Community College Libraries & Academic Support for Student Success [Pre-print]

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"Student success" has moved to the forefront of the higher education agenda. Success has often been defined by the achievement of institutional outcomes, predominantly comprised of various measures of student persistence, achievement, and attainment, including rates of transfer, enrollment in postsecondary education, GPA, retention, time to graduation, and graduation (Kuh, 2006). In other cases, student success has been measured as a function of post-graduation job attainment and compensation (Guthrie, 2016).

Researchers have measured the library's contributions towards these success outcomes in a variety of ways in an attempt to demonstrate a positive correlation. At the institutional level, researchers determined that the ratio of professional library staff at elite Association of Research Libraries institutions predicts a positive relationship with both retention and graduation rates (Emmons & Wilkinson, 2011). Library expenses are also positively correlated with graduation and retention rates at four-year colleges and universities (Crawford, 2015). At the individual level, a number of studies of four-year universities have correlated library use (library workstation logins, database logins, circulation check-outs, and/or electronic resource access) with student retention and GPA (e.g. Allison, 2015; Haddow, 2013; Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2014).

The vast majority of this research to date, however, has been conducted at four year colleges and universities, and measures of student success have often been derived from higher education institutions, state boards of education, and the federal government, thus omitting the important perspective of the student in what defines success. To address this gap, Ithaka S+R and Northern Virginia Community College, along with six other community college partners and with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) [RE-96-17-0113-17], are taking an important step to strengthen the position of the community college library in supporting students through the

Community College Libraries & Academic Support for Student Success (CCLASSS) project.

The CCLASSS project is focused on understanding (1) how "student success" can be defined so that it is inclusive both of students' own needs as well as important policy priorities, and (2) what services colleges and their academic libraries can offer to most effectively support students in their attainment of success. The first and completed phase of the project, discussed within this paper, focused on understanding the practices, preferences, and needs of community college students from the student perspective.

Defining our population

In this first phase of the CCLASSS project, we invited 500 randomly selected students to participate in semi-structured interviews across the seven participating colleges: Northern Virginia Community College, Borough of Manhattan Community College, Queensborough Community College, Bronx Community College, LaGuardia Community College, Monroe Community College, and Pierce College. For institutions with multiple campuses, this sample of students remained proportional to the enrollment on each campus. We chose to have these students randomly chosen to ensure that the sample did not simply reflect heavy library users, student employees, or similar likely sources of sampling bias.

We included in our population (and therefore the resulting pool of invitees) currently-enrolled students over the age of 18, including credit and workforce students, non-credit, degree, credential, and continuing education students, and online students. While non-credit students often do not have library privileges, we decided that it would be important to capture their perspectives in this phase of the project to better understand their practices, preferences, and needs, and so subsequent phases of the project aimed at developing and testing services to meet student needs could be informed by these unique perspectives.

Creating our interview script

Our research question driving the first phase of this project was, "How can 'student success' be defined so that it is inclusive both of students' own needs as well as policy priorities?" Through the student interviews, we aimed to understand students' perspectives on what success means to them. Based on this objective and our overarching research question, we developed questions for our interview script in three main thematic areas:

Educational goals and expectations	Coursework and academics	Defining challenges and success
• Can you tell me about what you were doing when you decided to apply to this college? • What were your reasons for choosing this college? • What were your reasons for choosing to go to college in general? • What do you hope to achieve by attending this college?	• What kind of work are you assigned in your classes? • Where do you complete your work? • How do you come up with new ideas to incorporate into your projects? • How easy is it for you to access resources or information that you need to complete your work?	• What does success at this college look like for you? • What did you think would be the biggest challenge you would face with being here? • And now that you're here, what are the biggest challenges you face? • What do you need in order to make you more successful?

Inviting participants

While the overall objective for the CCLASSS project is to design and test new services for community colleges and their libraries, our aim in this phase was firmly to understand students' own practices, perspectives, and needs independent of the library. With this in mind, when possible, the email invitation for this study was sent under the signatory of the college provost, vice president of academic affairs, or equivalent. The email invitation for each college was sent under the subject line of "Share your experiences as a student at [college name] and receive a $50 Amazon gift card!" and included the following text:

> "We are conducting a study to examine the practices, perspectives, and needs of students at [college name]. Would you be willing to participate in a 45-60 minute interview, either on campus or by phone, to share your unique experiences and perspectives?
>
> Our local [college name] study is part of a larger study being conducted by seven community colleges across the U.S. and in partnership with Ithaka S+R, a not-for-profit research and consulting service. The information gathered at [college name] and other community colleges will be included in a report by Ithaka S+R and will be essential for understanding how to support the needs of students like you.
>
> If you are interested in participating in this study, please fill out this form to indicate your availability. If you are selected to participate, you will receive a $50 Amazon.com gift card following the interview."

We chose to offer a $50 Amazon.com gift card for the interviews, as this incentive was determined to be adequately neutral (as opposed to one that would appeal to a subset of students and therefore bias our pool of participants) and an appropriate level of

compensation for up to an hour of time. Students are a notoriously difficult population to recruit for surveys, and the additional motivation of an incentive can substantially increase levels of response.

Conducting interviews

In total, 37 interviews were conducted across the seven partner colleges. To continue maintaining separation between the presence of the library and these interviews, most interviews were held outside of the library in an office, classroom, or other academic room elsewhere on campus.

When students arrived at the interview, they were greeted and provided with a consent form that provided information on participating in the interviews, including the time, payment, and rights involved in participating. To ensure the accuracy of our findings, the interviews were audio recorded for later transcription, review, and analysis. The interview questions were asked to participants, and probes were introduced to prompt for additional detail where needed. There was also an opportunity for participants to provide additional comments at the end of the interview.

Once the interview concluded, participants were provided with a $50 Amazon.com gift card. A log was maintained to indicate that the gift cards had been distributed.

Analyzing interviews

Anonymized interviews were transcribed and coded through NVivo using a grounded approach. The transcribed interviews were assigned nodes for gathering related portions of the interviews in one place to examine emerging patterns and ideas. These nodes were ultimately collapsed into the following high-level categories:

- Choosing college

- Defining success

- Facing challenges

- Completing coursework

Key findings

Through these interviews at the seven partner colleges, we found that students:

- View community college as an accessible option – in terms of location, transportation options, and cost – that fits their complex lives and needs.

- Have complex definitions of success that focus on both their career and educational achievement as well as their personal development.

- Face significant challenges related to balancing work and school, finances, childcare arrangements, language barriers, transportation to and from the college, and navigating resources and services at their college.

- Complete their coursework in a variety of places depending on their individual needs and resources available, but generally want to avoid distractions and noise while working.

- Do not find it difficult to locate the information they need for their coursework and have a particular affinity for using Google when doing so. They tend to rely heavily on their professors for providing guidance on resources to use when completing assignments.

For a more comprehensive review of findings, please see our full report: http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/amplifying-student-voices.

Next steps

Following this first phase of the CCLASSS project, we will develop new service concepts to meet these student-identified needs and will assess these concepts via survey at each of the partner community colleges later this year. We will publish a separate report of findings from the aggregate results from these surveys in 2019. We will also publish a toolkit that can be further adopted by both community colleges and community college systems to test these service concepts themselves or develop and assess additional service concepts specifically relevant to their populations.

Acknowledgments

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