

I Love My Librarian!

Award

Sean C. Bird
Associate Dean of University Libraries
Washburn University, Mabee Library
Topeka, Kansas

Nominated by: Alan Bearman

This nomination is unanimously supported by all 9 librarians at Washburn University, as well as the 27 staff members in the Center for Student Success and Retention, 5 Deans and Assistant/Associate Deans, and the Washburn Faculty Senate.

In gathering materials for Sean's nomination, I heard, from every quarter of the university, what a difference he has made in the lives of others. A Washburn graduate who came back home to serve his community, Sean is the epitome of the Washburn motto: "Not for Ourselves Alone," and he has devoted his career to creating equal educational opportunity for underserved populations. His tireless efforts to increase educational attainment among first-generation, low-income, minority students at Washburn have impacted thousands of marginalized students who now enjoy the promises of a college degree: economic mobility, decreasing disparities of health and wealth, and better lives for their children. Sean has been a passionate advocate for underrepresented students for more than a decade. After becoming Associate Dean of University Libraries in 2010, he immediately brought a lens of racial and economic justice to the unit's vision and operations. He knew our students—33% minority, 45% Pell-eligible, and 50% first-generation—faced multiple difficulties outside the classroom, and he identified a need to provide them holistic, wrap-around services. What was unusual about Sean's analysis, though, was that those services belonged, physically and conceptually, within the library; for Sean, libraries are fundamentally about people—and at regional, public universities—about supporting student success. Collaborating with me, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, and colleagues from other universities and the local school district, Sean's vision culminated in the creation of the Center for Student Success and Retention, a unit within Mabee Library. Today, Mabee serves as a one-stop hub for the information, services, and resources students need to excel in their studies and graduate, including: access to technology, research assistance, tutoring, first-generation programs, enrollment advising, success coaching, prior learning and testing, veteran services, and assistance with their first-year experience. These services have created an inclusive culture in Mabee Library, where Sean reminds our team daily to "meet students where they are." Students' comfort here is evidenced by our soaring gate counts, which have more than doubled since 2010 to over 300,000. What is more, these services are improving retention and graduation rates for Washburn students, both of which are up 10 points since 2014.

In addition, Sean has developed or collaborated on several innovative programs that promote equity in higher education. To help first-generation, low-income, minority students retain at university and graduate with an Associate's degree, he helped found the Ichabod Success Institute. This now nationally-recognized bridge program has demonstrated particularly positive impacts on Latinx student success, and it has developed a sense of community and belonging at Washburn among underrepresented students. Importantly, this program is closing achievement gaps. Institute students retain at rates 10 points higher than their Washburn peers, and Institute students' on-time Associate's graduation rate is 3x higher than the national average.

Understanding the barrier that rising textbook costs are to low-income student success, Sean has led the Open Educational Resource initiative at Washburn. His innovative faculty grant program, which incentivizes faculty to redesign their courses with OER, has resulted in no fewer than 10 course redesigns in its first year, translating to thousands of dollars in textbook savings for Washburn students. Perhaps most importantly, in response to the emergency shift to remote learning this Spring, Sean quickly developed a program to ensure low-income students at Washburn had a laptop so they could successfully complete the semester. This program was critical for helping Washburn students weather the COVID-19 pandemic, for 45% of our students are Pell-eligible. While some universities structured their technology rental programs with complex applications, eligibility requirements, or verification procedures, Sean wanted no barriers between a student and the technology they needed to be successful. All a student needed to do to receive a laptop was raise their hand for help—by notifying anyone in Mabee Library and the Center for Student Success, or any member of the faculty. Using this model, Sean Bird met every student technology need at Washburn University in Spring 2020. Sean's service to first-generation, low-income students at Washburn University—an Open Access institution—is an exemplary model of how libraries promote equity and inclusion. His diligent work to close the achievement and graduation gap for underrepresented populations is well outside the normal role of a librarian, and his advocacy for marginalized students has been an inspiration to me personally. His leadership and vision have transformed Mabee Library's mission, organization, culture, and programming, and each day, he makes the Mabee somewhere students want to be.

Testimonials from Colleagues

Lori Fenton, Collection Development Manager, writes:

"Sean is the first person to arrive at the library each day. He dedicates those early morning hours to responding to emails (quite often from me) and resolving any number of issues that come up. When the pandemic lockdown and shift to remote learning happened last spring, I saw Sean respond immediately to set up services to ensure that students had the technology they needed to continue learning. He personally took responsibility for getting equipment and library materials into the hands of those who needed them, arranging for deliveries or pick-ups for our students, even shipping laptops across the country. Whether he is serving the needs of fellow librarians, faculty, students, or the broader Washburn, Topeka, and Kansas communities, Sean could be called the 'Linchpin Librarian.' He holds it all together."

Amanda Luke, Open Access Librarian, writes:

“Before the pandemic, our library was so popular with students it was often difficult to find seating. I attribute this in many ways to Sean’s approachability. I’ve never been to another university library where the Associate Dean can be seen at the front desk everyday greeting every student that walks in the door. He always has a friendly smile, a joke, or a word of encouragement for them. It was not unusual to hear a loud ‘SEAN BIRD!’ from across the library as a student came by to say hello, chat, or ask for advice. It’s clear that they feel comfortable approaching him about anything.

