Shhh! No talking about retention in the library!

By Heidi Blackburn

Abstract:
Student retention rates have long been a topic among school administrators, but it is an issue barely mentioned in library circles. This article will discuss the role the academic library can play in increasing and maintaining student retention rates on campus. By focusing briefly on four main topics, including reaching out to students early and often, getting them in the library door and getting them to stay, the reader will be able to see the broad picture of how crucial libraries are to fighting student attrition.

Introduction

Why is nobody talking about retention in the library? As the famous Hermione Granger once declared, "Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself." So why are librarians so afraid to talk about retention? Administrators fret over it, student support services do their best to keep the numbers up and the Board of Regents usually still finds something to improve. "Retaining a student is fundamental to the ability of an academic institution to carry out its mission. A high rate of attrition is indicative of a failure on the part of an institution to achieve its purpose. For institutions that rely heavily on tuition and fees to support academic programs and services, including the library, student retention is critical" (Mezick, 2007, p. 561). If retention is the bread-and-butter of the school, then libraries are the good-for-you side vegetable that complements the meat of the curriculum. So why do librarians, some of the biggest champions of education and learning, turn a blind eye to keeping students in school? Is it because academic libraries are considered old-standbys, content with the status quo as long as the funding is steady?

And this is the library….

Libraries have always had an assumed role in academia. From the earliest monasteries to the first universities, collections of texts have played a central part in providing scholars with information. For the oldest, most prestigious schools, the library was often the heart of the campus and a great source of pride. But now schools build multi-million dollar sporting arenas, residence halls and student unions to lure in students. However, these eager youngsters will still need help locating peer-reviewed resources and where will they turn? Libraries have become overlooked as campuses try to impress students with free Wi-Fi in the cafeteria, instead of focusing on the library's access to millions of articles and documents through regional consortiums. Student representatives showcase lavish new laboratories and research facilities but do not mention the one-on-one support librarians can provide these budding Einsteins. On the tour, the student's introduction to the library is generally along the lines of "And this is our library which was built in (insert date). It's open (insert time) to (insert time). A lot of people like to hang out there later at night because that's when it's the busiest. Do you want to take a peek inside or move on?" Inevitably, the prospective student will feel pressured to "hurry along" with the tour and will wind up feeling overwhelmed approaching the library when his or her first research assignment comes along. "Librarians can no longer depend on the campus to recognize that 'we are the heart of the campus,' but rather seek to identify and cater to the needs of the individual in the most effective manner" (Dennis, 2007, p. 91). When it comes to student retention, there are four key points for libraries; get to students early and often, get them in the door and keep them coming back.

Getting to them early

Ah, the freedom of being a first-year college student. The sudden independence (for some) to dress as they like, attend class when the mood strikes, hang out late, and oh yes, study when and where they see fit. "…becoming a new student in the research university environment required acclimation to the library and its enormous variety of information sources. For student success in most college courses, even in the first term, students must have basic information literacy skills immediately. To put off the initial development of these skills until the second term is indefensible" (Gardner, 2004). The first time many students head to the library can be daunting, due to the mazes of bookshelves, the confusion of locating materials using a mysterious call number and/or the sheer stress of a paper that is unfortunately due the next day. How can librarians help these students stay in school if they do not have the skills to locate the academic resources needed be successful?

Bibliographic instruction, both in the classroom and in the library, can go a long way towards student

retention through information literacy proficiencies. By giving students the skills to cope with the research demands of higher education, they are more likely to succeed. Instruction can vary from a one-credit semester long class, a request by an instructor for a classroom visit or simply a one session research seminar. At the very least, simply visiting the library with a first-year orientation class can help alleviate student reservations about using the library. In *Library Assessment in Higher Education*, one analysis showed that over a 15-year period, students were more likely to return for their sophomore year and continue on to graduate after participating in a freshman orientation class, even though many of the participants were less prepared for college than their peers who did not take the class (Matthews, 2007). Higher grades, retention rates and increased use of campus support services such as writing centers and libraries was also reported in another similar study, where once again, the students faired better than their counterparts (Matthews, 2007).

