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## The Impact of Information Services on Student Retention

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### **Abstract**

Universities, including support departments such as the library, are increasingly called on by the government, accreditation, and professional organizations to provide data demonstrating impact on education outcomes such as student retention. While modern, digital libraries serving nontraditional students distributed across locations are rarely touched on in retention research, qualitative and quantitative data can be combined to portray activities that increase student engagement, a major factor identified as a positive influence for student retention. City University of Seattle's Library & Learning Resource Center has adopted a framework for gathering and analyzing student engagement data organized by the categories of library facilities, library collection, library instruction, and library

people. This framework is effective in communicating the depth and range of resources and services library staff deliver to key stakeholders.

## Overview

Utter the words “academic library” and the vision likely to emerge is one of a large, impressively designed building located, perhaps, near the center of campus. The building is filled with rows and rows of shelves housing print journals and books. A handful of study carrels or rooms scattered throughout the stacks are filled with students working independently or in small groups, putting the finishing touches on a class presentation or project. Students may be using their own laptops, or waiting for a chance to log on to a computer. This is a traditional vision of an academic library, where the library is imagined as a quiet and relatively passive place for users who seek out its print resources and services. When the expansion of access to digital content is included in the vision, it is commonly assumed that librarians play an increasingly minor role facilitating access to online content. This traditional academic library is primarily adjacent to, rather than integrated into, the academic work of the university. In this vision, library users are traditional-aged students who are primarily self-guided while library employees focus on checking books in and out, shelving materials, answering a handful of research questions, and sometimes teaching library-use skills through orientations or one-shot instruction sessions at the invitation of faculty.

Historically, it has been sufficient for academic libraries to cite usage data including materials checked out, study rooms reserved, computer log-ins, instruction sessions or research questions answered as evidence that the library’s resources and services support outcomes such as student achievement and retention. However, as government, accreditation agencies, and local administrators call for increasing accountability in higher education, and as economic pressure to reduce costs increases, support departments such as the library are seeking more sophisticated methods for assessing and communicating the range and depth of support they provide and its positive impact on university-level concerns such as student retention.

This chapter presents initial steps that CityU’s library is taking to measure and communicate the depth and range of support it provides to

influence student retention. An overview of current student retention research from higher education and academic libraries, including thoughts on best practices and sample frameworks, will be provided. Steps academic library leaders can take to provide evidence of their positive impact on nontraditional student retention, with specific examples from CityU’s library experience, will be shared.

## Review of the Literature

Student retention is defined as “a measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution,” typically expressed as “the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall” (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d., para. 1). Student retention is an area of focus in higher education with federal and local governments calling for increased transparency around higher education outcomes, regional and specialized accreditation agencies calling for evidence of data-driven decision making, and an understanding that it is more cost-effective to retain existing students than recruit new students (Kuh, 2009). Scarcity of funding is also increasing pressure on support departments, including academic libraries, to demonstrate their contribution to educational outcomes.

Student retention is a complex outcome to measure and influence, with multiple cultural, social, and environmental conditions factoring into students’ decisions on whether to persist toward their academic goals. Family background, academic aspirations, work status, finances, and a university’s delivery method(s), support services, programs, and policies may all influence retention rates (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Hagel, Horn, Owen & Currie, 2012; Kuh, 2009; Murray, 2014; Tinto, 2005).

Research and practice on student retention originated over forty years ago, has focused primarily on traditional freshmen, and has shifted from an original focus on blaming the student for a lack of skills or motivation, to one that includes the role of the university with a particular emphasis on interactions and engagement between students and faculty or staff they encounter (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Murray, 2014; Singletary, 2010; Tinto, 2005;). Kuh’s (2009) research focused on actions with proven results that universities can take to positively affect student retention, commonly

referred to as high-impact practices, including first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity and global learning, service and community-based learning, and capstone courses or projects (Association of American Colleges & Universities [AAC&U], n.d.; Kuh & Schneider, 2008; Kuh, 2009).

Nontraditional students, broadly defined as students over the age of twenty-five who have experienced a gap between high school and university, work full- or part-time, serve multiple life roles including employee or parent, represent an increasing percentage of the student population in the United States and continue to experience lower retention rates than traditional students (Kuh, 2009; Markle, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Singletary, 2010). While some nontraditional students are degree-seeking, others are more focused on skill development and reasons for pursuing education include technology changes, shifting demands of the workplace and global economy, a desire to increase earning potential, or fulfillment of a lifetime goal (Markle, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Singletary, 2010). Factors identified as important for nontraditional student retention include confidence and belief in the ability to achieve academic goals, the meaning degree completion holds for career or financial advancement, the meaning of personal goal achievement, access to flexible delivery modes or time-to-degree completion, active learning strategies with real-world application, a clear road map of academic expectations, and access to relevant support services (Markel, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) provides support for libraries that are shifting assessment from a reliance on traditional input/output measures toward methods that demonstrate impact on educational outcomes (Oakleaf, 2010). ACRL recommends libraries document participation in high-impact practices, increasing interactions or engagement with students, increasing collaboration with student support services such as advising, and aligning library assessment with university student retention initiatives (Oakleaf, 2010). Libraries participating in ACRL's Assessment in Action program have completed twenty-four studies investigating the library's impact on retention, focusing specifically on instruction programs, research assistance, academic support, student engagement, library use, and first-year experience integration. The program and body of research produced are important first steps to document

library contribution to student retention, but they represent early research stages with many studies reporting insufficient data, incomplete findings, or non-generalizable results.

