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# “Student Needs are Academic Needs” and the Theological Library

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**ABSTRACT** Trends in the Association of Theological Schools and at the presenters’ seminary indicate increasing diversity of backgrounds and shifting student needs. A 2019 study by ITHAKA S+R of community college students, a population with substantial diversity, indicates a wider variety of student needs than what have traditionally been considered “academic needs.” It makes the case that all student needs are academic needs, many of which can be supported by the library. This aligns with the presenters’ view of their students’ needs and the library’s potential role. A discussion followed of the ways libraries can contribute with “service models” that respond to changing student needs.

## **OUR CONTEXT**

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary is a small denominational seminary located in Elkhart, Indiana, which we acknowledge as the traditional homeland of the Potawatomi people. In a given year, we generally have around a hundred students enrolled in our MA and MDiv programs. Every year, we’re finding that our students are increasingly from more diverse and less traditional backgrounds.

## **TRENDS AT AMBS AND IN THE ASSOCIATION OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS**

Many, but not all, Atla libraries have connections with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), which accredits graduate theological programs in the USA and Canada, including those at our institution. Both AMBS specifically, and ATS schools generally, are undergoing trends of increasingly diverse student populations, changing standards for undergraduate preparation, more and more international

students, students of color, and students from other marginalized populations.

One of the ways that we've seen this in our own context has been through the significant increase in the number of international students. From 2012 to 2016, we had a relatively low number of international students—less than 5% of our student body. That has been followed by a rapid increase, up to last year where we had nearly 30% of our student body composed of international students.

Our experience at AMBS follows a trend that we're seeing across ATS schools in general. Over the past thirty-plus years, ATS schools have experienced a steady increase in the total number of non-White students. This increase has been so dramatic that White students, who thirty years ago represented over 80% of enrollment at ATS schools, now make up less than half of the total enrollments (The Association of Theological Schools 2021).

## **STORIES OF AMBS STUDENTS**

Data trends are all well and good, but let's consider what these changing trends might look like for individual students. For this, we'd like you to consider two separate students that have come through AMBS degree programs in recent years. The stories of these two students highlight the ways in which historical and contemporary structural inequities impact students' academic needs.

Student #1 is an international student and a non-native English speaker. He moved to campus with his wife and their small child. Because of the requirements of his student visa, he is only allowed to work for the seminary (so, no finding a job off campus), and even then only for a limited number of hours per week. His wife's visa does not permit her to work. So this means that on top of taking graduate classes in his second language, he also has to find ways to support his wife and child on a very limited income.

Student #2 is a local American student. She is a minority, and she comes from a non-traditional educational background. In addition to her graduate coursework (for which she must commute 30 minutes to campus), she is also a mother with a full-time job.

Both of these students require support for them to be successful in their programs—but as you can imagine, the types of support they need vary significantly. Much of student #1's stress will be financial—how does he earn enough money to provide for his family, and how does he balance the need to work with time he needs to study? As

someone with full-time employment, financial issues are less pressing for Student #2; her needs lie in the areas of time management, as well additional support in navigating the realm of academia.

**THE REPORT: “STUDENT NEEDS ARE ACADEMIC NEEDS” BY  
MELISSA BLANKSTEIN, CHRISTINE WOLFF-EISENBERG, AND  
BRADLEE**

In 2019, Ithaca S+R published a report titled *Student Needs Are Academic Needs*, which addressed the ways in which community college students rely on libraries and other academic support services for a variety of needs—not just those needs that are considered “academic” (Blankenstein, Wolff-Eisenberg, and Braddlee 2019). Now, before we get too far into discussing what the report actually says, we’ll give a couple of caveats.

The first is that this report was published in 2019. This means it was published before the world was so dramatically reshaped by COVID-19. So it’s possible (or even probable) that some of the assumptions in this report may not be as accurate, or that some of the stated priorities will have changed.

We’ll also point out that this report is based on the experiences of community college students. And while it’s true that this is not an identical audience to our own students, many of the trends we’ve already discussed mean that our student bodies are, if not exactly the same as community college student bodies, at least sort of parallel due to the diversity of the populations we’re talking about.

