CHAPTER 1

The Articulation of Student Success

Paul Lai

When I have introduced myself to people on campus and more broadly in my life as a "student success librarian," they commonly respond by asking what that means. Even other academic librarians quirk their eyebrows at the job title. Some say, of course, all librarians' work is for the goal of fostering student success. Others don't have a working concept of what student success is in the context of academic librarianship. In between those two poles—that student success is all of academic librarianship or that it does not jibe with people's conceptions of librarians' work—is the messiness of articulating the work of student success librarianship.

In the essay that follows, I grapple with the identity of a student success librarian as part of the trend of "blended librarianship" job positions that focus on particular student populations or functional roles instead of long-standing subject liaison and technical services positions.[1] But importantly, I also note that many of the things I see as part of the work of student success librarianship are not exclusive to the job position—indeed, many academic librarians in different roles have likely done some of this work in their engagement with students. The substantive difference in student success librarianship is in the centering of a range of job responsibilities into one job position or service area, with some staff responsible for leading this work on behalf of the library as a whole.

In thinking through the articulation of student success librarianship, I consider two overlapping meanings of "articulation"—speaking of and about student

success librarianship and connecting it to other aspects of the university and of librarianship in this contemporary moment. For the first meaning of articulation, the overarching question I explore is, "What does it mean to say that I work on student success as an academic librarian?" For the second meaning, the question is, "When I speak of student success librarianship, what educational philosophies and professional values of librarianship am I connecting to in the broader work of the university?" In this chapter, I explore these questions to sketch out the terrain of meaning in which "student success" moves in contemporary academic librarianship. As I do so, I seek to surface places where our work mostly sits with the status quo of libraries and universities as institutions, for better or worse, as well as places where our work resonates with critical pedagogies and challenges the oppressive aspects of institutions. I see the emergence of student success librarianship as a generative moment for redirecting the commitment of our profession to doing anti-oppressive work.

My interest in a focused articulation of student success librarianship is a response to the looseness with which higher education institutions have used the term "student success" in the past few decades. As Maryrose Weatherton and Elisabeth E. Schussler argue, there are often many definitions and measures of success at play in student success initiatives on campuses, most of which are concerned with helping historically disenfranchised student populations (primarily first-generation and students of color) achieve academic success.[2] Much of the work in student success also acknowledges the need to consider students both inside and outside the classroom, thus connecting what are often distinct university functions and departments in academic affairs versus student affairs.[3] However, the indicators of student success are typically still the measures of GPA, retention, graduation, and post-graduation employment. In this way, student success initiatives sometimes reinforce existing, inequitable systems of student performance by focusing on supports that might address students' deficiencies. The underlying philosophy of the deficit-based model is one of individual student achievement or failure, a philosophy driven by neoliberal logics and what Lani Guinier terms the "tyranny of the meritocracy," where only supposedly deserving and striving individuals can succeed.[4]

In their exploratory study of first-generation college students' experiences of the library in their academic lives, Juliann Couture et al. note that many of the long-standing supports for first-generation students have, at their core, the idea of teaching them about the "hidden curriculum" in higher education.[5] This

approach normalizes the assumptions and processes of higher education and works to integrate first-generation students into existing systems. In addition to that work, though, it is valuable to push for structural changes that reduce the need for any student to learn a hidden curriculum. One example from Couture et al. is the struggle for first-generation students to ask for help in the library because they felt that they should already know the answer.[6] Placing student staff at library service points helped remove some of this barrier because first-generation students felt more comfortable asking other students for help.

Many projects and people working within student success initiatives draw on philosophies that consider how to remove institutional barriers that prevent students from achieving academic success. An asset-based model of student success focuses on activating the "funds of knowledge," experience, and skills that students bring to learning.[7] Instead of seeing deficits in first-generation students and students of color because they do not already know the cultural norms of middle-class, white society, an asset-based model understands that these students have a wealth of experiences and knowledge from different backgrounds that can inform their learning if faculty and staff recognize where to make connections with these funds of knowledge and the learning context of the classroom.

For example, Kim L. Morrison, using an autoethnographic approach to counter-stories for students in an information literacy classroom, focused on addressing racism directly in classroom discussions and content in addition to engaging students' cultural and racial contexts to encourage their understanding and sense of mattering.[8] By incorporating hip-hop topics and examples into their explorations of information literacy, Morrison helped Black students in particular see their cultural contexts in the concepts of information literacy.

