The Academic Library's Role in Student Retention

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Introduction

Student retention is critical to job security, but most importantly, we who work in academe are entrusted with our students' dreams. While there are many factors that enter into students' eventual graduation from college, the library can help by understanding some of the basics of the literature of student retention and then by creating spaces, collections, and personnel who are responsive to student needs. This session at PNLA's 2015 conference outlined research about student retention, summarized some of the reasons that it matters, and offered up some strategies that the author's library is using to be part of an overall campus effort to improve retention.

Retention in the Literature

How can the academic library play a part in student retention? Research shows that use of the library resources is related to student success (Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013; Stemmer & Mahan, 2016). I am more interested in the library's role in helping the students develop a sense of academic community, a community students would be reluctant to leave, a community of folk who help one another. There are many factors we cannot control:

- High school grades are best predictor of college success (Sternberg, 2013)
- Race matters (Kena, 2012)
- Socioeconomic class matters and has consistently been associated with college attendance & success (Pell, 2015)
- Issues in academic trajectory—does the student have a well-informed destination based on self-knowledge, knowledge of the field and the major requirements (Sternberg, 2013)
- Financial concerns (Sternberg, 2013)

A case study of Minnesota indicated that private benefits (higher levels of employment and higher income, better health, and better quality of life) and public benefits (wage spillover, higher civic participation, lower crime rates, and better social interactions) make the state's subsidies to higher education well worth it (Damon & Glewwe, 2011). In purely financial terms workers with a bachelor's degree on average earned about $20,000 more per year than workers with a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Ryan & Sieben, 2012). Over their entire careers, college graduates earn on average one million dollars more than high school graduates (Aspen Institute, 2015). In short, graduation from college matters.

Some of the names associated with retention in higher education are Alexander Astin, Vincent Tinto, Ernest Pascarella, Patrick Terenzini and George Kuh. The issues are very complicated, since it is so difficult to tease out the multitude of individual and institutional reasons why a student graduates or fails to graduate from college. In brief, Astin's research focuses on the shared work of both student and institution in creating an engaging environment. Tinto's work looks at students' sense of belonging and membership in the social communities of the institutions as well as the role of students creating knowledge together in the role of student retention (Tinto 2014). Pascarella and Terenzini's research

explores the roles of continuity or disjunction for students going off to college and their need for validation in either case. Kuh and a band of researchers studied institutions that were abnormally successful in retaining students between the first and second year as well as graduating students. Amongst other conclusions, it is clear that institutions that put students truly at the heart of the enterprise are more successful. "Campuses that take student success seriously know that learning is a 24/7 proposition where what goes on outside classrooms is just as important as what happens inside them. Are there places where students gather together in animated conversation – dining facilities, outdoor or indoor nooks, at the ends of hallways in classroom buildings, for example? Are students working in groups in unions, libraries, and in other open spaces? These may be clues as to whether active and collaborative learning are encouraged and practiced" (Kuh, 2005 interview).

The library, it is said, is the "heart of the university" and supports students as they transition from their home community to an academic community, giving them safe spaces outside the close quarters of residence halls. Here is a quick summary of some of the most recent research on the library's role in retention. Grallo, Chalmers, and Baker suggest that by training library staff to answer "non-library" questions while reporting back common questions to the appropriate units on campus, they "can be key players in campus-wide efforts to help students become acculturated to university life" (Grallo et al, 2012). One scholar argues for special marketing strategies that academic libraries should consider to help Latino students feel a similar sense of "haven" they experienced at their public libraries and do not experience in their academic library (Long, 2011). Mezick demonstrates that "library expenditures and professional staff have a significant positive effect on student retention" (Mezick, 2007). Tenopir's research findings indicate that faculty place more value on the resources these professors find at/through the library (Tenopir, 2012). Wilcox and Chia study the "stickiness" framework in academic libraries -- convenience, relevance, engagement and community that describe how discovery tools can deliver greater convenience, QR codes can increase relevance discovery, engagement increases through tailored library instruction, and community increases when the library acts as repository of faculty work.

Berger (1997) found a positive relationship between the sense of community and student persistence in dormitories. The library is similar to residence halls in that the relationships are random, not based on major or classroom experiences, but encompass the ancillary activities of a college experience—study, research, peer review of papers, etc.   Vincent Tinto writes in *Completing College* that student retention is shaped by "students' sense of belonging and membership in the social communities of the institutions" (Tinto, 2014). The library can play a vital role in that community building as it "is a place where people come together on levels and in ways that they might not in the residence hall, classroom, or off-campus location" (Freeman, 2005).

