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Earleen J. Warner
Bethel University

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The Power of Encouragement: The Role of Christian Academic Librarians in Supporting the Whole Student



**Earleen J. Warner, Reference Instruction Librarian
Bethel University**

ABSTRACT

Christian librarians are exhorted to consider the role of providing encouragement, care, and emotional and spiritual support to college students. Caring for the whole student can have a positive impact on college student success and retention, as well as have a transformational effect on students' spiritual lives. By treating college students as whole persons created in the image of God, Christians academic librarians can not only help these students succeed by meeting their academic needs, but also help students thrive by supporting them emotionally and spiritually.

*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up...
encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*
1 Thessalonians 5:11, 14 (NIV)

When Christian librarians serving in higher education analyze their roles within their institutions, their first thoughts may be of supporting student learning by providing research resources, information literacy instruction to classes, one-on-one assistance with conducting research, consultations with faculty to create effective research assignments, and a space for students to learn beyond the classroom. In addition to these and other tangibles, Christian librarians might also consider the role of providing encouragement, care, and emotional and spiritual support to students. While this type of support within higher education may seem peripheral, caring for the whole student can have a positive impact on college student success and retention, as well as have a transformational effect on students' spiritual lives.

The Real Purpose of Higher Education

As the role of the Christian librarian in higher education is analyzed further, it is essential to first understand the real purpose of higher education. Scholars have argued that the ultimate goal of college is more than instilling knowledge in the minds of students. Fawns-Justeson (2012) proposes:

The real purpose of our work is to... help them along their path to becoming thoughtful, engaged, self-aware citizens who are fully able to make choices that reflect their most cherished values; choices that lead them to a meaningful and satisfying life (p. 126).

Shushok (2011) describes the ultimate purpose of higher education as that of “developing better human beings” (p. 2). Sparkman, Maulding, and Roberts (2012) see college as a place where students can develop their “emotional and social intelligences” and “interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities” (p. 645). Schreiner (2010b) states that the “purpose of higher education is to help students grow intellectually, psychologically, and relationally” (p. 11). With this purpose in mind, it is clear that the goal of the higher education experience is to prepare students for multiple aspects of their future lives. Therefore, Christian librarians should not only look for ways to help students succeed academically, but should also find avenues to assist them in their pursuit of maturity. In other words, Christian librarians have the opportunity to play an important role in supporting the whole student as they seek to fulfill the real purpose of higher education.

College Student Success and Retention

To better determine how Christian librarians can support the whole student as he/she seeks to fulfill the real purpose of higher education, it is useful to review factors that contribute to college student success. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) found that student success included “satisfaction, persistence, and high levels of learning and personal development” (p. xiv). In her quest to understand what causes some students to thrive and others to just survive during their college experiences, Schreiner (2010a) led a national study using an instrument called the *Thriving Quotient*. Schreiner (2010a) defined thriving college students as those who were “fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally,” “academically successful,” and who “experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college” (p. 4). The results of Schreiner’s (2010a) study reveals the types of changes that could take place in students which would allow them to thrive.

One of the attitude changes that was shown to contribute to student success and thriving is that of adopting a “positive perspective on life” (Schreiner, 2010a, p. 6). Schreiner (2010a) found that when students are taught to handle problems with an “optimistic style,” “reframe the situation and strategies for success the next time,” and to “envision their future success” (p. 8), they are better able to weather difficult circumstances. If college students adopt this optimistic attitude change, they are more likely to be motivated to graduate and more prepared for the difficulties of life beyond college. Schreiner (2010a) created strategies that faculty and staff (including

librarians) can use to teach students how to adopt this change in perspective. For example, although most encounters with students are brief, academic librarians have multiple opportunities to encourage anxious students to positively view research as a valuable intellectual challenge, and to teach students the information literacy skills they need to meet this challenge. By doing so, academic librarians can play a vital role in helping college students to succeed and thrive.