Using an asset-based approach to student success, Xan Arch and Isaac Gilman explored barriers for first-generation students in navigating the academic library and provided suggestions on how to redesign services and facilities to reduce or eliminate those barriers.[9] Arch and Gilman surveyed college counselors about what they saw as challenges for first-generation students transitioning from high school to college and academic librarians about what services they provided first-generation students. Based on their findings, their suggestions for transforming the institution of the academic library included things like lending out laptops and other technology, having librarians be more involved in finding ways to reduce textbook costs for students, and connecting with students' families by envisioning them as part of the students' community.

Removing barriers whenever possible is an opportunity to challenge the systems and approaches that reproduce inequalities. Couture et al. write, "Libraries could implement critical pedagogical methods, which challenge students to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within society, in instruction and reference services."[10] Here, the attention is on institutional norms as non-neutral values, understanding instead that these norms are often drawn from white, middle-class, male, and heterosexual experiences that privilege some people over others. Much work in critical librarianship in the past few decades has drawn attention to the dangers of claiming neutrality—that, in fact, being neutral mostly means taking the side of oppressors or a dominant group at the expense of marginalized groups. Because dominant and marginalized groups come to the library with deeply unequal resources and experiences, simply claiming neutrality in being open to all groups does not address how marginalized individuals enter the library and perceive our resources differently.

For example, libraries that prohibit food and drinks draw on a long history of institutions wanting to preserve physical books and manuscripts, with the expectation that library patrons have other spaces and means for eating throughout the day. In thinking more broadly, however, we might consider how unhoused students or commuter students may not have an easy place to go to eat snacks or a meal while they are studying on campus. They may have brought food because they do not have a meal plan to eat at the campus cafeteria or a dorm room to go back to for snacks. So, although the idea of keeping libraries free of food and drinks may seem neutral, there are important considerations for how such a policy impacts students without assumed resources. This is not to say that all libraries must allow students to bring in food and drinks, but a more careful consideration of students' differential experiences of such policies can increase a sense of belonging for more students.

For another, more complicated example, librarians who focus only on showing students how to find information resources in subscription databases as the most credible sources for their assignments may inadvertently further marginalize some perspectives and research. Instead, teaching students about academic and publishing biases in championing some research and voices over others would help students understand how academic value is produced (what makes for good peer review) and the overarching power of academic publishing giants like Elsevier and database vendors like EBSCO and ProQuest in making some research available over others. Foregrounding substantive and credible research that asks

critical questions about what becomes accepted truth in a field would also be useful to counter the myth of neutrality. In student success librarianship, I believe in adopting a critical approach that questions the neutrality of existing norms and policies for academic libraries and invites students into the conversation about how information and value are created in the academic context.

One of the aspects of student success librarianship that appeals to me most is its focus on students of color and nontraditional and first-generation students. There is significant overlap in job responsibilities with other job titles like undergraduate and first-year experience librarians, often with student success measures identified in all of these job descriptions. Todorinova notes in a study of undergraduate and first-year librarian job descriptions that "within the blended librarianship umbrella, undergraduate librarian roles have the most in common with positions that are most similar to librarians that are hired to serve minority, international, and underrepresented groups."[11] Additionally, the emergence of student success librarians as a job title in the last handful of years seems connected to the changing demographics of students in higher education, with attention to how a more diverse professional librarian workforce can teach students of color, first-generation students, and nontraditional students more thoughtfully. I have seen more job postings for "diversity, equity, and inclusion student success librarians" lately, which suggest that there is a haunting of non-white, non-traditional, first-generation college students in the term "student success librarianship."

Although this focus on diversity is powerful, it is also important to consider how the contemporary context of a shrinking population of high school graduates who might pursue higher education degrees is, at least in part, the reason that many universities have seen a demographic shift in the students they serve. In order to survive, these universities have been enrolling more students of color and first-generation students, often without a clear plan for serving them in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate. The creation of the "student success librarian" job title seems in part to be a quick fix for reaching a different student population without rigorously examining how the cultural norms of the library and higher education institution at large may be oppressive.

