

Revitalizing the Declining Community College Library

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Author Note

This essay was written by a Master of Library Science student in the LI810 Research in Library and Information Science course, fall 2014, at Emporia State University. Students are introduced to qualitative and quantitative research concepts and methods. Research concepts and methods are applied to library and information science topics with the goal of using research-based evidence to lead positive change.

Abstract

This essay uses research-based evidence from library and information science research to address declining use of community college libraries. It answers critical questions of how community college administrators, faculty, and students' views of community college libraries and professional librarians can be changed to better utilize professional librarians and library services and resources to accomplish educational goals for student learning and achievement. A four-step, evidence-based action plan is suggested to revitalize community college libraries and facilitate higher community college student learning and achievement.

Keywords: community college libraries, community college librarians, evidence-based

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Librarians, administration, and faculty frequently have differing perceptions of the role that librarians and libraries should take in community college education. This leads to asking a critical question. How can community college librarians, administrators, and faculty views of the community college libraries be changed so to accomplish educational goals for student learning and achievement? This question appears difficult to answer as community college trends reveal a significant lack of acceptance of the professional librarian as an instructional partner with content area faculty. Further, as educational trends shift to use of objective student data gathered in electronic test formats rather than student data generated through a combination of scores and narrative feedback evaluations of individual student's reading and writing assignments, the traditional mission of the community college libraries to support academic learning becomes jeopardized.

Once viewed as a centerpiece of learning, the community college library has in many cases become a symbol of lost educational tradition as students and faculty fail to recognize the academic library's place in the process of academic research, student learning, and academic achievement. According to Ray (1989), assignments given to community college students primarily evaluate students on data recall; many faculty only lecture and grade students on rote memorization rather than in-depth articulation and comprehension of the material. This type of memorize-and-recite educational approach does not necessitate utilization of library resources or encourage students' development of research skills necessary for college, careers, and jobs, and results in a decline in overall library use. Furthermore, with open access provided by the Internet, students rarely access reputable sources available through library databases and paper-based collections. Evidence of this problem is provided in a study by Wei and Jacobson (1996)

indicating that 45% of students felt that they can find all information they need for assignments from the Internet and 34% indicated that the Internet is their most important resource.

Importance of Community College Libraries

Administrations sometimes recognize the symbolic importance of the library, but its functional role in service to the institution's mission will ultimately determine administrators' budgetary decisions (Lynch, Murray-Rust, & Parker, 2007). In the current age of accountability, declining library usage statistics start the ultimate decline for the community college library budget. As academic librarians can no longer expect budgetary support, they must demonstrate their value to the institution. This becomes increasingly difficult with existing declining materials usage and gate counts. Ultimately, the resources available in the library will suffer as decreased budgets determine, often restrict, the amount of new material that can be purchased.

Community colleges are significant entry points to higher education and preparing students for the technologically-driven job market. Studies indicate that the community college library is an essential element in the academic success of students and their future in an information-driven society. According to a 2012 study, 76% of students utilized the library resources for studying, research, or other activities and there was "a significant relationship between students' frequency of use and GPA scores" (Odeh, 2012, p.225). Despite the significant correlation between library use and academic achievement, university provosts interviewed about their attitude on the library indicated that "so few faculty now require their students to use the library, and that tends to argue that it is losing its place as the center or heart of the university" (Lynch, Murray-Rust, & Parker, 2007, p.219).

Research reveals a decline in use of the academic library by college students. This is a serious problem particularly for community colleges "which serve five curricular purposes:

academic transfer preparation, vocational-technical education, developmental education, continuing education, and community service” (Warren, 2006, p.297). Without the resources to serve these five purposes, the community college library will continue to decline. To reverse the rapid decline in use of community college libraries by community college students, what can be done to change negative perceptions of the academic community college library and to ultimately achieve the five curricular purposes identified by Warren (2006) of academic community college libraries? Evidence from existing library and information research is used in this essay to answer this question and to inform four action steps for leading change and to make suggestions for practices in community colleges.

