CREATING CONNECTIONS BY UPDATING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE LIBRARY WELCOME EVENT

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Abstract

Many academic libraries demonstrate institutional value through participation in campus retention initiatives. In preparing for Cleveland State Community College's 2014 campus welcome event, offered as part of the college's larger retention strategy, the college library successfully updated an existing library welcome event. Through a literature review on community college retention theory, new student orientations, and academic libraries, the Cleveland State Community College Library's experience provides one example of how academic libraries can use existing staff and library resources to offer successful, low-budget new student welcome events.

Introduction

According to a 2009 report from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), only 49% of the first-time community college students surveyed in 2003-4 had been "retained" by the same institution in 2006, while 55% of these students persisted in higher education at any institution. In determining institutional student retention rates, the NCES survey counted students who had completed a degree or certificate program at the community college, transferred to a 4-year institution, or were still enrolled at the same community college (p. viii). The student attrition rate was highest within the first year of enrollment – 23% of the students surveyed had left the institution within the first year (p. 33).

In an effort to improve these student retention rates, community colleges across the country have employed a number of different strategies, including new student orientation

programs, holistic first-year experiences, student success courses, formalized academic goal setting and planning, accelerated developmental education, learning communities, and experiential learning outside of the classroom (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012).

Many academic libraries, including community college libraries, participate in campus retention initiatives. By examining the existing research on college retention theory, new student orientations, and academic libraries, this article aims to provide strategies for academic support units, including libraries, to support campus retention efforts. The Cleveland State Community College library's participation in a campus-wide student retention event provides one example of how academic libraries can use existing staff and library resources to offer successful, low-budget new student welcome events and to support student retention.

Background

Cleveland State Community College (CSCC) is a two-year non-residential college operated within the Tennessee Board of Regents system. The school serves approximately 3500 for-credit students (FTE 2200) from the surrounding counties of Bradley, McMinn, Meigs, Monroe, and Polk. The average student age is 28 (Cleveland State Community College, 2015).

In 2012, CSCC selected a new Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP): the First-Year Experience (FYE) – Connect to Complete. Designed to support first-year students, the QEP implementation process began in 2013. The FYE program's goals include improving the academic advising process, encouraging students to use institutional resources, and strengthening both student study skills and "higher order thought processes" (Peters, 2015).   As an institution, the program also aims to improve the retention and graduation rates of first-time, full-time degree-seeking students. The FYE program includes six major components: Freshmen Connection (FC) New Student Orientation, New Student Online Orientation (NSOO), New Student Advising and Registration (NSAR), mandatory Academic Advising, academic Early Alert (EA), and the First-Year Seminar (FYS), a 3-credit college

success course offered during the student's first enrolled semester (Peters, 2015). The CSCC library has been involved most heavily in the Freshmen Connection and First-Year Seminar portions of the FYE.

Initial FYE program results have been promising. The First Year Seminar (FYS) course was first offered as a campus-wide option during the Fall 2013 semester, and the fall-to-spring retention of students completing this course was 86%, compared to the 76% retention rate of non-FYS students. The Fall 2013 to Fall 2014 retention rate for FYS students was 64%, compared to the 50% retention rate of non-FYS students (Peters, 2015).

In 2013, the existing campus new student orientation was rebranded as "Freshmen Connection" to better reflect the goals of the FYE program. Offered before classes begin each fall semester, Freshmen Connection (FC) is an optional new student orientation event open to all incoming students who have completed the New Student Advising and Registration process. Incoming students and their families are invited to the four hour event, which features campus tours, complimentary lunch, and informational sessions on a variety of campus resources, including the library. Students receive event passport stamps for participating in sessions throughout the event, and the library is a required stop for students to complete their passports. Once students have completed their event passports, they are eligible to be entered into a campus-wide prize drawing. 370 students attended the event in 2012 whereas 330 students participated in 2013.

