

Academic Libraries and Vulnerable Student Populations:

A New Model of Embedded Librarianship for First-Generation University Students

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Abstract

There is compelling evidence in student services literature that first-generation students are more responsive to and better served by a “one-stop shop” model of institutionalized support that embeds university resources and services into a specialized program. Such programs are designed to provide students with a community of support through which they learn how to navigate social, academic, financial, and administrative challenges at the university. This case study explores the unique barriers, challenges, and needs of a cohort of one hundred first-generation students at the University of Utah and evaluates the effectiveness of a new approach to embedded librarianship within a “one-stop shop” model, focusing on relationship-building in order to more successfully teach information literacy concepts and skills.

Introduction

As instruction librarians, we understand the inherent value of the embedded model of librarianship. It has become the gold standard for information literacy instruction since Barbara I. Dewey’s seminal article, “The Embedded Librarian: Strategic Campus Collaborations,” was published in 2004. It is corollary that the more time we spend with our students, the more likely they are to learn, practice, retain, and apply the information literacy concepts and skills we have taught them. They are also more inclined to reach out to us for help outside of the classroom. The bulk of the literature around embedded librarianship focuses on course content design, classroom environments (physical and electronic), and teaching strategies; however, in this case study, I will instead discuss how I developed a new approach to embedded librarianship in order to better serve a cohort of first-generation students at the University of Utah.

In Fall Semester 2016, I was asked to serve as the J. Willard Marriott Library’s liaison to the Beacon Scholars Program. This program provides first-generation students with a community of support to navigate social, academic, financial, and administrative challenges at the university. Even before their first semester, Beacon Scholars enrolls students in a summer bridge program that helps them to orient themselves in higher educa-

tion, as well as to the University of Utah campus. Beacon Scholars offers support throughout the entire university experience—from before the first day of class through graduation.

Initially, when I met with Trever Bruhn, the Beacon Scholars Program Director, he was unsure how to effectively navigate a library partnership, or if there was even value in maintaining one. Bruhn explained that, in previous academic years, the librarian had provided one information literacy session in the library, which was appreciated and well-received, but there was little engagement between his students and the library beyond that. The previous liaison confirmed that only a handful of the Beacon students whom he taught had reached out to him for research support over the course of the two years that he served in this role.

Bruhn expressed that while he would like to have seen a greater librarian presence in the course, he was also concerned that the class schedule couldn’t accommodate additional library visits and that, if it turned out to be a repeat of their previous library experience, the students would not be responsive to my instruction or outreach anyhow. So, I suggested that we alter our approach radically. Rather than teaching a one-hour instruction session each academic year, I would instead attend each class throughout Fall and Spring semesters and provide a few brief instruction sessions, as well as on-site research support as needed. I would also participate in facilitating class activities.

Bruhn agreed to experiment with this new model and give me feedback as we progressed, allowing me to tailor my content to the students’ needs at critical times during the academic calendar (midterms, finals, etc.). Although I would be fully embedded in the course, I wouldn’t be lecturing each class session or providing for-credit assignments to the students to practice their information literacy skills. It was an unorthodox approach to teaching information literacy but, based on my understanding of the typical first-generation student experience, I felt confident that it would be a more effective strategy for reaching the expected information literacy learning outcomes than the one-shot sessions in previous years.

The First-Generation University Student Experience

In order to understand my rationale for proposing this alternative embedded model and to assess its effectiveness, it is critical to discuss the first-generation student experience. The literature tells us that it is generally characterized by fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and even shame. According to Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004),

[T]he evidence is reasonably clear that first-generation students as a group have a more difficult transitions from secondary school to college than their peers. Not only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions.... Compared to students whose parents are college graduates, first-generation students are more likely to leave a four-year institution at the end of the first year, less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a persistence track to a bachelor's degree after three years, and are less likely to stay enrolled or attain a bachelor's degree after five years" (p. 250).

