Lisa M. Given
School of Library and Information Studies
University of Alberta

Academic Librarians and the Road to Success: Facilitating Undergraduate Achievement through Information Access

Abstract: Academic success is a goal shared by all university students, and one that is embraced and promoted by professors, librarians, and other stakeholders in higher education. The desire for success is closely linked to the informational activities in which students engage (e.g., asking questions in class, consulting with librarians, surfing the web) in order to complete their assignments. At the institutional level, success is frequently defined by high academic standing, leaving students to locate information that will help them achieve high grades. In the academic library, information services reflect this standard by privileging the location of 'good' information so that students may achieve 'good' grades – but few studies in Education or Library and Information Studies explore students' (or other stakeholders') personal views of academic success. Indeed, the nature of success, including points of conflict between institutional and individual markers of success, is not well understood. Do professors, librarians, and students share similar goals? What role does academic information play in student achievement? Do students have adequate access to appropriate information resources? Are computer labs, the library, and other campus spaces designed to meet students' academic and informational needs? How does the socio-political environment of the university – in the context of available technological resources, commitment to information literacy initiatives, and/or the design of physical space – help or hinder student achievement?

This paper presents the results of in-depth, qualitative interviews with academic librarians at one Canadian university. These results form the first phase of a larger, multi-year project, which also examines faculty members and undergraduate students' opinions and experiences of the university as an information space. In this first phase, academic librarians shared their perceptions of: 1) undergraduate students; 2) academic success; 3) the role of information resources in facilitating success; and, 4) the university as an informing space (i.e., those facilities and/or activities on campus that help/hinder student achievement). Initial findings point to information access problems that result from the socio-political context of the university (e.g., disciplinary differences in availability of resources), varied and complex definitions of academic success, frustrations with the current mix of technological resources and the design of physical space, and the importance of information literacy programs in fostering student success. These results not only inform further research in this project (i.e., for comparison with faculty and student perspectives relating to information access and academic success) and other studies, but also provide direction to librarians and university administrators in the design of information services (and spaces) that best meet students' diverse needs. By exploring academic librarians' perspectives on these issues, we gain a window into the daily lives

of undergraduate students – as well as the institutional challenges that must be overcome in order to facilitate student success. This paper addresses the theme of the conference in three core areas: technology, particularly as this relates to access to digital information resources, computing labs, and the design of facilities; access, in terms of the availability of information resources and support for student learning; and, the socio-political context of the university.