The library first became involved in the new student orientation program in 2012. As a required stop for incoming students during the orientation event, library staff developed three self-paced activities to introduce incoming students to library services and resources: a library version of "Mad Libs," a crossword puzzle based on the library website, and a station where students were asked to "like" the library's Facebook page or to comment on the library blog (Twork, 2012).

In 2013, students attending the new student orientation completed surveys evaluating the effectiveness of the event. Based on the result of this survey, 57% of

incoming students reported that they would be "likely" or "extremely likely" to "use library resources in the pursuit of personal, educational and professional goals" (Peters, 2015).

In preparing for the 2014 new student orientation, library staff decided that the activities offered during past orientation events could be improved. To facilitate these changes, librarians drew upon the existing research on retention theory, new student orientations, and academic libraries.

Literature Review

Research on community college student retention and new student orientations indicates the value of students' academic connections in improving retention rates. Since many experts recommend intentionally facilitating interactions between students, instructors, administration, and staff, the professional literature offers a wide variety of strategies for academic libraries to become formally involved in campus student retention efforts.

Retention Theory in Community Colleges

According to Tinto's 1993 framework for student integration, students are more likely to be integrated into an academic institution and more likely to be retained as students after developing social and academic connections. Tinto argues that institutions seeking to improve student retention rates should be committed to systematically developing an inclusive campus-wide and student-centered learning community. Training faculty and staff to assist students plays a large role in this process. Tinto also recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all formula, since successful institutional retention efforts should be developed on an institution-by-institution basis.

While Tinto's student integration framework was originally developed for 4 year residential academic institutions, in 1997, Tinto investigated student integration at Seattle Central Community College. His research found that, in a non-residential community college environment, academic learning communities played an important role in helping students to develop both social and academic connections. Subsequent research (Strauss &

Volkwein, 2004; Davidson & Wilson, 2013) has corroborated the value of academic classroom experiences in facilitating community college students' social and academic integration.

Based on current research, community college stakeholders may wish to implement strategies for facilitating and developing students' academic connections to improve overall campus retention rates.

The Academic Library's Role in Campus Retention Efforts

While research seems to indicate that the academic library plays a role in improving student retention rates (Bell, 2008; Haddow & Joseph, 2010; Emmons & Wilkinson, 2011; Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013), the challenge for many academic libraries is articulating a direct relationship between the library and student retention rates.

Increased campus spending on libraries has been connected to increases in student retention (Bell, 2008; Emmons & Wilkinson, 2011); however, this data provides an indirect link between the library and student retention rates. In a 2008 briefing for higher education administrators, Bell recommends that academic libraries interested in tying the library directly to campus retention initiatives should focus on the library's role in providing personalized research assistance, developing information literacy skills, and collecting "data that links student persistence and satisfaction to the library's services, resources and people -- not just collections." Bell suggests that libraries could use information literacy initiatives as a tool within campus retention programs. Similarly, Rodriguez (2011) recommends tying the library into campus learning outcomes to demonstrate the value of the library.

Given arguments in favor of becoming systematically involved in campus retention efforts, librarians are employing a variety of methods to contribute. For at least two community colleges, Bronx Community College and Naugatuck Valley Community College, collaborations with first-year experience programs, especially first year seminar courses, has proven to be an effective strategy to improve the library's visibility in campus retention

efforts. At Bronx Community College, librarians worked closely with discipline faculty in planning and implementing a campus-wide first year seminar program that included information literacy among its learning objectives. Initial first year seminar results have been promising, including improved student GPA and retention rates (Sanabria, 2013). At Naugatuck Valley Community College, mandatory library instruction sessions for first-year experience students will allow librarians to gather data on incoming students and to better connect student academic success rates to library instruction. Librarians hope that increased involvement with first-year experience students will also allow the library to improve curriculum-wide library collaboration (Pagowski & Hammond, 2012).