Evidence-based Research about Non-use of Community College Libraries

The problem addressed in this essay is the detrimental view that community college teaching faculty have regarding professional librarians and academic libraries that contributes to failure by community college students to use the community college libraries to complete course assignments. Studies designed and conducted to address this problem were selected for this essay as evidence that this problem exists in significant circumstances in the United States (U. S.) and around the world. The following selected studies provide the basis for determining how professional librarians, along with administrators and faculty members, can take action to reverse this educational trend and to improve teaching and learning of information literacy skills and overall academic achievement by community college students.

Feldman and Sciammerella (2000), assistant professors in the Kurt R. Schmeller Library at Queensborough Community College of The City University of New York, designed a study that focused on librarian and teaching faculty perceptions of librarianship at six community colleges. They created a survey that was sent to six community colleges of The City University

of New York. The purpose of this survey was to learn more teaching faculty perceptions of librarians and librarianship. The authors chose departments that would be likely to schedule library instruction for their students and sent a total of 425 faculty surveys and 75 librarian surveys. The survey results indicated that “92% of the librarians felt that the teaching faculty are unaware of the nature of the field of library science/information technology and 94% believe that teaching faculty who assign research papers are unfamiliar with the use of current research tools available to their students in the library” (p. 492). Teaching faculty indicated that they felt that “it was the obligation of librarians to enlighten the teaching faculty with what they can offer them and their students” (p. 498). Despite this attitude, 64% of the teaching faculty responded that they did not make use of library instruction, and 37% indicated that they do not give assignments that use library resources (p.495). This study suggests librarians and teaching faculty need to communicate with one another to ensure that students and faculty are aware of the library resources and how to properly utilize them.

Herring (2001) at the University of Alabama conducted a study exploring faculty acceptance of the Internet for student research. The study utilized a survey instrument, some demographic questions, and a series of questions on classroom Web-use policies. The survey was sent to 1,129 full-time faculty in Alabama higher education institutions. The major finding from this study indicated faculty acceptance of the Internet as a credible research source for student assignments. Herring’s study indicates that faculty encourage students to use the Internet and provides websites to consult, as opposed to recommending use of library resources.

The primary drawback to students utilizing the Internet for academic research is the inability to discern credible sources and the lack of information literacy skills. Dubicki (2013) at Monmouth University studied faculty perceptions of information literacy at eight New Jersey

higher educational institutions. The study utilized an online survey that was available to both full- and part-time faculty at both two- and four-year institutions. There were 353 usable responses that revealed “the high value that faculty place on information literacy, but also reinforced the gap between perceived and desired levels of achievement” (p.113-114). Dubicki points out that the results provide a clear indication that faculty feel that achievement of information literacy skills is critical for college research but faculty in this study do not address this as part of their curriculum.

It is not only faculty who have come to lose value in the academic library, administration attitude has also shifted. Lynch, Murray-Rust, and Parker (2007) replicated a study done by Grimes (1992), which reported the results of interviews conducted with presidents and provosts of six universities. Lynch, Murray-Rush, and Parker compared the results of their 2004 interviews with the original Grimes’ findings to see if there were any major shifts in attitudes towards the university library. The results of the study indicated that presidents and provosts were “well aware of how technology has transformed the way scholars attain access to materials” (p. 226). The results also emphasize that presidents and provosts felt the mission of the library has changed and to garner support, the library must now demonstrate how it “serves the university mission” (p. 226).

Lack of faculty and administrative support leaves the library as a symbol of lost educational values, serving no real function to the institution. Johnson (2012), the R. Lilly Dean of University Libraries at Indiana University in Bloomington, reported on a forum that was based on a report produced by The Education Advisory Board for a group of provosts around the country. The forum was co-hosted by the provost and the dean of libraries, to share the information from the report to the faculty at Indiana University. The provost reported on the

forecast that by the year 2015 “90% of user information needs would come from sources not directly connected to the library; that there would be no need for traditional librarians; and that library space would be taken over by activities that are not related in any way to library services or collections” (p. 27). Johnson indicated that the purpose of the forum was to engage teaching faculty in a discussion about the future of the library at Indiana University and raise awareness of the decline of libraries at academic institutions.

