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The Library as an Academic Partner in Student Retention and Graduation: The Library's Collaboration with the Freshman Year Seminar Initiative at the Bronx Community College

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Abstract

In order for academic libraries to continue to demonstrate their value in an age of accountability, developing strong collaborations is essential. Collaborations provide a first rate opportunity for librarians not only to demonstrate their value to the institution and the research practices of the faculty but to facilitate teaching students how to navigate an increasingly diverse and at times confusing information environment driven by access to several technologies. For students entering college, learning early how to navigate the library and its resources can become an important element to their academic success. Inclusion of the library faculty into the development and teaching modules of student orientations and first year seminars, such as the ones designed at the Bronx Community College of the City of New York, provide a great step in establishing our value in promoting retention and graduation.

Introduction

The importance of collaborations between academic library faculty and disciplinary faculty is an essential component in the academic success of college students and in their future as participants in an information-driven society. The role of librarians as it relates in particular to contributing to the development of strong information literate students capable of operating in highly technological, diverse, and at times confusing environments is made easier when librarians are open to opportunities to participate in several areas of student development across college campuses. This article describes such an essential collaboration and provides an introspective on the role of the library and librarians in the Freshman Year Seminars (FYS), a set of one credit orientation courses offered at the Bronx Community College. The hope is to shed some light on the elements of this program on this campus, its role in promoting retention, as well as its merits in promoting future collaborations of the library in support of freshman students.

The Need for Freshman Year Seminars and Freshman Support Initiatives

College students often attend an institution of higher learning with the goal of acquiring a de-

gree and hopefully entering into a meaningful profession with economic rewards and a prosperous future. It seems to be common knowledge that faculty often report on how many students enter college unready and unprepared to meet the demands for academic rigor that is expected in college courses and for degree completion. This lack of preparation is not isolated to academic preparedness or an ability to handle college course work, although this is a significant factor. There is also a lack of social skills and adaptability needed for the college environment as well as an understanding of how to navigate the bureaucratic maze integral to college life.¹ These issues of academic preparedness, social adaptability and learning how college functions, is particularly evident among students at many of the community colleges in the United States, particularly those at community colleges serving a large percentage of minority, international and non-traditional students who have experienced, and some would say been the victim of, a lack of access to a first rate basic elementary and secondary education.² Yet, for thousands of these students, community colleges offer an unparalleled opportunity to gain access to higher education and fulfill the promise of a better life which a college degree can offer. Community colleges are thus providing "critical entry points to higher educa-



tion and economic opportunity for half of the nation's college students."³ Yes, this opportunity for access provides tremendous challenges for the nation's community colleges that are committed to an open admissions policy but being confronted with the task of meeting the social and academic needs of thousands of students not duly prepared for college.

Freshman year experience seminars aimed at supporting students through a compendium of interventions and services emerged in the United States since the 1990s. These freshman student seminars, as studies in this field have described, must be designed in environments aimed at challenging and supporting students with an array of practices intended to provide the necessary support structures that support student retention and lead to graduation.⁴

The Freshman Year Seminars at the Bronx Community College

In an effort to address the challenges of first year students and to provide support structures which can lead to greater retention, overall student satisfaction, and ultimately to graduation, Freshman Year Seminars (FYS) were inaugurated at the Bronx Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY). The Bronx Community College (BCC) is a large urban community college serving a student enrollment which hovers near 10,500 students. The Bronx Community College is located in a beautiful historically designated campus in the New York City borough of the Bronx.⁵ The college serves a large traditionally underrepresented black and Latino population and a significant number of international students hailing mainly from the Dominican Republic. The college has a dismal graduation rate that is similar to other CUNY two year degree granting institutions. For example, the 2007 entering cohort of students had a three year graduation rate of 14.6%.⁶ These numbers have plagued the Bronx Community College despite the evident commitment of faculty and staff at all levels to maximizing student success.

