

University libraries Leading the Way Through Choppy Waters: The Library's Role in Student Retention

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UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES LEADING THE WAY THROUGH CHOPPY WATERS: THE LIBRARY'S ROLE IN STUDENT RETENTION

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Abstract

The *raison d'être* of any business is the returning customer. In education, the customer is the student who returns year after year until he or she graduates. This study will focus on how academic libraries can be leaders in their Institutions by adopting a user-centered philosophy and services that will promote life-long learning, enhance students' academic experience, and promote engagement - which the literature and pertinent research identify as key elements for student retention.

The paper presents reports of earlier researches that correlated educational initiatives considered as high-impact practices with higher education student persistence. Having this discussion as a background, the paper addresses findings of studies which, in a more specific way, correlated library initiatives and services with student retention and proposed practical actions that academic library administrators can take to enhance student persistence.

1 – INTRODUCTION

Universities across the country face many challenges sixteen years into this century partially due to soaring costs of higher education, diminishing the ability of many students to pursue a college or graduate degree. This economic reality requires and imposes the need for universities to not only improve their image and value to prospective "customers", making their educational offering more attractive, but also develop initiatives that will improve attainment and retention rates. As I participate in different Committees across Campus and informally talk to key players and decision makers of Andrews University's administration, retention is constantly mentioned as being one of the university's main concerns for at least two decades now.

The American Colleges and Research Libraries' (*ACRL*) *Value of Academic Libraries Report* presented by Oakleaf (2011) exposes that student retention and graduation rates are currently among the most discussed foci of institutional missions.

According to the American Council of Education (2016), "Many colleges speak of the importance of increasing student retention and completion" (p.1).

Although the American Council of Education, (2013b) has stated that "The number of Americans attending college is at a historic high" it also stated that "far too many never make it to graduation" (p.1). Two years later Erisman & Steele (2015) also report a bleak reality. They observed that "A diverse array of over 30 million Americans have enrolled in college at some point but never completed a degree" (p. 2).

A 2013 issue of the online The Huffington Post (College, 2013) published a piece titled "College Students Finish Degrees" where it asserts that "overall 56 percent of those who started college in 2007 have not finished their coursework on any campus" (p.1).

In that same year, E. Gordon Gee, Chair of the commission and president of the Ohio State University asserted that "It is incumbent upon campus leaders to ensure that completion is as much of an institutional priority as access" (American Council of Education, 2013a, p.1).

Universities have taken measures and have developed different initiatives aiming at increasing the retention rates of their student population with significant success. Curtin University, in Australia, developed more than forty interventions to boost retention rates, six of which were considered of high

priority. Curtin University's 2007 retention rates was 84.1 percent for Domestic students and 89.7 % for International on-shore students (Curtin University, 2011).

According to Allen (2014), "It is widely understood that students' perceptions of how well their institution supports the learning process can predict a student's likelihood of persisting in college" (p. 10). A study conducted by Hagel et al. (2012) confirms Allen's statement. In 2011 the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) collected data from undergraduate students. The Council reports that 39% of students indicated their desire to drop out due to a perceived lack of institutional support, while only 21% of those who felt supported by their institution indicated the same desire. (Coats & Ranson, 2011).

Considering the results presented by the higher education literature, Johnson, 1997; Tinto, 2004; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Kuh et al., 2008; Crossling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009; Nelson et al., 2012; Rhoades, 2012; and Krause & Armitage, 2014, to mention a few, the process in which universities can reach higher levels of retention is demonstrated below by Figure 1. This diagram illustrates the flow that culminates in retention.

