

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Libraries and Student Success

By William Miller

As a dean of libraries, I sometimes feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole as I respond to institutional requirements meant primarily for the deans of the colleges. Recently I was asked to fill out the form sent to all deans to justify refilling empty faculty lines, or request new ones. Two questions in particular threw me. One was “how will filling this faculty line enhance your major?” The other was “how would filling this position contribute to student retention and graduation?”

My response to the first question was that the library has no majors, *per se*, although in a broader context, all students are “library students” in some sense. The retention question, however, was harder to handle. How, indeed, does filling an empty librarian position enhance “student success,” if that success is defined as retention and graduation rate?

I could have pointed to several recent studies that correlate retention and the size of library staff, showing a strong correlation between the two, and positing that having a well-staffed library is indicative of an institution which is doing good things to engage and support students. Having enough public service staff to interact fully with students, along with enough staff to provide all the other functions of a library competently, from acquisitions and cataloging to digitization and outreach are probably excellent predictors of institutional ability to create student success. But what specifically is there about libraries, by their nature, which is conducive to student retention and graduation?

Academic libraries cannot be all things to all people, and our major effort must continue to be the provision of information to support student and faculty research and study, whether that information

is electronic or in print. What has been developing over the past decade, however, is that academic libraries have evolved significantly from their origins as repositories whose only job was to acquire information, and help people to find it.

The average academic library today is a beehive of activity of all sorts, and much of it has little to do with our traditional origins. This evolution has placed academic libraries squarely into the realm of the new buzz phrase, “student success,” which is code for retention and graduation.

Advantages of the Third Space

Libraries have been described frequently as a Third Space, that is, neither home or personal space, nor a formal classroom or office setting, but something of a hybrid, a public space where people can choose to study alone, socialize with friends, eat and drink, and seek interaction with campus professionals as needed and desired. The freedom inherent in this set of options has made academic libraries probably the most crowded place on many campuses, especially during evening and weekend hours.

This heavy use is clear evidence, in itself, that academic libraries meet students’ needs in various ways, and enhance their satisfaction. Emblematic of this change is the emergence of the academic library as a major center for public computing and

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internet access, originally driven by the move to online catalogs, and then to online proprietary resources which now constitute the bulk of what most libraries are paying for as they acquire information.

Personal Assistance. People still need personal assistance in locating information and navigating what can be a difficult path to access resources. Traditional reference work is still important, and libraries are locations where people normally come to ask questions to satisfy information needs.

The mix of these questions, however, has changed greatly in recent years. Traditional reference questions now constitute from one-third to one-half of people's inquiries. The remainder of student questions covers a wide range of issues, from locational to personal, and often involve institutional interactions, such as "how do I add/drop a course," "where is the Writing Center," or "how do I pay a bill."

Other questions could involve personal issues such as finance, or even referrals for counseling, academic help, or job placement. By far the largest subset of "non-reference" questions, however, involve technology. Students today need instant answers to questions such as "how do I connect my computer to the campus network," "how can I print this article," or "why won't this software work on my machine."

Technology Assistance. Given the importance of technology assistance, most academic libraries now integrate it into the normal flow of reference work, and the "information commons," where library and technology assistance are integrated, is now widely prevalent.

In some situations, the library handles all of this by itself, while in others, staffing is provided also by the computing/information technology area of the institution. We might call this information commons idea "simple convergence," which dovetails very naturally with library needs now that almost all journal literature and much else are electronic.

Student Service Integration. Some institutions have gone beyond this first step, however, to larger efforts

at student service integration. Taking advantage of the natural tendency of students to gravitate toward the library, institutions are increasingly engaging in "super convergence," i.e. the placement of complementary student services within the library building. Most commonly, these include a writing center or a remediation center along with technology support.

A "one-service environment" is much preferable to forcing people to run around campus seeking individual offices, or call around for services, especially regarding information technology needs, which people tend to have an urgent and immediate need to satisfy. As institutions increasingly create centers for student success and name new positions such as "Chief Retention and Student Success Officer," the library increasingly comes into play as a locus for new efforts that clearly go beyond traditional library roles.

Libraries as Student Success Centers. Academic libraries can in fact serve as the physical location for student success centers, though in most cases this would require either new construction, or major relocation of low-use collections to storage facilities outside of the main building, in order to free up space for new services.

