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Returning to Learn: Research and the Prodigal Student

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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 workforce, motivations for learning, and the lapse in time since conducting academic research, returning students' study habits are likely different than traditional students. Despite the evidence, there has been little investigation of the research habits of returning students. This research seeks to understand the growth of the returning student demographics in higher education, very little research has been conducted regarding these students' research habits and challenges. The goals of this research are 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 25,000 students
• Diverse student body
• Approximately 1/3 of BA 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 35 and older

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.

Anxiety

"I had a big break and one of my first goals was to insistently work on re-learning. – Master of Social Work Student"

Varying Skills

"I'm not the best Googler in the world and that's what I probably my primary means of researching if you can tell. I, like you know, all the quotation marks and stuff and the like, I don't know how to use the like, I feel like I could do it more effectively than just kind of grabbing and just putting random words in and coming up with quotes up in the little suggestion box. – Undergraduate Anthropology major"

"I actually like it. I was pretty good and pretty efficient at finding research and she going through it, combing through it. Especially, I mean, it's something that I'm interested in, I just being able to be looking through the answers however it comes to whatever project I'm working on… – Master of Public Health Student"

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
• focus groups
• filmed research process with retrospective interviews
• survey

These methods are used to gain a deeper understanding of returning students' behavior, mindset, and life context in a library research context, these methods provide librarians the ability to more accurately assess the needs of a student's research experience.

This qualitative data will be analyzed using Atlas.ti.

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 a minimum of two years and 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’ Women’s Resource Center and Learning Center to offer a series of workshops with the campus’s Women’s Resource Center and Learning Center to offer a series of workshops before and during the fall term that is aimed at all returning 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 thoroughly analyzed, and a white paper for PSU will be written.