In order to address some of the underlying causes of the poor success rates of students, the Bronx Community College embarked on a re-

view of its freshmen orientation practices, an exercise motivated by the John Gardner Foundations of Excellence in the First Year Institute and by studies funded by the Gates Foundation. Studies conducted by the Community College Research Center of Teacher's College at Columbia University also helped by offering guidance in improving the freshman year experience.⁷

Student retention is thought to be improved through remedial classes taken prior to enrolling in credit-bearing college level courses. At the Bronx Community College, data produced as of October 2011 indicated that 29% of all entering students fail all three reading, writing and mathematics proficiency exams while 28% pass one of the skill tests and another 28% pass at least two tests. The remaining 15% of the students qualified in all three skill areas.⁸ The students failing proficiency exams were then required to complete a series of remediation courses before continuing in a degree program. Some of the drawbacks to these remedial courses include draining students of their financial aid, delaying their graduation date, and in many cases contributing to their discouragement with the college process. These all contribute to the college dropout rate. Statistics gathered by the college for the entering freshman cohort of 2010 indicate a one year retention rate of 58% of students.⁹ In an era of high accountability at all levels of publicly funded institutions, retention of students leading to graduation is of the highest priority for school administrators. With these sobering numbers, the college is committed to moving forward and to improve retention and graduation rates. As benchmarks of its quality education, the Freshman Year Seminars are intended to bring this about.

The FYS model at the Bronx Community College "includes several high impact practices designed to support student success, including: use of e-portfolios, embedded peer mentors, dedicated academic advisors, introduction to academic content and general education practices."¹⁰ Pedagogically sound academic exercises and a robust set of interventions via student support services are key elements of the seminars that enhance the experiences of students engaging and navigating college bureaucracy. The proposal for the freshman year seminars

were accepted as an “experimental” course by the college’s Curriculum Committee and officially given the designation “FYS.” Students receive a value of one college credit that counts as an elective. The courses were first piloted in the spring 2012 semester and continue to be offered into 2013. During its pilot phase, ten sections were successfully completed under the direction of ten faculty members from the Modern Language, Student Affairs, Health and Physical Education and Wellness, Paralegal Studies, Chemistry and Art and Music. The ten sessions had 152 students. The program also drew on support from advisors from the campus Academic Success Center, from staff of Career and Transfer Office and the Office of Institutional Research, and from library faculty focusing on information literacy.

The Bronx Community College Library Program

The Bronx Community College Library has a solid Information Literacy (IL) program. The program strengths are in its ability to tailor instruction around faculty requests, course assignments or research needs. These elements provide the opportunity to deliver information literacy sessions for our students with relevance to their course needs. The college also offers a regular set of freshman orientation seminars that all students are required to take, courses designated as “Occupational and Career Development” (OCD), and constitute the library’s primary vehicle of direct instructional contact with students. As Kuhn, Boruff-Jones and Mark state, “one of the more effective ways to teach information literacy systematically to large numbers of students early in their college careers is to include librarians in the instructional team.”¹¹ The Bronx Community College OCD seminars, and in particular the FYS, offer the BCC library a great opportunity to reach students early in their academic careers. The IL program at BCC works closely with teaching faculty as much as it is desired by them in order to improve or mediate assignments or to tailor class instruction around other needs of the course. English classes that have a research paper assigned also shape the much of the library instructional contact, as well as do other courses in Communication, Reading and Education and Nursing. The only perceived

deficiency in the IL program is found on the limited instructional contact time with students that range from fifty-minute to two-hour time slots. These time periods are widely perceived by library faculty as not offering enough interaction time to introduce students to higher order IL proficiencies, such as critical evaluation of sources, keyword selection and citation protocols. Time shortages may at times also prevent engaging in active learning models of instruction or critical thinking exercises. Time limits tend to restrict an assessment component.

Nevertheless, librarians try to offer fun and creative ways to integrate as much as possible about library services and the rudiments of research in sessions with students. Of course, librarians are always open to additional follow-up class sessions and encourage other direct instructional contact with students. Special workshops are occasionally offered when requested by faculty. Communication with faculty allows librarians to shape the class to the essential elements as identified by the instructors and the library faculty, and all informed by ACRL standards.

