

## **Community College Students And the Library Experience**

Community college is unique in the educational space—it has open enrollment that mirrors the public requirement for elementary and secondary education for all, it is an academic experience requiring different skills than those of secondary education, it has a fee system that separates it from the free basic education system, and the metrics used to evaluate its success varies across the country with input from politics, industry, and local community concerns. All of these factors contribute to constant changes and adjustments to the way community colleges adapt their educational techniques to achieve student success. Because libraries at community colleges deal with all enrolled students, the staff must adjust to new demands of diversity in student needs, changing department programs and faculty, and the diverse metrics that evaluate outcomes that determine community college budgets. The smaller staffs and resources that community college libraries have in comparison to four-year academic systems requires research specific to their concerns.

The history of community colleges began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the form of today's system began with President Truman's Commission on Higher Education in 1947 (Grubbs, 2020). That report suggested the name *community colleges* and recommended that they focus on 'low cost and easy access' education, with an emphasis on the local community population (Grubbs, 2020, p. 197). Presidents following Truman continued to expand the goal of community colleges, shaping the focus on providing a local, educated workforce with technical skills, in addition to providing an avenue to baccalaureate degrees through transfer opportunities, the focus of their original creation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Grubbs, 2020). The push for racial integration in the 1960s led to the "crystallization of the community college as an open-access and

multipurpose institution- traditional students, primarily middle class and White, lost their prominence as the core of the student body, and students of color” became a larger proportion of the student body (Levin, 2017, pp. 119-120). The 1970s were also when the colleges began to look to corporations for direct support, and to “develop specific job training programs for industries” (Grubbs, 2020, p. 197). The national shift from manufacturing to service and tech jobs has been reflected in the associate and vocational degrees offered by community colleges around the country (Grubbs, 2020).

Researchers have developed a number of general classification groups for community college students. These groupings may be based on education needs, such as remedial, technical or transfer options, or they may be due to other identifiers, such as part-time or full-time students (Levin, 2017). While these classifications are useful, they do not encompass the full scope of variables found in the community college student body. In addition to the individual variables, there are endless combinations of the multiple factors affecting pathways to student success.

Wickersham (2020) has pointed to this multiplicity as the norm, stating:

students are selecting among a wide range of pathways, including vertical transfer (i.e., moving from a 2-year to 4-year college), lateral transfer (i.e., movement between 2-year colleges), co-enrollment (i.e. simultaneous enrollment at more than one post-secondary institution) and swirling (i.e. back-and-forth enrollment at different institutions) to achieve their educational and career goals (pp. 107-108).

These are some of the challenges that community college libraries face when attempting to design programs and services for their student body. One of the biggest issues for librarians is to discover how the various needs of the students can be met with library services. The open enrollment of community colleges is a large factor in program design, especially in the realm of

information literacy (IL). Community college students often “lack prior information literacy experience and are not well versed in advanced research skills” (Dixon, 2017, p. 32). There are numerous difficulties in providing this help beyond the library’s issues of time and staffing, including the critical factor of faculty buy-in (Dixon, 2017). Even students’ own confusion in the difference between digital literacy and information literacy contributes to a misunderstanding of the need for help (Kim, 2015). This creates a need for research to discover how to best target the role libraries can play in providing students with the tools they require to succeed in their own short- and long-term goals in the college setting. One of the more successful efforts in recent research has been using embedded librarians for teaching information literacy.

The concept of embedded librarians was first coined in 2004 by Barbara Dewey, and has since become a focus of research into how to implement the learning of information literacy by college libraries (Kim, 2015). Instead of offering a single hour of library instruction as part of new students’ introduction to campus, embedded librarians work with faculty to create ways for instruction to be focused on specific class needs. While much of the research has been for use in four-year colleges, community college librarians face differences in student need and availability, leading to increased use of online instruction (Kim, 2015). One of the big challenges that can be overcome with online help is due to the nature of community college campuses, which usually do not have student housing. Students generally come on campus only for class time, or even take many courses online, making outreach to students inside the campus library more limited in scope (Grubbs, 2020). When there is faculty buy-in for information literacy some class time can be devoted to IL instruction, but there are often difficulties in this approach, especially with faculty willing to devote time to instruction that is not directly focused on class content (Ward, 2017). Community college faculty have many strains on their own efforts,

including teaching loads and the requirements for office hours and college service (Grubbs, 2020). Often, librarians need to actively provide reasons for faculty to use IL instruction to gain the best collaboration for student outcomes (Ward, 2017).

There are a number of formats that have been used by embedded librarians in community colleges. A study at Queensborough Community College experimented with creating a rubric to assess IL skills that was tailored to the needs of their students, 78% of whom need remedial courses when they enter college (Kim, 2015). This rubric was used for library training sessions that focused on students in English classes, so that the elements could be applied directly to class research. This allowed the faculty to gain the librarian's help with class content, while also giving the students hands-on practice in the techniques of IL, with the added bonus of combining students' time spent on classwork with IL instruction. During the study, it was found that the use of online LibGuides also went up, and it was speculated by Kim and Dolan (2015) that this use might explain why the students did not seek out in-person help. In an evaluation of the program, students were asked for their experience with the three in-person classes, and the responses indicated the need to resist giving too much information too quickly and to provide more help with citation creation, with one student calling the classes "very helpful, but very stressful" (Kim, 2015, p. 64).

Another point to consider in developing IL programs is to respect the knowledge the students bring into the mix. While there are definite needs to be addressed, providing that help should not dismiss the experience students have gained outside of the academic world. The deficit model, used to explain educational difficulties, places the blame on the students and can lead to educational systems excusing themselves from "addressing the needs of *all* students" (Terrile, 2019, par. 1). This model can create library anxiety, and prevent students from taking

advantage of library services. Using previous experience of internet search in their everyday lives can help students to learn the strategies of academic research, without undervaluing “students’ prior lived experiences” (Terrile, 2019, par. 3).

Studies connecting the use of librarians and information literacy training to student outcomes is directly related to obtaining funding to enhance these efforts (Lance, 2017). There are also studies that look at how libraries can contribute to overall student success beyond traditional library services by providing space and expertise in a variety of ways. The Community College Libraries and Academic Support for Student Success project is one that has looked closely at student needs and where those students feel comfortable reaching out for help. The third phase of that project asked students their definitions of success, and responses indicated a wide focus-

not only on career and educational achievement but on personal development and enrichment, and that more than half faced significant challenges around balancing work and school, finances, child care, language barriers, transportation to and from campus, and navigating college resources and services (Peet, 2019, p. 12).

The factors impacting community college students and institutions are complex, and come from a variety of internal and external pressures. These factors will only increase in the future, especially if the political push to provide free tuition to community colleges is realized (Farrington, 2021). But increased student enrollment will not change the challenges of a diverse student body, it will only enhance the importance in addressing them. Libraries in all public arenas are being forced to create new ways of working with a diverse population and incorporating digital media, and community college libraries are no different. Research into the ways to achieve the best outcomes will be needed in the near- and long-term future.

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