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The Out Loud Assignment: Articulating Library Contributions to First-year Student Success

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ABSTRACT

As more and more libraries consider GPA and year-to-year retention as relevant and meaningful measures of interest, it is important to consider whether these measures are locally appropriate. Several limitations of broadly applying GPA and first-year retention as measures of student success were recently discovered while completing a large exploratory research project. The project assessed the impact of a library assignment offered to students during their first term on campus at a large public research university. Findings revealed the assignment had a greater impact on regional campus students in contrast to the larger central campus, where changes in admission requirements has created an increasingly high-performing cohort of first-year students. Other indicators which may better locally articulate library contributions to student success are needed.

Introduction

In recent years the academic library community has strongly advocated that academic libraries provide local evidence of their measurable contributions to student success outcomes (Oakleaf, 2010). Several studies focused on linking usage of library materials to GPA or student retention, have emerged, following the University of Minnesota's *Library Data and Student Success* project and the University of Wollongong's *Library Cube* (University of Minnesota & University of Wollongong, n.d.). More broadly, an examination of GPAs of > 8000 graduates of Hong Kong Baptist University over a three year period found that students who had the opportunity to attend at least three library instructional workshops had higher GPAs (Wong & Cmor, 2011). The more workshops a student attended throughout his or her academic career, the more significant the correlation. Another study of whether the use of specific library services, including library instruction, by first-year students influenced academic achievement and retention found that enrollment in the libraries' Intro to Library Research I and Intro to Library Research II courses did correlate with higher student GPA (Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013). A positive correlation between library instruction and first-year GPA and retention to the second-year was also reported in a study at Middle Tennessee State University (Vance, Kirk, & Gardner, 2012).

As more and more libraries consider GPA and year-to-year retention as relevant and meaningful measures of interest, it is important to consider whether practically speaking it is appropriate to locally apply these measures. Not all library activities can or should be connected to a change in these metrics. After completing a large exploratory research project, some limitations of broadly applying GPA and first-year retention as measures of student success were recently discovered. Specifically, the project assessed the impact of a redesigned library assignment offered to students during their first term on campus at The Ohio State University through a one-credit orientation course taught by academic advisors. The study questioned whether students who completed the library assignment had a higher GPA than those who did not and persisted to the subsequent year at a higher rate.

Background

Ohio State is a large, multi-campus, research intensive, land-grant university, with a main campus in Columbus, Ohio featuring competitive undergraduate admission. Five additional regional campuses in Lima, Mansfield, Marion, Newark, and the Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, OH offer open admission to Ohio's high school graduates. Undergraduate enrollment at the Columbus campus was 45,289 in the fall of 2015 and 44,741 in the fall of 2014. Undergraduate enrollment at all 5 regional campuses combined was 6470 in the fall of 2015 and 6474 in the fall of 2014 (The Ohio State University, 2011–2016).

In 2014 University Libraries overhauled a library assignment offered to academic advisors teaching survey courses required of students during their first term on campus. The previous assignment, known as

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Make the Leap, walked students through four different research databases/indexes, including Google, by means of a series of guiding questions in effort to increase students' knowledge of different databases and increase skills in searching. Students complained that this assignment was boring and instructors expressed concerns that the assignment was not helping students learn to find the information they needed. The new assignment was named Out Loud and focused on the transition to college instead of specific library and information skills. The assignment was intended to support advisor's instructional efforts as they orient students to the college experience. Advisors must elect to incorporate the assignment into their survey course and the assignment is available on both the Columbus and regional campuses.

The Out Loud assignment applied findings of multiple Project Information Literacy (PIL) reports, which found that students struggled with finding, evaluating and using information, yet tended to overestimate their own research skills (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). Typically, students had no difficulty locating information, but were overwhelmed with the sheer volume of the information they found, its value, and how to use information in complex situations and apply higher order thinking skills. In addition, while students often struggled with their transition to college, many tacitly believe that being in college means being self-reliant (Head, 2013). Consequently, they may shy away from asking for help when it's most needed. Local conversations with academic advisors revealed that Ohio State students regularly struggled with help-seeking, confirming the PIL findings.