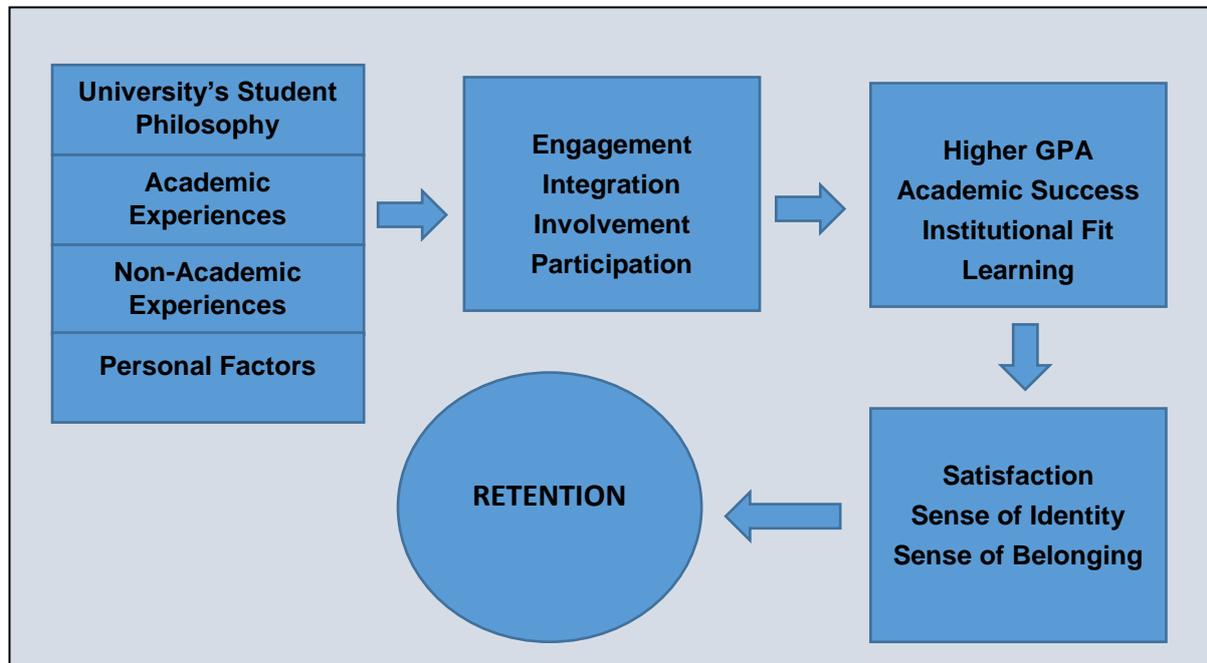


Figure 1 – Factors Contributing to Retention

2 THE LIBRARY'S ROLE IN STUDENT RETENTION

Several documents discussing the factors, which contribute to retention, students' persistence, and graduation rates, mention that this effort should involve the campus as a whole. A report from Curtin University (2011) asserts that many colleges and universities around the country can take action to improve student outcomes by implementing initiatives campus-wide" (p.1). It continues, emphasizing this holistic approach: "Virtually every aspect of the University has some direct or indirect impact on the quality of the student experience" (p.1).

Although it is clear that the university as a whole is responsible for students' retention efforts, surprisingly, not many articles published in the higher education literature factors in or recognizes the library as a partner in improving college retention rates. Amongst the most recent ones which do, it is

worth noting the studies conducted by Dennis (2007), Bell (2008), Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek (2009), Hagel et al. (2012), and the report published by the American College Testing (2010). They all emphasize that the library, through its many services, such as study rooms, library orientations, workshops, and library facilities play key roles in student engagement, learning, and retention.

However, the library and information science literature makes a rather strong case in favor of the library's role in contributing to student persistence and retention.

A study conducted by Kramer & Kramer (1968) reveals that students who used the library, 73.7% returned, and only 57% of those who did not. The authors conclude that "This study seems to show a strong and statistically significant correlation between library use and student persistence" (p. 312).

Porter and Swing (2006) found that study skills and academic engagement were two of the most important factors affecting intention to persist. Interestingly enough, studies conducted by Haddow & Joseph, (2010), Stone, Pattern, & Ramsden (2012), Haddow (2013), Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud (2013, 2014), and Eng, & Stadler (2015) indicate that there is a strong evidence that students who spend more time using libraries, interact with library staff, and engage with library services are more likely to persist than those who either use less or actually don't.

Considering that, there is evidence to suggest that library use enriches students' academic work and improves academic performance, leading to academic success and achievement and also that academic achievement leads to retention and persistence, library use then is an indirect factor contributing to students' attainment. Table 1 below reflects studies published in the LIS literature that either report actual initiatives or strategies academic libraries are taking to influence retention or report specific uses of library resources and services, which relates to observed academic success.

Table 1 – Library Resources and Services Related to Academic Success

RESOURCE USE AND SERVICES	SOURCE	UNIVERSITY
Databases (log-ins)	Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014 Haddow, 2013	University of Minnesota Curtin University, Australia
Circulation	Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014 Haddow, 2013	University of Minnesota Curtin University, Australia
Electronic Journals	Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014	University of Minnesota
PC Log-ins to Library's Website	Haddow & Joseph, 2010 Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014 Haddow, 2013	Curtin University, Australia University of Minnesota Curtin University, Australia
Interlibrary Loan	Mark & Boruff-Jones, 2003 Haddow & Joseph, 2010 Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014 Haddow, 2013	Mississippi & Indiana Universities Curtin University, Australia University of Minnesota Curtin University, Australia
Library's workstation	Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014	University of Minnesota
Research Workshops	Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014 Haddow, 2013	University of Minnesota Curtin University, Australia
In-person reference interaction	Grallo, Chalmers, & Baker, 2012 Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014 Eng, & Stadler, 2015	N/A University of Minnesota ACRL Libraries