Institutions are locating everything from remedial help for those who are struggling, to financial aid, supplemental instruction services, tutoring, ombudsmen, and orientation services in these student success centers. Advantages of placement within the library include hours of availability; students tend to need help during evening and weekend hours when libraries are typically open, even though most business offices are not. Moreover, libraries embrace the concept of service.

Service, in general, is a value perhaps more honored in the breech than in the observance within various offices at an institution, but it is a value inculcated into librarianship, and staff members are socialized into the desire to help people, regardless of need. An institution's online help systems certainly exist, but tend to be rigidly structured and often just frustrate people; in any case they clearly lack the human touch. The

library is widely perceived as a neutral, student friendly academic center, and as such, almost anything related to student success could be appropriate, as part of a one-stop service center.

Pre-enrollment Impact

Higher Education now recognizes the need to work with K-12 systems to improve student readiness for college, and help create standards. Libraries have not been directly involved with these efforts, but as school libraries have been eliminated, and school librarians reassigned to classrooms, academic libraries have become the de facto libraries for area high schools.

High school students are likely to be familiar with their local academic library already. It may be one of the few places on campus where they are welcome, and where they have been treated as though they were college students, and exposed to academic resources. They may have studied in the library, asked questions at the reference desk, and used the library's resources for papers. Additionally, the library's reference staff has probably conducted instructional sessions for area high school classes, especially advanced classes such as AP and IB.

Thus, academic libraries serve as important recruitment tools for their institutions. For prospective students who have not experienced an academic library, or are coming to visit from a far distance, including the library in a campus tour may be valuable in order to show them how different the library may be from preconceptions they may have.

Conventional wisdom holds that libraries have no role in student college choice, though they have a role in retention, and it is unlikely that many students would choose an institution of higher education based primarily on impressions of its library. This does not mean, however, that libraries cannot be a component in a student's choice.

Furthermore, if libraries have had no active role in recruitment, that does not mean that they cannot be enlisted into the effort; where they have been, the results are positive. Libraries can be active partners in new student recruit-

ment and interaction. When library staff volunteer to call prospective students as part of a broader institutional effort to encourage enrollment, the effect on students is akin to that of being called by a faculty member; it is akin to a coach calling a prospective athlete. Students appreciate the personal touch and being able to speak with a knowledgeable adult who can answer a wide variety of questions about the institution.

First Year Experience

Institutions understand clearly that what happens in a student's first year is crucial to whether or not that student stays at an institution, and graduates. Indeed, what happens in the first few weeks is probably the most crucial aspect of the first year experience. We are all familiar with the idea of the critical incident, which can either be propitious or disastrous.

A positive interaction with a staff member, be it faculty member, librarian, or support staff person, can color a person's perceptions significantly, with long-term consequences for good or ill. Librarians who help a student can make a lasting impression and be crucial to a student's adjustment to college life. Such sympathetic interaction goes far beyond simply helping someone to find a book or a journal article, and indeed it may have little to do with traditional library reference assistance. It may involve something simple like helping a student successfully set up a computer, or find out how to connect with an academic advisor, or seek academic or writing assistance.

Recognizing the importance of overall institutional First Year Experience programs, libraries are naming First Year Experience Librarians and mounting programs to complement the overall institution's efforts. Goals include helping students to transition from high school to college, orienting students to the library and its programs, but more generally helping students orient themselves to the institution and the services available to them. Focuses of library first-year experience programs vary; some are more focused on imparting traditional library skills, while others focus more on reducing

student anxiety and teaching critical thinking skills, including comprehension of plagiarism. The intervention of a professional librarian to introduce search strategy and guide a student to the literature of a particular field, while helping that person to define a thesis, would probably be the difference between writing an effective paper using vetted resources or writing a paper based on whatever the first screen of Google turns up, which would surely not be a recipe for academic success.

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New college students may lack all conception of scholarly literature, peer review, and the differences between vetted and untrustworthy web sites; moreover, they do not understand what they do not know, and tend to overestimate their ability and sophistication as searchers. In order to bring them along, librarians validate existing searching knowledge (i.e. Google, Bing) but introduce the concepts of scholarly vs. popular literature and how they differ, along with indexes and abstracts, and the library's own discovery tools.

