

Student retention and academic libraries

By Maurie Caitlin Kelly

Librarians must take an active role in retention activities

There is an old African proverb, "It takes a whole village to educate a child." Apply this to a university setting and it becomes, "it takes a whole university to educate a student." This statement, which was recently used as the basis for an academic task force report on student retention at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), sets out the partnership between students and the university. It implies that each person in the university has a role and a responsibility in assisting students to reach their goals. It is truly why we are here.

The academic library/librarian's role

In the current atmosphere of rapidly changing technologies, it is increasingly important that educators be aware of the needs and abilities of the student population. 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 library in general, and academic librarians in particular, play a pivotal role in the education and retention of students. Often this role is overlooked or considered secondary to that of other units and individuals in the university system. Evidence of this perception can be seen in the lower salaries of library faculty and the frequent slashing of library budgets. But what exactly is the role that the library and librarians play in the lives of students?

These roles can be as simple as providing 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. Resources such as dictionaries, computers, encyclopedias, and printers are readily available for use. For librarians, the most satisfying and challenging roles are often related to teaching students critical thinking skills and helping them grasp difficult concepts through work at a public service desk. But these functions are stationary. Students come to the library seeking help. Shouldn't the library, and more importantly the librarians, be part of a student's experience at a university from the first day? Most academic libraries offer bibliographic instruction sessions or tours upon request. Librarians often participate based on their subject specialties or specific abilities or interests. But how many are able to become involved in areas outside of the library walls? Has there been a direct connection between campuswide retention activities or the units involved in these activities and the academic library on campus? Do librarians network with academic advisors, counselors, and student affairs personnel to develop a greater understanding of the student population and their needs?

Student retention is not an issue limited to urban universities. There are programs related to student retention in universities as diverse as the University of Illinois at Chicago to the University of North Carolina, as well as many smaller two-year and four-year liberal arts colleges. There are meetings and conferences related to the freshman experience and student retention held regionally, nationally, and internationally, as well as journals devoted to these

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issues. In light of the attention this issue receives and of the staggering impact that new technologies have had in the academic environment, libraries and librarians must redefine their role in student retention to meet the challenges of the next century. The two ways in which librarians can meet these challenges are 1) to learn more about their students through both formal (surveys) and informal (networking with other campus units and individuals and reference interviews) data collection, and 2) to get involved—develop programs or participate in programs based on the needs of the student population that have been identified through data collection and networking.

Gathering data

One of the most important overall factors in student retention is gathering data on the student population. This data can be taken from

to compile a picture of each freshman class as a whole. Some eye-opening discoveries include: freshman students are typically unaware of the amount of time and effort they will need to invest in pursuing a college education; 96–99% expect to earn a B average in their first year of college, but less than 40% actually do. Students also tend to underestimate the time they will need to study to maintain a B average. Most students assume they will only need to study 11–20 hours per week, when in reality they will need to study 30–40 hours a week. With an instrument as significant as the EPS, one can only imagine what could be done if questions related to library and research experience and skills could be added to the survey. While the Penn State survey is one of the most extensive surveys in the country, most universities do gather data on their students that can be used by libraries to create programs addressing student needs. In addition, based on data taken from admissions surveys, outreach programs to specific schools or school districts could be created.

Informal interactions with students or other university faculty and staff are also an excellent source of data on the student population. Reference interviews provide librarians

with information on students' abilities and needs. Often, when many students are working on a particular assignment, it is possible to form a picture of the class as a whole. Bibliographic instruction sessions and library tours offer another opportunity for librarians to learn more about students. In addition to providing information about library systems and resources, the librarians should also take the time to find out what library experience the class has had (for example, how many students went to a high school that had CD-ROMs or an online catalog) and what their plans are for the future. Asking students about their majors or goals can help to develop a relationship between that student and the library, as well as demonstrate that the library is a caring and involved place. Finally, networking with other university departments and staff can help librarians develop a better understanding of the functioning and services available in the university system. Who and where are the advisors and counselors? What are the drop/add periods? These questions and others like them have answers that

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both formal and informal sources. Formal data sources include SAT or ACT scores, admissions surveys, and other existing university sources. Informal data can be gathered through reference interviews, networking with other university units and staff, and interaction with students during tours and instruction sessions. Used together, the data gathered through these sources can give both the university and the librarians an in-depth picture of the student population.

An example of one of the most comprehensive formal surveys administered at the university level is at Penn State University. Penn State's Division of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) developed and distributes the Educational Planning Survey (EPS) to over 10,000 incoming freshmen every year. The information gathered in this survey, which ranges from high school courses and grades to number of hours spent studying in high school, is used to evaluate student needs and abilities throughout their careers at Penn State. The individual data, which are not available for publication, can be used

may help librarians understand the university, and possibly help students who may be confused about where they are headed in their college careers.

Getting involved

While it is often hard to juggle the varied and time-consuming responsibilities that many librarians have, it is imperative that academic librarians develop programs or become involved in programs on a campuswide level. At UIC the library has been asked to participate in a freshman seminar aimed at reducing the attrition rate of UIC students. The Freshman Success Seminar is one of the results of several task forces set up by the chancellor to examine the causes and possible solutions for UIC's unusually high attrition rate. One of these task forces, the Student Retention Task Force, looked at the problems with student retention on many levels: the lack of a central advising unit or other centralized units that perform similar functions; the lack of availability of core courses; and the difficulty in using computing resources were some of the elements examined by the committee. It was the committee's recommendation that a student seminar, a required course, be designed. In the discussions that preceded the final report it was found that for this seminar to succeed the library must be a significant participant.

The Freshman Success Seminar that resulted from the work of the committees was implemented as a pilot program during the fall semester of 1995. Its goal is to assist entering students in the transition from high school to university life. The course includes segments on time management, money management, writing, and library research skills. The library research component is expected to be a hands-on look at some of the library systems and an opportunity for students to bond with the librarians. The format of the seminar is based on a combination of ideas. The team putting the seminar together looked at books such as *The Master Student*, articles, and other active freshman seminar programs and adapted some of these ideas. The Freshman Success Seminar will go through the pilot stage in 1995. Based on the success of the seminar, the university will



Doug Deckert, a student, and Melissa Koenig, a reference librarian, work together at the Univ. of Illinois at Chicago.

consider whether or not to make it permanent and required.

Conclusion

Libraries, by function, are an integral part of the college experience. More important, it is vital that librarians, as representatives of the library, work with other campus units and committees and participate in campuswide programs to promote this ideal. To reach more students, librarians should participate in freshman orientation, freshman courses, and introductory seminars. Becoming part of a campus committee or program will not only reflect well on the library, but will also help broaden the experiences of the librarians and deepen their understanding of student issues. Outreach programs can be developed with academic affairs or advising units on campus. 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.

The successful completion of a degree is the goal that every university has for each of its students. As part of a university community, the academic library and the academic librarian are important partners in this process. By understanding the needs and abilities of students, librarians can increase the importance of their role in the lives of those students and the success of the university. In doing so, the value of the library, its staff, and its resources will only continue to increase. ■