# Key to Success: How the Academic Library Supports Student Persistence

## *Introduction.*

The role of the academic the library in college student persistence has, over the last decade, become a vigorously debated and hot topic of research, especially when linked with demonstrating the "value" of the academic library and student success. Currently, academic librarians and researchers in higher education and library & information science have begun to re-examine the academic library and its use within the context of student persistence.

## *Definitions.*

What is student persistence? Student persistence is a frequently used key performance indicator (KPI) used to describe "student success," like graduation rates and college grades (Kuh et al., 2006) and is defined simply as a student's continued enrollment in college beyond any particular term. This definition is deceptively simple. However, it becomes particularly problematic when a student leaves an institution and then returns many years later (stopping out) or returns but not to the same institution.

Additionally, it is particularly problematic, because you will often hear these two terms, "student retention" and "student persistence," used interchangeably. They both describe the same phenomena, a student's continued enrollment. However, it has been argued that they are really two very distinct and different perspectives on a student's reenrollment. This distinction between student persistence and student retention was made by Hagedorn (2005) which was that "institutions retain students and students persist" (pg 92). Put a different way, from a student's perspective, their reenrollment in college is viewed by them as persisting. However, from the

college's point of view, a student's reenrollment is that they were retained by that particular institution.

Why does the point of view matter? Well, the first clue might be that we don't really hear students go "Yay! The university retained me!" when they return their sophomore year in college. The reason the distinction matters can be found in what student persistence (student retention) is supposed to be a measure of or an indication of for those enrolling students—and that is student success. So, this brings us to our next term that needs defining; what is student success?

How would you have defined student success as a freshman in college? Reflecting on my own freshman concerns in college, it would have been "don't get too many C grades" or some other very narrow definition of success. This specificity of what is student success is also reflected in Oakleaf's (2010) *Value of Academic Libraries*, stating that the "term (student success) is used to denote student ability to do well in internships, secure job placements, earn salaries, gain acceptance to graduate/professional schools, or obtain marketable skills" (pg.109). The problem is that not all students' definitions of success can be so explicitly identified; how a particular student defines her success will vary student by student. Joe Cuseo (2007) offers what I consider a broader, more inclusive, definition of student success which accounts for the variety of goals and aims of a diverse and frequently non-traditional college student population. He rather elegantly defines student success as "a favorable or desirable student outcome" (Cuseo, 2007, pg. 2).

How we define and understand these terms (student success and student persistence) is critically important. University and college administrators use many of these key performance indicators like student retention (persistence), graduation rates, and attrition rates as measures of

student success. Rightly or wrongly these measures are used to determine the value and success of academic departments and services. Academic libraries are somewhat compelled to use these higher education measurements and are often being asked to demonstrate how they contribute to student success using these measures. It is for this reason, librarians and library administrators must understand what is precisely being measured using these key performance indicators and what is not.

***Some Examples.***

What these specific definitions fail to describe and who they fail to include is extremely important. Regardless of whether student persistence is examined from an institutional or a student perspective, both perspectives are complicated by the variety of ways in which students move through postsecondary education. Therefore, having a very specific definition becomes especially troublesome, for example, when students transfer between two or more institutions, or when students progress at a different rates than the rest of their academic cohort, or when students have a stopout and then return several years later. A stopout is simply defined as when a student temporarily withdraws from an institution or system (Berger & Lyon, 2005); however, again, the reasons why a student stops out can vary tremendously from the academic to social.

For example, a student that enrolls in a university but stops out and then returns three years later to complete her degree would not be considered to be retained by the institution initially; although upon return to the institution she would be considered retained. However, from the student's point of view, the student has persisted to degree completion.

Another complicated example is the transfer student; for example, a community college student transfers to a university, but is not successful there and returns to the community college

to complete his associate degree. This student has not been retained by the university; however, again, from the student's perspective he has persisted to degree completion. Also, even if a particular student is retained; the student's individual progress may not match the rest of their cohort due to dropped classes, changes in major, and different course loads. Furthermore, there are multiple economic, social, cultural, and fiscal issues that can impact enrollment patterns and make it difficult to label a student a persister or non-persister.

