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Undergraduate Student Success and Library Use: A Multimethod Approach

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Executive Summary

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The full article was published in the April 2020 issue of *College & Research Libraries*. This open access publication can be found on the publisher site: <https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/24367> and in Digital UNC: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/libfacpub/96/>

Overview:

This multi-year project was a collaboration between University Libraries and the Office of Institutional Reporting and Analysis Services.

How libraries affect student success has become an increasingly important question to many academic librarians. To investigate this phenomenon, we explored student success via two approaches in this multimethod study: 1) through individual student interviews to obtain the student perspective; and 2) through hierarchical linear and logistic modeling of institutional data to gather the institutional perspective. Through the qualitative component, students articulated how they define success and how the library contributes to their success, especially in terms of providing a sense of belonging and facilitating the work of a community of scholars. The quantitative data provides additional context by demonstrating a small positive correlation between use of the library resources and student persistence, further highlighting the community building aspect of the libraries.

Motivation:

We view this multimethod research project as a way to inform strategies for improving how the Libraries contribute to student success. This study was proactively conceived by librarians, three years before the Strategic Enrollment and Student Success Plan (SESS) initiative was unveiled at the University of Northern Colorado. Our motivation has been, and continues to be, improving library resources and services for our community, and improving services for students to help them succeed.

Research Questions:

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

Key Quantitative Findings:

When looking at how use of the library services together contributes to a student's probability of persisting to the next academic year, we found that:

- Students who check out at least one item from the library have a 124% higher probability of persisting.
- Students who log into a computer in the library have a 50% higher probability of persisting.
- Students who have attended an instruction session have an 89% higher probability of persisting.

When looking just at the contribution of instruction sessions to persistence, we found that for each instruction session attended, students had a 30% increase in the probability of persisting.

When looking at how using multiple services contributed to persistence, we found that the more unique services the students used, i.e. the more relationships the student had with the Libraries, the higher their probability of persisting.

Even after accounting for historical academic performance through previous term cumulative GPA, checking out at least one material was associated with a 0.1 increase in term GPA, which is a little larger than the difference between a B and a B+ on a 3-credit course in a 15-credit term.

Key Qualitative Findings:

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 achievement: space, people, place, and resources and services.

○ Space: Tasks Determine Destination in the Library

This theme focused on the physical space of the library. Students particularly noted the rectilinear layout of Michener Library, 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 off both the Space and People themes, this theme focused on the library as place for the academic community. Some students referred to Michener Library 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

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.

Student Voices:

In their interviews, students uniquely articulated their experiences with library resources and services. Here are a few quotes that we found notable:

- “It seems serious, I like that personally. I like [that] it is sectioned out. If you know what you need there are places you can go. You recognize there is a need for different areas with different levels of noise. You can just go sit down and do your work and be on your own.”
- “We are all here to better ourselves for our future—I like that about the library environment—at a coffee shop you have no idea who they are. At the library you are most likely doing something academic.”
- “Furniture needs an upgrade to make the environment more modern, it looks old. The wooden chairs, you can only sit on for so long in them.”
- “If I am writing a paper, I look at UNC Library for research.”
- “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 I have at home and just the overall feel makes me stay more productive.”

Implications of Findings:

The strength of this study is that it explores the role the library plays in student success at two levels. At the institutional level, we conclude University Libraries does have a positive correlation with improved student success. The quantitative 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 libraries. The link to an improved GPA is minimal, but considering that many of the students interviewed are more concerned with building knowledge and developing a growth mindset, we are not disappointed or discouraged by the GPA results. 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.

What our Research Adds to the Conversation:

The presence of library value studies has increased significantly in the recent library literature. Our study adds to this body of literature by including the student voice. Many past studies have taken a solely quantitative approach and have tried to tie library usage statistics to student success (in various ways). We found this approach to be reductive. By interviewing students, we were better able to understand *how* the library contributes to their own conceptions of success.

Next steps:

- Use findings to improve student academic success in terms of Libraries programming, pedagogical decisions, material and equipment purchases, outreach and marketing priorities, and project planning.
- Use findings to help inform larger, student-centered decisions
- Communicate our research findings to UNC Libraries faculty and staff
- Communicate our findings to UNC administrators and SESS team leads
- Communicate our findings to UNC students