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Collaborative Library Outreach: A Key Retention Strategy at Open Access Institutions

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Collaborative Library Outreach: A Key Retention Strategy at Open Access Institutions

Abstract

Serving large populations of at-risk, first-generation, and low-income students, open access institutions face unique challenges regarding student retention. Academic libraries with intentional outreach programs are a valuable element of a comprehensive institutional retention plan targeted to the unique student population of open access institutions. Using the Clark Memorial Library at Shawnee State University in Appalachian Ohio as a case study, this article explores the elements of an intentional library outreach program targeted to support the retention of first-year students, many of whom are classified as first-generation, academically underprepared, or otherwise at-risk. The outreach librarian facilitates collaborative and intentional engagement opportunities such as orientation activities, in-class visits, embedded reference hours, events, workshops, and assessment projects to support campus-wide retention efforts.

Keywords

collaboration, retention, outreach, campus partnerships

Cover Page Footnote

A special thanks goes to Rebekah Kilzer for her support of Clark Memorial Library's outreach plan. Her leadership as library director inspired a new vision for library services.

From the Field
Collaborative Library Outreach: A Key Retention
Strategy at Open Access Institutions

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Abstract

Serving large populations of at-risk, first-generation, and low-income students, open access institutions face unique challenges regarding student retention. Academic libraries with intentional outreach programs are a valuable element of a comprehensive institutional retention plan targeted to the unique student population of open access institutions. This article presents the collaborative approach of an intentional library outreach program developed by the Clark Memorial Library at Shawnee State University in the Appalachian region of Ohio. The plan intentionally supports the retention of first-year students, many of whom are classified as first-generation, academically underprepared, or otherwise at-risk. Guided by the Learning and Outreach Librarian and achieved through campus collaborations, the outreach program facilitates intentional engagement opportunities such as orientation activities, in-class visits, embedded reference hours, events, workshops, and assessment projects to support campus-wide retention efforts.

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Introduction

Open access institutions champion the concept of access to all who wish to pursue advanced education. Given this commitment, open access institutions often serve a diverse student population including first-generation, low-income, and academically underprepared students. As higher education has moved toward a culture of accountability, pressures to improve student success measures, like retention and graduation rates, are greater than ever. Academic libraries are invaluable partners in retention planning at open access institutions. This value is magnified when the library collaborates with partners across campus. This article provides a detailed account of how one academic library formed an intentional and collaborative outreach plan to

meet the challenges faced by open access institutions.

The Open Access Institution

The open access institution has long been viewed as an opportunity to level the playing field in higher education, "ensuring access for all who can benefit."¹ Predominantly the core mission of community colleges, many universities have also committed to this egalitarian approach. Accordingly, the student populations of many open access institutions are incredibly diverse including students of nontraditional, first-generation, low-income, and academically underprepared backgrounds who face financial and life challenges not commonly experienced by traditional college students.² The open access approach cultivates cultural, racial, and ethnic



diversity as well. For example, community colleges enroll 52% of black undergraduate students, 57% of Hispanic undergraduates, and 62% of Native American students nationally. In fact, White students now make up 49% of the community college student population.³

Increased diversity often means increased challenges, particularly at open access institutions. Because of the socio-economic challenges faced during their formative years, students at open access institutions are often academically underprepared, not college-ready, or at-risk.⁴ Accordingly, open access institutions often enroll large numbers of students who have not mastered basic skills required for college success.

Retention Trends in Higher Education

In his seminal work, *Completing College*, Tinto outlines four conditions for student success.⁵ These conditions include expectations, support, and assessment and feedback. The fourth, and most important, condition is involvement – also known as student engagement. According to Tinto, students who are academically and socially engaged with their campus and its communities are more likely to be retained to graduation. Students at open access institutions, however, face many barriers to engagement.

Achieving a high level of academic and social engagement is a difficult task for any student, but is noticeably more daunting for the first-generation student. Because so many first-generation students are not college-ready, confidence is often an issue. Students who lack confidence are less likely seek help or ask questions, which is a major barrier to engagement. Not seeking help can often lead to feelings of isolation, impeding student engagement.⁶ Students' lives outside of school also contribute to feelings of isolation. Tinto's studies found that first-generation college students are more likely to live off-campus, attend classes part-time, and work full-time.⁷ By spending most of their time away from campus,

first-generation students are missing the opportunity to develop the network of emotional support that comes with social involvement. The feeling of loneliness that stems from the isolation a student feels when they are not socially engaged at school often leads to withdrawal.⁸