Some interesting retention strategies have focused on increasing self-awareness through journaling (Brooman & Darwent, 2012). Having a strong sense of community helps the student with self-knowledge and can act as a sounding board as different careers and majors are contemplated. One study found that "the development of "interpersonal ties," on which a student could rely to provide tangible aid, guidance, and feedback about academic matters and provided students with a sense of being cared for and of being a member of a network of mutual obligation, enhanced their coping abilities and increased their personal comfort around social and academic matters" (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002-2003).

Minority students must be better supported. "Compared with White students, Black students had 43 percent lower odds and Hispanic students had 25 percent lower odds of attaining an associate's or bachelor's degree, after accounting for other factors"(National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Those interventions focusing on community building seem particularly successful. Social support from within the college environment appears to play a vital role in the retention of underrepresented minority college students" (Baker & Robnett, 2012).

What Libraries Can Do
Some of the ways the library can support the institution's retention efforts, then, are to provide spaces, personnel, and collections that help students create a sense of community in general, create a sense of academic community specifically, and to validate students who, whether working on an ongoing academic journey or starting on what seems like a brand new enterprise, are on their way to successful completion of a college degree.

Specific ways that I feel my institution supports retention are environmental, collection building, and personnel practices. Environmentally, we have 11 group study rooms with large monitors and furniture built for group projects, along with whiteboards in each room so they can brainstorm and work on problems. We have rolling whiteboards which can be used to create a group study space in a flash. We have one room dedicated to anatomical models for our nursing students. We have a lot of bean bag chairs that travel around the library. We have an information commons with reference staff, technology students and writing tutors all within hailing distances of about a hundred computers laid out in furniture shaped like amoebas, so that students sitting near one another have some measure of privacy but access to any kind of help they can imagine needing. We have clearly demarcated noisy and quiet areas, so students can go to the place that best meets their needs. We intentionally collect and promote not just materials to meet students' academic needs, but use "special collection" funds every year to purchase, for example, wellness self-help books based on the counseling center's recommendations for conditions that our student body experience. We purchased a large group of high-interest, low-vocabulary books along with visual and language dictionaries to serve our large immigrant populations. We promote our fiction and movie collections through display areas around the entire library.

I feel that some of our personnel practices that are helpful unintentionally are structural. As faculty members, the librarians serve on a lot of committees that help them understand student stories, such as the board that weighs in when a student is in danger of being suspended from school. The librarians serve on thesis committees and help support students as they work on their theses, often perhaps being the least intimidating member of their committee. About half of us serve as academic advisors to pre-major students, which helps us remind ourselves annually what it is like to be 18 and gives us a good incentive to have a solid familiarity with resources on campus that can help students.

Personally, I have a number of roles that I feel help me support retention. I am the liaison to the student senate from the faculty senate which allows me to be aware of student issues. In one example this fall, students said that faculty needed to be more aware of the program that puts some general education textbooks on reserve. I sent out an email to the faculty alerting them three ways they could put their textbooks on reserve. I am also (self-appointed but officially sanctioned) liaison to Student Affairs. I have created a number of special LibGuides, such as the one for Study Abroad, which not only points to Mango, our language database, but to books on scrapbooking and journaling and similar activities that will help them have a more intentional experience and remember it for years afterwards. I have visited their spaces, such as the Veteran's Center and left handouts of a LibGuide I produced just for them, with sample call number areas to browse and let them know I would be happy to come over and help them with research in their space. I am taking the library outside the walls of the library and making sure that the students know the library's available to support them. The library supports our student workers with scholarships and Student Appreciation Parties, where the faculty and staff bring mountains of food for the students. I think that our culture is very student oriented. Many of the librarians and staff I work with greet students by name when then enter the library and have meaningful conversations with them about their academic journeys. It can't be institutionalized, but the most important thing we can do, perhaps, is simply to care about the students as people and take the opportunities we can to really see them and recognize them and listen to their stories.

Conclusion

The library must first understand some of the issues involved in order to support the work of student retention. A faculty development session dedicated to reviewing briefly some of the insights from retention researchers would be an excellent start. In my mind, much of the research points to creating spaces for group work and ways to support students making new knowledge together. The spaces libraries create also need to serve both social and academic purposes. Collections need to address the issues students face during these critical four years, not just in the classroom but as they develop intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, as well as in their identities as women, as people of color, as gay and lesbians, and every other way. I study the American College Health Association's report every year to see trends in issues that students report that factor into their academic success (sleep deprivation, for example, is a serious issue in many students' eyes.) Personnel can be deployed so that there are ready sources of communication between students and the institution. I highly recommend the Grallo (2012) article. Thinking about the library as a conduit between students and the university bureaucracies just makes sense to me. The library can support retention by understanding and responding to student needs.

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