This does not mean, however, that we cannot work from within the concept of student success librarianship to reimagine the relationship between librarians and higher education institutions, between librarians and students, between librarians and the regime of assessment and metrics. In what follows, I consider

approaches to student success librarianship—exploring student and community engagement opportunities, querying and restructuring institutional commitments to standard metrics, and foregrounding critical approaches to information for students in the constantly changing landscape of online technology—that would help re-energize academic librarianship as a whole and help shape the broader discourse of student success and learning in higher education.

Student and Community Engagement

The concept of "community engagement" is increasingly popular in librarianship as librarians seek to understand how to connect better with the patrons they hope to serve, especially those who have not already discovered the library's resources. The idea of community engagement is sometimes akin to traditional outreach in libraries, where librarians bring existing resources to a population not regularly seen at the library (the bookmobile is one classic example of such an approach). But other ideas of community engagement are more complexly invested in reimagining the library's approach to resources, services, and instruction rather than taking for granted that librarians know what information, resources, and instruction the people in their community need.

Instead of wondering how to reach students better with our bibliographic instruction, information literacy lessons, and other standards of library work, student success librarians might be focused more explicitly on becoming part of student communities on campus, then exploring with students how librarians can assist with their information needs in all of their learning and living environments. This approach would involve building relationships with student leaders, organizations, and individuals in contexts beyond the library and the classroom. Student success librarians might make regular appearances at student-led events, for example, not just to talk about library support but also get to know students and learn about their lives.

Student success librarians can also connect with other student success initiatives—both implicit and explicit on campus. The goal is to get to know other staff who are similarly exploring institutional barriers to student success and grappling with the question of how to work with students to help them succeed. At my institution, for example, there is a lot of really wonderful work that happens in departments that have historically addressed student success, such as TRIO

programs (including Student Support Services and McNair Scholars) and disability services. But there is also other powerful work being done that might not be explicitly labeled "student success." One example is a campus food shelf and kitchen, which addresses the fact that many students are not nourished—literally and figuratively—enough to be able to study and learn effectively. Another department on campus is focused on civic engagement for students and fostering a strong sense of civic belonging on campus, in the city, and in the world at large. This work ultimately helps students connect their academic pursuits to the rest of their lives, rounding out their identities as learners in school and beyond.

Much of this implicit student success work is about addressing students as "whole persons," a concept developed by social workers and brought into conversation in librarianship by Sara K. Zettervall and Mary C. Nienow.[12] To think of "whole persons" in librarianship is to see each library patron as someone whose information needs and information-seeking behavior are connected to many other aspects of their personhood. Librarians can also think systemically about information and library use—what are the infrastructures in place for information and data (publishing, distribution, consumption), and how can librarians and library users critically engage with those systems rather than simply waiting for others to determine what information we receive?

For student success librarians who conduct research as part of their job responsibilities, there are many ways that their research can help expand all academic librarians' engagement with students and their communities. For example, Bowdoin et al. share many projects through which they connect with refugees and asylum seekers to understand their information needs and information-seeking behavior.[13] These projects further the goal of transforming the services and programs that libraries provide by first to examining the community's needs instead of trying to fit existing services to new groups.

Rethinking Assessment and Metrics

Many student success initiatives use standard metrics of GPA, retention, graduation, and employment as the measures of success. Student success librarians can certainly do a lot to connect librarians' work to these metrics, and a robust body of scholarship and consulting in academic librarianship regularly measures the value of libraries to higher education institutions (even as this

scholarship often decries how higher education leadership sometimes devalue libraries).[14] In general, higher education's focus on metrics to prove the worth of departments and programs is a symptom of a neoliberal need to monetize everything and to value efficiency over all else. In that sense, resisting the call to measure things is in itself an important move to shift institutional values and philosophies of service. Of course, simply refusing to provide assessment data is not usually an option, but in as many ways as possible, student success librarians can reframe the kind of metrics used to measure our worth. As we tell our stories of librarianship, we can use alternative data to support our claims for the power of librarians' instruction, collections, and other resources to engage student learning.