Financial support is another major barrier to degree completion and student engagement. The amount of financial aid a student receives has a direct impact on student retention – with those receiving smaller amounts of aid being more closely associated with lower retention rates. Low-income students often work to supplement their income in order to support their educational endeavors. However, maintaining a work schedule can have a negative impact on a student's academic engagement. Further, time-to-degree may increase if a student attends school part-time to accommodate a job. The longer a student takes to complete a degree, the less likely the student is to persist to graduation.⁹

Barriers to engagement can be overwhelming for students, particularly during their first year of college. In one study, Engle and Tinto found that 60% of low-income, first generation students who did not complete their degrees left during the first year.¹⁰ Thus, the first few months at college provide a valuable opportunity for intervention. Implementing intervention programs during the summer and early days of a student's college career can help students engage. By implementing such programs, it is possible to discern and address the barriers that first-year students face. Grounded in Tinto's theory, the Clark Memorial Library (CML) at Shawnee State University and various campus collaborators developed an outreach program that supports students' academic and social engagement in support of institutional retention goals.

The Clark Memorial Library at Shawnee State University

Shawnee State University (SSU) is a small open access institution in Portsmouth, Ohio. First established as a community college in 1975, SSU has served the region as a university since 1986. SSU enrolls approximately 4,000 students, the majority of whom are classified as first-generation. Additionally, a large portion of SSU's student body are academically underprepared and must participate in developmental coursework. Serving this student population has proven to be a challenge, as the average graduation rate of 22% and retention rate of 57% show.¹¹

In 2012, *The Chancellor's Plan for Shawnee State University to Improve Course Completion, Retention, and Graduation Rates* was issued in an effort to improve student success.¹² The state-directed plan outlined specific goals to increase retention and graduation rates, including the implementation of a first-year experience program. Shortly after the *Chancellor's Plan* was issued, the University System of Ohio outlined a performance-based funding model in *Recommendations of the Ohio Higher Education Funding Commission*.¹³ The formula was heavily weighted on course and degree completions. The funding formula change magnified the need to improve student retention and graduation rates. In response to related legislation, SSU launched *Shawnee State University's Completion Plan*, which aimed to increase the number of courses completed and degrees awarded.¹⁴ The accountability imposed on Shawnee State University by the Chancellor and the state funding formula provided a common goal that aided in campus collaborations. As each campus unit considered their role in the shared mission to improve student success, it became clear that collaboration could lead to efficiencies and maximize the impact of student support initiatives.

Collaborative Outreach Plan

Given the increased focus on improving student success outcomes, CML was eager to play a vital role in achieving the institutional goals of improving student success measures. As institutional plans were put in place to improve student success, the library saw an opportunity to develop an intentional outreach program to help support institutional initiatives. Using Tinto's theory of engagement as inspiration, the library committed to meet students early and maintain contact with students throughout their first year in an attempt to help students become socially and academically engaged.¹⁵

After examining strategic goals within the library, the Library Director repurposed the Access Services Librarian position to serve as a dedicated Learning and Outreach Librarian. The Learning and Outreach Librarian position collaborated with campus partners to determine the best ways to support student learning, provide outreach opportunities to keep students engaged throughout their college careers, and to establish intentional connections with students. These efforts directly targeted academic and social engagement. The Learning and Outreach Librarian aggressively sought out opportunities to be visible on campus, personally interact with students, and initiate campus collaborations with potential campus partners. Katy (the article's coauthor) initially filled the Learning and Outreach Librarian position. Katy was highly involved in campus shared governance, teaching, and the women's center. Her engagement on campus was an asset in building collaborative relationships on campus. Indeed, the library forged many campus partnerships including University College, Student Affairs, and the Writing Center, among others. The initiatives implemented and relationships developed as part of the library's intentional collaborative outreach plan are described below.

Orientation



Given the intentional goal to meet students early and often, it was important for the library to establish a connection with students at orientation. It was also vital to communicate information about the library to students who may not otherwise be aware of the value of libraries. With over three-quarters of the incoming population categorized as first-generation or academically underprepared, communicating the value of the library and establishing a connection with students was viewed as essential to student success.

In the past, the library's role in orientation was limited to being a stop along the route of a campus tour provided to students during the day's activities. The library tour was often rushed or skipped altogether if the day's agenda was delayed. Given the new goal of increasing student interaction with library, the library determined that their role at orientation should be increased. The Learning and Outreach Librarian reached out to the Division of Student Affairs, who was responsible for organizing orientation activities. The library requested to be one of the highlighted campus resources at an information table session during registration in addition to confirming a commitment to the usual library tour. The shared institutional pressure to increase student success made this proposition an easy sell. The Student Affairs orientation staff not only agreed to the information table and a stronger commitment to maintain the library tour, but also suggested that the library attend a parent information session. This was a telling example that the success of achieving institutional goals of improving student success was dependent upon collaboration.

