



The Gentle & Precarious Balancing Act of the Student Success Librarian

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Slide 1 – Title

Welcome to The Gentle & Precarious Balancing Act of the Student Success Librarian. I am Julie Hunter, and I am a Student Success Librarian at Western Connecticut State University. I am also the Coordinator of WCSU's FY Peer Mentor Program.

Objectives

- Student Success
- Background
- Experiences
- Challenges
- Successes
- Tips for Success
- What I've Learned
- Further Reading

Slide 2 – Objectives

In this presentation we will talk about the definition of student success, we'll do a little activity here. I'll give you some background information about the position, discuss my experiences as a Student Success Librarian, including challenges and successes I've encountered. I'll give you some tips for success, tell you what I've learned and share some further reading.

Student Success

- What does student success mean to you?

padlet.com/hunterj41/7vn0kwosm2633q2l

Slide 3 – Student Success

So, I'm curious, what does student success mean to you? Or to your institution?

I have a padlet here. I'd like us to take a few minutes and have you share your ideas on student success. Unless you're logged into padlet, your responses will be anonymous.

<https://padlet.com/hunterj41/7vn0kwosm2633q2l>

Take a couple minutes to let people answer. Narrate as they go

Student Success

Definition:

- Retention
- Good academic standing
- Graduation

Slide 4 – Student Success

Generally speaking, student success refers to retention, good academic standing, and graduation for the individual student.

But as you can see, there are many definitions of student success. And there are many ways for a student to succeed.

Student Success

- What is my definition?
- What is my role?

Slide 5 – Student Success

As a Student Success Librarian, I think it's important to consider these two questions. In thinking about my own definition of student success and what my role is in it, even now – 2 years on the job – I find it challenging to conform to standard expectations

How do I define student success?

- I believe that student success does include retention, good academic standing, and graduation. But I also see student success as a very granular concept.
 - A student who get's their first B is a success
 - A student who asks questions in class, is a success
 - Students developing relationships, are successful
- I believe that student success looks different for each student.

What is my role in student success?

- Initially when I started this position, I came at it with the mentality that anything and everything could qualify as supporting student success. To be quite frank, I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to find enough opportunities to satisfy the expectations of my job.
- Looking back, I can see how wrong I was. But at the time I knew it was a newly crafted position, and in looking at the job description I could see that I would need to be creative in developing initiatives.
- I'll talk a little more about my role in student success at the end of the presentation.

Background

Student Success Librarian Job Postings

- [Emory University](#)
- [University of Tennessee at Knoxville](#)
- [North Carolina Community Colleges](#)
- [University of North Carolina at Charlotte](#)
- [Eastern Illinois University](#)
- [Humboldt State University](#)

Slide 6 – Background

So let's jump back a little bit.

I knew when I took this position in January of 2019, that it would be a unique role. Prior to my application, sometime in 2018, I started to notice this new trend – academic libraries searching for Student Success Librarians. Out was the (in my mind) hugely hipster trend of hiring Digital Humanities Librarians and in was this new and improved role that libraries needed to fill.

Student. Success. Librarian.

So, what is a Student Success Librarian?

A recent Google search returned postings for [Emory University](#), the [University of Tennessee at Knoxville](#), [North Carolina Community Colleges](#), [University of North Carolina at Charlotte](#), [Eastern Illinois University](#), and [Humboldt State University](#)

Background

- Develop instructional services for FY students
- Teach research instruction sessions for assigned subjects and academic programs
- Provide research services
- Build relationships across campus
- Contribute to library initiatives
- Serve as an ambassador to create a campus-wide structure to fully support and enable student success across the board
- Actively engage with academic programs and university and external communities in assigned subject areas and in support of student success
- Develop innovative library programming and services for newly-admitted and transfer students
- Work with library colleagues, other campus student support units, academic departments, and students to leverage and promote library resources contributing to student success
- Support [the school's] mission and strategic vision through campus-wide instruction and engagement efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate diverse populations

Slide 7 – Background

Job descriptions included responsibilities like:

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- Teach research instruction sessions for assigned subjects and academic programs
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- Work with library colleagues, other campus student support units, academic departments, and students to leverage and promote library resources contributing to student success
- Support [the school's] mission and strategic vision through campus-wide instruction and engagement efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate diverse populations

Background

- Provide research assistance in person and online, including some evening and weekend hours.
- Serve as liaison librarian for assigned departments by performing research consultations, instruction, collection development, creating [LibGuides](#), and other general liaison tasks.
- Develop and teach one credit peer mentor course in collaboration with appropriate university offices and departments
- Participate in library faculty governance.
- Collaborate with library faculty colleagues to develop educational services that integrate information literacy and research skills into undergraduate programs.
- Investigate, recommend, develop and coordinate scalable library programs related to student engagement, academic engagement, and orientation for undergraduate students, with an emphasis on information literacy skill-building of early-stage undergraduates and transfer students.
- Shape new directions for initiatives that support student learning and provide library services where students expect to find them.

