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Integrated Academic Student Support Services at Loyola University: The Library as a Resource Clearinghouse

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Higher education has seen the emergence of new models of student support services. These models vary greatly, ranging from those that, for example, simply streamline the registration process, to others that base new building construction on studies done about the information and service access needs of students.

In the recent past, colleges and universities have felt the impact of significantly higher drop out rates among freshman, and they have made attempts to assuage these rising attrition rates. Through extensive study of college campus culture and student needs, many institutions are changing long-standing protocols and adding a technology rich, user friendly environment in an effort to minimize the freshman drop out rate.

Loyola University New Orleans, like most institutions, is actively pursuing ways to bolster its student retention. Statistics show, of the freshmen that enrolled in four-year colleges in the United States in the fall of 1996, 26.4% did not return the following fall[1]. Although Loyola's attrition rate for the 1998-1999 school year was 16.35%, far better than the average, retention remains one of the University's major endeavors.

In an effort to better serve students, each year Loyola conducts the *Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI)*.[2] The *SSI* gathers student opinions concerning academics, campus life, and support services. Using the survey results, a retention task force implemented by the administration discovered that overall students were unaware of the various support services available on campus such as Writing Across the Curriculum, disability services, tutoring, and career counseling. Other institutions have witnessed similar situations. A task group focused on improving retention at Ivy Tech State College found that the facilities for support services units and the staffing levels for those units were, indeed, appropriate, but students, overall, were unaware of their existence.[3]

In response to student opinions at Loyola, the President of the University suggested that an existing lab located within the Library could be redesigned to serve as a resource clearinghouse—to represent all of the different academic support services on campus.

Since the University's administration sees student retention as a natural by-product of student success, seeing to it that all of Loyola's students have access to support services is an important step towards ensuring that each student is successful. We are working under the assumption that that if students are aware of the various support services on campus, use will "naturally" increase. Then, with increased use, we would expect to see an increase in our student's success rate. It is felt that if we can increase student success, then in turn retention rates should increase, too.

ACE Center

The new facility for academic support services at Loyola is named "The Academic and Career Excellence Center" or ACE Center. It is located adjacent to the reference room in the J. Edgar and Louise S. Monroe Library. At its fundamental core, the ACE Center is a word processing lab, but its mission is to be a highly visible, one stop student resource for referral to the appropriate academic assistance: counseling, tutoring, career guidance, academic assessment, disability services, as well as research and reference services. While the core services retain their respective identities, the ACE Center creates an environment where old geographic boundaries are blurred and activities move smoothly across multiple departments. The ACE Center is staffed with peer tutors representing all of the support service departments. The tutors must go through an intensive period of cross training. Tutors learn the main points of each service and more importantly they understand that the center is a point of referral to the home bases of the various services. The peer tutors are trained not only as tutors in their subject areas, but also as generalists with skills and knowledge to provide seamless delivery of services in all areas. "An important dimension of integrated information service on-site is efficient and effective referral to the next level of expertise, when appropriate."[4]

Central resource centers employing the "information commons" concept are a growing trend on college campuses in the United States. Institutions such as University of Southern California, University of North Carolina, and the University of Michigan have constructed physical facilities specifically designed to organize workspace and service delivery around integrated environments as a department or entire floor within the library.[5] The general underlying philosophy of these new spaces "is to support self-directed student learning, facilitate the development of students' potential, advance students' development of knowledge, and serve as a locus of community for students."[6] Librarians and other support specialists are working as peers on this single enterprise. This level of cooperation between services is not only bridging the physical separations between service units on campus, but also eliminating the service isolation

that formerly existed between the units. In an article in <u>New Directions for Student Services,</u> Marguerite Culp analyzes the power of partnerships to increase the influence and effectiveness of student services. She says that partnerships work effectively when they are part of an overall plan for student services.[7]