Although information literacy curriculum is thoroughly established on most campuses and is generally thought to be a good use of time, there is a lack of published works reporting on the evaluation of this instruction beyond pre-post testing. The assessment of students' abilities to regurgitate facts does not test genuine learning to see if students have acquired the necessary proficiencies. Assessment that is integrated into the course would force students to transfer their new skills to real classroom assignments, proving they have or have not met the student learning outcomes involving information literacy. From assigning complex annotated bibliographies to simply asking students to describe how they found their sources, integrating assessment into existing assignments requires some additional planning but the benefits of authentic assessment far outweigh the costs. Additional literature on assessment and information literacy is in no short supply but the key element is giving students skills to succeed will ensure their success on campus will culminate in graduation.

> "It is unrealistic to expect a student from a small public school system or a large overburdened urban school system to have the proper skills for academic library research. It is also unrealistic to expect the majority of the student population to be academically successful without these skills. The academic libraries in general, and academic librarians in particular, play a pivotal role in the education and retention of students" (Kelly, 1995).

No one likes being thrown into the lake without instructions on how to swim. Why would universities use the same method by giving students research assignments and then just ushering them out of the classroom with a general nod toward the library? Yet, because of program restrictions and time constraints, students often do not have time to attend instruction sessions or to take for-credit library classes not required by their major. Add this hindrance to an already over-scheduled curriculum where professors are not integrating librarians into the course content and it comes as no surprise that students are moving on to campuses where they feel academically supported.

Enter the First-Year Experience; a time-honored tradition of providing students with answers to every pre-meditated situation that could possible arise in the next four years, as well as opportunities designed to equip them with lifelong learning skills. A well-planned First-Year Experience can be a godsend for students who breezed through high school and do not have the study skills required for higher education. It is equally beneficial for students who managed to scrape an adequate standardized test score to meet the minimum acceptance level but who are fully unprepared for a rigorous course load. Colleges can avert a dropout crisis by stepping up this programming to ensure that these students persist beyond their first semester, because it has been shown that successful orientation programs directly affect student retention rates (Dennis, 2007). These programs, whether a week or semester long, can also provide contact with faculty and staff who will reach out to help students through the transition and become a support system. According to a study done by George Kuh, et al. (2007, p. 22) "… frequent informal contact with both classroom faculty and other university support staff contributes to collegiate success and to intellectual and emotional development in general."

However, even if the university has a program for introducing students to campus, the library may not receive its much-needed time in the spotlight. A handout with the library hours or a campus scavenger hunt clue gathered at the reference desk does little to build information literacy skills, arguably the most important skills a student will have to foster before graduation. When designing orientation curriculum, these skills need to be at the top of the roster and librarians should be consulted throughout the creation and implementation of these courses. Librarians have been "left out of the loop of the initial introduction of students to what many institutions believe really matters in college" (Gardner, 2004). Quality

interaction between students and librarians needs to take place, and while Boolean search skills may not be necessary on the second day of class, learning about the library setting and its resources is vital in starting students off on the right foot. Educators, administrators and librarians should strive to cultivate a program that builds as the student progresses, and one that balances fostering academic skills with the creation of the inevitable summer-camp atmosphere that many First-Year Experiences provide. In a nationwide survey conducted by Boff and Johnson (2004) concerning library involvement in the first-year survey, the results showed a staggering lack of library participation in such programs. "Out of 386 respondents, 315 schools had a library component, 67 percent required the library component, and 33 percent did not. Only 13 percent indicated they devoted 11 percent or more of the first year curriculum to the library component. When asked as to the in-class time devoted to the library component, almost half of the responding institutions reported no more than one hour" (Gardner, 2004).

The library is not often thought of as a "student support service" in the conventional sense, such as Financial Aid, Academic Advising or Health and Counseling centers. Indeed, the word "support" is often closely linked in the mind with such synonyms as "second-string," thereby somehow diminishing the importance of the participant. If academic departments and faculty rank first on campus, numerous student-supporting offices often see themselves in second place and act accordingly as passive participants in the fight to keep students in school. The time for "scholars versus staff" and "us versus them" is over. Schools and libraries need to do a better job of working together to boost retention rates. If a student comes to an advisor with failing grades in the middle of the semester, the drop-out process is already in motion. Could the student's professor, teaching assistant or resident hall director have suggested that the student seek help in the library? Is there a network of librarians, academic advisors, counselors, and student affairs personnel who work together to develop a greater understanding of the student population and their needs? (Kelly, 1995). Professors, counselors, and advisors should encourage students to seek help in the library before they start to lose academic ground. Braunstein, McGrath, and Pescatrices (2000-2001) all identify academic performance as a major, if not the most significant, cause of student withdrawal (Braunstein, 2001). While completing the assignment is ultimately the responsibility of the student, a full team should be

ready to support the student if he or she is drowning academically.