At Delta State University, librarians collaborate with discipline faculty to serve as mentors for incoming students in the university's new student orientation session and one-credit semester-long freshmen course: General Studies 101: Emerging Scholars. Designed as an informal, engaging introduction to campus resources, each section of the freshmen course is co-taught by one discipline faculty and one staff member. Program results have been extremely successful – in 2007, 90% of participating students enrolled for the following semester, compared to less than 70% of non-participating students (Dennis, 2007).

In contrast, taking the approach that developing long-term collaborative relationships with campus staff will have a stronger impact on library effectiveness than student-focused efforts, the University of Arizona libraries have been involved in "train-the-trainer" programs for campus staff involved in retention initiatives, including campus tutors and academic advisors. These sessions provide training on library resources, enabling campus staff to better assist students with research questions. The sessions have also encouraged more campus staff to refer students to the library for research assistance (Pagowski & Hammond, 2012).

While involvement methods vary widely by institution, these examples from Bronx Community College, Naugatuck Valley Community College, Delta State University, and the

University of Arizona demonstrate the increasingly visible role of academic libraries in campus retention efforts.

New Student Orientation Programs and Student Retention

As part of a nation-wide effort to improve community college student retention rates, many community colleges have employed comprehensive new student orientation programs (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012). Research indicates a connection between well-designed new student orientation programs, student integration, and student retention (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). Since campus orientation events can help to establish students' social and academic foundations, many experts recommend developing a strategic institutional plan for the event (Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Barefoot, Arcario, & Guzan, 2013; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2013).

New student orientation events provide the opportunity for incoming students to meet other new students, faculty, staff, and current students. Beyond simply providing information about the institution, orientations can facilitate foundational support for students' subsequent academic and social connections by helping students to establish "personal, nonthreatening contacts" with the people on campus who can help new students to succeed (Tinto, 1993, p. 159).

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (2013) provides a list of best practices for new student orientation programs. The best practices recommend involving a wide range of campus stakeholders in the orientation planning process, to strategically facilitate meaningful interaction between new students, faculty, staff, and current students. To improve the effectiveness of the orientation program, best practices also promote including students' parents and families in the orientation process. Familial support systems can help to ease new student anxiety and some orientation programs include activities and workshops targeted at students' parents and families (CAS, 2013).

When implemented strategically and collaboratively with campus-wide stakeholders, new student orientation events can provide an effective foundational tool for connecting students with the people on campus who can assist with student integration into campus life.

The Academic Library's Role in New Student Orientation Programs

The academic library should play a significant role in well-designed new student orientation programs. As outlined by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS)'s best practices for new student orientations, orientations should provide new students with the opportunity to learn more about library services and resources.

One of the challenges facing college and university libraries seeking to demonstrate academic value to students is that libraries (and librarians) can seem intimidating to incoming students (Mellon, 1986; Cahoy & Snavely, 2007; Kuh, Borruff-Jones, & Mark, 2007). So-called "library anxiety" may be caused by library size, not knowing how to find library items, and not knowing how to begin academic research (Mellon, 1986). Mellon suggests developing a "warmth seminar" to combat library anxiety: a session "to help students see the library with fascinating information and welcoming, friendly people available to help them" (p. 123).

Academic libraries have implemented a wide variety of strategies to make the library seem more approachable during new student orientation events, including library-themed activities and games. At Pennsylvania State University, the library hosts an "Open House" for incoming students. Costumed librarians greet students to the building and facilitate library services-themed games that allow new students to informally learn more about library services and resources while interacting with library staff (Cahoy and Snavely, 2007).

Similarly, the Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) University Library participates in a campus-wide orientation event to introduce new students to

library services. During the event, librarians set up a table in the library lobby with free popcorn to attract students.   To encourage students to learn more about the library, students who correctly answer library-themed questions are allowed to spin a prize wheel for a chance to win a small prize. Designed to informally introduce students to library services, the activity also provides the opportunity for students to meet library staff (Miller & Cooper, 2014).

