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Enhancing the academic experience

The library and campus engagement

Delta State University (DSU), situated in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, wrestles with many of the typical problems associated with smaller regional universities. Chief among them are improving retention and graduation rates, creating safe and nurturing learning environments, and producing solid informed citizens. The answers to these problems do not usually come easily or quickly. Yet, engagement, with its intense focus on student learning and a multifaceted appreciation of the academic experience, offers a possible solution. In 2004, DSU created a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as part of its Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation reaffrmation and made student engagement the centerpiece. Once SACS approved the university s QEP, engagement became more than just a philosophical issue, it became a tangible and necessary area of assessment.

Far from the sole realm of administrators and teaching faculty, student engagement found a natural home at DSU s Roberts-La-Forge Library. In fact, the library was in a prime position to help the university achieve its new goals, since the librarians were already involved in many engagement-centered programs.

Definition

While the topic is often discussed around campus, there remains some debate about what constitutes student engagement ; therefore, before the library could even highlight or categorize its engagement initiatives, some agreement on terminology had to be shaped. When searching the literature for steadfast principles or guidelines, one would be hard pressed to nd consistent answers. McMahon and Portelli examined numerous de nitions of student engagement and reported that current conceptions oftentimes are too narrow [or] do not address fundamental questions . . . that relate to the question about purposes of engagement. [1]

Kuh used a forthright postulation of student engagement when he stated the, (student) engagement premise is deceptively simple, even self-evident: The more students study a subject, the more they learn about it. [2] Ultimately, however, any de nition used for meaningful application and purpose must originate from, and be contingent upon, the collaborative efforts among students, faculty, and administration for the enrichment of student learning, achievement of lifelong learning skills, and the ful llment of responsibilities related to higher-education accountability.

Student engagement

Remembering Kuh s simple de nition, if more time spent with students equals more effective learning, then assimilating them just as they enter college makes the most sense. Despite all of the library s user-friendly signage and innovative outreach programs, incoming freshmen can still be overwhelmed by a place that seems so daunting, big, and just plain confusing. Making students more comfortable and allowing them to see the library staff as friendly and welcoming remains the biggest

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hurdle; the best (if not the only) remedy seems to be repeated, meaningful contact between librarian and student.

As a first step, the library has taken an active interest in Emerging Scholars, DSU's freshmen orientation course that introduces new students to college life and the world of academic expectations. Usually short on lecture, this session falls heavily on an activity that typically involves some iteration of a scavenger hunt or other interactive exchange where the students are required to cooperate with each other and acquaint themselves with the library's resources. While this type of course is nothing new, the library has tried to create an experience that meets the course leaders' expectations and purposes and achieves the library's primary goal of easing students into the fold. Make no mistake! The librarians have no misconceptions that they are creating information literacy experts. Actually, information literacy plays a very minor part. Instead, the librarian simply wants that first level of contact.

In addition to providing the single library session in Emerging Scholars, some librarians have even chosen to serve as mentors for the entire course. This level of participation increases the visibility of the library/librarian as part of the wider educational process, produces greater communication between the librarian and the rest of the campus, and creates a valuable bond between the librarian and student.

LIB 101-Fundamentals of Information Literacy, the library instruction program's flagship, possibly serves as the library's most concentrated engagement effort. Two overarching goals exist for the course: "Improve student's critical thinking skills necessary to identify, evaluate, and use diverse information resources effectively [and secondly], improve the cultural awareness of students and help them to gain knowledge and an appreciation of social issues of the contemporary environment.[3] These goals align themselves with other universities' information literacy courses; but, more importantly, they serve to fulfill key QEP goals, such as "increased student-student interaction and faculty-student interaction . . . increased use of technology and web-based communication . . . and engagement in free-flowing, multi-directional communication.[4] Although the university and library set these goals a few years ago, they are just as relevant today, especially with online courses and 2.0 technologies becoming the norm.

Another DSU service that the library has provided for a number of years is "Reference by Appointment"—personalized research sessions designed for students or faculty and facilitated by DSU reference librarians. These meetings foster engagement on several levels: students find a more relaxed environment to learn about the library's services and resources; librarians enable students to incorporate critical thinking skills into their research; and faculty discover new resources and find new partners for course content delivery.

Faculty engagement

The previously described programs do not stray far from the library's traditional roles; at a glance, instruction and information literacy sit at the core of most of them. However, with the availability of service opportunities around campus, librarians have become an even bigger part of the engagement picture. In 2006, DSU placed a librarian on the Student Engagement Committee (SEC), a byproduct of QEP. As a member of this committee, the librarian participates in discussions affecting the entire campus, and also brings a unique perspective not necessarily appreciated by faculty who may only see their students in the classroom.

Topics entertained by the committee include curriculum changes, service learning, and, most recently, faculty engagement. With the notion that student engagement begins with faculty, SEC created an entire seminar for new faculty members focusing on academic issues, introducing them to DSU, and more specifically, inculcating them during each class with the university's engagement theme.

The library had little trouble finding a place in this course. Actually, SEC adopted a service that the library had already been offering for years. At the beginning of each fall semester,

the library hosts an orientation that introduces new faculty to library services and also gives them a rst glimpse into collection development policies and procedures.

As an added bonus, each new faculty member receives a generous stipend to spend on library materials. While only one session, the value of the library component far outweighs its brevity. SEC gets a trustworthy ally for its new faculty program, and the library gets to spread its wares while contributing to a positive faculty retention effort.

As mentioned previously, advanced technologies are no longer a luxury, but an essential part of the higher education experience. DSU ensured this integration when, through a technology-related QEP goal, it called for increased faculty professional development, evidence of Web-based assignments, and the presence of advanced technologies listed in syllabi. For its part, the library could not stand by idly. Not only would the library have to update its own services, but librarians would also have to know how faculty were using technology in order to assist students while they were completing assignments in the library.[5]

For many new faculty, QEP is a mystery. Add to that the anxiety they must feel knowing that assignments and syllabi will be assessed. To ease this anxiety, the library began offering a unique service that illustrates several ways that faculty can incorporate technology into their coursework and safely ful ll QEP requirements by using any number of the library s services.

Some examples include adding course materials to electronic reserves, using the library s plagiarism detection software, and creating more research-based assignments necessitating the library s instructional and reference services. Although this initial service targeted new faculty, librarians believe that this service can bene t all teaching faculty members.

Conclusion

Whether it is through serving on the SEC committee, acting as a freshmen mentor, or teaching LIB 101, DSU s librarians have found numerous ways to participate in the university s engagement activities. Although QEP has not changed the library s mission or practices, it has changed how the library thinks about and de nes its student-related activities. Working closely with teachers and administrators, the librarians are ful lling the university s charge, taking part in many nontraditional library roles, and, most importantly, creating a more engaged student body.

Notes

1. Brenda McMahon and John P. Portelli, Engagement for What? Beyond Popular Discourses of Student Engagement, *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 3, no. 1 (2004): 62, 65.

2. George D. Kuh, What We re Learning about Student Engagement from NSSE, *Change* 35, no. 2 (March/April 2003): 25.

3. Roberts-LaForge Library, *Library Services Unit Speci c QEP Learning Goals for 2004-2005* (internal document, Roberts-LaForge Library, Delta State University, 2004), 1 2.

4. Ibid.

5. Delta State University, *Quality Enhancement Plan: A Strategic Plan for Increasing Student Engagement* (2004). ℣