In the Spring of 2020 as we were all navigating the Pandemic and what reopening the library would look like, Sean always kept access and safety as his top priorities. Sean carefully thought through every aspect of how we could safely get students access to the library. As the first day of classes approached, the librarians were all unsure about what to expect when students arrived and nervous about the new rules and safety regulations. But that first Monday morning in August there was Sean at the front desk greeting students and helping them feel at ease. The relief was clear on the faces of our returning students when they saw that, despite the social distancing rules, masks, and what now appeared like an alien landscape of a library, standing at the front desk being his usual friendly and super animated self was Sean Bird.

It has been a professional privilege for me to see his lead-by-example style of management and his unwavering commitment to ensuring our faculty, staff, and students are safe and have access to the library.”

Dr. Jennifer Wiard, Director of External Relations, writes:

“Sean Bird is a quiet hero. Each day, he serves others in extraordinary ways, and that with grace and humility. During normal semesters, two sounds dominate Mabee Library, the main library at Washburn University: the sound of bustling students, and the sound of Sean Bird’s clapping feet literally running through the building—on a singular mission to get the student he is assisting the help they need as fast as possible. Does a student need to schedule an advising appointment? He walks (or runs) them over to the Advising Office. If a tour of prospective students comes into the library, he takes over the tour to showcase our space and talk to new students about the importance of information literacy to their university educations and their lives. Are you meeting with a student who reveals they are in crisis? Just call Sean Bird, ASIST certified and a former EMT who knows exactly how to support the student and his colleague, make sure each are safe, and get the student, immediately, to the right resources. Sean Bird has made all these activities, and more, a central part of his job, because his calling, above all else, is to serve people.”

James Barraclough, Director of Undergraduate Initiatives, writes:

I have been a member of the Washburn University community of learning for over 12 years and I have had the opportunity to work closely with Mr. Sean Bird for the last 7 years as a member of the Center for Student Success & Retention. Whether it is a student or a colleague in need of assistance, Sean is always the first to volunteer to help. That desire to help certainly includes fulfilling the typical roles served by librarians, but goes beyond as Sean provides holistic support to those in need. It is normal to see him assisting a student with questions about financial aid, helping a parent of a new student

understand how to effectively support their child, and taking however much time is needed to simply be present with a student as they process an event and need a friendly and safe person.

Mr. Bird's influence extends well beyond providing effective services through our University Libraries. He has been integral in developing and updating the Information Literacy curriculum that is at the core of our mandatory first-year student seminar. Furthermore, his desire to provide support for the broad needs of our diverse student population led to his involvement in the creation of our Ihabod Success Institute. Although this 2-year bridge program for first-generation college students has an information literacy outcome, Sean's engagement with the program and its students does more than help us focus on information literacy—it helps all of us remain focused on serving the whole student. Put simply, Sean's efforts to support students have shifted Mabee Library initiatives beyond those of a typical library. His desire to go above and beyond for students, without even thinking about, has set an exemplary model for our librarians and student success professionals alike.

Dr. Kim Morse, Professor of History, Faculty Senate President, writes:

"There really are few folks on the planet finer than Sean. His work this Spring to put technology in every student's hand was extraordinary, inclusive, and so important. It was a great relief for faculty to know that if a student lacked technology, they could send them to Sean and he would take care of it. WU, our students, are so fortunate to have him as an advocate. These accolades are well-deserved."

Testimonials from Students

It is impossible to estimate how many students' lives have been changed by Sean Bird, but below is a sampling of testimonials taken from our graduating student exit surveys. The question asks students to name "any Washburn faculty or staff member(s) who made a positive difference in your life" and share "in what way did this person(s) make a positive difference in your life?" All responses are anonymous.

"Sean C. Bird was my biggest cheerleader at Washburn University. He believed in me more than I believed in myself many times and his encouragement has led me to always believe I can attain any goal I set out to attain. His positive attitude and drive to know everyone on campus that crossed his path inspired me to want to be just like him when I grow up. He is hilarious and whenever I was stressed or feeling down, I knew Sean was going to be able to provide a laugh. Sean was a faculty member who I knew I could turn to no matter what issue I was having."

"Sean Bird. That dude changed my life. I always struggled with math, but he encouraged me to go to the math lab every day. He is the reason I graduated."

"Sean C. Bird, (library) I did not have class with Sean, but he has also gone out of his way to be a friendly face on campus. He would go above and beyond to put a smile on students faces and is excited to be a part of the Washburn family of faculty and staff. Thank You!"

“Sean Bird. It was clear this person at Washburn had a genuine love for teaching and was passionate in his student's success. I will remember him forever. He went above and beyond and was always there to help me.”

“Sean Bird helped me through my first two years of school when I really was not a fan of Washburn; he pushed me through and showed me how to grow.”

“Sean Bird; he helped me be more open minded about learning and made me want to follow through with getting my education.”

“Sean Bird, for making me think critically about the world and why college is so important.”

“Sean Bird was an awesome instructor. He motivated me to do my school work, but best of all he motivated me in life. He was very energetic, full of life, and willing to help his students learn and better themselves.”

“Sean Bird was my English 300 teacher and I really appreciated how much he genuinely cared about student progress. He has even spoken with me outside of class about my future since I am unsure where I really want to do with my education after graduation.”

“Sean Bird: He was the best librarian I have ever had.”