> [L]ibrarians, more than ever, need to forge new and strategic partnerships on campus. As the use of electronic and web-based resources increase and the pattern of library use around the country at many institutions decreases – in terms of study space as well as a place to retrieve scholarly information – libraries face a significant challenge in trying to maintain the academic and social vitality they once enjoyed. Many students think the library of today is outmoded and irrelevant, and they instead rely on other sources of information, particularly electronic sources for their education. A resulting problem is that students, particularly first year students, have a hard time discerning between what is valid information on the Internet and what is no, what qualifies as appropriate data and information for their research papers and what does not" (Gardner, 2004).

Getting to them often
Once the word is out on campus that the library is ready to serve each student in order to help him or her achieve academic success, the work does not stop there. Getting the student to recognize the library as useful is but the first step; librarians must then foster relationships with students while instilling lifelong information literacy skills. Often, the librarian may only have one opportunity to create an impression on a student, through a one-time information literacy class, during a tour or when he or she is approached with a question. "These opportunities offer librarians a chance to learn more about students, in addition to providing information about library systems and resources. This can be a perfect time to find out what library experience students have had and what their plans are for the future" (Kelly, 1995). Every year curriculum and technology change, which means librarians should to take time to find out what the library should offer to best serve students and keep them coming back each semester. In the Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) study on student loyalty, the library was listed as one of the campus auxiliaries that impact a student's impressions of their university experience. The university library has the ability to serve as a foundation of the community. (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001).

Libraries as buildings have been taken for granted for so long that one must be reminded that libraries as a concept are equally important to a student's success.

"…in addition to high quality teaching, the emotional commitment a student makes to the university is extremely important. Part of this loyalty to the university is determined by the quality of the experience a student has with university services such as the library…" (Hennig-Thurau, et al. 2001). Students should see the library as a supportive bunch of people willing to provide resources that enable academic success, not as a looming cathedral built to house mysterious and elusive texts. How can libraries find out what happens outside the building in order to build this loyalty? By stepping out from behind the desk and into the light, so to speak. Make a point of having a booth or table at recruiting events, open houses and orientations so that students can at least match a face to the library, even if they do not remember the name. Volunteer to judge student events, hand out prizes at Homecoming or help coordinate the all-campus rally. Any activity that highlights the library and/or librarians will be worth its weight in PR gold and helps students recognize that the library is more than books and study spaces. Even showing moral support can go a long way, so attend athletic events, cultural fairs, career days, and theater performances. "The more librarians interact with the university community, the greater their impact will be on students' lives" (Mezick, 2007, p. 565).

Librarians can also reach out to students outside the library by becoming student club or organization sponsors. Perhaps the Anime club who is constantly asking for interlibrary loaned DVDs is looking for someone to show them new materials, or perhaps the Creative Writing Society could use a hand finding places to publish their works. Being involved with students on a co-curricular level can be just as beneficial for all parties involved as the formal student-teacher relationships built in the classroom.

Of course, the most essential interaction happens in the classroom. Embedded librarians have become popular with large universities, who assign subject specialists to collaborate with faculty in assisting students directly with projects through in-class instruction as well as individual support. Although many schools have specific librarians for this type of service, every librarian can serve in an unofficial capacity. "…the roles of the personnel are to serve the school community as an information specialist, teacher and instructional consultant. Within this context, the library and its resources can provide invaluable assistance in a program designed to prevent students from dropping out of school" (Coleman, 1990). If a librarian is not assigned to meet with specific classes or professors, he or she can still be involved by helping faculty design curriculum that involves library resources. Attending department and/or department head meetings, even sporadically throughout the semester, will help librarians stay on top of what changes are being made to assignments and classes.

