

# LIBRARY ISSUES

## BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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### Keeping Them Enrolled:

## How Academic Libraries Contribute to Student Retention

by Steven Bell

Who has the responsibility for student retention at academic institutions? While some institutions have created special offices to develop and lead the retention effort, the majority has yet to do so. Where there is no unique campus retention leader, academic administrators may struggle to understand retention factors and support student persistence. While extensive data about retention is available, all the experts conclude there are no magic formulas. A good bet would be for colleges to involve as many people as possible, administrators, staff, faculty, and even parents. Losing students before they graduate has profound economic and organizational consequences, so it's a matter of great concern to academic administrators.

While there are many reasons why students leave a college prior to graduation, there is one factor students point to again and again when asked why they are leaving: people. It may be a faculty member, an advisor or another student, but interpersonal relations have a significant impact on student retention. Robust relationships that give meaning to students encourage them to persist and keep them engaged in their academic life. Isolated students who fail to engage with peers, faculty and others are at the highest risk of dropping out.<sup>1</sup>

If both administrators and staff can have an impact on retention, then it seems logical that academic libraries and those who work there could potentially have an impact on student retention. In fact, it may be that academic librarians are already doing that. The challenge for academic library administrators is to bring to academic administrators evidence or documentation that concretely demonstrates how the library contributes to

student retention. For too long characterizations of the academic library as budgetary black hole or anachronism of the Internet Age have hampered library progress. If strong linkages between libraries and student retention can be made, then the perceived value of the library may indeed rise more than a few notches in the hierarchy of what really matters and what does not when it comes to student retention.

### What We Know

The good news is that research does demonstrate that libraries contribute to student retention. What dampens that news is that the findings are based primarily on traditional input and output measures. At least two studies have established significant relationships between library expenditure data per student, for materials and staff, and retention rates.<sup>2,3</sup> Put simply, the more institutions spend on these inputs the better their retention rates.

For example, one study found that spending just 10 percent more per student on library resources (\$36.05 on average) results in an additional 1.77 percentage points of graduation rates. Direct spending on instructional resources was the only institutional characteristic to have a greater impact on graduation rates. These findings must sound like music to the ears of academic library directors. It offers them a direct and positive connection between library spending and student retention.

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While these data-dependent studies are of interest, they may do little more than lead to the conclusion that the more an academic institution spends on learning resources, the better its chances of increasing retention. But if that is so, then why invest specifically in libraries? Why not spend more money for full-time faculty, for more academic advisors, or a full-time retention office? Thus, the library director who bases arguments for a larger share of the budget pie on these input-based studies is left with a shaky leg on which to stand.

### **Making a Better Case for the Library**

So in what ways can the director demonstrate that the library, with appropriate funding, can indeed contribute to student retention? Fortunately there is abundant research that points to the many things institutions can do, beyond merely increasing inputs, to improve retention. Much of this knowledge comes from the research of George Kuh, founder of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This research identifies strategies higher education institutions can take to help students persist.

Strategies for increasing retention rates focus on getting students more engaged in their studies and the institution. This includes creating better connections between students and educators, identifying high-risk students early in their academic careers, developing out-of-classroom learning experiences and improving teaching quality. These strategies focus on people—not physical resources.

In commenting on the role of academic libraries in contributing to student engagement and better institutional retention rates, Kuh said

that academic librarians may indirectly affect student success through their interactions with students and by helping them acquire needed research and information literacy skills and competencies.

By establishing rapport with students, librarians can help foster a supportive campus environment which has salutary effects on student engagement and achievement. Through pre-

sentations in orientation programs, team teaching in first-year seminars and other classes, and collaborating with faculty and students in other ways, librarians can help systematically integrate the acquisition of information literacy into the curriculum.

Kuh further states that the “key to helping students become information literate is working with faculty and other staff to design general education and major field assignments that require students to become familiar with information technology and to use engaging pedagogical practices.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The Five-Point Plan for Success**

Here then is a five-point plan, based on the findings of qualitative retention research that may put academic library administrators on more solid ground to make a case for how the library contributes to retention:

- Emphasize the delivery of individualized research assistance and personal attention.
- Focus on research skill building as a core contributor to student academic success.
- Provide data that links student persistence and satisfaction to the library’s services, resources and people – not just collections.
- Demonstrate how the library can contribute to a campus-wide effort that uses perks and incentives to keep students till graduation.
- Explore ways to involve the library in working with parents in supporting student success.

### **Putting Down Roots at the Library**

Students who stay develop strong connections to the institution. Colleges and universities must help their students establish roots within the academic community. That typically translates to degree completion and committed alumni. The new strategy is to get students to attach themselves to a specific educational or social program. Institutions also encourage faculty to be available to students in their majors; studies reveal that feeling connected

to a specific faculty member is an encouraging factor for students. While librarians have fewer opportunities to connect with students than classroom faculty do, institutions could certainly be doing more to engage librarians in the effort to heighten student feelings of connectedness.

Administrators may be surprised to learn that student-librarian relationships do occur. They typically happen as the result of a librarian’s visit to a class, followed by students visiting that librarian to receive personalized assistance. Once students realize how much assistance and research support they can obtain from a librarian it’s no wonder they want to get to know them better.

