libraries in the United States with nine or fewer librarians, she circulated a request for participation and received 259 responses. She then disseminated her findings about UX design for academic libraries at two national conferences.

In 2019, Jessica was the first staff member at the MGH Institute to apply and be selected for a new program designed to give staff members six weeks of leave from their daily responsibilities to pursue an innovative idea. Jessica, aware of the MGH Institute's plan to continue adding academic programs, seized the opportunity to sharpen her system for evaluating information needs and designing collection development practices. She already routinely reviewed course syllabi and faculty publication bibliographies to maintain a relevant collection. During her leave, she interviewed dozens of librarians from peer institutions about their strategies for anticipating changing collection needs. She presented her findings to the MGH Institute's board of trustees and applied them to facilitate the launch of new programs.

Her open-minded, future-oriented approach to leadership extends to the team of two instructional designers and an assistant librarian that she supervises. Two of Jessica's long-time direct reports describe her supportive leadership style:

"As our director, Jessica inspires us to exceed our goals and to exhibit the same dedication to the Institute and innovation of our services as she does. She empowers us to try new things and provide high-quality service to students, faculty, and staff. She spearheaded the creation of a strategic plan for the Department of Library and Instructional Design, which establishes our departmental goals and guides our services. The plan is aligned with both the Institute's strategic plan and our personal goals, so that all of our work is contributing to the Institute's mission."

--Tony Sindelar, senior instructional designer and teaching consultant

"Jessica approaches problems with an innovation mindset and designs solutions with a patron-centered focus. She makes sure that everyone in our department (few of us though there may be) has a say in developing annual goals and in long-term strategic planning. She encourages us to seek out interdepartmental collaborations and leadership opportunities, because Jessica knows what every extraordinary librarian knows: great libraries build and sustain communities far beyond the library's walls."

--Amanda Tarbet, assistant director of library services

Going above and beyond

Jessica routinely exceeds the bounds of her job description. One area where her exceptional achievements shine is her support for faculty scholarship. Starting in 2012, when the MGH Institute recruited externally funded research faculty and launched its first PhD program, the expectation for all faculty to disseminate their expertise became more explicit. Jessica recognized that in addition to facilitating scholarship passively through collection management, the library could actively contribute to generating new knowledge.

Many faculty members with a focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning expressed interest in testing ways to lessen the financial burden on students, who typically graduate with nearly \$100,000 in debt. Jessica worked with faculty members to identify a potential way that the library could help reduce the costs of graduate education. In 2014, she received one of 17 Sparks! Ignition Grants awarded nationally by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The Open Access Course Reserves initiative aimed to create a publicly available, curated repository of free, copyright compliant materials suitable for replacing textbooks in health sciences courses. She tested her database with faculty members at the MGH Institute and presented her findings at a national conference.

Jessica also sought to integrate library services into a project with a faculty member in the department of occupational therapy to enhance students' ability to raise the health literacy of their clients. In 2018, Jessica received a grant from the Massachusetts Libraries Board of Library Commissioners to develop and deliver a workshop for first-year occupational therapy students to introduce health literacy and cross-cultural communication concepts. She supplemented the instruction with research guides and materials from the library's community health collection. One participating student remarked, "I feel that the health literacy workshop was extremely helpful in fostering my thinking about the language I use in projects and with future clients."

Faculty members have come to see Jessica as more than a resource for scholarship; she has become a co-author. Her support for systematic review articles has earned her authorship credit on peer-reviewed articles as varied as "Effect of Physical Therapy Interventions in the Acute Care Setting on Function, Activity, and Participation After Total Knee Arthroplasty: A Systematic Review" and "Building Academic Communities to Support Nursing Students with Disabilities: An Integrative Review." One nursing faculty member described Jessica's invaluable role in manuscript preparation:

"Jessica Bell is a librarian extraordinaire who has become a collaborator in my scholarly work. She has always been a source for assistance in literature searches but now is a co-author on papers given her input into the development of papers, her astute suggestions when she reads the various versions of an article, and her expertise on different formats for citations and references. Recently we have worked together in the laborious work of submission of articles. She is an invaluable team member with a can-do personality and a ready smile. How can you not be productive with an ally like that and enjoy the journey?"