Library Collaboration with the FYS

Pioneers in the FYS movement such as John Gardner have observed that “librarians were dramatically underrepresented in the power groups that convened on campus to develop new visions for improving the first year.”¹² Having been invited to participate in the FYS discussion at the Bronx Community College presented a wonderful opportunity to express the keen interest that library faculty have in the success and retention of freshman as well as the importance of the library to academic success overall. It also presented a chance to demonstrate the advocacy role that librarians play in the education of students.

With a new Bronx Community College Library now located in an elegant and technologically modern building,¹³ librarians were invited to participate in some of the FYS planning meetings and discussions during the later preparation phases. In these meetings, faculty leaders well acquainted with the best research practices aimed at student success explained the rudiments of course design integrating both for sup-

portive and challenging elements in an array of disciplines including Health, Physical Education and Wellness, Paralegal Studies, Business and Chemistry. Faculty teaching the FYS have a lot of freedom on the academic portion of the courses, but all seminars follow general education objectives promoted by the university with the academic content of these courses cleverly wrapped around these general education guidelines. These guidelines recognize the importance of information literacy and constitute an essential component. Accordingly, faculty are encouraged to include a research or library related assignment when designing their courses.

The commitment of the Bronx Community College Freshman Year Seminars to include the library, and in making information literacy a strong part of the content and general education proficiencies of these courses, demonstrates the institutional belief that IL and the library are integral elements in the success of our students. In order to keep the FYS planning meeting manageable, only two faculty members were invited to participate. The author was happy to participate in these collaborations, which allowed the library to show its services as truly as academic partners in the teaching enterprise, along with its traditional role as a support service. Overall, library participation was welcomed by the library faculty.

Library faculty involvement focused on which IL skills and proficiencies should take precedence. Discussion also centered on what information literacy is and the essential information about the library and its services. In developing the FYS, great care was given to the appropriate scope of learning expected, the nature of student engagement with the material, and the methods of instruction. The design of meaningful, challenging, yet manageable and not excessively demanding research assignments for students taking a one-credit course presented the most obvious challenge to some of the faculty and librarians. Differences arose on occasion on how best to approach and shape the task. Ultimately, faculty continued to have broad freedom to shape their IL assignments and, given the different disciplines involved, the assignments were diverse in their complexity and design. Assessment planning presented a challenge due to the

various facets of the FYS and the assessment needs for the IL component being different from other aspects.

Besides being of benefit to the students in the program, there were distinct benefits for the librarians involved. It helped us explore more deeply what it means to teach IL and to realize anew its importance as an academic skill. Participating in the FYS helped librarians determine what is important and relevant to students, how to cover this in an hour of instruction, and how to improve communication. It also demonstrated to BCC the role and value librarians play in the teaching/learning process and in achieving the immediate goal of improving student success and retention. Participating in the FYS was a terrific opportunity for librarians to partner with the teaching faculty and to be regarded as authentic academic colleagues that support their work in key, essential ways.

As Alan Guskin suggests, adapting our notions of information literacy to this new generation in their the first year college experience will be a challenge for faculty and for college administration, but, he says, "the leaders in dealing with these incredible changes will be the librarians who have travelled the farthest and changed the most in transforming their staid academic units into the most exciting, dynamic, and central learning environments of our colleges and universities."¹⁴ Librarians have a key role to play as leaders and advocates in IL. It is a collaborative effort, though, where librarians must hear from teaching faculty as much as it is important for teaching faculty to hear from librarians. It is a collaboration that builds trust, mutuality and collegiality. Steven Bell compiles a "Five-Point Plan for Success" in integrating the library as a valuable partner in the education and retention of students. In making his case, he lists among other things the important role librarians have in research skill building, in being core contributors to student success, and in providing data that links student persistence and satisfaction to the library's services, resources and people.¹⁵ Librarians need to be considered a valuable resource, not only because of the collections and the traditional services that are offered, but also because of their experience in teaching IL and

making it a competency crucial in the academic success of students.

Preliminary Results of the FYS and Suggestions for Future Collaborations

The effects of the FYS at the Bronx Community College is beginning to demonstrate impressive numbers as it relates to student retention, higher GPA's and the number of credits attempted and completed as evidenced in the preliminary data presented in the tables below.