A Sense of Belonging

A significant contributor to student success and retention is having a sense of belonging (McDonald, Bacon, Brown, Brown, & Carter, 2007). When new college students do not feel as though they fit in, do not understand the culture of their new community, or have difficulty navigating the institutional structure, they are less apt to persist to graduation – especially if they also struggle with the rigor of college academics. Therefore, if a higher education institution builds an academic community that provides ways for a student to feel welcomed, accepted, supported, cared for, and connected, there is a stronger possibility that the student will remain (O’Keeffe, 2013). When students experience friendliness and empathy from faculty and staff, and develop at least one good relationship within the institution, they are more likely to adjust well to life in higher education (O’Keeffe, 2013; Schreiner, 2010b). If students feel connected to faculty, other students, and the subjects they are studying, deep learning can occur, thereby contributing to their success (Palmer, 2002). The idea that students who feel connected will remain in college is supported by Tinto’s (1975) seminal study on student persistence which argued that “it is the individual’s integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college” (as cited in Grallo, Chalmers, & Baker, 2012, p. 183).

All members of academia have an impact on their campus community and on a student’s sense of belonging. Christian academic librarians can contribute to these elements by providing a welcoming atmosphere and emotional support to students while assisting them with their academic needs.

Student Relationships With Faculty/Staff

A related factor that has an impact on college student success and retention is positive relationships between faculty/staff and students. Cox (2011) found that “even simple, incidental contacts mean something to students” (p. 61). Hagenauer and Volet (2014) discuss the impact that faculty-student relationships can have on the ability of students to acclimate to life in higher education. When faculty show themselves to be approachable, caring, helpful, supportive, understanding, and encouraging (Carlson, 2014; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Lillis, 2012), and treat students as “whole people,” they contribute to students’ success and adjustment to college life (O’Brien, 2010, p. 109). In their study on college students’ emotional

outcomes, Goldman and Goodboy (2014) found that since positive emotions can have a profound effect on students' ability to think and learn (and their motivation to do so), and on their engagement in the classroom, it is important for faculty to display confirming behaviors toward students. In the same way, academic librarians can contribute to effective student learning by showing students that they are valued and supported.

Positive interactions between faculty and students, either inside or outside of the classroom, also help students to become more motivated, confident, and academically successful (Hoffman, 2014). Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010) found that when faculty have affirming relationships with students, those students are more "likely to find the learning process to be enjoyable and stimulating, and gain a better understanding of how their college education could prepare them for the job market" (p. 339). All in all, when students perceive that faculty and staff (including librarians) are supporting them holistically (academically, emotionally, and socially), their college experience is more positive and successful (Kelly, LaVergne, Boone, & Boone, 2012).

Mentoring

A particularly significant type of faculty-student relationship is that of mentoring. Mentoring takes place when "a faculty member and student develop relationships in which functional and personal interactions converge" (Cox, 2011, p. 52). Since a mentoring relationship may involve assistance with coursework and career exploration, as well as "emotional and psychosocial support," mentors have the potential to support the whole student (Cox, 2011; Fuentes, Alvarado, Berdan, & DeAngelo, 2014, p. 289). College staff (including academic librarians) may also serve as mentors to students. Many campuses encourage formal mentoring relationships between staff and students. For example, Bethel University's (St. Paul, MN) Woven Lives program gives staff (as well as faculty) the opportunity to mentor students and have a positive influence on their lives.

Mentoring provides a significant opportunity for faculty/staff to encourage and inspire students, and help them "develop perspective on ... values, goals, and life" (Fawns-Justeson, 2012, p. 126). In further describing the power of mentoring, Fawns-Justeson (2012) suggests:

We know learning does not take place in classrooms only – learning also occurs quite powerfully as students struggle to live in the real world. If we take time to develop relationships with our students, and if we are available to guide them through these real-world learning experiences, we will contribute more substantially to their overall growth and development (p. 132).

Additionally, when faculty show compassion, openness, and empathy toward their mentees regarding the personal issues with which they are dealing (e.g., academic

stress, anxiety, depression, rejection, new living situation) by showing “care for the whole person,” the resulting positive personal connection can lead to significant growth in students (Cramer & Prentice-Dunn, 2007, p. 775). Although a mentoring relationship between a student and a Christian academic librarian may be somewhat different from one between a student and a faculty member, it still has great potential for benefiting the student.