Encouraging relationships with students in the classroom, even if the class only meets with the librarian once a semester, is important. "Spending time with students will help determine how best to teach them about the library and how to use information resources. Developing effective instruction sessions and adding useful collection resources can also be results from frequent interactions with students in formal and informal situations" (Dennis, 2007, p. 91). Does the reference desk receive overwhelming requests on how to locate the archives for a project? Perhaps the instruction librarian should add this stop to the class tour. Do students consistently ask for a certain subject guide? Find out if a copy is available online, if the link needs to be updated or moved to a user-friendly location on the library's website. Are students and faculty aware the library will be open later during final exams? Maybe department or campus e-mails could to be sent out as reminders. "Promoting the use and services of the library through letters and interactions with faculty and through announcements in student newspapers will also demonstrate the commitment the library has to the student population" (Kelly, 1995).

A librarian who mentors students and teaches a class has a greater opportunity to be remembered than one who only uses the library to interact with students (Dennis, 2007). A student will remember the librarian who visited the classroom and brought candy or played an interactive game, even if they do not completely master Boolean Operators. In his or her darkest academic hour, a panicking student needs to remember a helpful face over how to build an advanced search string. He or she will seek out the librarian, who can use the opportunity to work on maintaining the relationship for the future. Students who feel respected and at ease asking for help will be more likely to succeed in reaching their goal of graduation (Mestre, 2008). But what about the librarians who never set foot in a classroom? Being aware of what is going on with individual students on campus can seem like a gargantuan feat at major universities, but every student matters. Start small, with the library's own student workers and fan out from there. If the workers feel comfortable at the library, they will do their own part by encouraging their peers to use the library for

collaboration and research. A student will likely seek help with class work if he or she had positive interactions at work with a supervisor. This contact may even lead him or her to recommending the librarian to a friend who is also struggling.

Getting them in the door
The university may employ the largest group of caring, friendly librarians around, but even in this digital age, the library building itself will still play a central part in student retention. Literature on libraries changing from academic archives to hip study halls is growing as schools reinvent the image of libraries on campus. In his article on college retention, John Bean states "… specific campus resources, such as the library as academic factors affecting student retention decisions. [He] also identifies physical places for socializing, including library study areas, as being an element common to programs designed to encourage student persistence (Bean, 2003). No longer do students want quiet study tables and towering rows of dusty books, microfilm and theses. They want sunny window nooks with Wi-Fi capabilities, group collaboration rooms with audio and video plug-ins and a java spot near the door for a caffeine fix during late-night cram sessions. Smart universities have picked up on these trends, and more importantly, how these new buildings or additions attract and retain students. "…library administrators report that students also are looking for a place to meet other students, work on group projects, and seek out opportunities for interacting with fellow students. The library has become a social environment, a place to be, and a destination, where students can experience the company of fellow students" (Waxman, 2007, p. 429). Potential students touring campus want to see a building that they can envision themselves using and libraries who do not work to keep up with these patron demands will soon see themselves lacking patrons. In these days of belt-tightening and budget scrutinizing, not every campus can order new couches or put in an espresso machine but it is the attitude that is crucial, not necessarily the architecture. Lounge chairs and tables gathered and arranged to encourage browsing or a classroom turned into a study room can equally boost morale. "A library that supports fun, non-traditional activities will invoke positive attitudes about its space. Areas specifically designed for comfort, pleasure and productivity will be remembered and reused" (Dennis, 2007, p. 90). Libraries who fail to act will feel the effects quickly as students migrate towards user-friendly spaces. "Gate counts and circulation of traditional materials are falling at many college libraries across the country, as students find new study spaces in dorm rooms or apartments, coffee shops, or nearby bookstores" (Carlson, 2001, p. A35). Why would students stay on campus if the study atmosphere is less than hospitable? Buildings that have not been updated in decades, with uncomfortable seating or confusing layouts will hinder students both physically and mentally from committing to using the library. Structures that offer cramped spaces and poor lighting often drive students to more attractive parts of campus, or to the nearest off-campus coffee shop" (Carlson, 2001, p. A35).