Slide 8 – Background

The job description I applied to included concrete things like:

- Provide research assistance in person and online, including some evening and weekend hours.
- Serve as liaison librarian for assigned departments by performing research consultations, instruction, collection development, creating LibGuides, and other general liaison tasks.
- Develop and teach one credit peer mentor course in collaboration with appropriate university offices and departments
- Participate in library faculty governance.

Some of the more vague responsibilities included:

- Collaborate with library faculty colleagues to develop educational services that integrate information literacy and research skills into undergraduate programs.
- Investigate, recommend, develop and coordinate scalable library programs related to student engagement, academic engagement, and orientation for undergraduate students, with an emphasis on information literacy skill-building of early-stage undergraduates and transfer students.
- Shape new directions for initiatives that support student learning and provide library services where students expect to find them.

The first 4 tasks on this slide, I understood what was being asked of me. I had experience doing most of these things and understood what I needed to do to make these things happen.

The last 3 tasks though, were new to me. Sure, I can understand what I was being asked to do. But there was no manual on how to complete these tasks.

- I understand how to create educational services related to IL and research skills, but how do I get them into UG programs?
- I think the second one is asking me to once again create programming for UG & transfer students related to IL skill building, but with the added spin of considering student engagement, academic engagement, and orientation? But how do you specifically tailor IL instruction to address student & academic engagement?
- This last one, my question is which initiatives need new direction? Am I responsible for evaluating and shaping new directions all of our library services?

What I soon came to learn was that these responsibilities were vague, for a reason.

Experiences

Year One

- Human Library - humanlibrary.org/
- FY Peer Mentor Program
- Departmental liaison
- Instruction
- Reference & research
- Committees
- High school visits
- Social media
- Professional research & presentations

Year Two

- COVID response
- FY modules
- Faculty workshops
- Library Blackboard presence
- Supervising an adjunct
- More committees
- New professional research & presentations
- Instruction & reference & liaison
- FY Peer Mentor Program
- LIB course code
- Rehaul PM Program & LIB 101: Fundamentals of Academic Success

Slide 9 – Experiences

I'd like to share with you my activities over the last two years.

In my first year:

- I coordinated WCSU's first Human Library Event (<https://humanlibrary.org/>)
- Assumed the role of Coordinator of the FY Peer Mentor Program
- Performed liaison duties
- Developed and delivered instruction, which included collaborating with a professor on a new student research project
- Held reference and research hours
- Joined any committee that I could. This included elected governance roles and working groups like OER, TIDDL (technology, instructional design, and digital learning), and UndocuAlly
- Hosted local high school's and introduced them to academic level resources
- Assumed responsibility for the library's social media
- And tied up a research project resulting in presentations and a published paper with colleagues

In my second year, COVID hit

- Initiated the library's response to the pandemic, including facilitating the creation of documentation should the school close and managing a libguide
- Created a standalone instruction module on information literacy that FY faculty could incorporate into their newly online courses
- As a member of the working group on TIDDL, I developed and presented multiple faculty workshops on library and academic support resources and how to embed them in BB courses
- Facilitated the inclusion of library resources in Blackboard, in point of need locations for students

- Assumed responsibility for supporting our new Marketing & Outreach Adjunct
- Joined more committees like the library Search Committee, a CSU consortium committee on IL, and the University's Committee on General Education and the Orientation Committee
- Began a new research project with a colleague
- The usual ... instruction, refence, and liaison duties
- Reworked all of the training for the peer mentor program and converted it to an online class, in addition to coordinating the program remotely
- Successfully proposed through faculty governance the creation of a new course code to support library instruction efforts
- Completely rehailed the FY Peer Mentor program to target support to at-risk FY students, including creating the course LIB 101: Fundamentals of Academic Success, acquiring our first budget, and hiring a GA

Now, I realize this looks like I'm bragging. I promise that's not my intention (although when I was creating this slide I did have a little moment). But what I do want to do is showcase the range of activities I've participated in.

On any given week, I could be having conversations with any of the following:

- Library director
- Provost
- FY Coordinator
- AccessAbility Services
- Counseling and/or the Women's Center
- Danbury Public Library
- Director for the Center on Excellence in Learning & Teaching
- Coordinator of our EA2P program – which supports minority students
- The Dean of Students
- Coordinators of our tutoring services
- Marketing & Outreach adjunct

These are just a few of the conversations I have to (quote) "Collaborate with appropriate campus entities to develop and assist with outreach events that increase student engagement with the library and first year programs."