Peer research consultation	Soria, Fransen & Nackerud, 2013, 2014	University of Minnesota
Ebooks	Haddow, 2013	Curtin University, Australia
Course reading materials	Haddow, 2013	Curtin University, Australia
Virtual Reference Chat	Haddow, 2013	Curtin University, Australia
Library Instruction	Knapp, 1966 Kelly, 1995 Hardesty, 2007 Pagowsky & Hammond, 2012 Hubbard & Loos, 2013 Bell, 2014 Eng, & Stadler, 2015 Murray, 2015 ACRL, 2016	N/A University of South Carolina University of Arizona Naugatuck Valley Comm. College 137 Academic Libraries N/A Martin University ACRL Metrics Database N/A 200 post-secondary Schools
Library use in general	Kramer & Kramer, 1968 Stone, Pattern, & Ramsden, 2012	California State Polytechnic College University of Huddersfield UK Universities' Websites
Library space, facilities	Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 2009 Bean, 2003 Murray, 2015	University of Maryland N/A N/A
Improves GPA	ACRL, 2016	200 post-secondary Schools
Library expenditures	Mezick, 2007 Eng & Stadler, 2015	586 academic libraries ACRL libraries
Total library materials costs	Mezick, 2007	586 ARL/ACRL
Number of professional staff	Mezick, 2007 Emmons & Wilkonson, 2011 Eng & Stadler, 2015	586 ARL/ ACRL 99 academic libraries ACRL Libraries
Student employment	Rushing & Poole, 2002 Lau 2003 Weston, 2006 Love, 2009 Wilder, 1990 Allen, 2014	N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A Literature Review
Social learning environment	Bean, 2003 Seidman, 2005 Price & Fleming-May, 2011 Matthews, Adams, & Gannaway, (n.d.) Booth, Scholfield, Tiffen, 2012 Eng & Stadler, 2015 May & Swabey, 2015	N/A University of Queensland N/A University of Queensland University of Technology, Sidney ACRL Metrics Database 5 Academic Libraries in Canada
Learning Commons	Turner, Welch, & Reynolds, 2013 Loertscher & Marcoux, 2015 Storey, 2015 Thomas et al. 2015 Cunningham & Walton, 2016 Dallis, 2016	N/A N/A N/A N/A
Use of Library Services Leads to Higher GPA	De Jager, 1997 Zhong & Alexander, 2007 Wong & Cmor, 2011 Wong & Webb, 2011 Cox & Jantti, 2012 Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013;	Univ. of Cape Town California State Univ. Bakersfield Hong Kong Baptist University Hong Kong Baptist University Wollongang Library University of Minnesota Illinois Institute of Technology

	Massengale, Piotrowski, & Savage, 2016	Paul V. Galvin Library
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As we can see from Table 1 above, the literature emphasizes that provision of information literacy initiatives, social learning environment and use of library services leading to higher GPA contributes to retention.

A case study conducted by Mark & Boruff-Jones (2003) at the University of Mississippi and Indiana University demonstrates how the NSSE results can be applied by librarians for assessment purposes. The authors claim that “The NSEE is an excellent diagnostic fit with the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education because learning outcomes can be correlated with student engagement” (p.480).

The ACRL’s Assessment in Action (AiA) three year program involving 200 postsecondary institutions across the country recently reported that there is compelling evidence for library contributions to student learning and success in four key areas: (1) Students benefit from library instruction in their initial coursework; (2) Library use increases student success, as students achieve higher course grades, GPA, and retention levels; (3) Collaborative academic programs and services involving the library enhance student learning, and (4) Information literacy instruction strengthens general education outcomes (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016).

INCREASING RETENTION THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

The literature highlights the library partnering with different academic Sectors (which is different from collaboration) as a strategy to reach greater retention levels. Housing of related services, such as IT, Writing Center, Student Outreach, Student Success etc. at the library is one strategy which has the potential of increasing library use (Hardesty, 2007; Mahaffy, 2008; Pagowsky & Hammond, 2012; Allen, 2014).

Of more interest, however, are the outreach strategies to reach other departments through liaison programs. Librarians have partnered with other Departments in different ways to assist struggling students. Librarians can partner with the office of diversity to assist students at risk, train students to be peer-to-peer library advocates, participate in inter-departmental intervention teams, and promote use of library facilities for collaborative studies. Librarians can also “be embedded in academic support centers, minority/diversity-related cultural centers, and student affairs offices” (Allen, 2014, p. 14).

Different methods of embedding librarians are being used. While the Queensland University of Technology (Australia) uses Student Success Assistants to contact struggling students and refer them directly to a librarian for personalized assistance (Nelson et al., 2012), instructors at the University of Arizona “mark absent or low-performing students in college’s early alert system and the learning support staff would answer basic reference question” (Allen, 2014, p.14). Hagel et al. (2012) suggest that students should be sent to the library so librarians can provide instructional services at point-of-need.

