

Minority student success

Librarians as partners

by Barbara Holmes and Art Lichtenstein

Many universities are working to improve freshman retention rates, especially of their minority students. While it is generally recognized that instruction in library research skills helps freshmen succeed, relatively few programs exist that target library skills programs at minority students. Often when the question of how to foster library success among minority students is examined, the proposed solution involves hiring a “diversity or multicultural services” librarian.¹ Unfortunately, although this approach may be a good one, many libraries today are unlikely to receive funding for new positions. Instead, many are struggling to maintain current services with existing, or even smaller, professional staff.

The APT program

At the University of Central Arkansas, regular library staff are providing effective research skills instruction for minority freshman by participating in a unique program called the African Americans Partnering Talent (APT) Summer Academy. The APT Summer Academy, initiated in 1995 by the chair of the department of administration and secondary education, is delivered through a cooperative effort among a number of academic units on campus: the colleges of education and health and applied science, undergraduate studies, the Office of Minority Affairs, and the university library. The academy has met with measurable success. Furthermore, it did

not require funding for a new library position or any significant special costs to the library.

Central to the success of APT was the inclusion of library staff in planning the program. The input of library staff helped to give broader definition and specificity to the vision of the project, which is to “create a community of learners who acquire the necessary academic success skills needed to persist successfully in the university.” This partnership between academic faculty and library staff has formed a unique foundation for incoming minority students.

Each summer the APT Academy accepts a class of 50 minority students, the majority of whom are high school graduates and have been accepted for regular college admission in the fall. APT students are required to live in dormitories, follow a rigorous schedule from Monday through Friday, and participate in weekend enrichment activities. The daily program includes four hours of for-credit course work in English and math and sessions in physical fitness, leadership, career planning, and research skills. A typical day for APT students starts with physical exercise at 6:30 a.m. and ends at 9 p.m. with a mandatory, two-hour study hall in the library.

Virtual information retrieval

The research skills portion of the APT Academy, taught by librarians, is known as the

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APT class sessions

Class One: Library terms glossary (e.g., URL, primary source, database), interpreting LC call numbers, introduction to an online catalog, assignment of individual research project.

Class Two: Use of logical operators for online information retrieval, use of selected subject databases.

Class Three: Use of print format indexes and reference books, specialized reference sources for African American studies.

Class Four: Planning and design of a research paper, style guides, plagiarism.

Class Five: LC subject headings, subject and keyword searching.

Class Six: Internet overview and basic techniques (e.g., entering URL's, bookmarks, saving to disk, printing).

Class Seven: Select Internet search engines and subject guides.

Class Eight: In-class time to work on research project.

Class Nine: Information retrieval scavenger hunt.

Class Ten: Wrap-up, end-of-term social gathering.

“Virtual Information Retrieval” course. It is designed to teach students efficient and effective techniques for information-gathering, documentation, and assessment. Students are trained to exploit both high technology and traditional information sources and formats. In developing the lesson plans for this course, librarians worked to answer the question, “What practical knowledge and concrete research skills will be of immediate value to students as they work to achieve success in their college courses?”

This course was designed with two paramount goals: first, to teach solid information retrieval skills, and second, to build strong, productive working relationships among students and library staff. To optimize the likelihood that the second goal was met, only librarians who volunteered to be APT instructors were directly involved in the program. Great care was taken to ensure that they supported the APT vision and recognized the importance of the affective dimension of learning.

Collaboration and collegiality are at the heart of the APT program, and librarians seek to develop close relationships with students—relationships that will help students handle the challenges freshman year brings. Ideally, students develop a comfort level with librarians that enables them to seek help whenever it is needed.

Curriculum development

Since the APT Academy is offered as an integrated learning program, the librarians, as they worked to design specific lesson plans, solicited advice and review from the academy director and advisory committee. This process, followed by all APT instructors, helped ensure that the program was delivered as a cohesive learning experience. There were meaningful connections between the information retrieval course, the math course, the English course, and other portions of the program.

The research skills portion of APT consisted of ten one-hour class sessions, supplemented by homework assignments and individual projects (see sidebar on this page). Each class was broken into a half-hour of lecture and demonstration, followed by a half-hour of hands-on work with instructors providing one-on-one tutoring.

Results

Preliminary results of the APT program indicate significant success. Institutional data show that APT students are performing at a higher level academically than other student populations and are achieving higher overall grade-point averages. Also, APT students are returning to the university at higher rates than the overall student population. For the students entering the fall 1997 APT program, 100 percent have remained at the university through the spring 1998 term as compared to 90 percent for non-APT students.

In addition to the hard data, several other very important outcomes have emerged:

1. Students view librarians as an active part of their academic support team.
2. Students use the library more frequently and seek out the librarians with whom they have developed partnerships.

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3. Instructional faculty have become advocates for the role of librarians in the instructional delivery process.

4. More visible, vibrant, and credible relationships have been established between librarians and instructional faculty.

5. Librarians are seen as a viable part of the freshman year experience, and their role in the induction of students into the university has been expanded.

Recommendations

As librarians seek to partner with instructional faculty to help students with the acquisition of research skills, it is very important that attention be paid to the

characteristics of the students being helped. At University of Central Arkansas, APT participants are first-time freshmen, sharing all of the usual anxieties of students undertaking the college experience for the first time. They do not possess the academic maturity to fully appreciate the rigors of college study, and they have little first-hand experience of what this entails.

Knowing this, librarians should exhibit great patience in working with these students. They need to help students make solid connections between the skills being learned and what will be expected of them as college students. Frequently, librarians should "check for understanding," a teacher task that is well known to instructional faculty. Doing this, they can make sure that their instruction concretely supports the academic experience of their students.

Note

1. Chadley, Otis A. "Addressing Cultural Diversity in Academic and Research Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 53 (May 1992): 210. ■

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