Lacking the institutional knowledge that traditional undergraduates have provided to them by parents or older siblings who previously attended a university, first-generation students must learn how to navigate a complex university system as they go.

The new opportunities that some students view as exciting may be intimidating to a first-generation student who is less familiar with the ins and outs of college life. 'Whether it's walking into an unknown office, reading a bill statement, or talking with PhD faculty, the level of "scary" could keep first-generation students from reaching out,' says Lynda Sukolsky, director of the Academic Achievement Center at Seton Hill University. 'It's safer to just avoid or safer to try and navigate things on your own'" (as cited in Haskins, 2016, para. 7).

Additionally, first-generation students are less likely than their peers to access university resources and services. In part, this is because they do not know that these resources and services exist and are available to them, but also because they fear that asking for help will be read by staff and faculty as being ill-prepared for college life, obliviousness, or inadequacy. Confessing that a first-generation

student does not understand a particular college task, coupled with the misperception that their peers know how to accomplish this task, undermines the student's sense of independence and can lead to feelings of failure and shame. Efforts to empower and normalize these kinds of experiences for first-generation students are shown to improve student retention and success (O'Connor, 2016).

Strayhorn (2006) recommends that "programs targeting specific groups may be better suited to address the particular challenges faced by segments of the student population, such as black men or first-generation college students" (p. 104). The Beacon Scholars Program is designed to fulfill such a goal. Resources and services are embedded into the Beacon Scholars program in order to remove barriers to first-generation students asking for help. Over time, students are able to build trust with faculty and staff, develop a comfort level with seeking support, and understand the myriad of resources that are available to them. As students build these college life skills, Beacon Scholars staff are able to refer students out to other entities on campus with confidence that students will follow through on those referrals.

First-Generation Students at the University of Utah

As of January 2015, the University of Utah identified 32% of incoming freshmen as first-generation university students (Office of the President, para. 3). That same year, Beacon Scholars showed a 190% increase in enrollment from the previous academic year. The program enrollment is now capped at 100 students because of limited resources.

Beacon Scholars serves a diverse student population. In Fall 2016, 106 students enrolled in the program. Of these, 1% identified as American Indian; 3% as Pacific Islander; 3% as black; 4% as white; 19% as Asian; and 71% as Latinx. More than three-quarters of this student group identified as female. In addition, approximately 20% identified as undocumented (with or without DACA status).

Methods

With this framework in place to help Beacon Scholars students navigate the university's systems, it made more sense for me to be fully embedded into Beacon Scholars

as a member of the support staff—one who represents the library as a campus institution and system—than for me to provide an isolated one-shot instruction session annually or even a more traditional, multiple-visits-to-the-library model of embedded librarianship. Location is critical to this model. If students could learn how to use library resources and services from within a space where they felt comfortable, they would be more inclined to engage with me and, consequently, to develop their information literacy skills.

Because Beacon Scholars enrolls one hundred students maximum each year, this group is divided into halves; there are fifty students in the Thursday cohort and fifty in the Friday cohort. Each cohort is led by two student leaders, who have already completed (at minimum) one academic year as student members of Beacon Scholars. Student leaders are supported by Beacon Scholars staff, including Mr. Bruhn and a program coordinator, as well as support staff from the Office of Engagement and a dedicated student success advocate.

Classes met for two hours each week. The first hour is dubbed “Social Hour,” and the second is “Project Hour.” During Social Hour, I facilitate class activities alongside the other members of the support staff. These activities are designed to foster relationship-building and community among the students, staff, and faculty. During Project Hour, we participate in activities that are designed to support students as they carve their academic paths by teaching them how to engage campus resources. We also provide activities that support the development of students’ course projects.

I teach one 60-minute session each semester, using active learning techniques and problem-based learning activities. I also provide brief point-of-need lectures, offer practice exercises that are connected to the course research projects, and lead discussions—all of which takes place in the Beacon Scholars classroom during Project Hour. I also field spontaneous research questions as they arise any time during the two-hour class period and outside of class as well by text, email, or in person.

