

## Chapter 2

# Building a Scholarly Network in Learning Communities at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln

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### ABSTRACT

*In 2011 the Chancellor at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL) charged each department and academic unit within the university to create programs and strategies to increase student enrollment within the next six years. The UNL Libraries embraced this goal by becoming more involved in the first-year experience programs and the first-year learning communities. This chapter will outline how the UNL Libraries gained library administration support to hire a Learning Communities/First-Year Experience Librarian and describe how they applied the theory of threshold concepts to develop a series of workshops and e-booklets to teach information literacy skills to students affiliated with the William H. Thompson Scholars Learning Community. These two initiatives will demonstrate how UNL Libraries built connections with campus units and services to become actively involved in student enrollment and retention.*

### INTRODUCTION

The mandate of all universities and colleges is to recruit and retain students in college until they graduate. In 2011, the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) set the course for entry into the CIC Big 10 by challenging every college, department, and unit to become involved in developing programs and services to increase student enrollment by 5,000 students by the year 2017. The National Survey on Student Engagement (2014) states that the formation of First-Year Learning Communities and increasing student contact with faculty are two high-impact practices that positively improve student retention and enrollment. In response to this UNL employed administrative staff to establish and administer programs and initiatives for these students resulting in the formation of twenty-nine first-

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year learning communities and by 2014 UNL had established a First-Year Experience and Transitions Program. At this time the libraries had a few services specifically for first-year students that had evolved out of informal connections with other units, but the only consistent service to first-year students was the one-credit hour online library research course that was a requirement for some courses and programs. UNL Libraries recognized the need to be more purposeful and aggressive in responding to the Chancellor's charge and made a decision to partner with college departments and units that were dedicated to student success and student retention. These efforts were minimally effective as the library faculty only became actively involved in a few summer camps and academic support programs. The opportunities for the UNL Libraries to be more involved in the first-year experience of the students became apparent and in 2011, following the Chancellor's lead, the libraries hired a Learning Communities/First-Year Experience Librarian to work with teaching and research faculty and also the university's First-Year Experience and Transition programs.

This chapter will outline how UNL Libraries is becoming integrally involved in student retention and success by connecting with first-year learning communities. It will discuss how UNL libraries established a presence in the William H. Thompson Scholars Learning Community through the development of integrated workshops and e-booklets and by soliciting the support of the library administration. The following three programs will be highlighted: Interactive Research Workshops that incorporate a threshold framework and active learning; Quick Tip Booklets a supportive mobile teaching and research tool for the students and faculty and the Study Café, a dedicated space for study and academic support.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Value of Learning Communities in Student Success**

Learning communities bring together smaller groups of students who have the same academic interests and career goals. The types of scholarships the students may have, their shared academic disciplines, or a common theme that connects the students and their interests to each other make each learning community unique. The students take common courses, attend the community academic and social events, and sometimes live in the same residence hall. These learning communities make the student's academic career more relevant and support retention by (1) restructuring the curriculum to create connections between the courses (Pedersen, 2003), (2) merging the classroom and college social experiences to facilitate lifelong learning outside the classroom (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012), (3) providing more intimate contact with professors and teaching faculty (Rocconi, 2010), and (4) by giving students more opportunities to become involved in campus activities (Zho & Kuh, 2004). Frazier and Eighmy (2012) in studying the experiences of students affiliated with first-year learning communities found that "direct and intentional" faculty and staff involvement with the students resulted in a higher level of student satisfaction with their courses and their overall college experience (p. 25). Libraries can then have an impact on student satisfaction with their courses if their faculty increase their involvement with the students through instruction and other events.

For decades universities have documented the importance of the student's first year in college and have developed many first-year experience programs to provide for the academic and social needs of these students (Alexander & Gardener, 2009). The development of first-year seminar courses was in response to Tinto's research that first-year seminars positively impact academic achievement and also have

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