Although various schools are hopping on the bandwagon in an effort to redesign their libraries to include coffee shops or technology centers, not everyone is onboard with this design. "In addition the challenge of finding funds for this project, the library also faces the challenge of convincing some faculty and administrators that this 'learning commons' is appropriate for a library environment. Many think the library should be a hall of books, a quiet place, with no food or drinks allowed. The concept of students relaxing and 'hanging out' between classes challenges some views of the role of the traditional library" (Waxman, 2007, p. 429). Libraries are responding in a multitude of ways to those who question the proposal of changing the library's image so drastically. Several schools chose to plunge full speed ahead and ignore such objections, while others pulled back and hesitantly take small steps to test the campus body's reaction. Yet most play a balancing game between pleasing students and faculty and meet these demands by finding middle ground. A majority of faculty still envision the library as a "…quiet place for students to study or meet in groups to share ideas and strategies. It is a non-threatening environment where even the most basic question can be asked without embarrassment" (Kelly, 1995). While these will always be fundamental student needs, there has been a swell in student requests added to the list. "Student demand is increasing for access to information in multiple formats and the productivity hardware and software that can be used to incorporate that information into a finished product and foster 'knowledge creation.' This increased reliance on technology, as well as the shift towards cooperative learning and group study, has led libraries to adopt the idea of an Information Commons" (Mezick 2007, p. 565). In the future, whether libraries will blend a mixture of "old school" with "new school" or adopt the idea of becoming an "Information Commons" all together is something only time will tell. No matter the name, the architecture or the manner in which information needs are met, it is essential that students are free to come to the library in

the pursuit of knowledge and excellence with the assurance they will be welcomed and supported.

Getting them to stay

So students are on campus, receiving academic assistance, and attending to their business of earning those diplomas. Librarians are out spreading the word across campus, both directly to classes and indirectly through other means. In a perfect world, students are aware of the various ways they can seek research help, they frequent the library for solo and group study and check out unending amounts of materials. So how do librarians get them to stay happy and on campus? Nurturing students so they become lifelong learners and information literate by the time they graduate is every librarian's dream. But the students themselves have to commit to finishing their degree, preferably at one school. Their tuition dollars pay for the lights to stay on and the new bookshelf to stay full. As the saying goes "It takes money to make money." School administrators are fully aware that departments can only do so much with shrinking budgets, yet inevitably the library budget is often the first on the chopping block. Directors constantly have to fight to keep their budgets as online database and periodical subscription costs skyrocket. Yet these big-budget technological wonders attract students and so the circle goes around and around. Libraries must justifiably spend vast sums of money on these services to attract and retain students, who in turn pay ever-increasing amounts of tuition. Studies have shown that new library materials and services give both the students and the school a competitive edge. Mezick's study on the relationships between library expenditures and student retention showed "…the strongest relationships exist between total library expenditures, total library materials expenditures, and serial expenditures at baccalaureate colleges" (Mezick, 2007, p. 564). Although additional documentation and hard evidence (like the aforementioned study) may be required to convince a stringent administrator, librarians know that if they supply it, somebody will use it. Reminding faculty and administration that libraries play an integral part in campus life is an on-going cycle but one that will eventually become natural as the school begins to understand the connection between a strong, well-supported library system and student retention rates. Getting students to stay is by far the hardest step in the process, due in large part to campus politics that must unfortunately be depended on for much of the success or failure.

Conclusion

So why are librarians not talking about retention? Is it the fear of shining the spotlight on the library and its activities (or lack thereof) dedicated to keeping students on campus? There is no shame in saying "We aren't doing enough to prevent student attrition," only in deciding not to take any action to tackle the problem. Libraries are not stand-alone entities, but part of a team putting forth a campus-wide effort to keep students on the path to graduation. The sooner librarians accept responsibility and unlearn the notion that retention is strictly an administrative issue, the sooner they can focus on the task at hand. By reaching out to students early and often, they can build supportive relationships with the student body. Providing patrons with the necessary resources (both physical and online) to complete assignments will move students through the door and help boost academic success. Convincing students to stay by continuing to pay for such resources will lead to a higher overall campus retention rate. Librarians as a profession are dedicated to the worthy cause of serving others, and will surely take the opportunity to carry on helping to ensure not only student success, but also overall success for their institution.

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