Other recent library studies have built on traditional input/output data, finding positive relationships between increased expenditures for library resources or professional staff positions and student retention (Emmons & Wilkinson, 2011; Mezick, 2007). Studies that examined student use across multiple library resources and services found positive associations between library use and student retention, particularly early in the first semester of enrollment (Haddow & Joseph, 2010; Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013; Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2014). Haddow and Joseph (2010) recommended that libraries respond to their findings by offering carefully targeted programs and services, while Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud (2013; 2014) cautioned that results are not causal. It may be that students with higher retention rates are already academically motivated and predisposed to accessing support services such as the library.

Some leaders in the library profession have focused on strategies to build relationships with students such as proactively reaching out early and often to new students, particularly as the students who most need assistance may not seek it, and seeking ways to support fulfillment of students' academic aspirations (Bell, 2008; Blackburn, 2010; Hagel, Horn, Owen, & Currie, 2012; Lankes, 2012). Bell's (2008) five-point strategy included an emphasis on research assistance and personal attention, highlighting data that links student retention to the library's services and people, while others emphasize developing close partnerships with instructors, catering to diverse students in the conception and design of services, anticipating trigger points for withdrawal that can be influenced by point-of-need library support, and collaboration with other support services for integrated academic support (Hagel, Horn, Owen, & Currie, 2012). The focus on relationship development can be framed as a standard of care that aligns with the American Library Association's (ALA) *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* (2013) and research on the ethic of care. Characteristics of care include approachability, listening/inquiring, interest in the student's needs, accepting responsibility to act on what is noticed, patience, honesty, trust building, and follow-up (ALA, 2013; Keeling, 2014; Kyriacou & Constanti, 2012).

## Integration into the Student Experience

The common thread throughout retention research for traditional and nontraditional students and within library literature is student interaction and engagement, with no clear method identified for how a library director can move beyond traditional input/output measurements to document the department's positive impact on student retention. The form of activities identified by research to increase student engagement are noted to vary widely based on the context of the university in which they are adopted, even when aligned with the AAC&U's leading model of high-impact practices (AAC&U, n.d.; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Given no clear research-based strategy, a balanced approach could include intentional selection of formal and informal qualitative data enhanced with relevant quantitative data points from traditional input/output measures. This balanced approach adds meaning to the story shared with academic leadership that may be more familiar with a traditional vision of academic libraries than the depth and range of services delivered by modern academic libraries. Murray (2014) noted that the perception library directors hold of the department's contribution to student retention is not generally backed by data, but presents a useful framework for organizing the range of work libraries engage in to which data could be added. This framework includes the library facility, library collection, and library instruction. The inclusion of library people adds depth to the library's story.

Examples of starting points utilizing this framework for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data, grounded in student retention research and best practices identified by library leaders, are listed in the following table.

Framework	Qualitative Data Sources	Quantitative Data Sources
Library facilities	In-person/online feedback	Front desk/online usage Use of study rooms Website usage data

Library collection	Open-ended survey questions In-person/online feedback	Survey response data Collection data Usage data
Library instruction	End-of-Course Evaluations In-person/online feedback	Number of sessions offered Number of students taught Tutorial usage data Student achievement data Number of research consults
Library people	Standards of care Collaboration with faculty Collaboration with support departments In-person/online feedback	Outreach data Number of orientations attended Number of students reached Users/non-users data

## Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

City University of Seattle Library & Learning Resource Center serves primarily nontraditional and online learners in the United States and abroad. For several years the library has been exploring strategies to gather meaningful and actionable data, to align its work with university goals, and to increase academic leadership's understanding of the range and depth of work its staff members provide. Examples of how the CityU library blends qualitative and quantitative data, utilizing the framework of library facility, library collection, library instruction, and library people, are provided below.

## Library Facility

In the context of CityU's distributed student community, the library facility includes a physical location in Seattle, presence in the learning management system, and the library website. A combination of in-person and online feedback combined with usage data portrays student engagement with the library facility.

With a move to a consolidated Seattle campus in 2013, the library was repositioned from a remote building apart from classrooms and faculty to the center of campus. Engagement with students at the service desk has soared from approximately 5 per week to an average of 247. Now serving as a primary gathering space for the university community, demands for library study rooms and booths and computer workstations have steadily increased.

A primary point of contact with online students and students at non-Seattle locations is CityU's learning management system (LMS). CityU library has maintained a virtual presence in the LMS for nearly ten years. The nature of this presence has evolved, based on student feedback, to include a direct link to the full range of resources and services students can access on the library website. Within the LMS, liaison librarian profiles have recently been co-located with faculty profiles inviting students to reach out for assistance and describing the nature of support they can expect. In academic year (AY) 2015 an average of 153 questions per week were received through these LMS connections by librarians.

