



Evidence Summary

Undergraduate Students Who Use Library Resources Are Also More Likely to Stay Enrolled

A Review of:

Haddow, G. (2013). Academic library use and student retention: A quantitative analysis. *Library & Information Science Research*, 35(2), 127-136. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2012.12.002

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Abstract

Objective – To determine if there is an association between library use and student retention.

Design – Quantitative analysis.

Setting – A large research university in Australia.

Subjects – 6330 new undergraduate students.

Methods – The researcher obtained a data set on all new undergraduate students registered at the institution in April 2010 from the student enrolment system. The data set included students' identification number, age, gender, Australian postal code, and country of

residence. Using the students' identification numbers, the author then retrieved information from the library's systems on the number of physical library items borrowed, and the number of logins to authenticated electronic library resources by this cohort at three points in the first semesters of 2010 and 2011. These three points in the semester fell after the course withdrawal date, mid-semester, and after exams. The author obtained additional data sets from the student enrolment system at the end of the first semester of 2010, and after the course withdrawal date and after exams in the first semester of 2011 to determine which students from the original sample were retained over the 18 month period. The researcher then compared library use data for students still

enrolled at each date to those who had withdrawn from their studies.

The researcher also coded students' data according to age and socio-economic status to allow further analysis. All students in the sample were grouped into two age categories: students under 21 years of age, and mature students, which included all students aged 21 years and over. Those students with a permanent Australian address (5125) were coded as low, medium, or high socioeconomic status using the 2006 *Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas*. Postal codes were also used to determine if a student resided in close proximity to the university library in Western Australia, and could be expected to access the physical collection.

Main Results – Students who withdrew by the end of their first semester in 2010 were more likely not to access online library resources at all (39% versus 20.4% of retained students). By the end of the first semester of 2011, retained students still showed higher use of library online resources. Over half of those leaving their studies did not login to library resources by the end of the first semester of their second year of study, compared to 17.6% of retained students. Borrowing rates for physical library items was very low among both retained students and those who withdrew from their studies in both years.

The data did not demonstrate a strong association between a student's socioeconomic status, library use, and their retention. The findings regarding age were more significant when it came to retention, with mature students more likely to withdraw from their studies by the end of their first semester than those under 21. In terms of their library use, retained mature students were more likely to borrow physical items from the library than younger students in both their first and second years of study.

Conclusion – While students who remained enrolled over the 18 month period did demonstrate higher use of the library's electronic and physical collections than those who withdrew, the low use of the library's

physical and electronic resources even by those retained undermines any conclusions that could be drawn about the positive associations between library use and retention. Mature students may benefit from targeted library supports, as their library use seems to be more positively associated with their retention than with younger students. Socio-economic status did not appear to play a major role in library use and retention, according to the study's findings.

Commentary

This study is one of many currently attempting to connect the work of the academic library to larger institutional aims like student retention. While assessing the impact of library collections and services on student success is not new, there has been increasing emphasis placed on it by organizations such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in recent years. In her high profile ACRL sponsored report *The Value of Academic Libraries*, Oakleaf (2010) highlights student retention as an area where academic libraries can and have demonstrated their contributions. The author's work here shows that North American academic libraries are not the only ones feeling the pressure to provide evidence of their value, and emphasizes the need for those engaged in this work to look beyond their own borders for best practices and strategies.

The author states that other libraries will find more value in the study's methodology than in its findings, which cannot be easily generalized. This is, in part, due to the eccentricities of the data collected at this institution. For example, categorizing all students 21 and over as mature is problematic, but the data obtained from the university's enrolment system could not be parsed further. Logins to authenticated resources may also be one of the best data sets available for exploring library use, but as students authenticate at this institution for services ranging from chat reference to database access, it is difficult to tie results to collection spending or specific types of library support. The limitations of using

postal codes to determine socioeconomic status are also acknowledged. An earlier study by the author at the same institution did find differences in the use of the library's computers based on students' socioeconomic status, and it would be interesting to know why that source of data was not used again or why the author relied only on the use of electronic resources as a measure of students' library use in relation to this variable in the follow up research (Haddow & Joseph, 2010).

Overall, the study's transparency around the strengths and limitations of the methodology employed, as well as the detail provided about the results (for example, including the mean, median, and mode for logins) increases its utility as a model for other libraries (Glynn, 2006). This study provides a useful example for how libraries can use data collected in the course of university business, like registration data, to explore library impact on students. Those interested in library use and student retention should also refer to the Oakleaf report, which outlines a variety of additional

data points and methods that could be used for this type of research.

References

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