Results and Analysis

By the end of our first academic year using this alternative model of embedded librarianship in Beacon Scholars,

I had met with 44 students outside of class for research consultations, in addition to those who asked for extended research support (30+ minutes) during class. In general, this was at least one student per class visit each week. This was a significant increase in the number of student consultations through Beacon Scholars, compared to the three previous years.

The value of being embedded in the program as a member of the support staff—especially in facilitating classroom activities that aren’t information literacy focused—is that students had numerous opportunities to see me as a whole person, rather than an unknown authority figure. In turn, I also got to know them on a personal level. Over the course of our year together, we learned each other’s names, personalities, interests, and stories. We developed relationships, rather than sharing a series of isolated classroom visits. By taking the time to develop rapport, we were able to negotiate how to communicate effectively. In the process, I taught them how to engage help from one of the biggest, most unfamiliar institutions on campus: the library.

Students learned through their interactions with me each week that the library is a key partner in their success. Because I met them where they were in the Beacon Scholars classroom—one of a few spaces on campus where they feel comfortable and safe—I became a reliable fixture of that space for them. This model also gave students opportunities to build trust with the library through their relationship with me, as we simultaneously built their confidence to ask for help. They learned to successfully access and use many library resources from within their Beacon home base before they ever entered the physical library.

Because Beacon Scholars is a multi-year cohort program, the impact of this alternative model of embedded librarianship on my relationship-building efforts is cumulative. I have the opportunity to see students return from one year to the next. And because I’m familiar to those returning students, new students are less intimidated by my presence and more likely to seek out my help and respond to me after seeing their peers doing so.

Resulting Library Services Modifications

As much as I represent the library while I am in the

Beacon Scholars classroom and offices, I also represent Beacon Scholars at my library. I learned through this model that there are significant barriers to accessing library support that are unique to first-generation students. In order to improve the library's services for this underserved and vulnerable population, at the beginning of the Fall Semester 2017, I began to collect data about Beacon Scholars students' technology access, skills, and needs. In addition to completing a pre-instruction assessment of their information literacy skills, students answered a brief questionnaire. Of the 100 members of the cohort, 86 completed the assessment and questionnaire.

As a result, I learned that while 93% of students surveyed have access to a home computer/device for their homework needs, 18% of those students do not have reliable Wi-Fi at home. This information became especially valuable from a library services and marketing perspective, when I learned that the majority of students surveyed (67%) weren't aware that the library can lend them Wi-Fi hotspots.

As mentioned previously, one major barrier is a reticence to engage institutional support in an environment that they are struggling to navigate independently. In my conversations with students, many described the physical library in terms such as "intimidating," "hard to navigate," and "scary." However, with the addition of a fully embedded librarian into the program, this perception of the library building has been lessened significantly. Now, students rarely hesitate to ask me to meet them in the library to help them with their research.

I also learned that, while technology resources in the Beacon Scholars offices are limited, students prefer to stay there, rather than visiting an unfamiliar library or other equally unfamiliar computer labs on campus. In the small annex building where the Beacon offices and classroom are housed, students have access to six desktop computers that are 7+ years old and two laptops that are 5+ years old. These computers are intended for use by eight staff members, as well as Beacon Scholars students, many of whom do not own their own computers.

For many students, the choose to make the long trek across campus for access to a computer even though they are not guaranteed that one will even be available, because those computers are in the space that they feel

most comfortable. While the computer lab in the library's Knowledge Commons is another option, I discovered that students' library-related anxieties (whether based on fear or previous negative experiences at the library) are a significant barrier to their access.