--Inge Corless, professor of nursing emerita

Adapting to Covid-19

From March to August 2020, the MGH Institute shifted to all remote instruction in compliance with public health guidelines. The library's primarily virtual collection and strong existing social media presence helped maintain access to services during the transition. Jessica and her team pushed instructional content to the library's YouTube channel, which now totals 67 videos viewed 27,414 times. The library's Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook pages each counts more than 200 followers. Posts encouraged students to access online course reserves, tutorials on search strategies, and resources for stress management.

With clinical placements in affiliated hospitals suspended, faculty members scrambled to identify online resources that would allow students to develop their skills and meet requirements for licensure. Jessica fielded dozens of requests from faculty to vet databases of virtual clinical scenarios for suitability and affordability. At a time when budgetary constraints forced across-the-board cuts, she successfully lobbied to invest in the highest quality databases that would enable students to maintain their academic progression.

Since the Bellack Library and Study Commons opened in 2016, Jessica has promoted it as a third space where users can reflect deeply and collaborate creatively. Normally, she would host events themed around Banned Books Week, National Cookie Day, and final exam study breaks to encourage participation. With the inviting physical space unavailable, Jessica and her team focused on virtual community building. They hosted a live spelling bee where contestants had to spell medical terms and a team trivia night. For students who still needed materials from the community health collection, Jessica set up a system of contact-free pick up. When students returned to campus in the fall for select in-person activities, it was not a surprise that their most frequent request was to regain access to the library space.

In-person workshops, which had been a regular source of interaction between Jessica and student cohorts, had to be recast as online, asynchronous modules. One doctoral student who served as a graduate assistant in the library, recalled the process of working with Jessica to migrate one popular workshop:

"Normally, students would attend in-person library workshops to learn about APA citation formatting. However, the sudden shift to an online learning environment created a challenge for how students would access these workshops, especially with the recent change from APA 6 to APA 7. Jessica turned this challenge into an opportunity. Within three weeks before the start of the summer semester, Jessica worked efficiently to complete this online workshop with me. We created an APA 7 online workshop with comprehensive modules and quizzes to test students' knowledge. I genuinely enjoyed working with her as she sought creative ways to teach students a topic that would otherwise be thought of as uninteresting. After the launch of the workshop, students told me that they found the online workshop extremely helpful in advancing their writing to a doctoral level. The workshop exceeded students' expectations of online learning, exemplifying one in many ways how Jessica represents the best of the library profession. "

--Anna Do, occupational therapy doctoral student

Jessica also positioned the library to confront the newfound visibility of systemic racism that flared during the Covid-19 pandemic. She had already collaborated with members of the MGH Institute's Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Council to collect resources for faculty members to create culturally appropriate case studies for teaching. In addition, she had dedicated efforts over several years to build a collection of documentaries about health disparities that faculty frequently use in their classes. In light of the events of summer 2020, Jessica committed the library to participating in the MGH Institute's anti-racism efforts by completing library anti-racism training and conducting an audit of the library's collections, displays, and events. One faculty member commented on Jessica's modeling of inclusion:

"For the last three years, I have worked with Jessica in many different capacities. First, in my classes, where she has gone above and beyond in improving activities around health literacy for clients from different backgrounds. Second, Jessica has helped us in capstone graduation projects on many, many literature searches for systematic reviews. Jessica has always been available and ready to assist us and has instilled the love of literature exploration among our students, staff, and faculty. As a faculty of color, Jessica has always made me feel supported in a culturally sensitive and compassionate manner."
--Rawan AlHeresh, associate professor of occupational therapy

Conclusion

In 2015, the MGH Institute recognized Jessica Bell as Employee of the Year, the highest award a staff member can receive. Since then, her contributions to the MGH Institute community have only deepened and broadened. She is committed to making the library central to the mission of the MGH Institute, constantly adapting it to address new academic and societal needs. The array of task forces, committees, and working groups Jessica is invited to serve on attest to how much faculty and staff value her input. Students know her by name and single her out for praise on surveys. The colleagues who work most closely with her value her mentorship and wisdom. We love Jessica and, though her humility will find it difficult to accept, we consider it time that the entire country learns why.