Supporting Spiritual Formation in College Students

Another area in which Christian higher education faculty and staff can support the whole student is that of spiritual care. Burchell and Larson (2010) emphasize the importance of faculty building personal connections with students and offering empathy, affirmation, and spiritual encouragement. White (2006) also highlights the crucial role that faculty play in modeling Christ-like behavior before their students, and in being facilitators in students’ spiritual formation, by saying that educators should “view students as created in the image of God and work with them in authentic ways that nurture the whole person” (p. 306). According to Yoder (2013), students are looking for faculty and staff to serve as their “faith mentors,” and want to know more about their “professors’ faith journeys, Christian perspectives, and spiritual practices” (p. 87). Therefore, Christian faculty and staff (including librarians) have a significant opening to serve as spiritual role models and to help shape the faith of the students entrusted to them.

In his essay “The Role of the Library in the Character Formation of the Christian College Student,” Smith (2002) focuses on the “moral responsibilities of librarians” in “positively influenc[ing] character formation” in college students (pp. 181-182). Smith (2002) argues that librarians should model a Christian life before students who are still in the process of developing their own morals and values. For example, librarians can help to facilitate the development of morals in students by teaching them about the ethical use of information, respect for other library users and for library property, and about the self-discipline that is required to conduct good research (Smith, 2002). Christian academic librarians also have the opportunity to impact the spiritual lives of students by praying for and with them.

Support Specifically from Academic Librarians

Academic librarians can contribute to the real purpose of higher education in many of the same ways as faculty, but there are also ways in which librarians specifically can contribute to student success and retention. For example, since relationships and emotions have been shown to have an effect on student success, librarians Pagowsky and Hammond (2012) further investigated the significance of relationships between librarians and students, and how that affects students’ ability to become acculturated to college life. On each of their campuses, these academic librarians sought ways to collaborate with offices that provided both academic and non-academic support

(e.g., tutoring centers and student affairs). As part of giving students a more “personalized experience,” Pagowsky and Hammond (2012) developed paths from these other offices to librarians so that appropriate assistance would be available at point-of-need (p. 584). Pagowsky and Hammond (2012) also argue that “student/librarian relationships are an important contribution to a student’s sense of belonging, academic success, and connection with those who support success—all of which contribute directly to student retention” (p. 583).

In addition, Grallo, Chalmers, and Baker (2012) propose that since the academic library is a neutral, safe place where students can ask any type of question, librarians have excellent opportunities to provide emotional as well as academic support. For example, academic librarians can help students acclimate to the college environment by directing them to the correct departments that can answer their questions about college structure (e.g., financial aid, graduation requirements), and by participating in the “casual, out-of-class student-faculty relationships [that] were the most positive predictor of the intention to persist” (Grallo et al., 2012, p. 183). As academic librarians partner with other campus offices providing academic and personal support, they, too, can contribute to student success and retention.

When conducting information literacy instruction sessions for college students (which may include lessons in how to plan research strategies, effectively navigate online research resources, evaluate information sources, and avoid plagiarism by correctly citing sources), academic librarians are providing students with the opportunity to gain skills that will reduce frustration and contribute to their persistence in college (Allen, 2014; Grallo et al., 2012). Academic librarians can be even more effective in supporting students when they serve as liaisons to departments/programs and are able to provide personalized assistance (Allen, 2014). In this role as a liaison, Christian academic librarians are better able to form relationships with students, model Christ-like behavior, and provide encouragement and support to them.

Online/Distance Students

A group of students to whom academic librarians can provide specific support are those taking online/distance courses. College staff (including academic librarians) play a significant role in meeting the individual academic and technology needs of these students (Boles, Cass, Levin, Schroeder, & Smith, 2010). Since online/distance students will most likely never visit the physical library, it is crucial for librarians to effectively connect with them virtually (Kadavy & Chuppa-Cornell, 2011). Studies have shown that online/distance college students need more comprehensive instruction in selecting research resources, developing search strategies, navigating searching interfaces, tracking down information sources, etc., than students who can stop by the physical library whenever they have a question or a problem with a research tool (Kadavy & Chuppa-Cornell, 2011). When academic librarians provide

effective online instruction to distance students, they are helping to meet this important need.