Nevertheless, from an academic library perspective, given these complications with pinpointing whether or not an individual student at any particular point in time will or will not persist to degree completion because of transfer or stopping out, the most logical point of view the academic library should take is the students' perspective. This ultimately brings us to the real problem with all of these overly specific definitions of student success and narrowly defined key performance indicators.

***The Students.***

It is all their fault. How awful that they don't fit so nicely and neatly into the little defined boxes we've so very carefully created for them. So who are these un-cookie cutter-like students creating such havoc with our nice definitions? Well, this is an evolving question to try to answer because the entering undergraduate population is becoming increasingly more diverse. Adults beyond the traditional ages of 18 to 22 years are now attending for the first time or returning to college. Furthermore, more than 73% of all students in undergraduate institutions can be described as different from traditional college students (Choy, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics defines a nontraditional student as having any of the following characteristics: 24 years of age or older, does not enter postsecondary education immediately

after high school graduation, attends a college or university as part-time (or full-time) for at least part of the academic year, works 35 hours or more per week while enrolled, is considered financially independent by financial aid eligibility standards, has dependents other than spouse, is a single parent, or is recipient of General Educational Development, other high school completion certificate, or did not complete high school (Choy, 2002). Despite the many barriers a nontraditional college student might face, such as family responsibilities, scheduling conflicts, and feelings of intimidation upon returning to college, nontraditional college students are a growing population at institutions of higher education across the United States (Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012).

As an example, the California State University (CSU) system, more than one third of CSU students are first-generation college students (CSU Chancellor's Office, 2014), and 84% of undergrads who enrolled don't graduate in 4 years (CNN Films, 2014). The CSU average time to degree is 5.7 years, and 14.9% of undergrads who enrolled took more than 6 years to graduate (CSU Analytics, 2002). Ignoring all other non-traditional student characteristics, 25.4% of the CSU undergraduate population is non-traditional based on age alone (25+ years of age) (CSU Analytics, 2014). Additionally, a recent CSU student survey found that 75% of CSU undergraduates worked while taking classes, and fully 1/3 of the working students worked at least 30 hours per week (CSU Chancellor's Office, 2015). The CSU system potentially has a tremendous non-traditional student population—if just defined by the NCES. However, if one considers other non-traditional student characteristics of underrepresentation, like gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, education, religion, language, lack of information, disability, and socio-economic status (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), then this non-traditional student population is likely higher than the 73% nation-wide statistic (Choy, 2002).

***The Effect of these Nontraditional Student Characteristics.***

Simply, the effect of these nontraditional student characteristics on student success and student persistence is cumulative. Each nontraditional student, depending on how many risk factors they have for non-completion, increases the time span for how long it will take them to graduate from college. For example, a nontraditional student with two or three risk factors will take a median of 76 months, and a highly nontraditional student with four or more traits, 131 months (Kennen & Lopez, 2005). In fact, by institutional control, the median time to earn a degree was 55 months for a 2008 bachelor's degree recipient graduating from a public institution (NCES, 2011).

More specifically, the statistical result of any study, which generally follows an academic cohort for six years at most after high school graduation, could potentially miss half of the eventual Latino college graduates who graduate 70 months after their high school graduation. These interpreted results can then in turn make the educational achievement gap between Hispanics and whites seem larger than it is in reality (Kennen & Lopez, 2005).

So, this raises the question that if only 27 percent of the national college population is likely to complete their degree in the traditional 4 years, and those who take longer than 6 years to graduate will not be considered as having persisted or even be counted in a college graduation rate, could these students (potentially the majority of our students attending a public university/college) be considered as being set up for failure? Or, perhaps at the very least, are these students being communicated unrealistic expectations of what student success looks like? So, when considering a complex and diverse student population, the task of measuring student success and student persistence becomes all the more challenging, much less answering the

question: How can the academic library support the persistence of such a diverse non-traditional student body?

