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Libraries and Student Retention



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ABSTRACT

Mick Williams presented the workshop “Libraries and Student Retention” at the June 2015 Association of Christian Librarians Conference. This article of the same name encapsulates key points that were shared during the workshop’s PowerPoint presentation on how academic librarians can actively promote student retention at their own institutions of higher learning.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2007–09, private Christian and secular colleges are facing new challenges, both cultural and demographic. American economic fragility underlined by the Great Recession has perhaps caused a “downsizing” of the American dream, particularly in regard to parents’ and students’ college spending decisions. Also, demographic changes decreasing the number of traditional college-age students cannot help but hurt private colleges’ bottom lines (Bell, 2015).

Academic librarians may find many of these challenges “above their pay grade,” but there is no reason for them to be passive. Library directors can look for ways to successfully interact with both traditional and nontraditional college students (Bell, 2015). By partnering with professors whose programs quickly get students engaged in the academic milieu, librarians can help forge successful bonds that can make the difference between retention and withdrawal (Hagel, Horn, Owen & Currie, 2012). Librarians can also use statistical data, anecdotal evidence, and their professional judgment to preemptively help students get past those points in the curriculum which are most likely to lead to failure (Hagel et al., 2012).

Early intervention on the part of librarians is critical. If first-semester freshmen get actively involved in academic work involving library resources in the first few weeks they are on campus, they have a higher retention rate (Haddow & Joseph, 2010). Much of what drives academic retention is actually a feeling of fitting in and being a part of the college community on the part of beginning freshmen. Thus, libraries actually have a fairly brief time to have maximum impact: roughly the first half of a freshman’s first semester is the critical window.

What, then, is needed to make a difference? There are four key steps that together can make a difference: having a vision of what is needed, creating an action plan including the use of the library’s “soft power,” successfully implementing the plan, and building in an annual assessment cycle (Williams, 2015). (“Soft power” is the ability to get others to cooperate because they choose to do so, as opposed to “hard power,” which is the authority to enforce cooperation.) This article shall deal with them each in turn.

The vision that is needed is not some utopia; librarians should shoot for the best outcome realistically attainable. Try to envision what implementing the changes needed to obtain a best-case scenario would look like, and then strive to put them into place. Try to determine both what the library has to offer and also which professors would be the best ones with whom to partner (Williams, 2015).

The action plan may look different from what has come before, although there may be antecedents from ideas a library has tried previously. Having librarians brainstorm both individually and collectively will help release their creativity. Librarians should feel free to use a SWOT analysis similar to those used by industry to determine the real situation the library faces. Determine what soft power the library already has. Strive both to add more and to put it to good use. A library can, in all likelihood, never have too much soft power (Williams, 2015).

Implementing the plan always brings new challenges and the unanticipated, so anticipate that surprises will arise. Creating both timelines and checklists will help the library staff avoid leaving things undone, and it can help build in accountability (Williams, 2015).

Create an annual cycle of assessment. If this does not take place, one is forced to rely solely on anecdotal evidence and professional judgment. The first part of the assessment cycle should be quantitative measurement of relevant data. The next part of the assessment cycle needs to be a qualitative analysis of what the data suggests in the professional judgment of those who were part of the assessment processes. The third and final part of the assessment cycle is a qualitative/intuitive segment. At that point, one goes beyond mere data analysis and uses it as a springboard for improvements and new ways of doing things (Williams, 2015).

Finally, if the library director has friends in high places at the college (again, a reflection of soft power), she can share retention information she has gleaned during her research that may be far beyond her pay grade and outside of librarianship *per se*. Just as a sporting event is often won or lost by a few points, even marginal improvements can help (Williams, 2015). Also, we should pray that God will help us and that our efforts will glorify Him. †

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