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Improving Student Success: Arkansas State's Partnership With Credo and Regional High Schools

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Abstract

In this “out of the box” session, two librarians from Arkansas State University (A-State) and Credo’s chief content officer discussed their innovative collaboration in which A-State and Credo are working together to bring information literacy resources and instruction to local high schools in support of college readiness.

The session covered several issues, including how the library engaged and garnered administrative support, the challenges in establishing meaningful partnerships with local high schools, and developing and tracking the right metrics to validate progress. Topics of discussion included ways in which the library is working to do more to enhance its strategic importance relative to administration goals; an overview of the established project goals and how success will be tracked in areas, including college preparedness, retention, graduation rates, grade point average (GPA), and recruiting; and why this matters to the A-State Library. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and provide feedback.

Introduction

The session opened with the introduction of presenters Jeff Bailey, April Sheppard, and Ian Singer. The presentation stated that the session would be a conversational overview of their joint initiative and that they would welcome questions and feedback. Attendees were invited to mention if their library was engaged in a similar endeavor or if they were aware of something similar at another institution.

Background

Like many academic institutions in the state, Arkansas State has a high percentage of first-generation students who come from economically disadvantaged families. Many of these students struggle academically and fail to graduate. To address this problem, the Arkansas Department of Higher Education and Governor Asa Hutchinson launched the *Closing the Gap 2020* initiative in 2015, with goals that include decreasing the percentage of Arkansas high school graduates that require remediation at the college level, raising first-year retention rates, increasing the attainment of underserved student groups, and decreasing the time to degree for students.

Shortly after *Closing the Gap 2020* was released, A-State and Credo personnel discovered their similar interests and initiatives at the 2015 Charleston Conference, and follow-up conversations led to this partnership.

The Partnership

Credo is providing literati, along with support and training, to Arkansas State and up to 12 area high schools at a special rate, all of which is paid by Arkansas State with no costs being passed along to the high schools. A-State librarians are using literati as the foundation for building better working relationships with these high schools, partnering with them to increase high school student success and prepare these students for college-level work.

After the initial idea for the partnership emerged, Bailey visited with A-State’s provost, who readily endorsed the idea. The provost stated that in addition to benefitting the library, the partnership could aid student recruitment initiatives, and the “Provided by Arkansas State University” message that would be included on the literati landing page at each high school would be excellent advertising for the university, providing even more potential return on the investment of the subscription cost.

The Details

Initially, the decision was made to offer literati to the 12 area high schools that participate in concurrent enrollment programs with Arkansas State University. With the help of A-State's concurrent enrollment program director, Sheppard contacted each high school to explain the project, request a meeting to demonstrate literati, and learn if the school was interested in participating. Most of the high schools responded quickly and were eager to participate, but others did not respond to the requests. After giving all schools substantial time to respond, participation was then offered to other nearby high schools.

In this partnership, A-State librarians provide the initial contact and put high school representatives in touch with Credo support personnel, who then work directly with each school to configure their unique instance of literati and provide training to school librarians and teachers. A-State offers support in training and other information literacy needs, but it is not directly involved with setting up each school's instance, instead allowing the schools to take ownership of their own instance. A learning community of representatives from A-State, Credo, and each of the participating high schools had their first meeting in December 2016. This learning community will allow participants to address areas of concern as well as share ideas and success stories. Sheppard will also give learning community participants an overview of how research is taught at Arkansas State and what research skills are expected of incoming freshmen.

Arkansas State's primary goals, which will be tracked using data provided by the university's Office of Institutional Effectiveness, are to increase college readiness for area high school students and improve the success rates of incoming freshmen from these high schools as compared to incoming students from all other high schools. Another goal of the project is to improve A-State's relationship with these high schools and their students, which will hopefully lead to increased enrollment at A-State. Additionally, this project is viewed as an excellent opportunity to better align the library with the university administration's goals and increase the perception that the library is actively contributing to the success of students and the university.

Singer emphasized that Credo's goals are 100% aligned with A-State's, focusing on providing

research and information skills instructional support, improving first-year student success, and increasing high school student college readiness. Additionally, Credo is jointly focused on measuring outcomes to validate the goals of the partnership and building learning communities to share successes, address concerns, and develop working relationships. These communities will also give Credo valuable feedback on their literati platform.

A-State's implemented its own instance of literati in May 2016, just as Sheppard and Bailey were beginning to make their high school visits.

It's Harder Than You Think to Sell a "Free" Product

Bailey and Sheppard next addressed some of the challenges they faced in contacting the high schools and obtaining their agreement to participate in the project. Timing was an unexpected hurdle, as the license with Credo was signed in the spring, and Sheppard's first contact with the high schools came just as they were busily preparing to wrap up the school year, with many personnel leaving for the summer.

When Bailey and Sheppard visited each school, they were invariably greeted with skepticism about a deal that seemed "too good to be true" and concerns that A-State would expect the high schools to pay part of the subscription costs at some point in the future. One of Bailey's regular tasks during each visit was to explain A-State's long-term commitment to the project and to assure the librarians, teachers, and principals present that Arkansas State would pay the full cost for literati for the entirety of the project.

As conversations moved toward implementation, it also became clear that there were varying computer skill levels among personnel at the high schools, and this gave the A-State librarians the opportunity to volunteer to visit the schools in the future to provide additional training on the use of online resources.

Measuring Success

A-State librarians will be obtaining data from the high schools on their goals, which include increasing the graduation and college admission rates for their students, increasing student information literacy skills, and reducing the number of student plagiarism

cases. This information will be correlated with usage data that Credo will provide to A-State for each high school to see if there is a connection between use of literati at an individual high school and any reported changes.

Arkansas State's Office of Institutional Effectiveness will be providing anonymous data on average entrance exam scores, admittance rates, and the number of incoming students from each participating high school that require remediation. Procedures are being established for that office to provide the library with ongoing student success data, including average grade point averages,

retention rates, and graduation rates for students from participating schools compared to base year and to nonparticipating high schools.

Conclusion

This project is very early in the first year of implementation, and it will be several years before we will be able to assess our progress. The presenters hope to be able to return to the Charleston Conference in the future to provide updates on this exciting project.