In the library community it is common to hear tales about library student workers who become lifelong friends at the library because they got to know the librarians better. What this points to is a significant institutional opportunity to enlist librarians in the effort to help students build their roots. Administrators can help to involve the library by inviting and opening doors to librarian participation in campus social programs where more student-librarian interaction can occur. Administrators can further support librarian efforts to become more integral to what happens in the classroom by funding social activities and programs that allow librarians to reach out to students.

### **Libraries Support Academic Success**

Many authors have stressed the value of information literacy programming at their libraries. Despite clear evidence that students produce higher quality academic research papers when they experience these programs, information literacy initiatives are hardly universal. There are still many institutions where academic librarians struggle to find their place in the teaching and learning process. According to the *2006 National Center for Educational Statistics Report on Academic Libraries*, only 30 percent of 4-year institutions had incorporated information literacy into their strategic plan.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps a better way to think of these initiatives is to look beyond their ability to get students to use higher



quality research resources and to view them as a way to support the campus student retention effort.

One area where we know students struggle is in producing research papers that meet their professors' expectations. The campus professionals best equipped to support students so they succeed in research-oriented projects are academic librarians. In their research on how academic libraries can contribute to academic success Ying Zhong and Johanna Alexander concluded there are strong connections between student academic success and the library's initiatives, resources and programs.<sup>6</sup> Zhong and Alexander found that on just one dimension of academic success, GPA, students with GPAs of 3.5 or higher more frequently cited reference/research assistance as a contributor to their academic success. The report contains additional, similar indicators that reinforce past anecdotal evidence that there is a symbiotic relationship between high achieving students and the academic library; they use librarians and librarians help them succeed.

### **Get the Right Data**

What we really know about the library's contribution to academic success is quite limited. Beyond the quantitative studies that link resources to retention, little is known about how academic libraries help students persist to graduation. Part of the barrier to discovering more is that the major student engagement survey, NSSE, yields little information about the library's impact on student engagement.

While waiting for the NSSE survey instrument to add several library-related questions, there are actions academic librarians can take to start documenting their contribution to student retention. Academic administrators could work with the library director to develop local surveys designed to gather data about the library's role in student engagement. How often do they come into contact with librarians? Have they received help from a librarian with research, and if so how has that helped their academic achievement?

These surveys should target seniors and recent alumni to best ascertain in

what ways the library contributed to their persistence to graduation. These surveys will no doubt indicate that some students graduate with little or no interaction with the library or librarians. But that shouldn't deter librarians from discovering what more they can do to reach these students. We all need to better understand those factors that make the library a non-factor in student engagement so librarians can correct those failures.

### **Library Perks Could Help**

Higher education is, to a large degree, about treating people equally. No student, we believe, should be treated preferentially. While an "all students are equal" philosophy is important, we also know that students are exposed to all sorts of commercial ventures that reward them with perks, typically for being loyal customers. Whether it's the campus coffee shop offering a free tenth cup after nine purchases or getting access to better campus housing based on seniority, students are no stranger to preferred treatment during their college years.

Marty Nemkoff, a blogger for the Chronicle of Higher Education's Brainstorm blog, advanced the idea of leveraging campus perks as a way to encourage students to stay enrolled. In a post dated June 9, 2008 Nemkoff advocates making "completion of each year a milestone with rewards" as a retention strategy. His example is the U.S. military academies where first-year students have few privileges but earn more of them, along with status, as they add another year to their education. Nemkoff posits that this concept could be expanded to include priority parking, registration or dining privileges.

Why not incorporate library privileges into that suggestion? Libraries are often the last bastion of equal service on campuses, but perhaps in the name of improving retention, this needs rethinking. For example, library study rooms, particularly at exam time, are highly sought after. Obtaining a study room could become a perk for upper classmen who could gain access without waiting. No doubt, lower classmen would dislike this, but knowing that perks come with seniority may encourage a longer stay. What about bonuses for the number

of books borrowed, consultations with librarians or attendance at library workshops? Bonuses could be used at retail shops across campus. Radical ideas to be sure, but in the name of retention such ideas are on the table for consideration.

### **Connecting with Helicopter Parents**

Overbearing parents are traditionally considered a bad influence on their children's higher education experience. Constantly hovering and at the ready to take on faculty and administrators, helicopter parents, as they are called, are thought to do their sons and daughters more harm than good. But those perceptions began to change when data from the 2007 NSSE revealed that students whose parent intervene on their behalf – 38 percent of freshman and 29 percent of seniors – reported that they are more active and satisfied with college than other students.<sup>7</sup> It appears that helicopter parents may actually be a positive factor in aiding student retention.

Other than the library's typical freshman orientation for parents, a program to keep parents occupied while their son or daughter registers for classes, academic libraries have made little effort to reach out to parents. But given their influence over and connectedness to students, especially freshmen, parents are the perfect target for library outreach efforts. A few academic libraries have begun to exploit this trend by creating door magnets or other giveaways that are targeted specifically to parents. They contain the library's web address and messages such as "When they call you for research help, you can call us" to remind parents that librarians are available to help their sons and daughters cope with challenging college research assignments.

Academic administrators who recognize the value in working with parents to keep students satisfied and enrolled, should realize that the library can play a valuable role in the students' support and survival system. Along with faculty, student-life staff, and housing personnel, academic librarians can be enlisted to be accessible to parents who expect their child to receive personalized