Because much if not most of an academic library's information resources are now electronic, it is important to integrate access into the institution's learning management systems, and also to make access possible via mobile applications. New students need to understand that "library" does not have to equate with "old-fashioned" or "irrelevant," and that an ability to tap into the considerable library resources that are proprietary and not free to the general public is an advantage worth having. Not coincidentally, there is little point in spending the millions of dollars most academic libraries spend on proprietary resources if these resources are left unused, so an organized effort, early on, to introduce students to the new and unknown world of scholarly resources pays dividends for the institution in a variety of ways.

Upper Division

Dealing with upperclassmen entails its own challenges, as they choose a major and are expected to become proficient in the literature of a field. At smaller schools, and perhaps even at larger ones, a good strategy to enhance student success would be to pair students up with their own "personal librarian." This could be especially valuable as students choose a major, if they can be paired up with a librarian subject specialist. This pairing would offer the personal contact discussed earlier, while also providing a secure source of help to students as they embark on research in their field and need orientation to a specific set of resources.

I have not focused on graduate student completion in this paper, but completion rates, especially in doctoral programs, are notoriously low, and this system of pairing graduate students with subject librarians would be especially useful in helping graduate students persist and complete their degrees.

Pairing librarians, in effect, with particular classes can produce significant results. "Embedding" librarians in online courses can provide course-specific, subject-oriented assistance, at point of need. There ought to be a "library" tab in all online courses, which leads to the

assistance of a librarian, along with a guide to resources specific to the course at hand. As the percentage of instruction online increases, embedded librarians will play an increasingly important role in the success of students in these courses, many of whom may truly be coming from a distance which precludes physical interaction in a library building.

What is "Success"?

The concept of student success is very much in the eye of the beholder.

To a librarian, success may be helping a student do competent research, enhancing the student's ability to think critically and find intellectual resources to inform the process of research and writing.

To faculty members, student success probably means teaching students to master a body of material and use the material in their careers or in graduate study.

To administrators, success means retaining students, educating them, and graduating them, preferably within four years, but certainly within six years.

To a student, however, success may look very different. Graduation would obviously be high on the list, but ranking right there along with it would be acquisition of the tools or credentials to obtain a good job, and a high-paying one to boot.

Moreover, both individual states and the U.S. Government are now validating these measures, and increasingly look to rank and fund institutions based on criteria such as graduation rate, yes, but also on employment and salaries, criteria which are largely out of the control of institutions.

We have to face the fact that to an academic, a college education is about learning and improving the ability to think, but to the general public, as well as to governmental officials, the purpose of education is pretty much focused on job training, and preferably on obtaining a lucrative job.

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In the face of this, we need to acknowledge reality and assist students not only with their college careers, but also with the job search as an end-product, though it surely is not the only one. We all need to have the means to support ourselves, and finding productive and preferably lucrative work is a reasonable goal. Career centers are certainly focused on this process, but librarians also have the tools to assist students in a job search, with everything from resume creation to search strategies and information about the prospects, and salaries, of each field. Doing so should not be underestimated as a contribution to student success, and institutional success.

Do Libraries Really Contribute to Student Success?

Although we can assume that the answer must be yes, this is a question that needs much more investigation. So far, most evidence is more a matter of anecdotes and correlation, not causation. For instance, a recent British study found statistically significant correlations between book

use, electronic resource use, and student success, and determined that students who do not use a library are "7.19 times more likely to drop out" (cited in Weaver, 2013). This finding is based on correlating library use by graduates with use by drop-outs. Other studies have found similar kinds of correlations. Clearly, a student who uses a library in meaningful ways is more likely to be a successful student than one who never attempts to use library facilities and resources. We also know that libraries rank highly in student satisfaction in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), at least at institutions whose libraries are highly engaged in student interaction.

Retention and graduation are noble goals, in themselves, but ultimately, institutions not engaged primarily in vocational education need to ask themselves what kind of graduates they want to produce. A four-year college graduate who has never used the library is probably not the ideal end-product of a school's curriculum. Libraries can contribute to student success, and the more that they are integrated into the institution's instructional and outreach efforts, the more helpful they will be. --miller@fau.edu

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