Student feedback also informed a substantial redesign of the library's website. The site changed from a student portal requiring multiple clicks to access basic content, to a graphically designed and easily navigable website from which most content can be accessed with one to three clicks. Visits have increased from 97,656 in AY 2012 to 159,751 in AY 2015, and students' navigation complaints on the satisfaction survey have entirely disappeared.

## Library Collection

A relevant, accessible collection provides critical support of student learning and supports student retention (Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2014). Even as online content increases, libraries play a role in curating content aligned with academic programs and future workplace needs.

In response to an increasingly distributed student body and complaints about lack of access to resources, CityU's library collection has changed from primarily print in 2008 to one that is 98 percent digital and is enhanced by a patron-driven-acquisition eBook program. Over 152 million international resources in the collection support student assignments outside the United States, and a global focus by programs within the United States. The most recent student survey indicates that 87 percent of respondents use the library's resources and services to support their studies, up from only 13 percent in 2008. Further development of the collection is guided by usage data and direct feedback from students and faculty, and evidence of student engagement with the collection is revealed through usage data.

## Library Instruction

Over the past ten years, CityU's library instruction program has transitioned from ad hoc inclusion in one-shot instruction sessions and orientations, to one that is fully integrated across academic programs at the students' point of need in support of the university's information-literacy learning goal. Instruction is augmented by tutorials accessible 24/7 on the library's website. In AY 2015, librarians led 131 required instruction sessions reaching 1,091 students, and gathered baseline data on the use of instruction materials in the learning management system. Participation in ACRL's *Assessment in Action* program assisted with a pilot to align data on student use of library instruction materials and student performance on the university's information-literacy rubric with student achievement. Modifications to the library's plan for data collection related to instruction are under way.

## Library People

While student engagement is composed of interactions between students and people, interaction in and of itself is not equivalent with engagement. For engagement to be effective, the quality of care within interactions is what will, in the end, have the most significant impact on

engagement. Quality of care that includes listening, patience, trust, and more is also difficult to gather quantitative data on.

CityU librarians focus on outreach and on respectful and supportive engagement with students in each interaction that encourages and fosters their confidence in learning. Librarians know these efforts support student retention through explicit feedback they receive from students and increases in research support requests. Examples of feedback include:

- A fifty-year-old aeronautic employee returning to earn his bachelor's degree, anxious about online courses, who was ready to drop out before starting his first course until he received the help from a librarian that he needed to access a required online simulation.
- A thirty-something student reporting she would not have completed her master's thesis research to earn her degree had she not received support from her liaison librarian.

For each student who takes the time to share his/her experience in engaging with the library, librarians know that there are many more students who could use their support who never engage with the library. Initial outreach focused on increasing faculty awareness of library resources and services, based on student survey results indicating 42 percent of students learned about the library from their instructor and through the university's focus on implementing an integrated information-literacy instruction program. With operational maturation of instruction and faculty outreach, focus has turned to increasing direct outreach to new students and on developing collaborative relationships with advising staff. Data on the number of welcome e-mails sent to students and faculty is now tracked, and timing for sending messages has been modified to align with likely due dates for first assignments resulting in increases in student responses and requests for help.

### **Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations**

From a deep dive into student retention research and initial efforts to seek more sophisticated methods for articulating the depth and range of the library's engagement with students to support retention, CityU's library has learned that:

- research-proven activities that increase student retention are highly dependent upon the specific context of universities and their students' needs;
- selection of qualitative and quantitative data to understand and communicate the library's impact on student retention is a good place to begin local research, and is an iterative process; and
- collaborative relationships can take three or more years to mature.

Each year CityU library works to identify more sophisticated methods for understanding and communicating the impact of its services to stakeholders, with future strategies informed by the previous year's findings. Library directors are encouraged to start with the data at hand and collaborate with other departments, including information technology, institutional effectiveness, and advising. Next steps for CityU's library include gathering and analyzing student-specific library use and instructional engagement data with a goal to identify patterns that inform more effective outreach to non-users and impact on student achievement, and to pilot a low-middle-high need student framework based on practices in CityU's doctoral programs. Collaborations with the advising team will expand, and a pilot comparing the library's instruction data with program retention data will be started.

### **Conclusion**

Student retention is influenced by many complex factors, and specific research-proven activities to increase retention allow for variations based on individual universities' cultures. Library directors who wish to apply more sophisticated methods for demonstrating the range and depth of the modern library's work and its impact on student retention may use a balance of qualitative and quantitative data to convey the connection between resources, services, student engagement, and thus, student retention.

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## Author Biography

Mary Mara is the Director of the Vi Tasler Library & Learning Resource Center at City University of Seattle with experience leading the design and implementation of an integrated information-literacy instruction program, developing a digital library to serve students located worldwide, and modernizing data collection and analysis strategies within the library. She holds a BA in Norwegian from the University of Washington and a master's degree in library and information science from the University of Washington's iSchool.