In order to provide more personalized instruction and support, many academic librarians become embedded in online/distance college courses and programs (Carrico & Neff, 2013; Hoffman, 2011). Academic librarians can effectively embed in online/distance courses by using the course management system to provide video tutorials and assessments, an “Ask the Librarian” forum, or a discussion forum in which the students can reflect on their research process and the librarian can provide suggestions for the improvement of searching strategies (Kadavy & Chuppa-Cornell, 2011). Benefits of having a librarian embedded in a course or program include “faculty... spend less time answering student research questions,” and “students generate higher quality work” (Carrico & Neff, 2012, p. 200). When academic librarians are embedded in courses and programs, they are better able to establish relationships with students. This, in turn, helps students to feel more comfortable seeking out assistance from librarians in the future, and making further use of library resources (Carrico & Neff, 2012; Hoffman, 2011; Martin, Reaume, Reeves, & Wright, 2012). In addition,

By providing an open, non-judgmental environment for... students to receive additional research assistance, distance services librarians can greatly affect the retention rate in... programs. Students with more personalized experience in their programs usually stick with their institution through graduation. (Carrico & Neff, 2012, p. 201)

Therefore, it is of particular importance that Christian academic librarians support the whole student well in in the online environment.

Adult Students

Academic librarians can also provide specific support to adult students who struggle with the challenge of balancing school, work, and their personal lives. Many adult students have never been to college, or have not been enrolled in a college course for quite some time. As a result, they may experience fear of not succeeding academically, embarrassment over needing assistance, anxiety about conducting research, and “technostress” over navigating online research resources (Cannady, King, & Blendinger, 2012; Cooke, 2010). One of the ways that academic librarians can support adult students is through the creation of online research guides (e.g., LibGuides). By using these guides to provide selected resources in which the students can begin their research, and easy access to librarian contact information, librarians help to reduce adult students’ library anxiety (Cannady et al., 2012). When academic librarians create an open and trusting environment for adult students during information literacy instruction sessions and one-on-one appointments, librarians

can facilitate “transformative learning” by helping to reduce fear, anxiety, and stress (Cooke, 2010, p. 222). Christian academic librarians have a prime opportunity to be that “listening, nurturing, collegial connection” (Carrico & Neff, 2012, p. 205) by providing research assistance, as well as emotional support and friendship, when adult students need it most (Langer, 2010).

Whole Person Librarianship

Although neither student success nor library literature appears to make the specific correlation, it is clear that some of the very behaviors and character qualities God expects of His people have been empirically proven to contribute to college student success and retention. When faculty and staff (including librarians) encourage students, help them to feel a sense of belonging, show them care, develop personal relationships with them, assist them in learning to navigate college structures and online resources, and support their learning process, students are more likely to thrive in college and to graduate. College faculty and staff have crucial decisions to make regarding the students who have been entrusted to them:

We can affect student thriving in the daily choices we make, choices to dialogue rather than direct, to encourage rather than criticize, to see possibilities rather than problems, and to actively promote student success rather than simply prevent failure. When we do, a greater number of students will not only survive college, they will thrive – and so will we. (Schreiner, 2010b, p. 11)

As one of the 2014 American Library Association Emerging Leaders, Zettervall (2014) promotes the concept of “Whole Person Librarianship,” acknowledging that serving library patrons is much more than teaching someone how to search in an online index/database or correctly cite an information source. This concept uses the “social work model of seeing and serving the client – or patron – as a ‘whole person’ in the context of his or her life” (Zettervall, 2014, para. 1). By treating college students as whole persons created in the image of God, Christian academic librarians can not only help these students succeed by meeting their academic needs, but librarians can also help students thrive by supporting them emotionally and spiritually by encouraging their hearts and refreshing their souls. †

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Earleen J. Warner is Reference/Instruction Librarian at in Bethel University in St. Paul MN. She can be reached at e-warner@bethel.edu.

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