***Do we support student persistence?***

Because of the broad influence of academic libraries, there is a great opportunity for libraries to demonstrate their value on issues of student persistence and student success. Kuh et al. (2006) who argued for the student perspective like Hagedorn (2005) suggested that taken together, a student's impressions of the institutional quality, the student's willingness to attend the institution again, and the overall satisfaction the student has with their educational experiences are precursors of educational attainment and other dimensions of student success. It is ultimately the student's satisfaction with the institution and educational experiences that will encourage the student to persist in college. Supporting a student's persistence in completing the degree and attaining individual academic goals comports well with the mission of an academic library, given its unique service orientation and commitment to educating users to be information literate. It is within this broader information literacy context that an academic library can have an impact on a user's persistence in the attainment of educational goals, regardless of whether or not those goals are related specifically to a course or an assignment at a particular college or university. Additionally, the literature indicates that the library is especially key for first-year students. Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud's (2013, 2014) studies specifically found that first-time, first-year undergraduate students who use the academic library have a higher GPA their first semester and higher persistence than non-library users. It is because of this broad influence of academic libraries that there is a great opportunity for them to demonstrate their value on issues of student persistence and student success.

Libraries can serve as a bridge between the social and the academic. Evidence of this can be found by simply examining your library spaces and how they are used for both social and academic activities. Libraries have the potential to positively impact student success not only through connections between the library and the classroom, but also user by user through outreach and library programming which helps to build social capital for the university community.

There are several ways in which academic libraries already currently support student persistence; however, as always, there is room for improvement. This is particularly the case in how academic libraries model institutional integrity, which is the degree to which students perceive the library as a safe welcoming space (Braxton et al., 2014). Library services and spaces have an impact on student satisfaction with the university and consequently their willingness to reenroll or persist in college.

Another way academic libraries demonstrate this commitment is by their by participation in first-year student orientations or involving students in library policy and programming decisions. This reinforces the idea of the library as place, by actively ensuring that the library is safe and welcoming to all regardless of age, race, creed, color, sex, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, marital status, and socioeconomic status. Each student encounter is an opportunity to support that student's educational goals and foster student success. Each encounter is an opportunity to establish a safe and welcoming environment for learning and inquiry. Each encounter is an opportunity to support that student, who is likely a non-traditional student, to persist in college.

Finally, this social and environmental aspect of academic libraries is especially important to nontraditional students because their barriers to persisting in college are more frequently

social, not academic (Courtner, 2014). Horn (1996) noted, these students who have work and family commitments may be inhibited in their ability to socially integrate. This suggests that if practices and services exist to ease the competing demands of work and attending college, then they would be more likely to participate in the academic and intellectual life of the institution (Braxton et al., 2014).

***How do we measure our impact on student persistence?***

The research currently being done on how academic libraries contribute to student persistence has approached persistence through various contexts. Historically these have been inputs and outputs, value, return on investment (ROI), and library assessment. In the 1970s libraries began to focus on performance measures (Hamburg, Ramist, & Bommer, 1972) and described these measures in the form of inputs and outputs. In fact, academic libraries still commonly describe and report their activities in the form of basic inputs and outputs. These inputs are generally measures like library resources for hiring staff and purchasing materials, measurements reflecting internal operations, gate counts, and number of reference questions answered. Outputs are generally defined as the effectiveness of service delivered, outcomes, and the impact of the service provided. Most recently; Emmons & Wilkinson (2011) found that a change in the ratio of librarians to students predicts a statistically significant increase in student persistence and graduation rates. Emmons & Wilkinson (2011) posited that academic libraries are part of a complex social system in which the librarians interact with its students and faculty, which leads to improved information flow and ultimately an organization which helps students succeed. The problem is we don’t know why adding additional librarians increases student persistence.

Value studies also appeared during the 1970s; Orr (1973) wrote a pivotal paper on the measurement of the "goodness" of library services. He proposed to evaluate library service within the dual concepts of quality and value. Quality of service is defined as how good is the library service and its measurement is a function of resources, capability, and utilization. Value of service is defined as how much good does the service do and its measurement is a function of the library's beneficial effects. However, what is specifically meant by "value" now is a bit more of a loaded term, often conveying other unpleasant meaning beyond what Orr suggested in 1973. However, looking past these superficially fiscal interpretations of value, De Jager (2002) also arrived at a similar conclusion, stating that "the library adds value to the student experience through a combination of resources and services offered; that it is the whole package that the library provides: peer group assistance, research advice and technological support" (De Jager, 2002).

