Undergraduate Student Success and Library Use: A Multimethod Approach

Jennifer Mayer  
*University of Northern Colorado*, jennifer.mayer@unco.edu

Rachel Dineen  
*University of Northern Colorado*, rachel.dineen@unco.edu

Jayne Blodgett  
*University of Northern Colorado*, jayne.blodgett@unco.edu

Angela Rockwell  
*University of Northern Colorado*, angela.rockwell@unco.edu

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Undergraduate Student Success and Library Use: A Multimethod Approach

Overview:
How do libraries affect student success? This study examines the relationship between library use and student persistence. The research questions include:

1. How does use of specific library services correlate to persistence for undergraduate students?
2. Is there a positive correlation between the number of uses of library services and academic achievement for undergraduate students?
3. What role can or does the library play in student academic success?
4. How do students define academic success?

Methods: Quantitative
This quantitative analysis used student demographic, academic, and library use data for all degree-seeking undergraduates enrolled at UNC in the fall 2017 semester. Library use was measured by physical item checkout, use of library computers, instruction sessions attended, and research consultations. The control variable was first-generation status, gender, Pell-grant eligibility, or college GPA. The data was then categorized by the major of the student.

Qualitative
For the qualitative component of our study, we conducted 17 face-to-face, semistructured interviews with current UNC undergraduate students. The interview questions centered on if, how, and why the students used the library. The only criterion that students had to meet to participate was to be a current undergraduate student. The interviewees were selected based on their major, field of study, and demographic characteristics.

Research Questions:
- How does use of specific library services correlate to persistence for undergraduate students?
- Is there a positive correlation between the number of uses of library services and academic achievement for undergraduate students?
- What role can or does the library play in student academic success?
- How do students define academic success?

Findings:
Quantitative
The quantitative data demonstrates that at the macro level, University Libraries has a positive correlation with improved student success. The data shows a clear connection between library use and an increase in the probability of persisting to the next year. However, the link to an improved GPA is minimal, but looking at how students define academic success and their focus on building knowledge and developing a growth mindset, we are not discouraged by the GPA results.

Qualitative
From our interviews, we learned that students hold strong and varying opinions about the library. They overwhelmingly value the library as a distinct place on campus. We identified four major themes regarding the perceived role of the library in students’ academic success: academic place, people, space, and resources and services.

Space: Tasks Determine Destination in the Library
This theme focused on the physical space of the library. Students pointed to the inviting and welcoming environment of the UNC Libraries, study rooms, and the variety of furniture types available.

People: Sometimes a Distraction, but Can Offer Help and Comfort
For this theme, students discussed both library employees and library users. Specifically, interviewees acknowledged the “helpful” employees, underutilized librarians, and the “social environment” of Michener Library.

Place: The Library is a Place People Know and Want to Be
Building on both the Space and People themes, this theme focused on the library as place for the academic community. Some students referred to Michener as their “safe space” while others noted a desire for more community-oriented programming.

Resources and Services: The Library Has What You Need to Get Things Done
Lastly, this theme explored the resources and services offered by the libraries. Students mentioned the benefit of having access to electronic resources, laptops for check-out, and expensive software packages.

Implications:
The strength of this study is that it explores the role the library plays in student success. The study data shows a clear connection between library use and an increase in the probability of persisting to the next year, suggesting the community-building impact of the library. The qualitative data, which allows us to examine the role the library plays at an individual level, demonstrates the library’s role as an academic community center and the critical importance of the library as an academic place. Our findings indicate that the libraries contribute to student success in terms of helping students progress in their knowledge and persist as university students.

What’s Next?
We anticipate the findings of this study will have significant impacts on decision making in the University Libraries in terms of how we can increasingly contribute to our students’ articulated sense of belonging when they use the library, which in turn impacts their academic success in the form of persistence. This research will have the potential to inform future steps to improve student academic success in terms of our programming, pedagogical decisions, material and equipment purchases, outreach and marketing priorities, and project planning. After all, improving services for students to help them succeed was the main driver of this study.

Research Team:
- Jen Mayer, Associate Professor, Head of Library Research Services, University Libraries
- Rachel Dineen, Assistant Professor, Information Literacy and Instruction, University Libraries
- Angela Rockwell, Data Analyst and Report Writer, Office of Institutional Reporting and Analysis Services
- Jayne Bledgett, Interim Dean of Libraries, University Libraries

Students who have attended an instruction session have an 89% higher probability of persisting – that number increases by 30% with each session attended. Students who check out at least one item from the library have a 124% higher probability of persisting.

“Everyone knows where it is, you have everything you need, so if you have a group project you go, hey, let’s just meet at Michener Library and use the computers.”

“I really like coming here [Michener Library] because it’s an area specifically for focus, so I don’t have the same distractions as I do at home and just the overall feel makes me stay more productive.”