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Using Evidence in Practice

Exploring the Impact of Research and Instruction Librarian Accessibility on Graduate Student Achievement

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Setting

This article examines the impact of embedding a research and instruction librarian within an academic department, with a particular focus on how this initiative improves graduate students' access to library resources and services. By relocating a research and instruction librarian into the graduate school, the library seeks to address the unique challenges that graduate students face in navigating and utilizing resources, especially in research-intensive programs. This initiative plays a critical role in supporting academic success, as graduate students often need customized assistance to manage complex research tasks effectively.

Velma K. Waters Library, located on the main campus of East Texas A&M University (ETAMU) in Commerce, Texas, serves a diverse student body of approximately 12,000 undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students, as well as faculty, staff, and community members. The institution is situated in Northeast Texas and offers academic programs at several instructional sites across the region.

ETAMU offers courses in various formats, including face-to-face, hybrid, and online. These different delivery modes necessitate an integrated approach to providing library support, as the nature of student needs varies based on their learning environment. For instance, online and hybrid students often rely heavily on digital resources and require seamless access to library materials and support services. To meet these diverse needs, the library has adopted a more holistic approach, integrating both physical and virtual support services to ensure that all students, regardless of their mode of study, receive the necessary academic assistance.

Recognizing the growing reliance on these resources, the library took a strategic step to enhance access and support by relocating one of the research and instruction librarians to the graduate school. This relocation was driven by the need to address graduate students' unique challenges in accessing and utilizing library resources. The graduate school at ETAMU offers a range of master's and doctoral programs in disciplines such as education, business, and the sciences, many of which require extensive research and data analysis. Graduate students, particularly those engaged in research-intensive programs, often require advanced support with their academic work. The decision to embed librarians into individual academic departments, such as the graduate school, was made to address these challenges directly by providing more specialized and accessible services. The librarian was tasked with fostering an environment where students could receive tailored support for their academic and research endeavors.

Embedding a librarian within academic departments was designed not only to support face-to-face interactions but also to ensure equitable access for distance learners enrolled in hybrid and fully online programs, recognizing that distance students often face unique barriers, such as limited access to physical resources and real-time support. This initiative is part of the library's broader goal of enhancing its visibility and ensuring that students and faculty receive the full benefit of library resources.

Problem

One of the core issues was the lack of visibility and engagement between the library and graduate students, particularly those enrolled in hybrid or fully online programs. Despite the availability of resources, internal library usage statistics from ETAMU indicated that graduate students were not utilizing library services as effectively as expected. Data from reference consultations, database access logs, and attendance at library workshops showed lower-than-anticipated engagement levels. Graduate students, who often juggle multiple commitments along with their academic research responsibilities, need easy access to specialized resources and personalized guidance from librarians to enhance their ability to conduct effective research.

A significant challenge identified among graduate students was the limited opportunities to engage with librarians directly. This conclusion was drawn from library user feedback, reference transaction logs, and a university-wide survey assessing graduate students' research support needs. The lack of interaction often affected their ability to receive timely assistance with advanced research tasks such as navigating databases, managing citations, and conducting literature reviews. The local data suggested that students, especially those pursuing research-intensive programs, experienced difficulties in accessing specialized

resources, which compounded issues related to information overload and navigating databases effectively with the right research strategies or techniques. These findings align with **Harris' (2011)** study, which highlights the growing complexity of graduate students' research needs and the importance of direct librarian support in managing these challenges.

The traditional model of centralizing library services within a single building or through an online portal was inadequate in meeting the diverse needs of graduate students at ETAMU. This led to the exploration of alternative service models tailored to improving accessibility and relevance for graduate students. Ince (2018) supports this approach, noting that academic libraries are increasingly adopting more flexible service models to better meet the needs of graduate students in research-intensive environments. The problem was compounded by the fact that graduate students often lacked the advanced information literacy skills necessary to navigate scholarly databases and manage information effectively, which are crucial for their academic success.

