

Libraries and Student Success: A Campus Collaboration with High Impact Educational Practices

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Introduction

Academic libraries are actively exploring reliable methods to demonstrate their value and impact on student success and retention to campus administrators and governing bodies. As many campuses moved from the teaching to learning paradigm they employed the AAC&U's essential learning outcomes as outlined in their Liberal Education and America's Promise project. Many universities utilize high impact practices in the effort to improve retention, persistence and success. Rigorously researched, these practices have proven successful. Libraries participate in many high impact practices through information literacy programs and collaborations with student affairs, service learning and undergraduate research. One way to demonstrate library contributions to student success is to align closely with these successful high impact practices and document activity.

In 2007 and 2008 the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) published two reports to address the future of 21st century higher education, *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007) and *High-Impact Educational Practices* (2008). Both reports drew heavily from the research of George H. Kuh and others and their analysis of data from the National Survey and Student Engagement (NSSE). The first, commonly referred to as the LEAP (Liberal Education and America's Promise) Report, identified several "essential learning outcomes" needed by 21st century graduates in order to be successful:

- Knowledge of human culture and the physical and natural world
- Intellectual and practical skills
- Personal and social responsibility
- Integrative learning¹

The LEAP Report recommended that liberal education must transform itself in order to prepare students for the challenges of a 21st century global society.²

The second report identified ten educational practices that support the essential learning outcomes:

- First-year seminars and experiences
- Common intellectual experiences
- Learning communities
- Writing-Intensive courses
- Collaborative assignments and projects
- Undergraduate research
- Diversity/global learning
- Service learning
- Internships
- Capstone Courses

The report also provided evidence of the positive effects associated with participating in high-impact activities based on NSSE responses from both first-year students and seniors.³ These practices work because they require students to devote time and effort to purposeful tasks and demand interaction and feedback with faculty and peers on substantive issues. Participating in high impact activities increases the possibility that students will experience contact with

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diverse people. The opportunities for study abroad and service learning enable students to apply their learning to other settings and experience life-changing opportunities.⁴

Academic Libraries and High Impact Practices

Several studies examined academic libraries' work with high impact practices on their campuses. In 2003 Kuh and Gonyea studied the nature and value of students' experiences with their libraries. They sought to discover the unique contributions of libraries to learning and the impact of students' library use on their engagement with effective educational practices. They used the College Student Experiences questionnaire (CSEQ) which included a library experiences scale. The results indicated that libraries are important in helping colleges and universities achieve their academic goals. They learned that minority students used their libraries more often than non-minorities.⁵ The authors recommended that higher education needed more investigations into academic libraries' effectiveness with supporting student learning and if library use impacts persistence and graduation. They noted that academic librarians are well positioned to provide leadership in these endeavors and collaborate with appropriate units on their campuses to conduct this research.⁶

Academic librarians are indeed meeting this challenge. In 2010 the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) published *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, prepared by Megan Oakleaf, which provided numerous recommendations and guidelines for libraries to demonstrate their value to their institutions. The *Report* recommended integrating with high impact practices and linking with the data that shows their positive results with student success.⁷ Riehle and Weiner conducted a literature review in 2010 on five high-impact practices to gain an understanding of the extent information literacy is integrated into them.⁸ They included capstone experiences, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research

and writing intensive courses in their study. Their examination confirmed that information literacy competencies are included in these practices, although they not always labeled as such. They recommended that librarians partner and collaborate with the leaders of high impact practices on their campuses and that information literacy competencies be an essential component in program planning and the instructional design process from initial conception through assessment.⁹

A 2014 dissertation by Adam Murray reported on a survey he conducted of academic library deans and directors of public comprehensive universities with the Carnegie classification of Master's level in the United States. Murray sought to understand better their perspective on the role of academic libraries in student retention and used the high impact practices (HIPs) as a framework. Murray asked three questions:

1. To what extent do academic library deans/directors perceive their academic library's current services and resources as aligning with high-impact practices affecting student retention?
2. How do academic library deans/directors document and communicate the impact of library services and resources on student retention?
3. Is there a correlation between retention data and academic library deans/directors' perception of their library's involvement with high-impact practices?¹⁰

Murray determined that deans/directors view library services and resources as aligning closely with HIPs and that they have consistent methods of supporting them. Academic libraries primarily rely on assessments from information literacy student outcomes and user satisfaction ratings to indirectly document library impact on retention. Most communication of these findings is usually in the form of an annual report or presentation to university leadership but many respondents indicated there was no method of communication.¹¹ Murray offered several recommendations including libraries integrating li-

library instruction into a wider range of high impact practices, identifying metrics to establish standards for calculating correlations between common library services and retention, taking a pro-active approach to improve retention based on the specific practices of the institution and finding new methods of communicating with university leadership.¹²

Case Study

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) used the LEAP Report as a major source for its Strategic Plan 2008-14. Several high impact practices are integrated into the curriculum and student affairs activities. The University Libraries work closely with faculty and student affairs staff to align with these practices. Learning communities are a practice highly emphasized at UNCG and the Libraries are embedded with them. In 2013 the Libraries developed an extensive report to document and map its activity to high impact practices. This paper presents a case study on learning communities to include research about how learning communities contribute to student retention and success, how they've impacted student success at UNCG and best practices on how to ally with high impact practices and use the results to demonstrate the value and impact of the University Libraries.

