

Becoming a Student of Kalamazoo: Experiences in Learning, Community Connection, and Belonging

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Requested Leave

I am requesting 740 hours of sabbatical leave during the Fall 2025 semester, which is half of the 1480 hours contractually required of non-classroom faculty. If I receive sabbatical leave, I will work out a schedule with the Director of Libraries.

Statement of Purpose

I plan to delve deep into the city where I live - Kalamazoo - by physically exploring spaces and places and building connections with people and organizations within the community. Having on-the-ground experiences learning new things and making connections will help me grow roots, both personally and professionally, allowing me to reflect on and create a sense of belonging in the community and library.

Narrative

Introduction

As a librarian at Kalamazoo Valley's Texas Township campus, I meet hundreds of students every semester. Some are regulars, staking out a particular spot every time they visit the library, like the nurse who wants to be a computer scientist or a group of students bonding over calculus problem sets. I learn their names, chat about assignments and answer their questions, and sometimes they share a bit of their story with me. Other students come to the library with a class, and I have the opportunity to work with them for an hour or so. Though fleeting, I get to know them through the topics they pick and the questions they ask. With all students, I try to pay attention to the things that matter to them, their challenges and their successes, their feelings about an assignment or school in general. I hope that I help students feel welcome in the library, that I see and support them, no matter how long our paths cross, like the overwhelmed student who came to the library because I seemed friendly during a brief class presentation. Whether students are enjoying the view while studying, using a computer, searching for a book or just walking through, I want them to feel like they belong in the library.

Learning Through Exploration

My initial path to librarianship was circuitous. I left college with an interest in literature and a desire to share the written word with others. I tried writing and editing and bookselling. I spent some time teaching. I was a volunteer educator in the outdoors and in a public library. I read widely. And, in the course of all this exploring, I realized a couple of things about myself. I loved learning new things and wanted to share that love of learning with other people. However, being responsible for 5-days-a-week classroom learning was not exciting to me. Instead, I wanted to be someone who sparked learning in other settings – a library, the outdoors, the

community – and who connected people and resources and ideas. It was important to be part of a community focused on learning and enriching lives. So, in search of that, I went to library school and became a librarian. And, throughout my career, I’ve been grateful for the diverse experiences I’ve had with teaching and community building. Learning remains at the heart of what I do, both personally and professionally, whether it’s learning how to play the piano as an adult or introducing students to the trees and trails outside the Texas Township library windows.

Learning in the Context of Community

Many years ago, I was an outreach librarian – I drove a small truck called the Readmobile – for a public library. I brought library services and resources to underserved neighborhoods and preschools in Madison, Wisconsin. Through this experience, unfamiliar neighborhoods and streets became familiar and I built relationships with people from all walks of life, many of whom had never been to a library. I still remember some of the kids who frequented a predominantly Hmong community center - the boy who shouted every time I used the hydraulic lift to unload the books from the truck and the tiny little girl whose grandmother would bring her a sweater during the library program. While the aim of these outreach services was to bring learning experiences to the community, in truth, the learning was reciprocal. I also developed important relationships, whether it was with the teacher curious about incorporating early literacy activities into the day, a boy with behavior challenges who calmed during storytime, or the families that wanted to teach me the Chinese words for “book” and “frog.” My adventures in neighborhood centers and Head Start classrooms made me a better librarian. I learned how to transform library services into learning experiences that resonated with others. I learned how to problem-solve and adapt, whether it was navigating cultural differences or dealing with a flat tire. Working outside of the library only confirmed for me that intentional relationship building leads to learning that is relevant and authentic.