It is also essential that student success librarians engage students in reframing and reclaiming institutional definitions and measures of success, moving beyond narrow, quantitative metrics to also consider students' sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and purpose. As Ian Beilin notes, "Our challenge should be to teach success on *two* levels. We ought to encourage alternative definitions of success while at the same time ensure success in the existing system."[15] Librarians can approach success on both of these levels by taking an asset-based approach to nontraditional students, by removing barriers that hinder those students' abilities to access existing services and resources, and by considering what new services and resources nontraditional students might need.

For example, instead of just tracking database usage to demonstrate the value of libraries, student success librarians can work closely with other librarians, especially electronic resource librarians, to assess the accessibility of electronic resources. What barriers might prevent students from fully searching, finding, and reading the wealth of materials in these resources? Learning about web accessibility is one way to do this work. We might approach online accessibility through user experience studies with students. Another consideration of online barriers might lead to working with vendors to expand multilingual access to digital collections.

Instead of administering typical Likert scale surveys to measure student learning after a bibliographic information session, student success librarians could study where and when students have difficulty engaging with databases. More extended conversations with students might also reveal how they actually go about doing research for their assignments, providing librarians with a better understanding of students' actual information-seeking behaviors.

Information in Technology

With each passing year, we all face a dizzying need to adapt to new interfaces and gadgets. More importantly, this means that our mental models for learning new information and skills are changing on a regular basis. Every decade or so, cohorts of students will enter higher education with distinctive mental models about what it means to be a student and what it means to find information. The Mindset Lists originally created at Beloit College are one way that higher education professionals have tracked these changing mental models for incoming first-year students. The 2005 list, for example, notes, "Hard copy has nothing to do with a TV show; a browser is not someone relaxing in a bookstore; a virus does not make humans sick; and a mouse is not a rodent (and there is no proper plural for it)."[16]

In the context of this chapter on student success librarianship, I want to caution that such generalizations often assume a white, male, heterosexual, middle-class norm that can gloss over the diversity of mental models within a generational cohort. However, as librarians, regular revisiting our understanding of what students think and know is crucial to making sure we truly connect with students and their mental models of the information landscape. Michelle Keba Knecht investigated the role of students' epistemic curiosity as they conduct research for classes.[17] Instead of taking for granted that innate curiosity would lead to better research for a topic, Knecht sought to clarify and quantify whether that correlation is accurate. The study's findings, in fact, are inconclusive about whether curiosity about a self-selected research topic does lead to stronger positive feelings about the process and more information-literate work.

Researching the psychology of students' information-seeking behavior, especially first-generation students and students of color, can help student success librarians understand the connections and disconnections between students, information technology, and library research skills. More generally, student success librarians can ask questions in their everyday work that help to bring to the surface how their students might understand information technologies in changing ways. Where do they search for information for classes? How do they understand the ethics of using generative AI like ChatGPT?

Today's students have grown up in a vastly different context from those of us born before the turn of the twenty-first century. They are proficient in internet forms of communication and information-seeking that I, for example, may not even be aware of. Their ability to learn from short videos presented in a scrolling

context on platforms like TikTok is a different form of assimilating information than reading from a book—not necessarily a worse approach but one that may need careful consideration to combat misinformation.

Teaching the psychology of the internet should be a key component of all information literacy instruction. Tristan Harris of the Center for Humane Technology argues that we should foreground a call for tech companies to engage in ethical design that does not exploit humans' need for connection and validation and vulnerability to positive feedback loops.[18] Just as nontraditional students should not be blamed for the fact that institutions of higher education have not been designed to encourage or even allow for their success, Harris understands that our widespread addiction to smartphones is not the fault of individuals who are unable to resist temptation but the result of the fact that such addiction is built in to the coding of the apps and the financial systems of Silicon Valley.

Conclusion

There is so much that I love about the concept of student success librarianship, and I am particularly interested in how this job title points the way to eliminating barriers and transforming higher education and academic libraries as institutions that tend to see students who deviate from a white, middle-class, male, heterosexual norm as deficient. I want to embrace the job title and engage with campus-wide student success initiatives, remembering to hold on to librarianship's core values while still turning a critical eye towards the legacies of librarianship that have been unaccepting of difference. Ultimately, though, I am still full of questions about how our work can do more to transform the culture of our institutions at large. What projects, events, activities, and other work can undertake to invite students to use their wealth of knowledge and experience to reinvent library resources in ways that will spur student learning? How can we engage the entire campus community in thinking critically about information?