Challenges

- Siloed work
- Defining the work
- Student success umbrella
- Feelings of obligation

Slide 10 – Challenges

There are a few challenges I've identified to working as a Student Success Librarian:

- Siloed work – This one is quite hard to work around. My role inherently requires collaboration. As you may or may not know, a lot of faculty struggle to collaborate and often prefer to work on their own, whether by choice or by necessity. This includes librarians.
- The second challenge I've experienced is defining the work. What is it exactly I am responsible for? I share a lot of the same responsibilities as my colleagues (reference, instruction, collection development), but I am also responsible for programming, outreach, marketing, and the development of new initiatives. Aside from the fact that these are things that all librarians should be working collaboratively on, where is the line? Without boundaries, these responsibilities can grow and multiply to include just about anything.
 - For example, it was recently suggested that the library's Public Services Committee (which I am on) consider initiatives to support student success. My question to the committee was, "will new initiatives decided upon by this committee, ultimately be my responsibility?" Based on my job description, it is reasonable to assume that any new projects created to support "student success" could at some point be pushed to me, or that I would be evaluated on their success. This brings me to the next challenge...
- In my second semester I started to notice this pattern... The student success umbrella. There was this space in which projects were pushed to – This project supports student success, let 's have the student success librarian do it. There were a couple of different logic trains happening here.

- One, our library is short staffed. Everyone hired prior to me is pretty maxed out on projects
- Two, the role of Student Success Librarian is just vague enough that anything can be placed under it. For example, social media. Social media is not in my job description, and it is not directly tied to student success (remember that definition we talked about earlier: retention, good academic standing, and graduation). However, marketing the library's services does technically fall within my job description and library services do impact student success... so if we apply transitive logic, then managing social media becomes something that I could/ should do. This brings me to my next point
- Feelings of obligation. It is really easy to become overwhelmed in this role and say yes to every request.
 - There is of course the obvious reason for saying yes to everything. It's assumed that if you're in a tenure track position, you're going to jump at every opportunity that is presented. And I would say yes, there is some of that.
 - But more importantly I have found myself saying yes to projects because I realize that no one else will work on them. And if I don't do it then it's a lost opportunity.

Successes

- Variety
- Connections
- Empowered

Slide 11 – Successes

All that being said, I would say that I have found this job quite rewarding.

- I have never been one for repetitive tasks, I get bored easily with mundane responsibilities, and I have found that this job encourages and supports a variety of tasks in a way that engages me.
- I get to have conversations that librarians don't traditionally have. I know more about the course approval process, orientation, mentorship and tutoring, and student life than I ever thought I would. And I have found this knowledge to be empowering. Not only do I find myself having a seat at broader university discussions, but I have found opportunities to advocate for the library and bring information back to the library in new ways.
- And speaking of empowerment, I am lucky enough to have a director and colleagues who support my ideas. This job has given me the autonomy to develop new initiatives and try new things

Tips for Success

- Balance
- Collaboration / delegation
- Prioritize
- Manage expectations

Slide 12 – Tips for Success

If you find yourself in a position like Student Success Librarian or First Year Librarian, I have a few tips for success.

- Find balance
 - Balance the things you need to do (whether tenure related or expectations of the job) with things you want (or would like) to do
 - Find ways to do fun things, both for you and the students. For example, one of my favorite things to do is putting together a week-long stress-free finals event at the end of each semester. I put out craft supplies and puzzles, coffee and snacks, and schedule therapy dogs. Another little thing I enjoy doing is handing out business cards to new student orientation tours. I make it fun and silly. It always catches them off guard, but I enjoy seeing them smile
 - I would also add here that it's important to learn to say no. Even if you're on tenure track, it's likely that your plate will fill up pretty fast and it helps no one if you're burnt out.
- Collaboration/ delegation
 - Find ways to collaborate by identifying and developing relationships with departments on campus, for example: Admissions, Student Affairs, Res Life, Orientation organizers, etc. Participate in support initiatives like OER, technology, and student support working groups – we have one called UndocuAlly that supports initiatives for undocumented students

