Returning to Learn: Research and the Prodigal Student

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Abstract

Returning students - those with a significant lapse in time during their formal education - make up a large and growing percentage of the student population at Portland State University (PSU). Over 40% of PSU undergraduates are over 25 years of age and 21% of graduate students over 39. Given returning students’ experiences in the work force, motivations for learning, and the lapse of time since conducting academic research, returning students are a diverse group studied through different lenses than traditional students. Despite the growth of the returning student demographic, very little research has been conducted regarding these students’ research habits and challenges. The goal of this research is to describe returning students’ research habits and to identify potential improvements to library services and instruction for returning students at PSU.

About Portland State

• Urban public University in Portland, Oregon
• Oregon’s largest university with over 29,000 students
• Diverse student body
• Approximately 12% of 3A graduates entered Portland State as transfers
• 45% of students are enrolled part-time
• Large population of adult learners
• Over 40% of undergraduates are over 25 years old
• 21% of graduate students are over 40 and over

A Gap in the Literature

The education literature has shown that returning students have different experiences, needs and practices than traditional students. Over the past decade, libraries and other units in higher education have done significant investigation of the research habits of the traditional 18-22-year-old student. However, studies on the research habits of returning students, and studies regarding returning students in general, are rare, despite this growing population in all U.S. institutions of higher learning.

First Impressions

Based on the data already collected but without complete analysis, our initial impressions show that returning students do have unique challenges and experiences in regards to research.

Methods

Borrowing from ethnographic research methods in anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences, this mixed-methods qualitative study includes 5 components:

• research journals with retrospective interviews
• photo diaries with retrospective interviews
• video diaries
• filmed research process with retrospective interviews
• survey

These methods are used to gain a deeper understanding of students’ behavior, belief, and use of a library research context, these methods provide librarians with access to normally unseen aspects of a student’s research experience.

This qualitative data will be analyzed using Atlas.ti.

Anxiety

"I had a long break and my first term was I was incredibly worried about researching." – Master of Social Work Student

"...my biggest challenge is my personal anxiety that I have over something that isn’t going to happen. That’s real anxiety. And I think I have so many, probably because of this concept that we have a knee that plays in our head. And sometimes it’s negative thoughts, sometimes it’s positive thoughts, and I think I have so many internalized negative messages about education and academia that...I’m kind of my own enemy in that regard." – Master of Art and Social Practice Student

An example of the data collected from students during focus groups that describe their research experiences:

Chemistry Major

"I feel like I can get more done when I’m at work. People who are at work are like crazy people. And you know, I can do things in smaller chunks, and I think it helps, like I’m able to be more disciplined in ways, so I just...the more and more complicated our lives get with outside activities: personal life, family, the more it’s hard to concentrate and study on work. So I try to just take breaks more... I try to just take breaks more and do things in smaller chunks, and I think it helps, like I’m able to be more disciplined in ways, but it’s harder for me to function. So maybe when I think of the library I think of sitting for a long time, and not sit rather at home where I can do other things like cook. That’s another thing I do to distract myself." – Master of Education Student

"Yeah, well, children always have questions, and you know one of my children has more needs than the other, it’s a special needs child. And as you know, trying to balance and make sure all this stuff gets right is very stressful, and I can’t stop away from my room or different places, so it’s really stressful. But the way you do this can be difficult, and I know that some of the students do this effectively, because I came out of lunch at time, scatter my books everywhere and I’m taking bits between reading stuff and so it’s trying to find a balance of being able to get this stuff done in the amount of time..." – Undergraduate Chemistry Major

"I think it’s just hard for me to sit, more than my undergraduate experience, and since I’ve taken a break and I’ve backpacked, I feel like I’d feel a lot better for doing long periods and do work and study. I feel like I’ve more and more complicated our lives with different jobs and personal life, family, the more it’s hard to concentrate and study on work. So I try to just take breaks more and do things in smaller chunks, and I think it helps, like I’m able to be more disciplined in ways, but it’s harder for me to function. So maybe when I think of the library I think of sitting for a long time, and not sit rather at home where I can do other things like cook. That’s another thing I do to distract myself." – Master of Education Student

"Yeah, I don’t really like to ask for help. Just don’t. And it’s given a little easier now that I’ve been here for a while, but I guess I kind of feel like, I ask for help, that means I don’t know anything and I don’t want anybody to ever think that I don’t know anything. I actually didn’t even come into the library until this year, and it was for an assignment, because I didn’t know it’s something that or just more stuff that I’d have to try to figure out how to navigate and it’s kind of stressful, so it’s, asking anybody for help is really...not happy..." – Undergraduate Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Major

Varying Skills

"I mean I’m not the best Googlizer in the world and that’s what I probably my primary means of researching if you can tell. So, like you know, all the quotation marks and stuff that like I don’t know how to use and like, I feel like I could do it more effectively than just kind of googling everything and putting random pages in an annotated bibliography that I’m just like, oh there’s a bunch of stuff that’s good, what goes up on this little suggestion box. " – Undergraduate Anthropology

"Actually I felt like I was pretty good and pretty efficient at finding research and she going through it, combing through it. Especially, I mean, I think that’s what I’m interested in...I just bring like the library here by being here and if it’s asking however it applies to whatever project I’m working on..." – Master of Public Health Student

Returning to Learn: The Prodigal Student

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Seeking Outside Help

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Participants

• BA, MA and PhD students at Portland State University.
• Most were between one semester and one year into their studies. A few had been at Portland State three or more years.
• A gap of four years or more at any point in their formal education. Selected participants had been out of school for more than fifteen.
• Selected participants show a diversity in age, experience, academic discipline, and status.

Early Outcomes

Based on initial findings, the library is working with the campus’s Women’s Resource Center and Learning Center to offer a series of workshops before and during the first Fall term that is aimed at supporting students to help them develop an information management system and habits to ensure their success.

Continuing Research

Survey data will be collected in Fall of 2013. Data will be analyzed, and a white paper for PSU will be written.