5

How one-shot library instruction is failing transfer students

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Transfer students exist! And they're important.

Transfer students make up a significant portion of university populations for a multitude of reasons. Approximately 1 in 3 students will transfer institutions during their college career (Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskan, Yuan, & Harvell, 2013). The rising cost of college, feeling unprepared by their high school education, and being undecided about what to study are only some of the possible reasons to attend a community college before committing to a four-year institution. There are also many transfer students that move from one four-year institution to another. This could be due to a change in studies, a desire to move, or simply seeking a better fit for their education. The flexibility to move between institutions is beneficial to students, but raises a number of issues, particularly in the library.

When students transfer into a university, librarians have no knowledge of their previous information literacy education, and assumptions about what students do and do not already know can be detrimental to their education. It is common for transfer students to be lost in the mix of the rest of the student population as librarians focus on other unique groups with more easily defined needs, such as first year students. Furthermore, librarians are often hindered by the "one-shot" library instruction model, in which they only have the opportunity to meet with classes once and cannot address individual students' needs. In addition to this lack of outreach to transfer students and the limitations of the one-shot model, there is limited literature discussing this gap in services. "[While] transfer students have received some attention in the library literature, the amount of research is scant in comparison to the growing numbers and needs of this population" (Phillips, 2010, p.337). This paper discusses the importance of outreach to transfer students, the complications that arise when attempting to address their needs, and suggestions to address these issues by looking at the influence of student engagement on retention and past studies conducted by libraries on transfer students. Furthermore, this paper will offer suggestions to support transfer students in a way that one-shot instruction cannot.

Background

Libraries are not the only ones failing to address the needs of the growing transfer student population. A study conducted at a large research oriented state university in 2006 found that the services dedicated to integrating community college students into the university were lacking (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). This was discovered through interviews during which the researchers inquired about students' perceptions of the university versus their previous institution, the assistance students had received throughout the transfer process, and whether students had attended transfer student orientation (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The study asserted that the first year students at the university received the bulk of the outreach efforts that lead to retention, and this gap in support for transfer students is echoed in library literature.

Academic libraries tend to focus the majority of their outreach on first year students. That is because they know that making this connection is important to student retention. Academic libraries offer invaluable services that engage students with their studies and encourage efficient and effective information seeking behaviors. One study found that library use in the early weeks of a student's semester are significantly linked with retention (Haddow & Joseph, 2010). It is important that librarians begin to put their efforts into supporting transfer students in addition to first year students.

The University of Toledo, recognizing a consistent increase of transfer students, explored potential initiatives to address their information literacy instruction needs (Phillips, 2010). They conducted a survey of other academic libraries in Ohio to gauge the existing information literacy programming for transfer students by contacting 72 academic librarians. These librarians were chosen because they were listed as representing the information literacy programs of their respective institutions. The survey aimed to gather information about the information literacy philosophies at each institution, the librarian's rating and description of their information literacy services, and finally to determine whether transfer students were given special instruction. The results signified that there was not substantial outreach to or tailored programming for transfer students, even when the librarian acknowledged them as a unique population. "While several OhioLINK academic library respondents acknowledged transfer students as a unique population with unique needs, this survey revealed that many do not provide separate instructional services for these students" (Phillips, 2010, p.342). As a part of the questionnaire, librarians were asked to detail why they did not provide specialized instruction for transfer students (if they had signified that they do not). They could choose from none, other, no funding, too few transfer students, transfer students are prepared, or unsuccessful past attempts. The majority of institutions responded, "None", signaling that this is likely an opportunity for outreach that simply hasn't been addressed or considered (Phillips, 2010, p.340).

Who are they and how do we find them?

The complications do not end with deciding to allocate resources to transfer students. Transfer students are difficult to identify. They are immediately immersed into the student body and most often impossible to distinguish from the students who have attended that institution since their freshman year.

During a diversity initiatives movement, Oakland University in Southeast Michigan acknowledged the need for tailored outreach to transfer students and assigned their outreach librarian to address these needs. It was important to the Oakland University library to include transfer students and other special populations in their diversity initiatives. The outreach librarian was tasked with improving outreach and services to multiple special populations including: minority racial groups, international students, graduate, returning, and transfer students, distance learners, at-risk students, and Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Students. The outreach librarian did this by increasing exposure of the library utilizing marketing strategies such as flyers, mailings, Facebook, and planning campus-wide events (Switzer, 2008).