These data demonstrate encouraging retention numbers and solid increases in average GPAs of freshman students participating in the FYS when compared with other orientation models. As of early January 2013, 68.3% of 379 students enrolled in the FYS during the fall 2012 semester have re-enrolled and their GPAs and average term credits earned are demonstratively higher. These numbers may significantly increase as 2013 registrations progress.

Table 1:

**BCC New Students' One Semester Retention, Fall 2012
Retention of First Year Students Based on Orientation Model**

Orientation Model	N	Enrolled Spring 2013
FYS/ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs)	90	93.3%
FYS	379	75.2%
OCD (Occupational and Career Development)	893	68.3%
All others (not enrolled in any orientation seminar)	479	50.3%

Table 2:

**Average Term GPA and Term Credit Earned:
Fall 2012 BCC New Students.
Orientation Model Comparisons**

Orientation Model	N	Average Term GPA	Average Term Credits Earned
FYS/ASAP	90	2.79	9.23
FYS	379	2.17	5.94
OCD	893	1.77	4.73
All others (not enrolled in any orientation seminar)	479	1.60	3.64

Source: BCC Office of Institutional Research, January 5, 2013



However, while it is relatively easy for the BCC library to understand our influence based on extrapolated outcomes, especially as they relate to higher GPAs and higher course completion, it will not be possible to quantitatively measure our influence and the impact of our participation in these courses unless we design an instrument to do so, and such an instrument should be constructed. This tool should be separate from other IL assessment methods with the goal of measuring the academic effect on students who participate in FYs and on their work in research assignments that require critical thinking and critical evaluation of sources. Only in this manner we will be able to demonstrate our value quantitatively. Nevertheless, strengthening our presence as librarians by actively seeking to contribute to the FYs will undoubtedly have an impact on student scholastic achievement.

Conclusion

Seizing opportunities to increase collaboration with disciplinary faculty to better achieve the mission of the Bronx Community College can help to improve the first year experience of its students and thus help to achieve stronger retention rates and higher GPAs. The FYs afford the library an opportunity to highlight instruction as a library-based imperative for students that helps ensure their ultimate success in college. Having the opportunities to meet freshman students in a set of seminars so centered on promoting student success helped the library highlight, and in fact realize in new ways the value of library faculty as an essential educational partner.

Endnotes

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² *Ibid.*

³ "Institute on Education and the Economy" *Community College Research Center* (New York:

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<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/History.asp>

⁴ Upcraft, *Challenging and Supporting*, p. 10.

⁵ Bronx Community College, "Bronx Community College's University Heights Campus Designated a National Historic Landmark, Bronx Community College,"
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⁶ Bronx Community College-CUNY Office of Academic Affairs, "Actual and Predicted 4 Year Graduation Rates of Full-time First Time Freshman Entering Associate Program" (June 14, 2012).

⁷ Columbia University, Community College Research Center,
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⁸ Office of the President, Bronx Community College of the City University of New York, Carole Berotte-Joseph, President, "Student Profile, Spring 2011" (October 2011).

⁹ BCC Office of Institutional Research, "Associate Degree-2010 Entering Cohort, One Year Rate of First Time-Full-Time Entering Students."

¹⁰ Bronx Community College Office of Research, Planning and Assessment, "Brief Description of Freshman Year Seminars Goals" e-mail correspondence, Dr. Nancy Ritze (August 17, 2012).

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¹² John Gardner and Andrew Koch, "Preface" in *The Role of the Library in the First College Year*, ed., Larry L. Hardesty, *The First Year Experience Mon-*

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¹³ For information about the new library building at the Bronx Community College, see; David W. Lunlap, "A Bronx College Gets a Library Building That Is Truly Its Own," *New York Times*, (Monday, September 3, 2012) http://www.bcc.cuny.edu/CommunicationsMarketing/Documents/NYTimes-BCC_Gets_a_Library_Building.pdf

¹⁴ Alan Guskin, "Foreword" in *The Role of the Library in the First College Year*, ed., Larry L. Hardesty, *The First Year Experience Monograph Series, no. 45.* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2007), p. xiii.

¹⁵ Stephen Bell. "Keeping them Enrolled: How Academic Libraries Contribute to Student Retention," *Library Issues: Briefings for Faculty and Administrators* 29 (September 2008): 1