The library's information table was set up during the morning orientation registration session. In the spirit of collaboration, the director of the campus Writing Center, which had just relocated to a prime location in the library, joined the Learning and Outreach Librarian at the information table. The purpose of the orientation

information table was to give students a first opportunity to meet the Learning and Outreach Librarian and to learn important information about how the library can support student success. The librarian prepared an elevator speech to highlight resources and services available including online library guides created specifically for students in first-year courses, library hours, and the availability of study rooms, subject-specific librarians, and course reserves. The librarian handed out pens, notepads, and buttons with library contact information.

The Library Director and the Learning and Outreach Librarian also spoke with parents during a 20 minute information session. This session was part of a series of speakers who informed parents of the various support resources available to students. During the presentation, the library communicated the results of an in-house study that showed students who use the library are more than twice as likely to graduate as students who do not use the library.¹⁶ The presentation also explained that the Learning and Outreach Librarian is specifically assigned to support their students and introduced available resources such as dedicated subject librarians, study space, workshops, electronic and physical resources available both through the library's own collection and through OhioLINK, a statewide consortium. The Learning and Outreach Librarian encouraged parents to suggest a library visit if their students expressed concern with research, writing, class assignments, or conducive study environments.

While parents attended the information session, students visited the library as part of a campus tour. The Learning and Outreach Librarian collaborated with a library student employee to greet students as they passed through the library on the campus tour. The student employee provided input on a welcome display and elevator speech to share information about library resources. Such peer-level input was an

important collaboration to connect with incoming students. The welcome display included a table filled with resources such as math-help DVDs, course reserve books, and other items such as popular movies and graphic novels. Accompanying the table display were signs that highlighted the basic resources available and links to the library's web and social media sites. The student employee was able to speak from experience and offer tips for using the library. The student employee highlighted the study rooms with white boards and display screens, availability of desktop and laptop computers, free printing, quiet study spaces, helpful staff, and resources to aid with assignments that students often encounter during their first year of coursework. The Learning and Outreach Librarian was on hand to say hello to continue the intentional, sustained connection with students. As with the information table, the goal was to ensure students had an opportunity to connect with a library staff member and learn how library resources and services can support student success. Inviting the collaboration on the display and tour made the activity authentic and useful to students.

Library Party

The next opportunity to interact with first-year students was at an annual welcome event that kicked off fall semester. The library party had become a traditional fall semester event as a way to welcome students to the new academic year and to the library. The success of the library party was well known and made the event attractive to campus collaborators. Responding to pressures to improve student engagement and success, the Divisions of Student Affairs developed an event dubbed the Weekend of Welcome to orient students, foster engagement, and kick off fall semester. The Weekend of Welcome, which took place over the extended weekend just prior to the start of classes, included activi-

ties that allowed students to get to know one another and to prepare for the exciting academic work and student activities that lie ahead. Since the library party took place during the designated time period, the Division of Student Affairs reached out to the library to make the library party a culminating event for the weekend's activities.

The "Party at the Library!" event was open to residential and off-campus students. This event was another opportunity to help students become familiar with the library and library staff. Since the library party was now part of a larger campus initiative, the library received support from Student Affairs in the form of increased promotion, financial support for prizes, and administrative support. Events included music, bingo, video games, board games, carnival games, craft stations, a photo booth, and free refreshments. Activity stations were set up around the library to encourage exploration of the building. Library staff worked at each station to meet and greet students. For example, video game stations were set up using the display screens in group study rooms and a staff member was on hand to assist with games and chat with students. Prizes for activities were provided by the library and Student Affairs. Prizes included practical items such as notebooks, highlighter markers, pens, and sticky notes. Students were especially appreciative of the prizes as it helped to alleviate the financial burden of purchasing school supplies. Assessments of the entire Weekend of Welcome event included several comments that the library party was the favorite event of the weekend.