Learning Communities in Higher Education

Learning communities have been part of the higher education landscape for over 40 years. They are usually characterized by students taking at least two linked courses as a group and working closely with the professor and each other. Often they explore a common topic and examine it through the lens of different disciplines.¹³ Some learning communities include a residential component referred to as living learning communities.

Recent research provides evidence on the impact of learning communities on student engagement, performance and retention. In 2003, Hotchkiss, Moore and Pits evaluated the success of self-selected one-semester Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs) in

achieving retention and performance goals at a non-residential urban campus over a four-year period. They learned that there was a significant correlation between FLC participation and GPA and retention, particularly for African American males.¹⁴ In 2004, Kuh and Zhao examined NSSE data to determine, among other things, the relationship between enrollment in a learning community and academic performance. The data showed that seniors with a learning community experience had higher GPAs than those who did not.¹⁵ In a literature review in 2007, Andrade examined 12 studies on learning communities and persistence and reported that learning communities had a positive impact. Furthermore, they were successful for both academically well-prepared and less prepared students. It wasn't clear, however, if these gains were due to the structure of LC's themselves or due to the enhanced engagement inherent in them.¹⁶ The same review noted that students who participated in LCs reported that gains in their GPAs were attributed to learning communities. These studies used a variety of methodologies including course grades, cumulative GPA, self-reports, focus groups and credit hours completed.¹⁷ A 2010 study examined performance and retention of first-year students at a public Midwestern research-extensive university enrolled in three types of first-year programs. Two of these programs were Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs), who lived on the same residence hall floor and took four classes together, and Academic Theme Floors (ATFs) where residence hall floors had dedicated educational themes or academic disciplines.¹⁸ They found that first semester GPAs had the highest effect on retention. Of these three types of experiences students who participated in FIGs had an 18% higher retention rate. Interestingly, this rate was regardless of GPA.¹⁹

Libraries and Learning Communities

Academic libraries have a history of collaborating with learning communities, primarily as a way to integrate information literacy skills into the curriculum. Over a decade ago, Joan Lippincott recommended that librarians work with learning communities as a way to

“a deeper understanding of the information needs of students and faculty and establish librarians as partners in the learning enterprise in new and important ways.”²⁰ In a 2006 literature review, “Information Literacy and Integrative Learning,” Galvin reported on several ways librarians worked with learning communities including paired for-credit courses and course-related information literacy instruction.²¹

A few studies assessed librarians’ involvement with learning communities. In 2006, Lebbin used focus groups to assess a Library Studies 100 course that was linked with a freshman English course at the University of Hawaii Manoa. Participants noted that it was very valuable experience to learn basic information literacy skills early in their college career. In addition, they gained important skills to apply to other courses including the ability to locate sources, recognize scholarly sources and apply citation skills.²² Voelker also used focus groups to assess librarians’ involvement with learning communities at Kent State University. They determined it was a useful way to contribute to the retention of at-risk students. Several librarians embedded in learning communities and provided not only information literacy sessions but also provided sessions on plagiarism, careers and sponsored pizza study breaks. Through the focus groups they learned that the students really appreciated the services from the library and even asked for more! The library hoped to expand involvement with learning communities based the focus group feedback.²³

Learning Communities at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), one of seventeen campuses of the University of North Carolina system, is a High-Research Activity University and also earned a “Community Engaged Classification” from the Carnegie Corporation. In 2013-14 the enrollment included 13,640 undergraduates and 2,666 graduate students. With distance learners the total headcount was 17,707

UNCG has sponsored Living Learning Communities (LLCs) for over 40 years. The Warren Ashby

Residential College (WARC), established in 1970, was among the first of its kind in the nation. WARC provides on-site classes and faculty offices in the residence hall, academic advising and a small student-faculty ratio. A Coordinator teaches in WARC and is also responsible for housing and community-building aspects. In the 1990s’ UNCG added several new LLCs with varying emphases that provided students with opportunities to have more informal interactions with faculty, bond with students with common interests and provide social support in their first year of college.²⁴ When the current chancellor arrived in 2008, UNCG embarked on a new strategic plan for 2009-14 and used the LEAP Report as a major source. The Plan focused on the importance of student success with an emphasis on retention and graduation rates. Learning and Living Learning Communities were articulated as a priority to provide students with a more engaged and integrated learning experience. One goal of the Plan specifically focused on learning communities:

- Implement first-year learning communities for all first-time UNCG undergraduate students to encourage integration of learning across courses. (Learning Communities)²⁵

UNCG currently offers over 30 Living Learning Communities, Learning Communities (LCs) or Residential Colleges.²⁶ By fall 2013, approximately 50% or 1300 first-year students participated in LCs.²⁷ Residential Colleges focus more on the experience of living together and taking general education classes together while working closely with faculty. Other communities center on taking paired classes in specific subject areas. Topics include a wide range from entrepreneurship, teaching, science and health, and multiculturalism. Others offer the opportunity to explore a variety of majors.