Return on investment, explicitly looks at the cost and monetary value of an academic library. A key paper by Mezick (2007) used collected library data to examine relationship of both library expenditures and number of professional library staff to student persistence. She found "statistically significant relationships exist between professional staff and student retention within each Carnegie Classification, the strongest relationship between these two variables at doctoral-granting institutions" (Mezick, 2007, pg. 564). It can be argued that this rises very little above the input and output measures and doesn't attempt to describe how the people, services, spaces, and materials (that the money was spent on) impacted students in meaningful ways which encouraged their persistence in college. Just that money was spent and students were retained by the institution.

However, in the 1990s an important article was published on the importance of matching library assessment to university goals (Allen, 1992). Allen (1992) suggested an academic library should be able to match their strategic plan to university goals. Additionally, Allen (1992) suggested that libraries should focus on institutional objectives like training students in methods of scholarship and research. She recommended goals aimed at lifelong learning and independent learning are obvious cases of congruity between college goals and areas of library impact. Allen (1992) also noted that "college graduates definitely see lifelong learning as a key educational outcome." (pg. 65) and "the ability to find and use information is clearly key to successful lifelong learning" (pg. 65). Finally, most research libraries and university missions both seek to serve as conservators of cultural heritage and be a cultural leaders within the community (Allen, 1992). There is a clear and measurable intersection of both university and library interest here.

The importance of using the university mission and goals as a lens to examine library effectiveness and the development of assessments of library services isn't merely to "prove" the value of the library to university administration; it is to lend additional focus to library effectiveness studies beyond the mere regurgitation of a series of inputs (e.g., we hired a lot of staff and we bought a lot of materials) and to instead measure library effectiveness. This matches well with Braxton et al. (2014) in the higher education literature, who note that "institutional integrity" is the degree to which an institution actually adheres to its espoused mission and goals relative to the actions and behaviors of its administrators, faculty, and staff. Additionally, Braxton et al. (2014) suggests some possible ways to impact student persistence like participation in a learning community, use of active learning practices, the use of good practices in undergraduate education, academic advising, faculty interest in students, and first-year student orientation programs.

***Some examples.***

Academic libraries already target students by partnering with teaching faculty in order to integrate use of library services and resources into their curriculum and orientation to the university. Assessment of the success of these partnerships is not just a measure of the effectiveness of the information instruction, but also potentially a measure of the library instruction's impact on a student's persistence. Did those students who effectively used library materials in their class projects/writing perform better in class, or get a higher GPA? Were those students satisfied with the information instruction component of the class? The degree of academic success demonstrated by the student, coupled with the degree of satisfaction with the information instruction experience, are indirect and direct measurements of student persistence.

Additionally, the academic library often plays a socializing role for students; academic libraries are social institutions and a part of the social capital available to a community (Kyrillidou, 2002). Because the academic library is an environment where both the academic and the social take place on a campus, the academic library's impact on student persistence should be viewed more holistically. De Jager (2002) suggests that the academic library contributes to the whole student experience through a combination of resources and services which helps to build social capital for the university community. Measurement of academic library's socializing role on student persistence can be done through surveys (like LibQUAL+) or by using focus groups to gather information from specific student groups. Do the online library resources help you complete your school work when off-campus? Do library spaces and resources help you with your studies while on campus? Do library spaces and services impact your overall satisfaction with the university? The degree to which these services and spaces impact a student's

satisfaction, perception, and ability to complete work directly impacts that student's decision to persist and the university's goal to retain students.

### *Conclusion.*

The question of how an academic library impacts student persistence is complicated. Braxton (2000) argued that different theories were needed to gain a full understanding of student persistence. I would take this recommendation further and suggest that the lens through which academic libraries examine their impact on student persistence be expanded beyond value, return on investment, or simple inputs and outputs; it must encompass the economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological perspectives. The academic library is large, multifaceted, complicated, and evolving institution with a rich history of scholarship and service. The academic library and its impact on students defy oversimplification.

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