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A Family Affair: Library Opportunities to Connect With Parents and Families

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of libraries engaging with parents and student families are broad and can result in benefits to the students' success in their collegiate experience. While this is most critical, parental connections can also produce positive results for libraries and their institutions as well. Such examples include fundraising and development opportunities, increased partnerships between the library and other campus units, and improved retention and recruitment. This article presents ideas for many ways in which libraries can engage with parents and families, while also exploring the benefits of such efforts.

CONNECTING WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Libraries are constantly exploring ways to engage students, bringing them into our buildings, having them meet with librarians, and encouraging their use of our resources and services. An area for further exploration exists in engagement with the parents of our primary patrons. As Little and Price articulate, "parents are an important resource to their child and should, therefore, be brought into the college's culture and engaged just as much as their child is. Providing the information and resources to parents of students allows the institution to build upon and utilize an entire support structure that is already in place within the family unit" (190). Effective connections with parents and families can result in ripple

positive effects for nearly everyone involved from the student, to the parent, to the college, as presented in the following section.

Benefits to Student Success: Role of Parents

The role of the parent in students' success is increasingly evident. The negative view of the "helicopter parent" has turned to reveal positive results from such parenting styles. In the 2007 National Survey of Student engagement, findings indicated that students who were frequently in contact with their parents had "higher levels of engagement and more frequent use of deep learning activities" and "greater gains on a host of desired college outcomes, and greater satisfaction with the college experience" (25). There are differing ways in which parents are involved in their children's academic lives, but it appears clear that "including parents and family members in the orientation, transition, and retention processes is vital to the success and personal development of today's students" (Ward-Roof 2010, 91).

Similar to parents' roles, research and studies show that the library can also play a critical and positive role in the academic success of students. In their study on the impact of library use and undergraduate student outcomes, Soria, Fransen and Nackerud found that "the data suggest that first-year students who used the library at least once in the fall semester had higher grade point averages compared to their peers who did not use the library at all during their first semester. Further, the data suggest that first-year students who used the library at least one time during their first semester had higher retention from their fall to spring semester" (160).

Libraries are in a perfect position to help parents help their children. Parents are very interested in ensuring that the library is central to their students' lives and they want to know the details of what the library provides for their child. Parents need to be shown not only the resources the library has to offer their student but also the personal and individualized help that librarians can give their child. As they

prepare to take a step back from being the student's main support system, we can show them “that the library can play a valuable role in the students’ support and survival system” (Bell, 3) and they can in turn encourage their student to turn the library for support.

Benefits to the Library: Connecting Through Admissions, Financial Aid and Development

Developing strong partnerships with various units across campus that have frequent interaction with parents can do a great deal to promote the library. Offices such as admissions and financial aid are definite stops for any prospective families visiting a college campus. The library’s presence in these units show prospective parents that the library is a fundamental element of not only the campus but their child’s success. And, as Cummings explains, “reaching out to non-academic departments or units can be of enormous benefit to the library community. Besides becoming a willing campus partner, relationships will develop and take on new life and the library will see real advantages in institutional support” (292).

The library is typically a stop on any college tour for prospective families, but the impact of that stop can be more powerful if it is part of a larger understanding and collaboration between the library and Admissions. Additionally, a strong collaboration can result in much more for the library than a stop on a tour. If Admissions sees the library not only as a selling point to parents and students, but a vital piece of the university, then the library has successfully connected to Admissions. This can result in increased inclusion in many parent-reaching efforts, such as promotional material, parent handbooks and involvement in other admission-sponsored events. In a similar way, by fostering a relationship with the financial aid office, the library can connect with parents in the moment that they are focused on the financial burden of college and show them ways in which they can help alleviate the strain.

A strong and positive connection with parents can be an excellent tool for development and fundraising. Parents who are in a position to make a donation to the college are more likely to designate that gift to the library if they have a positive impression of the library and see the library as key component to their child's success. And since libraries serve a great number of students, there may be direct and indirect opportunities to connect with them from a development perspective.