Based on a literature review, Allen (2014) developed a conceptual map of library efforts in student retention. The map includes partnering with office(s) of diversity and at-risk outreach; Integrate IT and Writing Center in library; Train students to be peer-to-peer library advocates; Promote use of library facilities for collaborative study; Leverage library student for informal academic integration; and Participate in inter-departmental intervention teams.

Machin, Harding & Derbyshire (2009) report a partnership effort between academic and library faculty to develop an innovative health and social care professional program at Northumbria University. The authors argue that this partnership enabled the theme of lifelong learning to be embedded into a complex, year one, inter-professional modules entitled “Foundations of Learning and Collaborative

Working" (p. 145), and concludes that the ultimate benefit of this joint effort is the enhanced student experience.

For several years now, Andrews University has had a similar experience as the library's Instruction librarian has worked closely with an English professor to enhance students' information literacy. Reflecting on this experience, Dr. Closser describes this partnership with the library in the following way:

I have always included library lectures in my second semester general education research writing course. Early in the semester, I typically arrange with a librarian to bring my students over for a week of lectures and exercises intended to introduce them to library resources and give them practice in using various databases and reference tools.

Over the last five or six years I've attempted to achieve a closer connection beyond the traditional "library lectures." I began listing the librarian, with her consent, as a co-teacher of the course. Her name and contact information appears with my own on the syllabus. This encourages students to see the librarian as central to the course objectives. To increase the librarian's visibility, and to encourage students to feel more comfortable seeking the librarian's assistance on their projects, I began to include opportunities for students to conference with the librarian as well as with me.

This current semester the librarian and I have made three significant changes to the course. First, she has attended all regular class sessions and participated in two class activities and discussions. Second, she has begun attending conferences I have with students. The librarian brings a fresh perspective to the paper which I have looked at perhaps too often. A third change is that the librarian is involved in reading and grading final drafts of students' writing (Closser, 2016).

As James White Library implements partnership initiatives such as the one with Dr. Closser, we can only agree with Allen (2014) when he states that "The future of library retention efforts lay not so much in the isolated efforts of librarians, but in librarians working with other departments to retain students through graduation" (Allen, 2014, p. 16).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Retention is a major concern for higher education institutions across the country. A high rate of attrition is not only an indication of a failure on the part of university to achieve its mission, but it also means that time, resources, and opportunities were wasted.

There is a common understanding amongst higher education administrators that retention should be the concern of all the departments across campus. The library can be a key player in providing student engagement strategies. The more the library participates in engaging students in the academic life, the more it will contribute to students' success and persistence. By helping students achieve academic success, librarians make their most significant contribution to retention. This is achieved when librarians are actively and purposively creating bonds and interacting with students; providing social learning opportunities and facilities, research instruction initiatives which improves students' search skills and peer counseling programs; work in close partnership with teachers and academic departments; provide access to relevant databases, e-books, interlibrary loans, and in-person reference interaction, all leading to better grades, more satisfaction, and academic acculturation, which again, leads to retention.

Albeit it is encouraging that university stakeholders are stimulating librarians to participate and get involved in academic-wide retention efforts, a study reported by Hubbard & Loos (2013) indicate that a minority of the libraries investigated actually had retention in their agenda in a formal and attentive way.

Libraries need to emphasize the role its resources and services play in student success and retention in order to justify continued investment in this area, especially in a time when universities are devising

innovative strategies, relocating budgets, and creating an academic atmosphere to curtail attrition and secure student retention.

The data of the study conducted by Kuh & Gonyea (2003) to identify the role of the academic library in promoting student engagement in learning presents the results obtained from more than 300,000 students who completed the Student Experiences Questionnaire from 1984 and 2002. The authors conclude that “On balance, the results of this study indicate that libraries play an important role in helping the institution achieve its academic mission” (p. 267).

By partnering with other departments, and being connected to the rest of the institution, librarians will demonstrate how valuable the library (i.e. its resources, facilities, and services) is in contributing to student engagement, success, and retention. Finding ways to “create opportunities to internalize the norms, values, and technologies of students’ new academic, social, and bureaucratic cultural landscape” (Chaskes, 1996, p. 89) will enhance the library’s role and visibility as an indispensable partner in the institution’s effort to curtail attrition.

Librarians and libraries need to redefine their role to meet the challenges that student retention represent. They need to internalize the fact that they are partners in the academic endeavor, and not mere collaborators. The service mentality places libraries as a student support entity (second-string) which collaborates with other academic departments. Libraries need to acquire the image of a pro-active organism, and not simply re-active to the institution’s academic and social needs.

We need to excel in working side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder with students, faculty, administrators, counselors, and student affairs personnel to influence students’ persistence and increase degree attainment levels. This is the only way university libraries will lead the way through today’s higher education choppy waters. James White Library is doing its part leading Andrews University to a safer harbor.

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