The decline of the community college library has not only been studied in the U.S. but also in other countries. For example, Odeh (2012), an associate professor in the Department of Library & Information Science at Zarqa Private University, conducted a study that involved a sample of 304 students registered in the 2008-2009 academic year at the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Zarqa, Jordan. The goal of the study was to investigate the relationship between grade point averages and students’ use of information resources held at the library. According to Odeh, the study revealed that “academic achievement had a significant relationship to their use of books” (p. 222). He goes on to say that use of textbooks in particular had an effect on academic achievement and attributes this to the fact that “the teaching and learning process is focused on the use of textbooks” (p.230).

Action Plan for Leading Change

This essay addresses the important topic of how community college administrators and faculty views of the college library and roles of academic librarians be changed to recognize the importance of teaching research and information literacy skills that support community college goals for student learning and achievement. In many instances, the problem identified in this topical area appears to present an overwhelming challenge to reestablish relevance of the community college library once the library has lost the academic support of faculty and

administration. Fortunately, as is revealed through this essay based of current library and information science research, there is solid research-based evidence to suggest this problem can be resolved through focused and aggressive actions by professional librarians and other community college officials. Based on evidence articulated in the research publications in this essay, the following four-step action plan has potential to improve student and faculty use of community college libraries, if not to arrest the overall decline, and to revitalize the community college library as a key component of education at community colleges.

Step one, Rebrand the Library

Rebrand the library with a focus on student-oriented customer service. The idea of branding utilizes best practices of the business world. “Corporate branding and relationship marketing builds customer loyalty and satisfaction” (Gall, 2012, p. 549). A brand “is an idea in the mind of your constituents created by what you say and do” (Abilock, 2007, p.8). In the case of the library, patron loyalty can be critical as it is more difficult to rationalize budget cuts from a library that is appreciated and defended by its users, than one that is not seen as valuable to the institution. In an academic environment, online presence and presentation is an important aspect to branding and marketing, especially when remote library users are taken into account. Re-evaluating how the library appears digitally, and taking into account whether the digital interface is user-friendly, can be as important as the physical appearance of the library. Revising the mission statement to uphold the patron-oriented “brand” (Gall, 2012, p. 549) and ensuring that all librarians and staff are reinforcing it is critical to rebranding.

According to Gall (2012), individual librarians create an idea, or change a pre-existing idea, in the minds of students, faculty, or administration “about what the individual librarian is and does, thus creating a brand” (p. 555). The core concept being that the impression that is

created or changed is positive, and encourages increased library usage. In many ways, creating a personal brand is merely being mindful and deliberate about interactions with library patrons and all that is being done on a day-to-day basis. Gall indicates that academic librarians already have a brand, that “librarians are the people who know where the information is” (p. 555). He goes further to suggest that to make that brand stronger, librarians must focus on interactions with patrons and attending professional development sessions to learn new skills to keep current in the field. Over time, as the reputation for providing excellent services develops, the good reputation will encourage others to use the library.

Step Two, Embedded Library Instruction

Implement focused embedded library instruction. Community college librarians serve multiple roles simultaneously, lacking the specialization that is often seen at four-year institutions. According to Silverman and Williams (2014), “the multiple roles that community college librarians must assume is exponentially more difficult considering that they typically do so with fewer librarians than at four-year institutions” (p. 242). Such limited staffing is frequently detrimental to the library, the institution, and the students. According to Silverman, “many community colleges do not have enough librarians to meet accreditation standards for agencies such as the Higher Learning Commission” (p. 242). Limited staffing, leadership, and budgets as well as lacking support structures creates an obstacle for the community college librarian, and severely impacts their effectiveness within the institution. To address these issues, an alternative instructional method such as embedded librarian programs can be implemented.