The University has collected data that indicate retention rates and GPAs are higher for students who participate in LCs. The retention rate for those in the Residential Colleges is 87% as opposed to an average of 77% for the University as a whole. Furthermore all Learning Communities report a .10% higher GPA average above the UNCG.²⁸

The UNCG University Libraries and Learning Communities

The Libraries have a history of involvement with Learning Communities, beginning in 2007, when we assigned liaisons to the learning communities as part of our Student Affairs Connection Program.²⁹ Liaisons work closely with their communities to provide information literacy sessions, workshops on specific tools and topics such as citations and plagiarism. They also offer satellite reference and in-depth consultations. Library faculty teach sections of UNCG's acculturation courses some of which are paired with LCs. One librarian has been a faculty fellow of a LLC for years. In WARC, mentioned above, the liaison trained a student to serve as a primary communication line between the students and the Libraries. On a lighter note liaisons provide co-curricular activities such as game nights, mystery nights and participate in LC social activities.³⁰

The Libraries were heavily involved with the strategic planning committee that established LCs across campus with both the Libraries' Dean and First-Year Instruction Coordinator serving on it. The First-Year Instruction Coordinator also joined an eight-member team that attended the 2010 National Summer Institute on Learning Communities. The increased emphasis on LCs in the Strategic Plan also provided the opportunity for the Libraries to augment this relationship and integrate more fully into the curriculum. Liaison assignments were expanded to all LCs. Specific outcomes for liaisons were identified:

- Library liaisons to the LLCs will increase contact and embed further with their communities in order to establish closer communication and to ensure that students utilize the Libraries' resources and services. Contact may be whatever is appropriate for the community and may include, but is not limited to, office hours, information literacy classes, UNS 101-type courses, training student peer mentors and general programs.
- Liaisons will gather data such as number of questions asked, hours on site, classes, program attendance and student feedback.
- Data will be collected at the end of the academic year and a report developed. We might hold a summit with the LLCs or participate in a program already happening to report our results.

As the Libraries sought to show how we contribute to retention and student success we determined that a useful method would be to document our collaboration with these high impact practices. As mentioned previously, this method was recommended by ACRL, Kuh and Gonyea and Riehle and Wiener. Steven Bell also advocated it in "Keeping Them Enrolled: How Academic Libraries Contribute to Student Retention," a *Library Issues Briefing* in 2008. Bell interview George Kuh, who said,

...that academic librarian 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.³¹

Bell further stated that there is ample research that indicates that student engagement contribute to student success and that academic libraries can play a strong supporting role in these activities.³²

We built on data already collected and prepared a very detailed report documenting our unique and significant contributions to all high impact practices. For each practice we provided background information on how the practice operates at UNCG, mapped our activities to the practice and provided statistics for one academic year to illustrate the level of support. For the learning communities section we included each LC, named the liaison, provided narrative and bullet points for the activities and statistics. The evidence that supported Learning Communities included:

- 41 information literacy sessions
- Embedded librarian in Ashby Residential College

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- 2-4 office hours/week
- Research consultations
- Developing LibGuides
- Attending final presentations or posters
- Assignment design
- “Lab sessions” with students
- Research consultations
- Workshops for instructors³³

The report was widely shared on campus with the Provost, Student Affairs and academic deans. We also shared it in the library community in North Carolina and received very positive comments and feedback. We distributed it in print, via e-mail and posted it on our institutional repository for easy access. The report proved very valuable for other situations as well. The University faced major budget cuts in 2013-14 and all academic units were asked to document how they support student success. We were easily able to pull from the High-Impact Report to provide this information. In 2014 we welcomed a new Provost and one of the first items the Libraries’ Dean sent her was this report. We update the statistics each year so that we continue to demonstrate our continuing collaboration with the high impact educational practices at UNCG.

Conclusion

Academic libraries are closely interconnected with student learning through liaison work and information literacy programs. Collaborations with student affairs, service learning, undergraduate research and other student programs also provide important opportunities to impact and contribute to student success. Student retention and achievement are critical issues at most academic institutions and much time and attention are devoted to them in both academic and co-curricular programs. College and universities take advantage of educational practices that are researched and proven successful. Librarians provide unique contributions to these practices to support and enhance student experiences. We all keep statistics and generate reports to document our activity. An effective strategy to demonstrate our value and impact is to map these statistics in order to link to the

successful educational practices on our campuses and provide evidence to campus administration. These reports need to be visually appealing and easily accessible to campus administrators and distributed widely as possible in a variety of print and online venues. It is one practical approach to show our value and how we support and enhance students’ careers in higher education.

Notes

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