Benefits to the University: Supporting Recruitment and Retention

While academic libraries are increasingly recognizing their roles in student recruitment, such roles are generally still ones of potential growth and further opportunity. Kopp explains that academic libraries "can bridge the gap between what students see as 'generic marketing' and the important message of how the institution differentiates itself from other schools in rationale and purpose...the library serves as a vehicle to talk about the academic life of the institution with these external audiences," yet these strengths and opportunities are not well capitalized (194). The good news is that keeping these facts in mind, libraries can make great and creative efforts to show prospective families the library's value while they are still in the college search phases and use the benefits of the library as a recruitment tool.

In one study, Lombard found that while the majority of students' decisions on which college to attend was not influenced by the library, after completing their undergraduate work, many saw the value of the library and felt it should have been a determining factor, with one student noting "during my decision to enroll in a college having a library was not a concern for me. Now that I have one available to me I don't know what I would do without it" (240). Libraries can capitalize on such late realizations by packaging and presenting them as key elements of success to potential students and their parents.

Legacy recruitment is also an area in which the library can participate. Research has shown that siblings can influence students' college choice. A Harvard Kennedy School study revealed that 20% of students attend the same college or university as their older siblings (Goodman 2015, 75). Taking advantage of every opportunity engage with families of currently enrolled students puts the library in an excellent position to support sibling recruitment and increased enrollment for the college.

Finally, like colleges and universities, parents desire retention and academic success for their children, and such success relies on a number of facets including students connecting with people and achieving positive results in their classes and scholarly efforts. A growing library commitment with much potential is the focus of libraries' efforts and impact on student retention. As Bell indicated even in 2008, it may even be that libraries are already contributing to student retention but have not yet capitalized on the demonstration of such success (1). Focusing on the parent connection in retention is a way for libraries to concentrate and capitalize on one key aspect of this larger retention goal. In fact, Bell's final point in "The Five-point Plan for Success" in student retention is to "explore ways to involve the library in working with parents in supporting student success" (1).

OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT

The following section presents some of the ways in which the library can establish connections with parents and families through events, collaborations and partnerships.

Campus Events

Any time that parents are on campus, or interacting with the college, is a chance for the library to connect to them. Given the many benefits to connecting with parents, it's crucial to take advantage of

every available opportunity. Inserting the library into campus events can go a long way to create support for the library.

Move-in Weekend and orientation present an interesting opportunity for libraries. “Given their influence over and connectedness to students, especially freshmen, parents are the perfect target for library outreach efforts” (Bell, 3). While students are busy with orientation activities the library can arm parents with knowledge and resources they can then pass along to their child. As students transition to college life, there will undoubtedly be times when they still turn to their parents for support. Setting up meet and greet sessions with subject and liaison librarians can reassure parents of the help available to their child. If the library is able to make meaningful connections with parents in the student’s first days of college, they can remind their child of the helpful librarian they met while the student was at an orientation session and encourage them to seek out the support of the library.

As students and alumni celebrate Homecoming Weekend, the library has the opportunity to connect with past, present and future students. Preus Library at Luther College has honored the work of alumni by hosting an exhibit of alumni art in the library. The library is the perfect location for homecoming events as Professor David Kamm points out, “a lot of people wander back through the library because they've all had some experience there...it's a place they know, and that they're familiar with--they want to see what's going on” (Myer 2016). By hosting such events the library becomes an important stop in a busy weekend of homecoming activities and can show visitors to the campus the support and services they provide for students. As one Luther professor points out, events such as these are an opportunity to “see success stories” and hosting the event in the library shows that the library is supportive of and an active player in this success.

Libraries, parents and students benefit when libraries participate in Parent Weekend events. As Ward-Roof, Heaton and Coburn explain, events such as Parent Weekend provide parents with “opportunities to interact with faculty and staff, tour campus facilities, and meet those who are important to their son or daughter. These interactions are good times to emphasize the messages outlined in orientation and help parents and family members continue to develop positive relationships with staff, faculty, and administrators” (50). Parents are likely hoping to see the library as an important part of their child’s academic experience and by working with coordinators of parent events, the library can make sure to enforce that message.