Learning in an Academic Library

Now, as a faculty librarian in the Kalamazoo Valley Libraries, I provide reference assistance and information literacy instruction to students in many disciplines. Helping students navigate the research process is learning in action, and I encourage them to explore and experiment, whether it’s roaming the stacks or trying a new way to brainstorm. I also plan for and bring attention to more relational aspects of learning, such as emotion, shared ideation, and motivation. I am energized by developing learning activities that foster connections with peers, library staff, or other college resources. Of course, the pandemic and the rapid adoption of online learning has complicated teaching efforts. Not everyone has thrived with the shift online, as evidenced in numerous news stories about increased struggles with isolation and mental health. In the classroom and in the library, student engagement seems less robust. And, there are countless students who may never come to the library, either because their classes are completely online or their anxiety is too high. As the social and emotional impacts of the last few years keep unfolding, I feel drawn to re-visit and re-imagine some of the ways in which we teach and learn and build community.

Becoming a Learner in My Community

Which brings me to my request for sabbatical leave. I propose stepping outside of the library and connecting more deeply with the places and people who make up the community where I live. I would like to become a student of Kalamazoo, moving through my community in real-time and tracking down some of the many opportunities for learning and connection. By grounding myself through experiential learning, I will gain new perspectives about how I can support student learning and belonging in the library.

Why this particular approach? While I grew up in Kalamazoo, I moved away after high school. Since then, I've lived in many different cities, and in each one, I built strong connections with people and places. The sense of belonging I developed contributed to my personal growth and fostered collaborative connections in my professional life. My experience here as a returnee to Kalamazoo has not been the same, and I miss having stronger personal and professional connections in my hometown. Why is this? I moved back to Kalamazoo with my family in June 2019. We had two months to settle into a new house, neighborhood, and school district before I started full-time at KVCC. Six months later the pandemic hit and I didn't have the chance to set down strong, new roots.

Of course, I am not completely isolated – I spend time with my family (more settled now) and I participate with some social groups and cultural organizations. I have built connections with students and colleagues at KVCC. And, I do my best to keep up with community events and organizations. However, I've realized that I have more knowledge about the Kalamazoo of decades ago, rather than the Kalamazoo of today. My day-to-day responsibilities keep me in the library most of the time, so much of my current information about the community comes to me second-hand. This means that I don't have enough personal experience with the community where our students live and learn. In order to build the strong connections that lead to authentic learning, I need to understand Kalamazoo as it is today, and not just as I remember it.

Student Learning in the Community

If I'm feeling adrift and distant from my community, I can only imagine how students must be feeling as they embark on a college journey, particularly post-pandemic. Students are applying what they've learned (or not learned) in previous community and educational contexts to a new environment. They are navigating college culture, with norms and practices that may not be familiar. They're learning how to balance school, work, family and life. Many students spent middle and high school in virtual learning environments and were not able to build social skills and connections. I've seen this disconnect first-hand with my own kids, as well as with students hesitant to participate and engage with the library. What can I do as a librarian to bridge these gaps?

Experiential learning can lead to a transformation of understanding (Holthe and See 33). Getting closer to students' educational and community experiences will help me better understand the learning landscape in the Kalamazoo area and will increase my effectiveness as a teacher and librarian. This is why I want to meet librarians and volunteer with community organizations, explore neighborhoods and participate in community events – to know where students are coming from in order to support their current and future learning. Also, one of the key roles of an

academic library is to provide students with access to accurate and relevant information that supports academic and personal success. Connecting with community-based resources will allow me to integrate information about programs and services into library services, building connections and trust with students.

Connecting to College Mission and Values

A sense of belonging is increasingly being understood as essential to learning and the health of a community. Cohen writes in *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* that, “A substantial body of research has established that students who report a strong sense of belonging tend to be more motivated to learn, perform better academically, have better rates of attendance...and have higher self-esteem and better mental health” (213). And, it’s not only students, but the entire community that benefits from a sense of belonging. “Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*...found that community health, educational achievement, [and] local economic strength...were dependent on...the quality of the relationships, the cohesion that exists among its citizens” and “acting on and valuing our interdependence and sense of belonging” (Block 5). Grounding myself in the wider community can only benefit Kalamazoo Valley students as they seek their own places and spaces to belong.