Evidence

Several studies support embedding research and instruction librarians within academic departments to improve student engagement and research outcomes. Studies demonstrate that embedded librarians result in increased reference and research interactions, and more specialized instructional support when librarians are embedded within academic units. It is beneficial for all research assistance formats and serves a wide range of patrons, including students and faculty. Having librarians within reach allows them to better focus on their target patrons, identifying specific needs and requirements through closer engagement with departments and individuals across in-person, online, and hybrid settings.

The integration aligns with Shumaker and Talley's (2010) findings that library services thrive when librarians are actively involved in the academic environment, delivering targeted assistance and fostering close collaborations with faculty and students.

Further evidence supporting the findings is provided by O'Toole et al. (2016) who observed a 371% increase in email reference interactions and a 275% rise in reference appointments when librarians were physically embedded within academic departments like biology, art, and education. This arrangement allowed librarians to respond promptly to research inquiries, offer targeted, discipline-specific guidance, and engage more deeply with both students and faculty. This embedding enabled librarians to address complex research needs in ways that centralized or virtual library services could not achieve, leveraging the benefits of proximity and continuous presence for both in-person and remote interactions (O'Toole et al., 2016).

Embedding librarians also fosters a collaborative environment that helps librarians engage directly in curriculum development, create course-specific research guides, and participate actively in departmental meetings. Schulte (2012) expands on this by noting that embedded librarianship leads to more than just increased visibility; librarians become integrated into the academic culture, transforming from information providers into collaborative research partners. Schulte's review highlights cases where embedded librarians worked closely with faculty to design research-focused assignments and guide students in practical information literacy applications, which were instrumental in improving students' research skills and resource engagement.

Implementation

In the spring of 2024, Velma K. Waters Library officially began relocating research and instruction librarians into various academic departments, starting with the graduate school. This initiative, spearheaded by the dean of the library and supported by the university's provost, dean of the graduate school, and departmental deans, sought to enhance the visibility and accessibility of library services.

The relocation of a research and instruction librarian to the graduate school involved a physical move to an office within the graduate school building, providing closer proximity to graduate students and faculty. This strategic location enabled the librarian to become an integrated part of the academic environment, increasing visibility and accessibility. The relocation increased visibility due to the graduate school building being a central hub for graduate student activities. Many graduate students take classes in or visit this building for consultations with faculty, communication with graduate school staff, thesis or dissertation reviews, and administrative support. In addition, strategic signage in the building, as well as announcements in graduate school newsletters, highlighted the librarian's presence. Faculty communication and collaboration with the graduate school and their teaching in the building were also instrumental in promoting the librarian's services to their students.

Relocating the librarian to the department facilitated regular meetings with key stakeholders, including the associate dean, faculty members, and the theses and dissertations specialist. This strategic placement enhanced accessibility, making it easier to schedule and conduct meetings and enabling the librarian to respond promptly to students' needs and emerging issues, whether in-person or online. The increased presence and availability of the librarian fostered stronger relationships, promoted collaboration, and supported the development of tailored services to meet the diverse needs of students and faculty.

The relocation also played a crucial role in the creation of a collaborative research guide, specifically designed to address graduate students' unique needs. It was first introduced to graduate students during workshops conducted by the graduate school's theses and dissertations specialist. These workshops provided an ideal platform to showcase the guide's features, including step-by-step instructions for navigating databases, managing citations, and preparing theses or dissertations. By integrating the guide into these targeted sessions, students were not only made aware of its existence but also given practical insights into how it could support their academic work. The presence of the librarian within the graduate school also allowed for ongoing updates to the guide, ensuring it remained relevant and addressed evolving academic needs.

The librarian's role was actively promoted through various channels to ensure students were aware of the personalized support available to them. As part of these efforts, virtual consultations conducted via platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams provided students with one-on-one guidance regardless of their location. These sessions proved invaluable for helping students navigate digital resources, such as scholarly databases and citation management tools, and for addressing complex research challenges specific to graduate-level studies. To further extend support, the librarian developed asynchronous instructional materials, including video tutorials and research guides, tailored to the unique needs of distance learners, ensuring they could access assistance at their convenience.