For both Pennsylvania State University Libraries and the Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) University Library, welcome events focus on making the library services and staff approachable. However, beyond approachability, the librarian's role as educator is expanding. The library is no longer just "a place to tour, ask questions, and find sources" (Watts, 2005, p. 346), but a place to strengthen information literacy skills and enhance problem solving capabilities. The challenge for many academic libraries is finding strategies for encouraging students to take advantage of library resources and services.

As the examples from Pennsylvania State University Libraries and Indiana University-Purdue indicate, incorporating engaging learning activities into new student welcome events can increase student awareness of library resources and librarian assistance. Successful library participation in new student orientation events can also help to establish a strong foundation for students to develop the connections with librarians that can assist students' integration into campus life.

Literature Review and Cleveland State Community College

With research supporting the importance of campus-wide strategic planning for new student orientation events, Cleveland State Community College (CSCC) planned Freshmen Connection (FC) -- the new student orientation event -- in collaboration with a variety of campus departments, including the CSCC Library.

After completing the college's New Student Online Orientation (NSOO) and New Student Advising and Registration (NSAR), incoming students were prepared to attend the

FC orientation. As part of the greater First Year Experience program, CSCC's new student orientation event paves the way for mandatory Academic Advising, academic Early Alert (EA), and the First-Year Seminar (FYS), a 3-credit college success course offered during the student's first enrolled semester.

Methodology

CSCC librarians decided to design new student orientation activities to maximize new student interaction with library staff and to focus on the library's academic support capabilities.

Library 101: Introduction to the Library

By collaborating with the new student orientation committee to offer new student orientation and outreach events in the past, the library had developed a professional relationship with this committee. Planning for the college's 2014 Freshmen Connection (FC) new student orientation event began in early June 2014, when the head of the FC planning committee contacted the library to confirm event participation.

While other campus informational sessions were offered at set times throughout the event, the library wanted to continue being a self-paced event, available to participants at any time during the FC. Staff also agreed that it would be best to make the library a required stop for students.

Library staff began activity planning by establishing the library's student learning outcome for the event. The question used to assess the library event in the post-FC survey was: "After attending the Library 101 session, how likely are you to use library resources in the pursuit of your personal, educational and professional goals?" Based on this assessment question, librarians determined that the main learning outcome for the event would be that students self-identified as likely to use library resources in the pursuit of their personal, educational and professional goals.

To achieve this learning outcome, library staff agreed on three set parameters: all activities should be fun, all activities should appeal to both a wide range of incoming students and their families, and the entire library session should require no longer than fifteen minutes.

Beyond introducing essential library services and resources such as research assistance, staff wanted to promote unique CSCC library features, including upcoming library events and Studio Connect, the library's collaborative technology group space. Outfitted with iMacs, a Promethean Board, an Apple TV, 30 circulating iPads, and 30 circulating Dell laptops, Studio Connect was designed to allow students to experiment with educational technology and to promote collaborative group work in the library.

Staff hoped that encouraging participants to test out Studio Connect technology would encourage incoming students to consider how they might use the library's educational technology tools in achieving their academic goals. Staff also wanted to find out what social media tools were most popular among incoming students.

In planning for the 2014 FC, library staff faced several limitations, including a relatively small staff (in August 2014, the staff consisted of the library director, two librarians, and three staff members) and no budget for purchasing event items. As a result, staff deliberately planned activities that could be facilitated by a limited number of staff members with existing library supplies.

Based on the established student learning outcome, activity parameters, and staff limitations, the staff decided to offer two event stations within the library building: a Technology Sandbox and a Library Feud game. The library director greeted incoming students and introduced them to the library session. Three staff members manned the Technology Sandbox and one staff member facilitated the Library Feud game. One additional staff member served as a floater to allow each staff member to take one break during the four hour event. The library was fortunate enough to have a campus volunteer available to stamp student passports after completing both event stations.

Technology Sandbox

Coordinated by three library staff members, the Technology Sandbox activity was offered in Studio Connect. This activity was designed to allow participants to test out a variety of library technology tools by completing a series of engaging, self-paced activities. Participants were given the option of trying all activities, or completing none of the activities, while library staff remained on hand to answer questions and provide assistance.