Switzer found that the ideal library service for transfer students was independent research assistance: "research consultations are particularly useful for returning and transfer students who

may be encountering difficulties reorienting themselves to an academic setting" (Switzer 2008, p.291). Research consultations are easily customizable and therefore ideal for students with varying needs and capabilities. It is important that transfer students are made aware of these opportunities.

How do we make them aware of our services?

Orientation is the natural suggestion for the time to reach out to transfer students. However, orientations are busy and overwhelming affairs and the library is not always a priority. From the author's own experience, the library is not automatically enrolled in orientation activities, and instead is required to submit a proposal arguing why the library should be considered for a spot at orientation. There are many important groups, services, and offices vying for students' attention at this time. Students are overwhelmed with information and likely unable to retain any important information literacy instruction or skills. Libraries can embed their staff in these hectic days in order to market the library as a friendly place for research help (and more), but it is not an appropriate time to attempt to teach the important skills necessary to conduct college level research.

While the overwhelming environment of orientation is not the best time to reach students meaningfully through explicit instruction, one institution found that it was still a viable time to gain contact information and begin to build a relationship with their students. Librarians at the University of South Carolina-Upstate found an alternative to embedding themselves in orientation by creating a mandatory online tutorial/course hybrid called Foundation in Information Literacy (FIL) (Kearns & Vidas, 2011). FIL was delivered via the university's course management system (Blackboard), and informed by ACRL information literacy standards. It was designed to take approximately thirty minutes to complete and was conducted completely online (Kearns & Vidas, 2011).

The designers of FIL considered other options for outreach to transfer students including a drop-in workshop (where students voluntarily attend a scheduled library workshop) and a credit bearing information literacy course. FIL was mandatory, so by design it reached every transfer student, whereas a drop in workshop risks limited attendance. They ultimately decided upon the online course because they wanted to offer more than a drop-in workshop and did not have the resources to run a credit bearing course in information literacy. This online tutorial/course hybrid was intended to "alert students to the level of research skills [they] expect at Upstate, [but] FIL has [also] given us valuable information on the information literacy abilities of our transfer students" (Kearns & Vidas 2011, p.1) This outreach and instruction method worked in two ways. It informed the librarians of the level of expertise that transfer students were coming to their university with, and demonstrated to the students that college level research does require a specific set of skills. For the authors, this program was designed to encourage students to pursue additional help at the library if they struggled with the activity. Although the authors have good intentions, it would seem likely that the tool could be disheartening and intimidating for some students due to the lack of personal interaction in an online course. If students find that they struggle with the activity they may feel too intimidated to talk to a librarian about their gaps in their knowledge. However, reaching out to transfer students upon their entrance to the university is a great way to market the library and begin to develop a relationship with them.

What do we teach them?

Aside from finding ways to reach transfer students, academic libraries also struggle with what to do for them once they are aware of the library services. Transfer students enter a new university at varying stages of expertise. They could have received basic database skills from their time in community college, but nothing on how to evaluate different types of information. It is also possible that they have received no information literacy training whatsoever after attending a four-year institution with a weak instruction program. However, as they will be attending the same classes as students who may have received programmatic library instruction, they may be at a disadvantage. When University of North Carolina at Greensboro librarians surveyed their transfer students approximately 73% of them self-reported as being either fair or poor at knowing how to properly generate and utilize key words. They also found that the students who came from another University of North Carolina institution were rated as the most knowledgeable in information literacy while those coming from a community college were rated the least knowledgeable (Griggs & Lininger, 2015). There is also often a difference in how libraries conduct instruction in two year institutions versus four year institutions, "It is believed, in part, that this [difference in information literacy skills] occurs because of different instructional designs at two- and four-year institutions. Emphasis is on teaching basic library skills at community colleges while students at four-year institutions are expected to already have those skills and are taught skills to search for, locate, and critically analyze information" (Phillips & Atwood 2010, p.336). Two year colleges often employ a number of innovative approaches to teaching information literacy and many of them have robust instruction programs. While Phillips and Atwood's observation might simplify the differences between the instruction programs at two and four year institutions, it is important to recognize that these institutions may differ in terms of pedagogical goals and student experiences.

