

Review of Supporting Today's Students in the Library: Strategies for Retaining and Graduating International, Transfer, First-Generation, and Re-Entry Students

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Abstract: Review of Tran, N.-Y., & Higgins, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Supporting today's students in the library: Strategies for retaining and graduating international, transfer, first-generation, and re-entry students*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.

Keywords: *non-traditional students, international students, transfer students, first-generation students, re-entry students, adult learners, academic libraries, higher education*



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Supporting today's students in the library: Strategies for retaining and graduating international, transfer, first-Generation, and re-entry students challenges librarians to reframe the narrative surrounding non-traditional higher education students. With so much diversity among students affixed with the “non-traditional” label, it is impossible to identify characteristics that are both commonly enough shared to group or categorize and specific enough to target with interventions. It is this catch-22 that frustrates efforts of librarians in the field and the essays and case studies of *Supporting today's students in the library* illuminate the diversity of our students, the breadth of our services, our perpetual quest for innovation, and the difficulty of scaling our resources and services. A variety of themes arise throughout the collection. Some of these themes are explicit and cataloged in practically each of the contributed essays, such as the role of the library serving as a model for inclusive student-centered practices for their institutions at-large. Other themes, however, emerge only when a reader steps back and considers the collection as a whole. The futility of deficit-based categorization of students is one of the more prevalent among those latter implicit themes.

What links all the chapters, though, is best described by Graf in the first essay of the collection, “First Generation Students and Libraries: Beyond the Deficit Narrative” (p. 3-21). The focus on non-traditional students, Graf writes, “on the one hand...suggest[s] that institutions of higher education are increasingly aware of the diverse needs of their students on the other hand, institutional anxiety about retention and reputation simmers under the surface” (p. 3). That is, much of the decision to focus on services to non-traditional students at the institutional levels is based on attempts to secure funding for prioritizing these students and to maintain reputational capital (which is often directly tied to funding) such as high rankings on the Department of Education’s “College Scorecard” (Graf, 2020, p. 4). Though commenting on the broader higher education institutions, the essays appeal directly to the

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librarian and to the areas of resources, services, and instruction relevant to librarians. Creating inclusive environments that welcome *all* students may mean rethinking how academic libraries provide instruction, services, and spaces; but none of this is new or unheard of in the field. Libraries are constantly coming up with ways of revamping spaces or introducing innovative technology to stay relevant to our users and better meet their needs. Throughout the essays similar – if not the same – strategies and best practices come up repeatedly. For instance, self-paced, modular learning tools like online orientations, tutorials, and instructional videos are recommended to supplement instruction for students with limited English proficiency in one chapter and to support returning adult students who struggle with online learning environments in another. These same tools, however, are regularly employed by many librarians already though usually as tools for flipped classrooms and online courses.

Rather than looking for innovation among the essays, librarians should come to this collection with a mind to expand their established practices, perhaps by tweaking messaging and/or teaching strategies to intentionally include varieties of non-traditional students, irrespective of which precise label is affixed to them. The groups of students who get the most attention in this collection are first-generation college students (chapters 1, 8, 11, and 12) and multilingual or English language learners (chapters 2, 4, 6, and 7). Additional categories of students who receive some focus are returning adult learners (chapters 3 and 15), transfer students (chapter 14), and students who are single parents (chapter 16). There is some overlap between as well as nuance within each of these student types. International students come up regularly in the collection as they experience challenges in American higher education from being both returning adult learners and multilingual students. For that reason, the editors have chosen not to divide sections of the book by these student categories. Similarly, there's variety among the types of institutions whose library services and resources are

examined. Varieties of format or delivery of content (e.g. resources, instruction, services) are also represented.

This book is perhaps best approached in piecemeal fashion, picking through the chapters that seem to relate most closely to the reader's interests or to the types of institutions, libraries, or services best associated with their experience. While the editors have arranged essays according to "primary topics" (instruction, programming, and spaces), they can be read in any order (Tran & Higgins, 2020, p. 2). Reading the book in the arranged order quickly frustrated me. I found it much more appealing when I moved through chapters and topics freely, determining from the titles and from each chapter's introduction whether I would continue reading or find another place to land my attention. This allowed me to make connections between chapters that I likely would have missed otherwise.

Its catch-all approach is both a strength and a weakness of the book. It is unlikely that I would have encountered some innovations or projects that appear in this collection had I not read the book at all or cover-to-cover. I would have likely missed Stephan's chapter on Western Washington University's Research-Writing Practicum (chapter 9) which unquestionably aligns with my ambitions to design a credit-bearing research lab for my institution. The students who are a part of the Research-Writing Practicum are those "in need of additional support in classes that include research and writing components" (p. 124) who "self-identify as having learning difficulties [and] are more likely to be students of color, first-generation students, or second-language students" (p. 128). Unlike many of the essays in the collection, Stephan's explicitly deals with the overlapping identities, abilities, demographics, and experiences of the non-traditional higher education student, thus exemplifying the undercurrent theme of *Supporting today's students in the library*: there is no way to neatly label non-traditional students. While Stephan's essay aligns directly with my work, another essay that doesn't quite, but I am glad to have read, is Mandell and Baker's chapter on the expansion of the University of *Journal of New Librarianship*, 5(2020) pp. 96-99 10.21173/newlibs/9/11

South California digital collections (chapter 11). With little reason to read about archives, special collections, and digital collections, it's almost certain I would have never learned of it.

Although I've chosen to highlight these two chapters here, the same can be said for many of the essays I encountered. On the other hand, while most of the other chapters are seemingly much more relevant to my work on the surface—given similar student populations at my institution, the type of work that I do at the library, my role and various functions at the college—some weren't interesting to me at all. Some chapters approach their topic very broadly, making them appropriate for introductory discussions on those topics, or very narrowly, limiting their relevance beyond a very specific audience of practitioners. Because of the diversity among the topics, the types of students on which the authors focus, the activities or interventions described, and the library services or resources utilized in the respective chapters, it's difficult to gauge the success of the book as a collection. In a way, any academic librarian is likely to find something relevant to their work among the chapters of *Supporting today's students in the library*, but how many essays will be relevant will depend wildly on the scope of the reader's library or their work in it.