To introduce participants to the potential academic capabilities enabled by the library's circulating iPad collection, library staff set up one library iPad, projected onto the Apple TV, to display LeafSnap, a free i0s app used by some CSCC biology courses. The activity challenged participants to test out LeafSnap's accuracy in identifying leaves from a pre-set collection of flora gathered from across campus.
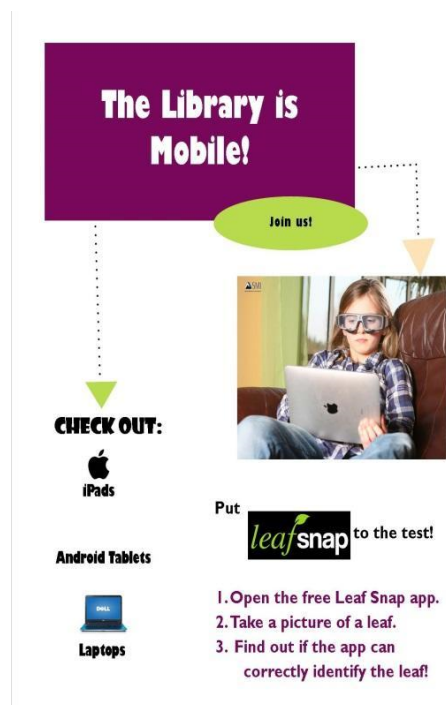
Figure 1: Directions for Library iPad activity.

Figure 2: Library staff assisting students during Library iPad activity.

As an activity to document the event and to engage a wide range of participants, staff transformed one iMac into a camera using PhotoBooth software. Participants were encouraged to test out PhotoBooth's photo effect tools and to use props such as fake moustaches in creating pictures.   Afterwards, participants were given the option to delete their pictures or to save their pictures on the computer, allowing the library to share the photos through social media.

Figure 3: Directions for PhotoBooth activity.

Figure 4: Library staff introducing PhotoBooth activity.

Another iMac was connected to a Wacom Bamboo Pen and Tablet to allow participants to test out the handwriting capabilities provided by this software tool.

Since the library's Promethean Board has proven popular with study groups, a blank page of the ActiveInspire software was opened on the Promethean Board, and participants were encouraged to draw pictures or to leave messages about the event.

As a strategy to engage participants who had brought their personal mobile devices to the event (including smartphones and mobile tablet devices), as well as to promote

upcoming library events, staff developed a QR code scavenger hunt. Staff created a series of 5 posters hung throughout the room. Each poster included a QR code linked to a separate web page containing content about an upcoming library event. Once participants downloaded a free QR code reader app onto their personal device, participants could scan each QR code to find out more about an upcoming library event. To encourage scavenger hunt participation, anyone who completed a five question worksheet based on information collected during the scavenger hunt received a small library-branded prize from the library's stockpile of potential giveaways, such as a stylus or bottled water.
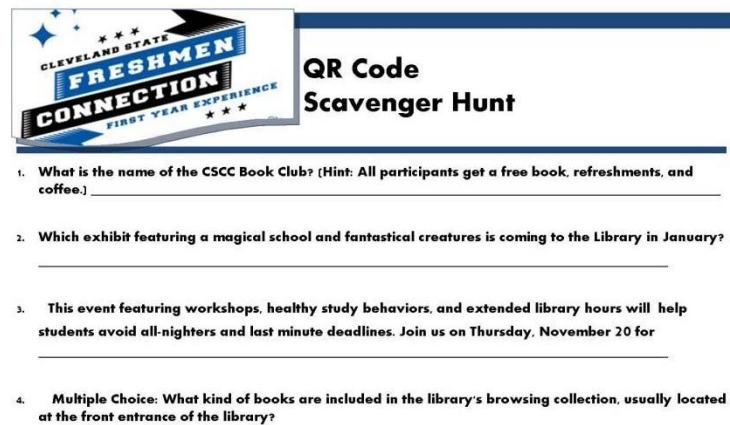

Figure 5: QR Code Scavenger Hunt directions.

