CARLI Counts Participant
Amy Odwarka, First Year Experience/ Student Success Librarian
Booth Library, Eastern Illinois University

Project Name
Persistence counts: Academic library community building events and first year student persistence

Abstract
I am conducting a quantitative study examining the correlation between first year/ first time students who attend library community building events and their persistence into second semester.

Motivation for the project
Past and current research on the correlation between student engagement with academic libraries and persistence/retention focus primarily on academic support; there is little in the literature that examines how library social events correlate to improving a sense of belonging and thus impact persistence/retention. Informed by findings in "Assessment in Action" literature from the American Library Association and the work of research librarian Barbara Eshback, this project studies the correlation between first year/ first time students attending library social engagement events and second semester persistence rates.

Eastern Illinois University has found that persistence among our First Year students has dropped over the years since COVID and the literature is clear; students who find community and a sense of belonging in their first semester have higher rates of return for the remainder of the year. These findings of my work would help librarians and libraries not only prove the value of community building activities for students, but also allow for new avenues of collaboration between libraries and campus entities who work to retain students and lead to higher completion rates.

Partners and Stakeholders
- Brian Keith, Dean of Libraries
- Michael Gillespie, Interim Dean of Student Success
- Amber Webb, Director of Academic Support Center
- Frankie Wilson, Director of Freshman Connection Living Learning Community
- Jennifer Reed, Academic Advising
- Maggie Burkhead, Director of TRIO
- Catie Danner, Housing and Dining
- Nolan Anderson, Institutional Research

Inquiry Question
Do first year/first time students who attend library community building events during their first semester have a higher rate of persistence in their second semester compared to first year/first time students who do not attend library community building events?

Study Participants
Participants in the study were all first year/ first time students who attended library community building events during the Fall, 2024 semester.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis
For this inquiry, I am using automated data logging. At all Library events, both educational and social, students are already asked by the library to swipe into the Panther Card Swipe system provided by the Marketing and Communications department at EIU. This system helps the library track attendance at events and also reports their university identification number and email. At each of the nine (9) social events the Library hosted during the Fall, 2024 semester, students swiped into the computer system being run by Library personnel or a Library Ambassador of Booth student volunteer upon arrival. This attendance data was then downloaded to an Excel spreadsheet at the end of the semester. At this time I have been reviewing data for double entries at the same event.

Once this file is complete I will turn the file over to Nolan Anderson in Institutional Research to:
- identify which attendees qualify as first year/first time students through E-number
- identify if they returned to school for Spring, 2025 through E-number
- generate a data report for me on the persistence numbers of all first year/first time students who attended classes in Fall, 2024 through E-number

Findings & Use of Findings
This inquiry study is still ongoing.

Next Steps
After data reports come back from Institutional Research I will be able to start analysis. This initial analysis may lead to more data sets being generated to potentially examine high risk groups of students, especially males.

Additional Reflections
One of the only caveats to this study has been technical issues with the swipe system. Although minor, there was a learning curve to how sensitive the magnetic strip reader was and if cards were being counted once, twice or not at all. Making sure the people who checked students into events understood they needed to watch the system to make sure the student was reported correctly was important. It also helped that I was running these events as part of my primary duties; I could deal with problems on the spot. Having this system available for no cost has also been imperative for data collection. I know some schools have this capability and some programs must purchase this type of equipment; if there was a cost I know my library would not be able to budget for the software in a time of flat budgets. Other programs that would be interested in replicating this work would need to examine what their school offers and potential financial barriers.

Timeline

December 2023
- Acceptance to CARLI Counts Cohort 5

February 2024
- Research question exploration
- Literature review

March - April 2024
- Literature review
- Finalize research question
- Connect with Institutional Research department
- Finalize research methodology
- Finalize data collection method
- Test data collection method

May - July 2024
- Apply for IRB (approval August, 2024)
- Identify events to be part of the inquiry study

August - December, 2024
- Data collection

January - March, 2025
- Work with Institutional Research
- Finalize data set
- Analysis work

April - June, 2025
- Draft findings
- Identify publication opportunities

Bibliography

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