The research on belonging continues to grow, especially in response to the isolation brought on by the pandemic. In *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation*, Kim Samuel writes that belonging is “the experience of being at home in ourselves as well as the social, environmental, organizational, and cultural contexts of our lives. It’s the basis for human flourishing” (xv). Belonging is both personal and communal. Kalamazoo Valley clearly recognized the importance and value of belonging for students when we invited scholar Dr. Terrell Strayhorn to present his research on student belonging at a recent Summit. The mission of the college – “to create innovative and equitable opportunities that empower all to learn, grow, and thrive” – would not be possible without fostering a sense of belonging. Several of the college values, which support the mission, also aspire to create a safe and welcoming environment for learning, especially as we navigate post-pandemic stressors such as social anxiety and learning loss:

- Caring & Respect
 - Foster a safe, dynamic learning environment
- Excellence & Quality
 - Value learning and develop an environment of intellectual inquiry
- Humor & Well-Being
 - Nurture creativity, humor, and enjoyment of work and learning.
- Teamwork & Stewardship
 - Develop and foster community relationships based on mutual trust.

Sabbatical Learning

A sabbatical will provide me with a structure and purpose for stepping out of my comfort zone and taking a deep dive into my community. I’m an introvert at heart, so it can be challenging for me to reach out to people I don’t know and visit unfamiliar places. After the pandemic and the increasing shift to life online, I feel even more out of practice. A sabbatical will provide

re-engagement opportunities that go beyond routine professional development. During a typical semester, I serve students in the library during the day in a very public-facing role, which leaves little time and energy outside of the workday for the kinds of community exploration I am proposing. Connecting with people and places in the Kalamazoo area will offer opportunities to reflect on and gain insight into students' experiences outside the walls of the college. It will provide dedicated time and space for me to feel not only like I belong in the community where I live, but also in the community that Kalamazoo Valley serves.

Kim Samuel additionally describes belonging as building relationships with people, places, power and purpose (xvi). To that end, I intend to identify with *places*, meet *people* who are also committed to teaching and learning, engage with decision-makers (those having *power* in my community), and find *purpose* through volunteering and reflecting on my experiences. Having the time and opportunity to explore, connect, and develop a personal sense of belonging – to flourish in my community – will allow me the energy upon my return to fulfill the College mission and values more intentionally and authentically. A sabbatical will lay the groundwork for creating “innovative and equitable [learning] opportunities” that foster a sense of belonging in the library.

Because I spend most of my work time in the library on the computer and doing research – whether in preparation for teaching, helping students, furthering professional development or developing library services – I do not plan to spend my sabbatical time doing intensive online research and writing. The emphasis will be on reading, experiential learning and reflection. While I do anticipate reading books that are specifically about community-building and belonging, I also want to leave my sabbatical reading list open to discovery and serendipity. When exploring my community, I want to remain open to unanticipated connections and insights. I plan to reflect on my learning experiences through writing, but also want to leave room for creativity. I will share my reflections in the post-sabbatical report, as well as in a presentation for Summit. I am considering developing a presentation based on this work for the Michigan Academic Library Association conference in May 2026. While students will certainly benefit from my renewed sense of belonging and purpose in my teaching and reference work, I may also decide that the most effective way to foster student belonging in the library may be to develop a program or online resource. My plan is to let my experiential research drive the outcomes.

Objectives and Activities

Because this sabbatical is centered on developing my own sense of belonging through learning about my community, my proposed objectives and activities may shift. I may discover that I'm not asking the questions or designing the activities that will lead me to my stated purpose. That's what makes experiential learning so exciting, and the reflective piece so essential. What follows are my initial intentions, subject to revision once I begin to dig in.