Figure 6: QR Code Scavenger Hunt questions.

Library Feud

In spring 2014, the library conducted a student survey to determine student perceptions of library services and resources. Based on these survey findings, librarian Andy Foskey developed Library Feud, a library-themed version of the television game show Family Feud to introduce incoming students to essential library services. Foskey also wanted to gather information about incoming students' preferred social media platform.

To create Library Feud, Foskey used a Powerpoint presentation to introduce a series of four questions and PollEverywhere, a free online polling system, to allow participants to respond via open-ended text boxes. Since the activity was offered in the library instruction lab, all participants were able to respond via library computers. Questions asked participants to guess the top reasons why students visited the library, top-rated library services and resources, and how librarians could help students succeed at CSCC. The activity also asked participants to share favorite social media platforms.
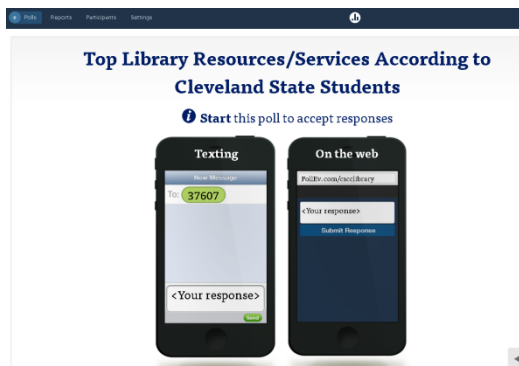

Figure 7: Polleverywhere screen for Library Feud.

Figure 8: Library Feud welcome screen.

Results

Since FC is not a required campus event, only 373 incoming students out of an incoming class of 798 (both full-time and part-time students) participated in the new student orientation. Since the college did not collect identifying student information on the post-event surveys, the library was unable to track student retention from survey respondees.

Out of the 373 participating students, only 95 students (approximately 25% of event participants and 11% of the incoming class) completed the event survey. As a result, survey results may not provide a representative sampling of the incoming class. In the post-FC survey completed by 95 incoming students, 62% (59) of students surveyed reported that they were "extremely likely" to use library resources in the pursuit of their

personal, educational, and professional goals, while 15% (14) reported that they would be "likely" to use library resources. 7% (7) of students were neutral. Only 8% (8) of respondents identified as "extremely unlikely" to utilize library resources. 7% (7) of survey respondents reported that the library session was not applicable to them.
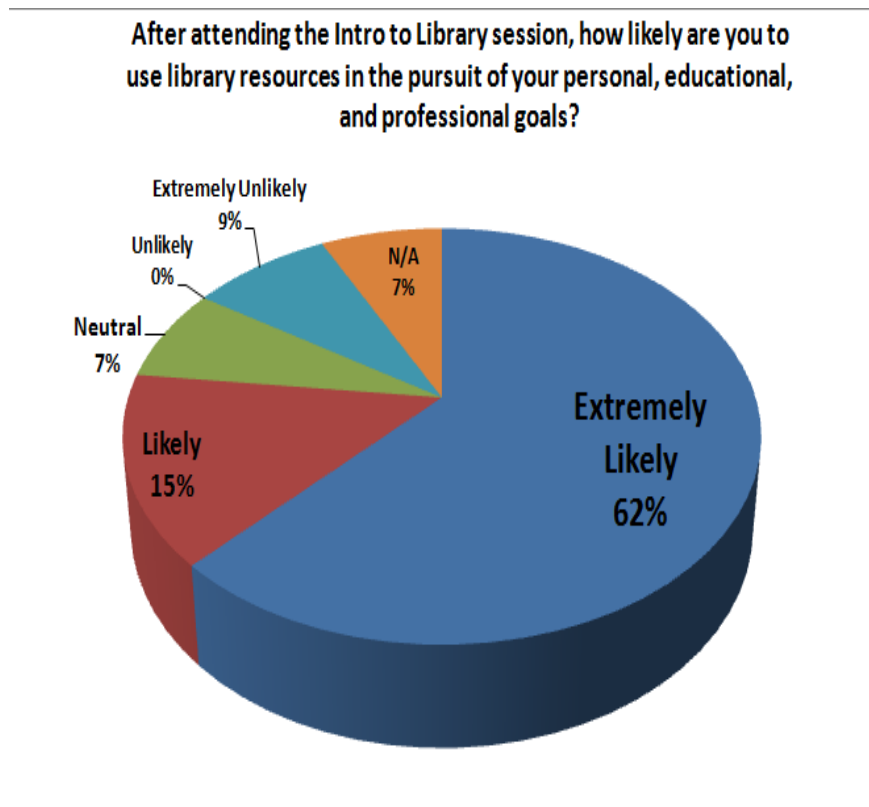