Another frequently cited barrier to library-provided technology was the four-hour checkout period for laptops, iPads, and other devices. Because a majority of Beacon students consider the Beacon Scholars offices their home base on campus, the trip to and from the library can take up to forty minutes, carving into almost a quarter of the checkout period. I took this information to Catherine Soehner, the library's Associate Dean for Research and User Services, who encouraged me to make a proposal to the New Services Committee. As a result, check-out periods were extended to fifteen hours to better accommodate all students' needs and access.

This model also provided me with critical insights into our first-generation students' financial needs and the socioeconomic factors that impact their education. Approximately 90% of students enrolled in Beacon Scholars in a given year are eligible for Pell Grants. For the approximately 10% of students who are deemed ineligible for Pell Grants, it is often the result of their lack of experience and knowledge in navigating financial systems of higher education. Many of those same ineligible students have low socioeconomic status and live independently from their parents, but they have not filed the substantial documentation that is required to change their dependency status through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Additionally, a portion of Beacon Scholars students are unable to access federal financial aid due to their immigration status.

However, even when granted aid, many Beacon Scholars students still lack the financial resources to pay University of Utah tuition. When a student successfully qualifies for a Pell Grant, they are awarded \$5800 annually, or \$2900 per semester. Imagine that this student is enrolling in fifteen credit hours each semester in order to graduate in four academic years. As of the 2016-2017 academic year, tuition fees for fifteen credit hours at the University of Utah totaled \$4412—and that does not include tuition differentials, which are additional costs associated with classes offered through particular schools (Office of Admissions, 2017). For example, for each credit hour

in math and science, there is a \$20 fee; while, for each credit hour in business, the tuition differential is \$197.68. The financial impact is a potentially large one for Beacon Scholars students, especially, where the majority of declared majors are pre-medicine, pre-law, engineering, and business. These are the areas that have the most frequent tuition differentials. A student could opt to take fewer credit hours, but in order to be considered a full-time student, they must enroll in twelve credit hours at minimum. Tuition is then \$3730 per semester (excluding applicable tuition differentials), which means that there is a balance of at least \$830 per semester that the student is responsible for. As a result, approximately 63% of students enrolled in Beacon Scholars for the 2017-2018 academic year hold jobs in addition to attending the university on a full-time basis.

With this valuable data presented in the context of the first-generation student experience and existing institutional support, my library was able to enact meaningful changes to our services and resources. Associate Deans Catherine Soehner and Harish Maringanti recently designated ten laptops that will be donated to the Beacon Scholars Program. These laptops were either formerly assigned to library employees or part of the circulating laptop collection in the Knowledge Commons; they will now be re-imaged, updated, and housed at the Beacon Scholars offices.

Conclusion

For first-generation students, a significant barrier to college success is a reticence to engage institutional support. This reticence generally originates from a combination of historically poor support from other major institutions throughout their lives, fears around the potential repercussions of asking for help, and a lack of awareness about the existence of university resources and services. One meaningful way that universities have worked toward engaging first-generation students is to focus on relationship-building by creating small communities of institutionalized support. These specialized communities partner with other campus organizations to ensure that students have access to all university resources and services.

If my experience is representative, librarians have a tremendous opportunity to embed themselves into these

communities. We can use our new embedded experiences as a setting to teach information literacy; to learn from first-generation students about their needs, challenges, and abilities; and to develop services and resources that are better suited to them.

All students struggle to some extent to acclimate to college life, but for first-generation students, it is important for educators and administrators to acknowledge that the playing field is not level, especially when so many are also members of marginalized groups (students of color, undocumented students, LGBTQ students, students who are identified as low-income status). It is easy to dismiss many barriers because, on the surface, they don't appear to be inherently institutional. It is also easy to confuse fear or anxiety around university systems with a lack of student motivation. But by embedding a librarian into a "one-stop shop" model of institutionalized support, we can learn critical information about our first-generation students as they begin to navigate social, academic, financial, and administrative challenges at the university. Refocusing our efforts on building relationships with students allows librarians to influence the efficiency at which we begin to level the playing field, which will, consequently, support all students to succeed.

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