Regardless of the student's previous institution, the one-shot library instruction model does not afford librarians the luxury of learning who transfer students are and assessing their needs. For example, if a librarian is teaching advanced evaluation of information to a junior level class and transfer students are not yet familiar with the basics of information retrieval, we will overwhelm them and contribute to feelings of self doubt and not belonging. Embedded librarians may have a better opportunity to gauge student abilities, develop relationships, and adjust to transfer students' individual needs, but librarians cannot rely on programmatic one-shot instruction to teach the transfer student population. Academic librarians must ensure that their instruction is engaging and informative about the resources and services available at the library. While this is true for any student population, it is especially pressing for students who may be struggling.

Recommendations

The difficulties discussed in these studies demonstrate the complications that arise when attempting to address the needs of transfer students. It is understandable that librarians struggle to pinpoint exactly what their distinct needs are, as they vary so wildly. However, it must be acknowledged that one solution will not address all of the information literacy instruction needs of any population. Instead, librarians must remain quick to adapt to individual needs, as this will best serve all of their students, "What every junior transfer does need is flexible, student-centered library orientation and instruction which celebrates the strengths this population brings to

campus instead of confirming their fears that they've come late to the table" (Ahnberg, 2015). This can be found in existing, easily customizable services such as research consultations. By marketing research consultations to transfer students, they will feel encouraged to seek out additional help. Transfer students will almost certainly be enrolled in classes with professors that assume they know information literacy basics that they may not, and this may cause them to feel ashamed about reaching out. If libraries explicitly market to them, they will hopefully feel more comfortable asking for assistance. The emotional responses to information literacy instruction are important to consider when assessing the success of these initiatives. It is important that librarians focus on individual attention and confidence building when working with this student population.

Rutgers University conducted an in depth study of the effects of collaboration between writing centers and librarians on "at risk" students, including transfer students (Tipton, 2006). This study focused on integrating library instruction into writing workshops and found that one of the most important factors in teaching these skills was how they affected students' emotional states and self efficacy. "The key is to provide both learning and emotional support as well as reality checks at each step in the writing/research process so that the student masters it rather than avoiding the task altogether" (Tipton 2006, p.6).

This study found that a students' emotional state when conducting research and perceived capability is important to their development as researchers. When students enter a situation feeling unprepared, they are likely to deal with self doubt and other self defeating emotions. Equipping these students with important skills at their time of need can increase their confidence and self assurance and lead to higher retention rates. Tipton (2006) also addressed a concern about tailoring services to some students and not others:

Small scale, intense collaborations continue and ought to continue at the research university at the same time the large scale efforts are pursued. One reason is special student populations such as our under-prepared transfer students. The one-size-fits-all school of education has already failed some of these students more than once, and alternatives are desirable for retention and graduation of a diverse student population. (Tipton 2006, p.401).

It might seem problematic to focus many resources on special populations of students, but that is necessary to create a comfortable learning environment for all. Services such as research consultations are still available and marketed to the student population at large, but putting effort into additional prompting for under-served populations can help them feel more comfortable.

If librarians take Oakland University's proposed expanded definition of diversity and include transfer students, it follows to consider outreach initiatives that emulate those to diverse students. Collaborating with student offices and programs that already provide specialized services to transfer students is an additional way to embed the library in transfer student culture. As Rutgers partnered with the writing center while they focused on "at risk" students, academic libraries can partner with existing services and initiate student affairs movements to better serve transfer students.

Conclusion

There is no simple solution for how to serve transfer students because they are such a diverse group of individuals. It can be difficult to pinpoint their exact needs and more difficult still to implement programs that adequately serve this population. The one-shot instruction model will not address transfer students' diverse needs. However, it is important to acknowledge that this gap exists. Once librarians do that, they should ensure they are explicitly reaching out to these students in order to signal to them that they are not alone. Having customizable services like research consultations available to these students is important. Developing relationships with other student offices and initiating diversity movements to aid at risk students will make the library more visible and more deeply embedded in transfer students' lives. It is also imperative to continue this conversation professionally. Phillips and Atwood included a call for papers in their 2010 study, and still very little research has been conducted on this topic. It is important that we do not fail to address the needs of 30% of our students simply because it may be complicated.

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