Sustained Academic Connection

Stemming from the *Chancellor's Plan* and the *Completion Plan*, SSU established the University College¹⁷, an educational home for students with undeclared majors. University College provides a general education focus and support services

to increase college readiness and student success. The University College developed a program for underprepared students with the goal of improving first-year retention rates. Dubbed the Success Curriculum, the program included students who qualified for developmental coursework in writing or math based on ACT scores. The program provided increased advising support, study skills workshops, and enrollment in a University 1101 course to help students learn about the various aspects of university life and how best to succeed in college.¹⁸ Hearing of the success of the library's collaboration with Student Affairs, the Dean of University College invited the Learning and Outreach Librarian to collaborate on a series of student support initiatives. The collaboration with University College led to a sustained library presence in various elements of the Success Curriculum including developmental coursework, a seminar provided by University College, and reference hours in several locations frequented by students enrolled in the Success Curriculum.

To sustain intentional interactions, the Learning and Outreach Librarian visited an array of courses throughout the students' first semester in the Success Curriculum. First, the Learning and Outreach Librarian visited each of the UNIV1101 courses offered through the Success Curriculum program. The Learning and Outreach Librarian presented a lecture covering the resources and services available for the specific needs of first-year students enrolled in developmental courses. The lecture was followed by a demonstration on how to use the library's website. The demonstration included how to find the subject and course-specific library web guides, how to look up reserve textbooks, and simple searches for library materials. A representative of the Writing Center also spoke about the resources available to students and how Writing Center services related to library services. A scavenger hunt was assigned to the UNIV1101 courses with an incentive to win gift

cards for gasoline and groceries. The scavenger hunt led students to online library sources of interest, through the library to find specific areas and resources, and included a task to meet and talk with the Learning and Outreach Librarian or other library staff. When the student connected with a staff member, they were given a small prize. The small prizes were provided by the library and included stickers, buttons, and candy. University College provided large prizes including gift cards to gas stations, stores, and local restaurants. The large prizes were drawn from a pool of completed scavenger hunt forms which were turned in when a student met with his or her advisor.

The Learning and Outreach Librarian also visited developmental math and writing courses. The Writing Center Director accompanied the Learning and Outreach Librarian to developmental writing courses. The short session alerted students to the library web guides created specifically for English courses, introduced the services of the Writing Center, emphasized the availability of library staff, and echoed the instructor's message that reading was a good practice to inform good writing. Developmental math courses provided an opportunity to interact with students in an unexpected way. The Learning and Outreach Librarian demonstrated the traditional online resources, including a library web guide highlighting math tutorials and resources. However, to drive home that the library really does have something for everyone, the Learning Outreach Librarian brought a cart of resources to class including math tutorial DVDs and how-to books supporting specific math topics the students would be exposed to in class. The Learning and Outreach Librarian was able to check items out to students in class. This interaction was particularly meaningful because the math instructors were very excited and very supportive of library resource use. The support of faculty reinforced the value of the library with students who may not have otherwise been

aware of the library's math resources. An unexpected benefit of visiting the development math course was the interest of the math faculty in assisting with collection development for math resources. After establishing a working relationship through the course visits, the developmental math faculty and the Learning and Outreach Librarian collaboratively selected materials about math anxiety for the library collection.

In addition to extensive course visits, the Learning and Outreach Librarian held regular reference hours around campus. On a weekly basis, the librarian was available in the TRIO Center to be available to the students involved with the Student Support Services program. This federal program provides support to low-income and first-generation students through advising, computer labs, study space, and programing.¹⁹ The librarian was included on the tutor schedule board so students were aware of when the librarian would be available. The Learning and Outreach Librarian also held weekly hours in the university's Student Success Center. The Student Success Center provides advising, tutoring services, and computer labs, making it an ideal location to provide on-site reference support. During these hours, the Learning and Outreach Librarian helped students with citations and finding resources for class projects in the Student Success Center computer labs.

Campus Collaborations

To sustain engagement throughout the year, the library also collaborated with campus partners to host several events for academic and social engagement. One of the most fruitful collaborations was with the campus Writing Center, which had recently moved to the library. The colocation of the services made collaboration a natural endeavor. The Learning and Outreach Librarian initially reached out to the Writing Center Director to invite her to attend orientation and Success Curriculum appointments. The Writing Center Director or designated student

staff spoke for five minutes during class visits. This collaboration was a tremendous value as the shared time was minimal, but effective in raising awareness about the Writing Center's resources, location, and relationship with the library.

The library and the Writing Center also co-hosted several workshops and events including workshops on effective presentations, reading events, and a writing and research event at the end of the semester to help students wrap up final writing assignments. The Learning and Outreach Librarian and the Writing Center Director took turns planning the events. The library provided refreshments, a large meeting room to host events, and staff time to prepare for events. The Writing Center Director created promotional materials and provided pens and brochures to give to attendees. The events served as opportunities for students to stay engaged with the university outside of the classroom.

