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Academic Libraries and Remedial Students: A Four-Pronged Approach



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ABSTRACT

This article provides one possible solution to the question: How can academic libraries contribute to remedial student success? A four-pronged approach is suggested: appropriate collection development, involvement in support services, collaboration with faculty, and embedding librarian/information literacy in courses.

Introduction

Retention, information literacy, and academic rigor have been the battle cries of many colleges and universities in recent years. Every year, multitudes of students graduate high school without the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in higher education. In a study based on student transcripts, 68% of those starting at public 2-year institutions and 40% of those starting at public 4-year institutions took at least one remedial course during their enrollment between 2003 and 2009 (Chen, 2016, p. v). At our small private Christian college, which primarily serves a minority population, this number was 95% in 2016 (Alaska Christian College, 2016). As the director of learning resources, I have employed a four-pronged approach to involve our academic library in the success of our students who are taking remedial or developmental courses. This approach includes: appropriate collection development, involvement in support services, collaboration with faculty, and embedding librarian/information literacy in courses.

Collection Development

One of the greatest challenges of collection development in a library that serves many students in need of remedial coursework is making sure that the library provides resources that are both useful and academic. Academic rigor has been a huge push at our institution as we try to help our students bridge the gap between the knowledge and skills they gained in their high schools, and the knowledge and skills they need in order to graduate with an Associate in Arts degree. We want to provide resources that they will be able to understand and use immediately, while

still fully supporting the needs of the Associate in Arts degrees that are offered.

In his article on information literacy, William Badke (2011) purposes that this is not just a remedial issue:

Academia assumes too much. We expect students to understand the information environment in which they live. Students, lacking a strong knowledgebase, are hard pressed to see the difference between an article found on About.com and a peer-reviewed journal article – except that the latter is filled with relatively meaningless notes and tables, while the former is understandable. (p. 52)

It is the job of librarians to not only make sure that library collections support the institution's academic programs, but that they are presented in a usable format. For our students, this means making sure that many of our online materials are available in an audio format so that students who are not strong readers can access the information. We have also intentionally subscribed to reference databases that are highly visual, containing pictures, video clips, and other interactive features. According to Anne Roselle (2009), who surveyed 31 librarians in 21 states, "nearly nine out of ten (87%) librarians interviewed consider reading levels and learning abilities of developmental students when building library collections" (p. 152).

While it is admirable that so many librarians think about the needs of remedial students when building their collections, very few librarians incorporate these needs into their official collection development policies or published library goals and objectives. Roselle (2009) states, "Well defined library goals and objectives for developmental students can strengthen planning efforts and help ensure adequate resource allocation for sustainability" (p. 153). It is essential that the needs of remedial students affect library collection development policies and published library goals.

Support Services

Reference services have always been a broad category within the context of the library. In the academic setting, reference assistance often looks a lot like tutoring. For schools that are fortunate enough to have a tutoring center, this is a great opportunity for cross-area collaboration. Library training sessions for school tutors help strengthen the relationship between the two areas. Many times, students start in our library and are then walked to the tutoring center for additional assistance, or vice versa. Training tutors so that they can adequately use library resources will ensure that those skills are passed along to students.

There are endless possibilities for collaboration with tutors and tutoring centers: from assisting with the design of specific online resources such as LibGuides, to building bibliographies for each developmental course. Tutoring centers are also great places to run information literacy workshops.

Collaboration With Faculty

The question of whether or not academic librarians should have faculty status has long been debated. In a study completed by Todd Gilman and Thea Lindquist in 2006, 664 doctorate-holding librarians were surveyed. Of those, slightly more than 50% indicated that they hold non-faculty positions, while only 37% said they hold tenure track status as faculty members, and the remaining 13% said they are ranked as non-tenure-track faculty members (Gilman, 2008). The biggest difference between these ranking systems is the librarian's ability to participate in faculty governance and campus committee work. Without faculty status, it is much more challenging for academic librarians to have effective faculty collaboration. Gilman states, "I suspect that the ability to participate in campus governance alongside professors makes librarians feel as though we are truly integral to the direction, policy formulation, and fabric of the parent institution" (Gilman, 2008).

Whether or not faculty status is granted to the academic librarian, it is crucial that librarians seek out opportunities to collaborate with faculty members at their institution. At our college, I teach at least one information literacy session in every course. This is possible because of our small size, but even larger colleges and universities will benefit from allowing and encouraging librarians to leave the library and enter the classroom. As library director, I am part of the curriculum committee as well as the faculty committee. I also have two faculty members, the director of IT, and the vice president for academic affairs on my library committee. This ensures that all decisions made about curriculum include input from the library, and all library decisions have faculty input. Cross-collaboration is key, especially when looking at the success of developmental students. Feedback from faculty and direct involvement in coursework are invaluable in informing collection development decisions, as well as the creation of appropriate libguides.

Library Embedment in Courses

Embedding library resources throughout the courses at a college or university goes hand in hand with faculty collaboration. It is impossible to effectively incorporate library resources within a course without faculty and institutional support. There are several ways that we choose to embed library resources at our college.

First, at least one assignment in every course is written with the goal of increasing the student's information literacy competency. In a developmental course, this works best if the assignments are scaffolded. Roselle (2009) explains, "Scaffolding is a teaching strategy for students who are novice library users. Through scaffolding, librarians limit the complexities of academic libraries and then gradually remove those limits as students gain knowledge and skills in library research" (p. 146). One example of this would be a biographical paper assignment. To start, students would be shown how to find a biography in the library or online. Next, they might be

asked to find an appropriate quotation from the book, and shown how to cite their source. Later, they could be shown how to look up another resource about that same subject using an online search tool.

Another way we embed library resources at our college is by bringing librarians or library technicians into the classroom a few times a semester. Increased exposure to the library staff helps students, especially developmental students, with their discomfort and fear of using the library and its resources. According to Horn, Maddox, Hagel, Currie, and Owen (2013), "If library services and resources are difficult to access through the LMS or less visible to students, then those who might benefit most from library support and information literacy education may be unaware of these services" (p. 238). Most librarians are aware of "library anxiety," the intimidation students may feel when contemplating library use (Roselle, 2009, p. 148). A very effective way to help students overcome their fear of approaching a librarian for help is through multiple exposures to library staff inside and, more importantly, outside of the library setting.

Conclusion

Academic libraries are an integral part of the success of remedial students. Applying the four-pronged approach presented in this paper is a great first step to serving all students, especially those taking remedial courses. Appropriate collection development that supports all students' individual learning levels, while retaining academic rigor, will guarantee that the library is a relevant resource for the entire student population. Academic libraries should provide support services that will benefit remedial students, both in the library as well as through partnerships with student tutoring centers. Collaborations with faculty and other institutional administrators will benefit all parties as coursework, library resources, and overall student policies affect each area differently. When faculty members and librarians are allies, students, especially those in remedial classes, profit. Finally, library resources (including librarians) should not exist in the library alone. Library resource course embedment is essential to remaining relevant and useful to students. Not only will students be more aware of what resources are available to them, but students' library anxiety will also be alleviated by placing librarians and library resources in the classroom. †

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