Engagement with Parent Associations

Colleges and Universities typically have a parent associations or organizations, and their missions and purposes can vary. “In the field of parent services, there are two basic models that have proven successful: the ‘student development’ model and the ‘financial development’ model” (Savage, 68).

While some parent groups are more clearly focused on development, fundraising and gift-giving and others focus more on involvement in the student’s academic experience, it is clear that college libraries can do a great deal more to become involved and connected with either type of parent associations.

Following are excerpts from a number of mission statements of parent associations with a stated focus on student success:

“to improve students’ Adelphi experience through parental knowledge of resources....an opportunity to play a supporting role in your student’s college experience” -Adelphi University

“As a parent you are a vital part of the Le Moyne community, and you play a critical role in helping your student make the most of his or her college experience” -Le Moyne College

“The Parents Office is here to promote awareness of and involvement in your student's educational experience. Together, we can make the most of your role” -Syracuse University

“serves all Cyclone families by promoting parent programs and communicating university resources to enhance students' experiences and success at Iowa State” -Iowa State

Even though parent association websites do not typically mention the library, in mission statements such as those above, the library could be a key resource about which parents should know. Parent organizations play a “connecting” role in bringing people and resources together, and libraries fit well and are often welcomed into such efforts. In describing common elements of parent programs, Savage explains that “Nearly every college and university parent program provides four basic services: a parent orientation program, a parent-family weekend, a website for parents, and e-mail responses to parent questions” (74). Working with parent associations and organizations, libraries can make efforts to reach parents in a variety of ways, from simply putting a link to the library’s web site on their page, to including information about the library in the parent handbook, to having an article about the library in the Parent’s newsletter.

There is also a role for libraries with the financial development-focused parent organizations as well. Such involvement can help the library to boost its gifts and fundraising efforts by ensuring that they are in the mix when the college is seeking gifts and donations from parents. “Besides the involvement of the library faculty and staff, the Friends of the Library and the Parents Association are two vital players in

building a flourishing library development program. Working with these two groups positions the library competitively on campus” (Huang, 149).

Working with Campus Units

Because the library belongs to everyone on campus, there really is no limit to the units or departments with whom libraries can build partnerships that reach and connect with students and their families. As Kopp explains, “for the academic library, partnering with admissions offices can be a mutually beneficial activity” (194). For example, successful planning between Admissions and the library can mean the difference between a guide pointing out a storehouse of books and highlighting an integral player in student success. Supplying tour guides with anecdotes so that the picture of the library that is specifically painted for prospective families is one in which the library plays a central role in student achievement. Miami University Libraries found that the “admissions office was very receptive to deepening the connection with the libraries” (Miller, 587). The Libraries made a strong impact by getting good information to the admissions office student tour guides and having them “tell stories about how the library has impacted other students and how the library makes things easier” (Miller, 588). Hearing stories directly from current students of ways the library eased the transition to college life is reassuring to prospective students as well as their parents.

When considering library development, “it is said, ‘nobody ever graduated from a library. Nobody ever graduated without one.’ With this slogan in mind, if one is asked to define who comprises the library constituency –the answer is the entire university community” (Huang, 147). And parents are a crucial part of this university community. Identifying, and even creating, unique points when the library connects with parents, results in potential development opportunities for the library. Such unique points of contact include our student library employees. In *Building an academic library fundraising*

program “from scratch,” Reid mentions some libraries’ practice “of soliciting current students and the positive effect of this approach on alumni giving, something a library could attempt, in particular, with current and past student workers” (54). Such connections with student workers can include student worker parties, special awards, and even monetary prizes. Positive results of these library efforts can be gifts or donations from parents of student workers or even from the students themselves in the future after they graduate.