The library also hosted a series of book talks and an author visit in partnership with the University Women's Center. Katy had a long history with the Women's Center including volunteering at events and serving as a member of the Women's Center Advisory Committee. This relationship created the opportunity for the library to reach out to the Director of the Women's Center to plan an author visit with supporting events and activities. The library was able to secure grant funding from the university's Development Foundation to provide free copies of the author's book to student participants. The Learning and Outreach Librarian and the Women's Center Director shared event planning responsibilities. The Women's Center arranged for the actual author visit including selection of the author, space reservation, promotion, and hotel and travel arrangements for the author. The library coordinated a series of book talks with food and discussion led by the Women's Center Director.

The library also reached out to the Office of Career Services to develop a dedicated collection of books that explored the majors available at the university and career options associated with those majors. This project complemented the Success Curriculum's goal of assisting students with undeclared majors. The library received a grant from the university's Development Foundation to purchase books that explored the majors provided by SSU and corresponding careers. The Office of Career Services provided posters to display alongside the collection to promote career readiness tips. The Director of Career Services, who regularly met with students by appointment, encouraged students to visit the library to check out the career collection.

Finally, the Learning and Outreach Librarian also developed a relationship with the athletics department. Given the high profile of the library through events and the presence of the Learning and Outreach Librarian around campus, the Athletic Director became aware of the efforts of the library. The Athletic Director reached out to the Learning and Outreach Librarian to explore collaborations. From this, the Learning and Outreach Librarian was invited to speak with university student athletes during early season orientation sessions. The orientation sessions provided an opportunity to interact with a specific cohort of students, many in their first year, who face unique challenges to balance schoolwork with athletic commitments. This collaboration may not have happened if not for the visibility of the library in other campus initiatives.

The Learning and Outreach Librarian also created ongoing displays in the main lobby of the library. Often in collaboration with campus partners, the displays highlighted library resources in addition to campus resources such as brochures about college majors, academic departments, and campus events. The tables included

trivia, games, and giveaways. A popular giveaway was a series of buttons with various designs showcasing library events and table themes. Displays highlighted Banned Books Week, Arts and Humanities Month, and Finals Stress-Free Zone with a specially-designed button for each display. Many students were motivated to collect each unique button. The collaborations were guided by the display themes, which were chosen by the Learning and Outreach Librarian. As various themes were scheduled, the Learning and Outreach Librarian reached out to relevant parties to get display suggestions and materials.

Assessment Efforts

To support a culture of assessment and to communicate value to campus administration, the library ensured assessments were built into all outreach efforts. Recording student identification numbers at all hosted events, workshops, and courses was the most valuable assessment activity. Having this data was essential to tie library engagement to student success outcomes. In partnership with the institutional research office, the library was able to blend library data with institutional data to gain an understanding of the impact of library outreach efforts. For example, the library used library party attendance data to calculate the retention rate for the year's incoming first-time students. The library calculated library party attendees had a fall to spring retention rate of 83%, approximately 8 percentage points higher than the overall fall to spring institutional retention rates. This shows some evidence that engagement with the library is a habit of successful students.

Another important assessment project was a collaboration with the Writing Center. The library analyzed course grades of students enrolled in courses that received a library instruction session versus those students who did not receive a library instruction session. The library data was

combined with Writing Center data of student tutoring sessions. Collaboratively, the library and Writing Center noted grades of students who received a combination of library instruction and tutoring services. Both partners also noted an increase in student traffic in the library and Writing Center. Library door counts increased 8% and Writing Center visits increased 104% after locating to the library and collaborating in class visits, workshops, and events with the library.

Conclusion

Given the success of the collaborations described here, the library feels that intentional, sustained interaction with students leads to increased student success through academic and social engagement. The Learning and Outreach Librarian observed an increased rapport with students that lasted throughout the year. This rapport created a connection between the student, their library, and their university. An added benefit was a stronger network of campus partners.

Throughout the year, the Learning and Outreach Librarian was invited to participate in many events, committees, and projects that may not have otherwise been possible if not for the strengthened partnership solidified in the library's intentional and collaborative outreach program. Specifically, the Learning and Outreach Librarian participated in a faculty project to evaluate, revise, and assess the university's General Education Program. Such collaborations were made possible by a visible and connected library staff.

The relationships described in this article helped develop a strong support network for students and allowed the library to assert itself as a key partner in the effort to improve student retention. By utilizing interdepartmental collaboration and establishing a sustained connection with its student body, Clark Memorial Library worked to support the institutional mission to increase student success. This type of collaborative support is at the very heart of the open access mission.

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