Outcome

Relocating the librarian to the graduate school was a strategic decision aimed at enhancing engagement and accessibility for graduate students. LibInsight, a data and usage analytics platform for libraries,

provides data that categorizes patrons into groups such as undergraduate students, graduate students (master's students), doctoral students, faculty, and staff. This data illustrates the impact of this move by comparing engagement levels in 2022 (prior to relocation) with those in 2023 and 2024 (after relocation). The findings highlight significant increases in the number of patrons attending library instructions, workshops, and events, as well as those seeking research assistance through transactions and consultations. These results demonstrate how the relocation has significantly enhanced the accessibility of library resources and services, fostering greater utilization and addressing the unique needs of graduate students.

The relocation also created opportunities for visibility and engagement that were not achievable in a centralized library setting. Strategic signage within the graduate school building, coupled with faculty and staff advocacy, ensured that students were consistently reminded of the librarian's availability. Furthermore, the integration of librarian services into graduate school workshops and departmental events reinforced the librarian's role as a readily accessible and specialized resource, fostering stronger connections and more frequent interactions with students.

Research Assistance Statistics

This section highlights the research assistance provided exclusively by the graduate school librarian. The statistics encompass both transactions and consultations. The data, collected using the library's LibInsight platform, focuses solely on the graduate school librarian's services, excluding data from other librarians.

The graduate school serves approximately 2,917 master's students, 365 doctoral students, and 217 faculty members who teach graduate courses. These enrollment figures are based on 2024 data and are used as an approximate reference for the years 2022-2024, as enrollment numbers remain relatively stable during this period. Research assistance for students in master's programs grew significantly from 0 patrons in 2022 to 26 patrons in 2023, and further to 74 patrons in 2024. While this increase is notable, it still represents a small percentage of the overall master's student population, indicating potential for further outreach and engagement. Research assistance for doctoral students rose from 0 patrons in 2022 to 11 patrons in 2023, and then to 16 patrons in 2024. Given the total doctoral student population, these numbers suggest increasing but still limited engagement. Faculty research assistance grew from 6 patrons in 2022 to 39 patrons in 2023, and then to 88 patrons in 2024, reflecting increased faculty engagement, due to the librarian's outreach efforts and role in supporting graduate students' research needs.

These statistics demonstrate the substantial growth in the number of patrons engaging with the graduate school librarian for both transactions and consultations. While the number of students served has increased, it still represents a fraction of the total graduate student population, emphasizing the need for continued outreach efforts to maximize the impact of embedded librarian services.

Instructions, Workshops, and Events Analysis

This section examines the attendance of patrons in library instructions, workshops, and events facilitated by the graduate school librarian. Instructions refer to class visits and library instruction sessions conducted for classes upon instructors' requests. Workshops include both online and in-person library presentations covering a variety of topics designed to meet patrons' needs, such as research strategies, database navigation, and citation management. Events encompass programs aimed at engaging focused patron groups with the library's services and resources, including activities like library orientation sessions and thematic events.

Attendance in these programs has followed a similar upward trend. The data highlights the total number of patrons from different groups who attended instruction sessions and workshops, as well as the number of patrons served by the graduate school librarian during events. These attendance figures reflect the librarian's targeted programming efforts and the gradual expansion of engagement with graduate students and faculty.

Master's students' attendance in library instructions, workshops, and events increased significantly from 0 patrons in 2022 to 6 patrons in 2023 and further to 26 patrons in 2024. While this represents a positive trend, it still accounts for only a small fraction of the total master's student population, highlighting the need for continued outreach. Doctoral students' attendance grew from 0 patrons in 2022 to 6 patrons in 2023 and further to 21 patrons in 2024, again indicating progress but leaving room for increased engagement. Faculty and staff attendance rose from 3 patrons in 2022 to 11 patrons in 2023 and further to 21 patrons in 2024, suggesting growing interest but also underscoring the need for further faculty involvement.