While the relationship between Financial Aid and the library may not be readily apparent or significant, it is in these small but sometimes high-impact moments that the library can stand out. For example, the mention of robust loaner technology programs available at the library can make parents feel more at ease about the added costs of sending a child away to college. The knowledge that their student can borrow a graphing calculator, iPad, or laptop rather than purchasing their own may be a great relief to parents. Similarly, parents will likely be interested in the option of borrowing textbooks from the library through the reserves program. Ensuring that the financial aid office is aware of these services can go a long way in helping parents see the value of the library.

Legacy Engagement

Though typically we think of graduation as the end the student’s college career, Commencement Weekend is a chance to leave a students with a lasting memory of their library. Having a presence at commencement activities shows students and their parents that the library is a proud supporter of their achievement and reminds them of the contributions it has made in helping students reach the final goal of graduation. What’s more, Commencement Weekend provides an excellent opportunity for sibling recruitment as the entire family generally attend the festivities. Seeing a positive representation of the library can provide a vision of success for younger siblings of graduates.

Chris Flegg tells us that “many institutions have learned via feedback from prospective students that alumni endorsements play a powerful role in their choice of universities” (60). We know also that “parents, along with other family and friends, were the most influential sources of information” (Johnston, 15). Given the power of alumni influence and the strong influence of parents, engaging with alumni provides the library with an opportunity to play a role in legacy recruitment. Monroe Library at Loyola University hosted an event for alumni to give them the opportunity to look back through yearbooks, commencement programs and university photographs (Library Lagniappe, 2016). Reaching out to alumni and hosting events for them in the library when they come back to campus reminds them that the library was a strong supporter in their education and will encourage them to pass this on to their own children.

Legacy opportunities are not limited to just Commencement or Alumni Weekends. Engagement with family members can happen with such small efforts as a welcoming smile or greeting to members of a campus tour, to larger events such as tours or orientations. Any library staff member who has participated in tours for families has likely encountered and interacted with younger siblings. Considering the idea of life-long learning, this could be seen as the first library visit of a potential student.

Creative Outreach to Parents

By removing limits and using creativity to explore outreach efforts, libraries are able to try out new initiatives that reach an audience that has previously not been capitalized upon. When there is evidence that parents see the library as important to their child’s academic success, a ready and supportive audience appears. For this reason, libraries can explore and freely experiment with ways to reach

parents. Some examples of such experimentation include libraries hosting parent events and orientations, to larger initiatives such as the following two at Syracuse University and St. John Fisher College.

As part of the library's "Welcome Fest" for students and faculty, Syracuse University Libraries created an open house, with people and tables presenting a broad array of topics, services, and resources from the library and the university. Considering student comfort with "selfies," the library decided to try something new with a postcard "photo booth" table. With a few different library backdrops, students could have a photo taken of themselves in the library. This photo was then printed onto a postcard, on which the student could write a message and add their parent's address. The library then mailed the student postcards to their parents, both domestically and internationally. Students loved that they could show their parents that they were in the library, and the library was able to make a creative and fun connection with parents who received a postcard of their child from Syracuse University Libraries.

Providing a library instructional session specifically for parents of new students at St. John Fisher College was an initiative created by the library. As described by Little and Price, "the goal of the library parent session is to familiarize parents with a twenty-first century academic library," so that parents are ready to support their child with his or her research at a time of stress and need (189). This outreach effort represents something beyond the typical library tour, by instead creating a strategic plan to use parents to help students with their research needs. By teaching parents about scholarly articles and library databases, the parent is then "strongly poised to respond to their child's frustration with an encouraging response that will defuse tension and suggest success" (189). In this way, the library is capitalizing on informing and preparing a known resource for the student - their parent.

CONCLUSION

Parents are important aspects of our students' academic lives, and as such, should be acknowledged and considered as allies and potential partners with libraries. Looking both closely and broadly at the opportunities to connect with parents, there are many opportunities for libraries. And the results of these initiatives and engagements can help accomplish a variety of things including supporting student academic success, helping to ensure that the library is involved in other university student outreach efforts, helping development and fundraising activities, and finally supporting the recruitment and retention of students.

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