Figure 9: Library 101 assessment

Overall, librarians were pleased with the survey results. With 77% of students reporting "extremely likely" or "likely" use of library resources, the 2014 post-FC student survey results represented a 20% increase from the 2013 student survey results. Anecdotally, the campus staff volunteer stamping student passports mentioned afterwards that many students had told her how much they enjoyed the library sessions. One incoming student told the college president that he had been "blown away" by his visit to the library during FC.

Next Steps

To improve Library 101 organization during future events, staff recommended offering a general group orientation to the Technology Sandbox at the beginning of the event, rather than relying on one-on-one orientations. Group orientations would have been especially useful at the beginning of the event, when nearly 30 participants arrived in the library at one time and library staff found it challenging to offer personalized orientations.

The library continues to be involved in campus retention initiatives, including the FYE program. All students enrolled in the First Year Seminar (FYS) course visit the library at least twice during their first semester. Librarians remain closely involved with the FYS course to develop activities that encourage students to strengthen critical thinking skills and to learn about institutional resources such as library research databases and librarian assistance. In addition, two librarians have taught the FYS course, one during the Fall 2013 semester and one during the Fall 2014 semester.

Starting in Fall 2015, the First Year Seminar (FYS) course will be required for all first-time, full-time degree-seeking students at CSCC. The library will be continuing to support the program through the FC event and through course library orientation sessions, while expanding the library's collection of instructional videos to support distance learners.

The library plans to continue involvement in the FC event, continually updating and improving Library 101 activities. In planning for the 2015 FC, the event planning committee's goal is to increase the percentage of students reporting "extremely likely" or "likely" use of library resources by 2%.

Discussion

In developing activities and encouraging participants to gain authentic, hands-on experience with library technology, the library was able to better facilitate informal interactions between library staff and incoming students. Staff also found that many of the

events, especially the iMac Photobooth, engaged a wide range of participants, ranging from young children to incoming students and their parents.

While the Library 101 event might not tie directly into improving student retention rates, the process of collaborating with other campus departments in offering the event and participating in campus retention initiatives was a valuable process for the library to improve campus visibility and to demonstrate the library's continued value to the institution. As a result of the library's work with the FC event, the library has been invited to participate in other campus recruitment and outreach events, including campus tours for elementary school students and prospective students from local high schools.

The CSCC library's experience also provides one example of how academic libraries can use existing staff and library resources to offer successful, low-budget new student welcome events.

Conclusion

By increasing the number of opportunities for informal interactions between library staff and students during the college's new student orientation event, the Cleveland State Community College library played a role in facilitating students' academic connections across campus and improving student retention rates. The college's Freshmen Connection event offers an opportunity for the library to demonstrate value to the campus community and to introduce new users to the library. By highlighting informational technology resources, the library continues to position itself as a campus resource beyond, as Watts (2005) puts it, "a place to tour, ask questions, and find sources" (p. 346), into a place to explore technology, develop questions, evaluate sources, and think critically.

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