- Develop relationships with departments and organizations across campus and in the community, for example: the Women’s Center or your local public library. And develop relationships with people who can advocate for you (the Director of the library pushed for me to be on the Orientation Committee, the Provost advocated for the improvements to the Peer Mentor Program, the library spokesperson encouraged me to join the Committee on General Education). Networking is a big part of the job. Start with one person and see what doors open.
- Encourage your library colleagues to get involved and work on projects with you. You will get a lot of noes and blank stares, but you will also find someone who can help/ or wants to help on one project that is relevant to their work. I looped our Digital Services Librarian and one of our Research Services adjuncts into helping me roll out libchat, including developing procedures and training.
- Anytime you’re working on a project, in addition to identifying collaborators who you trust, don’t be afraid to delegate tasks. This was hard for me, in part because I felt responsible for the projects I initiated (I’m at least a little type-A), but also because I felt bad asking people to do work that I assumed I should do. It helped to reframe projects in my mind – everyone is responsible for student success initiatives, I’m just lucky enough to be able to lead them. If you find yourself managing a team, get comfortable delegating
- Prioritize
 - Regularly assess the projects you’re working on. Make sure they are working for you and the library. Remember, everything can fall under the scope of “student success,” so what is most important right now and what contributes to the library’s long-term goals?
- And perhaps most importantly, manage expectations
 - This applies to your own expectations as well as that of your colleagues
 - Define your limits & boundaries. Be aware of what is in your job description and what you’ll be evaluated on.
 - Have conversations with your colleagues about how student success is a shared goal. Ask them what projects they are working on to support student success. You don’t have to get involved but showing interest in their work will reinforce shared ownership of student success.
 - Share your boundaries with others. What this looks like for me:
 - Is I communicate regularly with the Director of the library so that she knows what projects I am working on. This is unique because at my institution, I do not report to the Director. I keep her updated though because in her role she is able to have conversations at a higher level than I am. Knowing what projects I’m working on allows her to not only advocate for them and find resources and partnerships, but it also manages her expectations. If she comes across new ideas or opportunities, we can have a frank conversation about whether it is something I can take on or if it is something that we need to shelve.

- I tell others what I can do. For example, I have found myself in meetings where an idea is presented and members of the group do that side glance, wink, nod, suggestive joking to try to get me or others to volunteer for the task. Instead of taking on more than I can handle, I will tell the group what I can do, for example, "I can create the flyer."

What Have I Learned?

- Student Success Librarians are traditional librarians
- It is very easy to overextend yourself
- Job descriptions are written to support university goals
- It's important to evaluate your tasks

- Everything we do supports student success.

Slide 13 – What Have I Learned?

So, what have I learned over the last 2 years?

- Student Success Librarians are traditional librarians with the added intention of supporting FY students, if not the student population as a whole.
- It is VERY easy to overextend yourself in this role.
- Student Success Librarian job descriptions are written to please administration while also loose enough to support core library services.
- If you find yourself lucky enough to apply for and accept a Student Success Librarian position, make sure you constantly evaluate your responsibilities. Are they contributing to student success initiatives in a constructive way? Or are they tasks that no one else wants to do?
- Everything we do (librarians, faculty, staff, and administration) it all supports student success.

So now, what is my role as a student success librarian? After the last two years,

- I can more concisely say that my role is to support students. I am a traditional librarian with traditional duties like instruction, reference, subject liaison, and collection development.
- But I have the added superpower of facilitating conversations and projects to support initiatives across campus.
- My title may say that I am the Student Success Librarian, but it doesn't mean I am the answer to students' success. I am empowered by my job description to draw lines and work on specific initiatives.

Further Reading

- Association of College & Research Libraries. (2015). *Academic library contributions to student success: Documented practices from the field*. Association of College & Research Libraries. http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/value/contributions_report.pdf
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- Todorinova, L. (2018). A mixed-method study of undergraduate and first year librarian positions in academic libraries in the United States. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, (44)2, 207-215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2018.02.005>
- Triumph, T.F. & Beile, P.M. (2015). The trending academic library job market: An analysis of library position announcements from 2011 with comparisons to 1996 and 1988. *College & Research Libraries*, (76)6, 716-739. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.76.6.716>

Slide 14 – Further Reading

I've included a list of further reading. This list is in no way comprehensive. Consider it more of a sampling. I've included here some research performed by librarians, articles on the library's impact on student success, and an article on the emergence of student success as a profession in higher education... we are not the only profession to be hit by the trend to fill student success positions.

Further Reading:

Association of College & Research Libraries. (2015). *Academic library contributions to student success: Documented practices from the field*. Association of College & Research Libraries.

http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/value/contributions_report.pdf

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Thank You

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“If you’re the Student Success Librarian, does that make us the Student Failure Librarians?”

-Anonymous colleague

Slide 15 – Thank you

I’ve included here a joke that my colleague heard when she was first hired as a Student Success Librarian.

“If you’re the Student Success Librarian, does that make us the Student Failure Librarians?”

– Anonymous colleague

Thank you for attending my presentation. Please reach out if anything comes up.

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