Partnership and Collaboration

With the ACE Center physically located within the Library building, itself, it provides an ideal situation for the librarians, allowing them a natural role in the Center's overall management. Teaming librarians and the Library with other student support services is an innovation crucial to the Library's presence in campus development. Chris Ferguson, in his article, "'Shaking the Conceptual Foundations,' Too: Integrating Research and Technology Support for the Next Generation of Information Service," discusses the necessity to review reference service in preparation for the new type of student demands. "On-site information service models must fully support the entire range of contemporary user needs: information search, retrieval, and management using both print and electronic resources; communication with others (e.g., e-mail, chat, video); and the ability to shape information into reports and presentations (e.g., presentation software, and basic multimedia development tools)." He notes that as students work at this level of access at homes, in their dorms and campus labs, they expect the same access in the library. He also mentions that the recent success of the information commons concept (providing an access oriented environment) has raised student expectations to the point that libraries and librarians must rethink current service philosophies.[8] Due to the fact that the development of centralized service and information resources on college campuses is growing more common, it is important that libraries implement a level of outreach ensuring them an integral part in university planning. It seems that information access and information literacy are being viewed as a basis from which to build other service access points. As libraries involve themselves with campus initiatives such as learning communities, student retention and fund raising, librarians are making themselves more indispensable and valuable to the university community, at large, and to the student body, in particular.

Through the planning and management of the ACE Center, members of the committee have developed a clearer understanding of one another's roles on campus. Previously, support service staff and librarians had an understanding of the philosophies driving services, but they did not know the nuts and bolts of each other's daily operations. Armed with this new knowledge, the path to integrated services is clear.

The Library is a very natural component to academic support services, now, complementing tutoring, career decision making and Writing Across the Curriculum. Projects are both underway and under development to enhance the mission of Loyola's ACE Center.

Currently, a collaborative project is on-going to create a series of workshops formerly called "Term Paper Clinics." With the inclusion of all of the support services and other peripheral departments, these workshops target more than paper writing. In teaming with campus colleagues the ACE Center will host sessions that target specific courses and audiences. The sessions will range from paper writing (offering tips from writing experts and research and bibliography assistance), presentation creation (creating a presentation using Power Point, media tips from experts and research assistance), to resume writing and interview preparation (offering business and industry research tips). All of these sessions are fluid and will be augmented and modified according to the needs of the target groups. For example, Loyola's City College students take classes in the evening and weekends and tend to be working professionals. Sessions will be offered to them according to their schedule: later in the evening, early mornings and weekends.

A future goal of the instructional support sessions is the ability to take the show *on the road*, so to speak. The University will soon sponsor a web courseware package (e.g., Blackboard) enabling people to participate in these sessions from their homes, off campus, or even from residential halls on campus, in an electronic environment.

Evaluation

In a literature review in the article "Defining and Measuring the Library's Impact on Campus wide Outcomes," the author notes that most empirical research connecting college students' experiences and outcomes with specific campus services does not mention the role of the library.[9] So, the compilation and utilization of statistics measuring all of the constituents of the ACE Center is vital to maintaining a strong library presence on campus. The ACE Center will track its use through head count statistics, use surveys, and annual focus groups. The results of the assessment are shared with the University administration and with students. Also, of equal importance is that the student suggestions be addressed and that modifications to the center be made according to the assessment outcomes. The changes that are made as a direct result of the student feedback will be used as a tool for outreach, recruitment and publicity of the ACE Center and the University.

The development of the ACE Center has created lines of communication between the Library and academic support services whose goals are the same—serving the students. In "Defining and Measuring the Library's Impact on Campus wide Outcomes," the author asserts that libraries do make a difference in the quality and outcomes of learning and teaching, but need to collaborate with faculty to work toward university goals.[10]

The development of the ACE Center at Loyola may be a sign of the times in higher education. Many institutions are becoming more user-friendly now by redesigning

student services. This paradigm shift, a development of a cultural architecture, is an effective method maintaining a role for the library in the university goals of student recruitment, student retention, and student success.

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