I wrote and revised most of this essay when I held a student success librarian position at a small, urban university. I cherished the opportunity to explore resonances across the institution, and I made connections to staff in other departments gathered under the umbrella of student success initiatives. After a little more than a year, I was laid off from that position due to financial difficulties at the university. The layoff reminded me of the urgent need for all of us to advocate for the centrality of student success librarianship in the work of academic libraries today, work that university leadership often does not see or does not recognize as valuable.

Among the programs that I undertook during my yearlong tenure was a film screening of *Crip Camp* and a book club discussion of *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* (edited by Alice Wong), both coordinated with the disability services office and staff on campus. I reached out to financial services staff about cohosting financial literacy workshops in the library. I connected with our multicultural services staff to explore how to integrate information literacy into their work, and I attended events to meet student leaders and participate in the community. I worked with academic advising staff to plan for collaborations in the library building focused on study skills, tutoring, and other support and to encourage advisors to recommend the library's information literacy course for first-year and sophomore students. Through all of these efforts, I aimed to bring information literacy into students' lives as they connected with the university through other student-facing departments.

I also encouraged other departments to make use of the library building for workshops, presentations, and gatherings. Sometimes a simple reminder that the library's meeting rooms are a great place to host events for students can help foster a stronger sense of the library space as a learning commons and, by extension, demystify what we do as librarians.

All in all, I approached my work as a student success librarian as a reconfiguration of a librarian's tasks, programs, and approaches to student learning rather than a wholly different type of work. However, I often found myself reaching for different philosophies and values of librarianship. I am in a new position now, but still working under the umbrella of student success librarianship. I strive to focus on championing the learning of first-generation students and students of color. I lead with asset-based models of engaging with students inside and outside the classroom. I consider how institutions, policies, workflows, and the technologies we use are the barriers to student learning—sometimes unintentionally and sometimes not—and focus on transforming systems instead of just trying to teach students how to navigate artificial barriers. I now work with a team of librarians, and I see the power of articulating student success librarianship more deliberately as an orientation to our work and to honoring our students' racial and cultural experiences—an orientation that really should be embraced by all academic librarians in whatever role they hold. Ultimately, I hope to see more student success librarian positions take hold across our libraries so that we can collectively do this work of building (and renovating) more equitable institutions.

Notes

1. Todorinova, "Mixed-Method Study of Undergraduate and First year Librarian Positions," 207.
2. Weatherton and Schussler, "Success for All?," 2.
3. Mayer et al., "Undergraduate Student Success and Library Use," 380. For example, as part of their multimethod research design, Mayer et al. sought data at a macro level that captured the academic side of library work as well as individual student responses to capture the student-support side of library work.
4. Guinier's work powerfully underscores how often higher education's overall orientation towards learning is rooted in problematic understandings of success as a highly individualized endeavor for motivated learners. Instead, she advocates for the transformative power of education in building connections between learners and in activating the power of all learners to achieve success, regardless of their socioeconomic and racial backgrounds or their access to resources.
5. Couture et al., "'We're Gonna Figure This Out," 127.
6. Couture et al., "'We're Gonna Figure This Out," 134.
7. Ilett, "Critical Review of LIS Literature," 180.
8. Morrison, "Informed Asset-Based Pedagogy."
9. Arch and Gilman, "First Principles,"
10. Couture et al., "'We're Gonna Figure This Out," 141.
11. Todorinova, "A Mixed-Method Study of Undergraduate and First Year Librarian Positions," 214.
12. Zettervall and Nienow, *Whole Person Librarianship*.
13. Bowdoin et al, "Academic Libraries Serving Refugees and Asylum Seekers."
14. Croxton and Moore, "Quantifying Library Engagement"; Mayer et al., "Undergraduate Student Success and Library Use"; and Rowe et al., "The Impact of Library Instruction." These recent studies examine the correlation between library services and student success metrics.
15. Beilin, "Student Success and the Neoliberal Academic Library," 18.
16. Mindset Lists, "2005 List."
17. Knecht, "Investigating Nontraditional First-Year Students' Epistemic Curiosity."
18. Bosker, "Tristan Harris."

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