1. Continue to learn about the concepts of community and belonging, and see where my reading and on-the-ground experiences take me. An initial reading list is attached at the end of this document. Reflect on both my reading and my experiences in the community through a journal or some other creative form of expression.
2. Physically explore the geography of Kalamazoo, with an emphasis on neighborhoods, natural areas, and public spaces, in order to further ground myself in the community.
 - a. When possible, I will navigate by foot, bike and bus, as this is how many Kalamazoo Valley students navigate the city. Also, a slower, on-the-ground approach will allow for more opportunities to discover and interact with local organizations.
 - b. Visit places and spaces that I knew from living here previously, to see how they have changed over time, and visit areas new to me, so that I can better understand the Kalamazoo of today.
 - c. Spend time hiking in natural areas to create space for rootedness and reflection and to benefit from the restorative benefits of nature.
3. Interact with and learn from community organizations in meaningful ways by meeting with organization members or staff, attending programs and/or volunteering.
 - a. Use local resources (such as the [Local Organization Directory](#)) to identify community organizations that both support populations representative of our student body and provide non-academic learning opportunities.
 - b. Choose activities that will create connections and enhance my own learning by attending programming or volunteering with organizations that work with diverse populations.
 - i. Examples of potential activities:
 1. Attend community learning programs
 - a. Rootead (cultural and wellness education), or
 - b. Kalamazoo Nature Center (environmental education), or
 - c. Kalamazoo Public Library (lifelong learning).
 2. Volunteer or talk with community support programs
 - a. Kalamazoo Drop-In Child Care Center (supports student parents), or
 - b. El Concilio (supports members of the Hispanic community), or
 - c. Kalamazoo Literacy Council (supports ESL and literacy development), or
 - d. Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes (supports food security).

- c. Build my network of community connections by asking for recommendations of other organizations I should learn more about or people I should meet in order to better meet the information needs of the KVCC community.
4. Visit libraries in the area and talk with librarians about how they foster learning and build community in their libraries.
- a. Develop a more robust local professional network by meeting and talking with librarians:
 - i. Examples of potential activities:
 - 1. Visit local high school libraries and learn more about the library instruction and programming that our students may have experienced before coming to KVCC
 - 2. Meet librarians and learn more about/attend community programming in area public libraries, for example: Alma Powell, Eastwood, Washington Square branches, KPL Mobile Library, Van Buren District Library
 - 3. Make connections with librarians at academic and special libraries in Kalamazoo, for example: WMU Health Sciences Library, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, and/or Kalamazoo College
 - b. Identify library services that build community and a sense of belonging, in order to inform the future creation/adaptation of services in the Kalamazoo Valley Libraries
 - i. Examples of potential activities:
 - 1. Talk with Kate Langan, Engagement Librarian at WMU about her research on flourishing in academic libraries
 - 2. Use professional connections within the Michigan Academic Library Association to visit another community college library and learn more about student engagement strategies

Conclusion

Here's a story about how strong connections impact learning in a community college library. A returning adult student scheduled an individual appointment with me. We didn't start our conversation with research basics, instead we talked about how the day was going and how a new job and a full-time class load was exhausting. The student's research topic was personally meaningful and directly related to their career aspirations. So, as we talked about research strategies, I suggested connecting with organizations that were also doing this work in the community. The student, tired and dragging when they arrived, left the library fired up and ready to dive deeper into their project. I later learned that the student shared this library experience with their classmates and I wouldn't be surprised if this enthusiastic personal recommendation brought their peers to the library too.

This is just one example of the strong connections that already enhance student learning. The opportunity for sabbatical leave would allow me to bring even more intention and care to community building in the library. These wider connections have a ripple effect, not just here in the library or at the college, but throughout the community. Creating spaces where students know they belong further strengthens the community and contributes to their educational success.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my sabbatical proposal, which would reinforce my commitment to helping students learn, grow, thrive and belong in the library.

Anticipated Income

I do not anticipate earning any additional income from this proposed sabbatical project.

Courses Taught

As a non-classroom faculty member, I have not taught for-credit classes at KVCC. However, I do provide information literacy instruction to students in a wide variety of disciplines at the Texas Township Campus, with an emphasis on College Writing and First Year Experience classes. I also offer library orientations to many student cohorts and organizations, such as KVAAP, Student Athletes and Valley Future Educators Club. I provide library instruction sessions in person and over Zoom, in addition to creating library-focused Canvas modules for inclusion in KVCC courses.

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