The recording of statistics ensures an accurate reflection of the graduate school librarian's reach and impact. The data emphasizes not only the increasing number of patrons served but also the diversity of services offered to meet their unique needs. While growth in attendance is evident, these figures suggest that efforts to expand programming and participation should continue to maximize the benefits of embedding the librarian in the graduate school.

Student Satisfaction Feedback

Graduate students reported higher satisfaction with the library services through informal verbal feedback and appreciative emails. Many students noted that the embedded librarian's prompt assistance significantly improved their research processes, particularly when navigating databases and managing citations. Before the librarian was relocated to the graduate school, students often expressed uncertainty about where to find specialized help or whom to contact. The increased visibility and targeted outreach efforts, such as through newsletters, effectively addressed this gap, making it easier for students to seek assistance.

The relocation of the librarian to the graduate school has proven to be a transformative decision, yielding significant increases in engagement and satisfaction among graduate students. However, given the total student population, further efforts may be needed to reach a broader audience. The data underscores the success of this initiative, with marked growth in attendance across research services, instructions, workshops, and events. Additionally, the positive anecdotal feedback from students highlights the importance of proximity, targeted outreach, and the librarian's tailored support in enhancing the overall graduate experience. These outcomes demonstrate the value of embedding library services within the graduate school, establishing a model for fostering deeper collaboration, accessibility, and resource utilization that can be replicated in other academic contexts.

Reflection

The relocation of the research and instruction librarian to the graduate school proved to be a valuable initiative, but it was not without challenges. One of the primary challenges involved logistical issues related to the physical move. Securing an appropriate office space within the graduate school required extensive coordination with multiple departments, which led to delays in the initial implementation timeline. Additionally, setting up the devices and technology needed for the librarian to start working

without delay proved difficult. Ensuring access to necessary software and tools required for troubleshooting and support from the university's IT department.

Another significant challenge was building awareness about the new embedded librarian role among graduate students and faculty. Despite efforts to increase visibility through departmental meetings, email campaigns, signage, and newsletters, it took time for the campus community to fully understand the range of support services available and the new location of the librarian. Many students were accustomed to seeking help only at the main library and had to adjust to the concept of a specialized librarian dedicated to graduate school.

While the physical relocation posed logistical hurdles, ensuring robust support for remote assistance presented its own challenges. Providing seamless virtual consultations required reliable access to platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, as well as a clear communication strategy to inform students and faculty about these remote services. Despite these obstacles, remote assistance complemented the physical relocation, extending the librarian's reach and ensuring equitable access for distance learners and students unable to visit in person.

Despite these challenges, the initiative demonstrated the benefits of embedding librarians in academic departments. Addressing these obstacles provided valuable insights for improving the program in the future, such as refining communication strategies and preparing for logistical complexities.

To address the challenges identified in embedding librarians within academic departments, future initiatives should focus on streamlining logistical processes and enhancing communication strategies. For logistical improvements, establishing a dedicated task force involving representatives from the library, IT, and the targeted academic department could ensure smoother coordination for office setup, technology access, and integration. To build awareness, consistent and targeted communication campaigns leveraging multiple platforms, such as email newsletters, social media, and departmental meetings, could highlight the librarian's role and services. Additionally, collaborating with faculty to promote the embedded librarian during class sessions and integrating the librarian into departmental events could further reinforce their presence. By proactively addressing these areas and expanding support for remote services, the program can achieve greater efficiency and visibility, fostering even stronger engagement and support for graduate students.

Author Contributions

Fatemeh Kholoosi Raftar: Conceptualization (equal), Writing - original draft, review & editing (lead), Methodology (lead) **Jennifer Dyer:** Conceptualization (equal), Writing - original draft (supporting), Writing - review & editing (supporting)

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