To address this, the libraries' Teaching and Learning department took a holistic approach to overhaul the survey assignment. Guided by Carol Kuhlthau's Information Search Process model and supporting research, they incorporated cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements into the activity (Kuhlthau, 2004). The goal was to assist students in their first term on campus with learning strategies for seeking help and identifying resources for both personal and academic needs. This approach was grounded in the disposition of metacognition, the "ability to know what we know and what we don't know," (Costa & Kallick, 2014) provides a conscious awareness of self in relation to the task and environment. Metacognitive capabilities, thinking about one's own thinking, are at the heart of college readiness (Conley, 2008). Metacognition allows students to observe, assess, and value the content of their own thinking, emotions, and behaviors, deepening their capacity to learn. The three module Out Loud assignment attempts to make this process explicit by making students aware of their own thinking using a mindfulness assessment in the first module and by articulating the thinking and feeling aspects of common information-based scenarios in the remaining two modules. More specifically, the first module – Self Awareness – introduces the idea of metacognition and mindfulness, invites students to take the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale assessment, and concludes asking students to explore some of the nine short (approximately 1 min in length) videos of students sharing stories of challenges they faced as first-year students (MAAS, Brown, & Ryan, 2003). The second module – Campus Information – focuses on information-seeking tasks related to university business and student life and presents three scenarios of a student with an information-based challenge and asks the student taking the assignment to select from among a variety of next steps. The scenarios include descriptions of what the student is thinking and feeling in addition to the issue itself in order to normalize the negative emotions that are present in solving information challenges. The third module – Research – focuses on the different stages of the research process and like the Campus Information module, also presents three scenarios of a student with an information-based challenge with descriptions of what the student is thinking and feeling, and asks the student taking the assignment to select from among a variety of next steps. Brief quizzes of 2–3 questions between each module encourage reflective thinking. Students get credit for completing the assignment when they answer the final quiz question; the assignment is graded for completion only. Further information about the assignment, including preview access information, is in Appendix A.

The purpose of these activities is to normalize the strong emotions students experience when they encounter, often for the first time, the difficult thinking and feeling aspects of the research process and of help-seeking in general The assignment is named Out Loud to reflect that it speaks "out loud" these often invisible elements of information seeking and in doing so notes that these challenges are normal and expected parts of the transition to college.

Methods

To examine whether students whose advisors assigned Out Loud had a higher GPA than those with advisors who did not assign Out Loud, and to determine whether these same students persisted to the subsequent year at a higher rate, the authors collected a list of all students who received and completed the assignment during fall semesters 2014 and 2015[1]. This list was then matched to a list of students first admitted during fall semester 2014 and 2015 who were also enrolled in the university during fall semester 2015 and 2016 by harvesting data from the university's student information system. This second list included cumulative GPA, college, major, academic rank, academic status, and campus. Students who elected to withhold directory information via FERPA and students who were under 18 years of age when first enrolled were excluded from the query. The two lists were then blended in Microsoft Access using a unique identifier, and any identifying information was stripped. The cleaned data was then imported into SPSS and Tableau for analysis.

Independent *t*-tests were run to compare the cumulative GPA of students whose advisors assigned Out Loud in contrast to students not assigned Out Loud, by academic rank, campus, and college. Retention for Columbus and regional campus students was also calculated. Results were then visualized to emphasize differences by academic level and college and to facilitate the communication and sharing of the data with decision-makers throughout the university.

Results

In total 3384 students were assigned Out Loud on the Columbus and regional campuses during fall semester 2014 and 2536 students during fall semester 2015 (Tables 1 and 2). Regional campus advisors were more likely to incorporate Out Loud into their survey course curriculum, with 1566 (60.0%) campus students receiving the assignment in 2014 and 1156 (43.0%) in 2015. In contrast, on the Columbus campus, only 1818 (19.1%) students received the assignment in 2014 and 1380 (13.9%) students in 2015 (Fig. 1). This may reflect the differences in mission and focus of the different campuses. Regional campuses in particular, with open enrollment, emphasize small class sizes and more personalized instruction. The Columbus campus offers more competitive, high-enrollment, specialized majors.

In 2014, a statistically significant difference in GPA was determined between students assigned Out Loud and students not assigned Out Loud on the Columbus ($p = 0.001$) and regional campuses ($p \leq 0.000$) (Fig. 2). The same difference was observed among regional campus students in 2015 ($p \leq -0.000$), while no difference was observed for all Columbus campus students in 2015 ($p = 0.057$).

During their first term on campus, the majority of students either enroll directly in a college major, or are designated undecided or exploring. It is of note that in 2014, 68.2% ($n = 2558$) of students with majors listed in the College of Arts & Sciences, 97.0% ($n = 1537$) in the College of Business, 66.9% ($n = 1166$) in the College of Engineering, and 71.7% ($n = 1616$) in the university's exploration program were not exposed to the Out Loud library assignment during their survey course

[1] This study was reviewed by the Ohio State University Office of Responsible Research Practices and determined exempt from IRB review.