Educational institutions utilize course management programs that establish a digital element to all classes. Embedded librarians utilize this course management software, as well as traditional teaching tools, to provide information literacy instruction, handouts, and assignment

specific resources. According to Silverman and Williams (2014), the embedded librarianship model is used as a method to supplement ‘one-shot’ library instruction classes that are typically given during the freshman orientation course. According to Gall (2012), “the idea of embedded librarians can be seen as an outreach effort that, if not targeted specifically at geographically remote students, is certainly applied to online or hybrid classes” (p. 554). The primary benefit of embedded librarianship is that it requires little administrative support, no budget, and limited staffing while providing substantial benefits to students. It is also advantageous for libraries with no dedicated space for instruction as it is completely digital. Building relationships is fundamental to reaching out to remote students, “Librarians with a mandate to provide support for students’ information needs have a direct and immediate impact on student success, and are in an excellent position to create those long-lasting relationships” (p. 554).

Step Three, In-service

Include library instruction during faculty in-service. Evidence has shown that teaching faculty are primarily unaware of what library resources are available to their students and, consequently, do not stress the benefits of utilizing these resources. Introducing new and existing faculty to library resources and services is a way to market the library and the services it provides. In-servicing also promotes relationship building between librarians and faculty. “Faculty support of the library will increase library usage statistics and can initiate a campus-wide improvement in the library’s public image and encourage collaboration between librarians and faculty” (Lucas, 2011, p.122). Lucas goes further to say that faculty in-service also give librarians a chance to showcase their professional abilities and research experience. Faculty in-service “imparts key library science and research concepts, it teaches the faculty member how to use the library, what the library offers, and what is contained within its print and electronic

collections” (p. 118). In many ways, this allows librarians to teach faculty how they and their students can utilize library resources, using a modern-day method.

Step Four, Continuous Collaboration

Foster continuous collaboration between librarians and faculty. “Faculty/librarians collaboration is vital for librarians to remain integral to the academy” (Belzowski, Ladwig, & Miller, 2013, p.3). Collaboration encourages faculty to introduce librarians to additional resources needed to support their curriculum. This will have a tremendous impact on the quality of collection development. According to Mounce (2010), the importance of faculty and librarian collaboration to an effective information literacy program cannot be overstated. Increased collaboration will also impact library use as faculty are more likely to encourage student use of library resources, if they know that the resources were purchased to directly benefit their courses and assignments.

Conclusions, Suggestions for Practice

Research-based evidence indicates that the decline of the community college library starts and stops with faculty and administrative support. Faculty who feel that their resource needs are being met, and are well-informed about what the library can offer, are more likely to stress to their students the importance of utilizing the library. Once faculty support is reestablished and usage statistics improve, administrative support is likely to follow. It is critical for academic institutions to hire professional librarians who are willing and able to work hard to make the library a thriving and effective resource. According to Osa (2003) at Pennsylvania State University, “The leader in the education library becomes a very crucial factor in uniting professionals and paraprofessionals into a cohesive, goal focused, and happy team” (p. 19). In order to create this environment and foster continued collaboration with faculty, it is necessary

for the director to have the proper training and credentialing, the preferred professional credential is the master's degree in library science. According to Shaffer (2001), the Directory of Library Services at Troy University, the graduate degree is just the start, "An academic librarian ideally holds two master's degrees, one in a content area (for example, History, Education, or Biology) and another in library science" (p. 3).

Successful implementation will initially require a lot of effort on the part of the graduate-level academic librarian to reach out to faculty to establish the lines of communication and initiate collaboration. Once effective librarian and faculty collaboration is established, it is important to maintain it to encourage continued library support. Implementation of best communication and collaboration practices will lead to community college faculty, administrators, and academic librarians having positive, shared perceptions of the important role that librarians and libraries have in community college education. The community college library will prepare students for college, careers, and work, and become a symbol of educational success that recognizes the academic library's essential place in the process of student learning and academic achievement.

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