What did this report actually say? Well, one of the key insights is that not all students struggle equally, or desire the same support services. We saw this with our two example students—they both needed help, but the types of support they needed were vastly different. The report also concluded that libraries (and other academic support services on campus) are highly valued by students in addressing some of these unmet needs—including both curricular and non-curricular information needs.

Some additional points to note are that student parents often want more support with childcare, and students generally need greater access to technology.

The bottom line from all of these insights, though, is that student needs are academic needs—even if it’s in an area that would not traditionally be considered academic. And this, really, is the point

we want you to take out of this presentation. A student with unmet needs—a student who can't afford to feed his family, a student who doesn't have any help caring for a child, a student who isn't able to access the technology they need—all of these things represent obstacles to our students being successful. And if our goal is to help our students be successful in their academic programs, then I think it's prudent for us to consider ways in which we can lessen the burdens of some of these obstacles. There's also a moral imperative in many of our faith traditions to work toward justice for persons from diverse backgrounds that have been marginalized. This additional layer is part of our institution's mission and vision statements, so it's something we are passionate about.

The Ithaka report suggested several ways that institutions can support students as they navigate some of these hurdles that they might face. We'll go through these ideas, termed "service concepts" here, and we'll discuss ways that we have tried to address some of them in our own work at AMBS. I'd encourage you to think about ways that you've already worked towards some of these concepts in your own libraries, or ways in which you might implement services to help your students in these areas.

## **SERVICE CONCEPTS**

The first service concept, ranked as the most important by students at the community colleges studied, was labeled "knowledge base." It essentially means a single service point for a variety of student needs. We haven't done this exactly, but what we have done is consolidated the academic support services of the bookstore and the writing center with the library. This makes the library something of a one-stop shop for many types of academic support that a student might need as they progress through their degree programs.

A second highly ranked service concept was loaning technology. This is also something that our library has gotten involved with in partnership with our IT department. For a long time, we had loaned out a few laptops, sound and video equipment, headsets, etc. on a limited circulation basis. In recent years, we have begun offering longer loan periods, even up to a semester on some of our equipment, enabling students to fully rely on our school's equipment for their technology needs. This became even more important in the era of COVID-19, and our ability to do this was further enhanced by

COVID-related federal HEERF funds that paid for a new set of semester loan laptops.

The report also suggests the concept of a personal librarian, a dedicated employee available to each student to help find and use all kinds of information/content sources. We're small enough that we're sort of default personal librarians for our students, but we plan on implementing this terminology as a way of trying to increase engagement with us in the future.

There's also the idea of a social worker—a person available to assist with various personal needs such as housing, childcare, transportation, etc. We see this a lot with our international students. In addition to undertaking new graduate studies when they move here, they're also having to learn to navigate life in a country that is sometimes vastly different from their own. Having someone to help them with something as simple as grocery shopping or as complex as getting a driver's license goes a long way to easing the burden of integrating into a new culture. While this hasn't fallen under the library's purview, we do have a person on campus who fills this role.

Child care is another thing to consider—especially when you have adult students with their own families. There's a wide range of services you could provide that would accommodate this. Sure, you could put a daycare in the library, but it doesn't have to be that extreme. Even just making sure students know that children are welcome in the library can go a long way.

The last three service concepts were ranked as less important by the community college students, but they're still worth considering. Those are privacy (helping students navigate the increasingly fraught world of online technology and the privacy implications involved), community advocacy (helping students learn about and get involved in local issues that are important to them), and student showcase (an opportunity for students to present and be recognized for their work in a variety of ways).

**Discussion Questions:** In what ways have you been working towards addressing some of these service concepts in your own libraries? Or, what ideas do you have to do so in the future? Are there new services or new needs that you've become aware of, perhaps brought to the surface thanks to the COVID pandemic?

## NEW SERVICES

Now, we mentioned that the Ithaka report was published before the onset of the COVID pandemic. And clearly, things are not the same as they once were. COVID has both created new forms of student needs and also exacerbated some things that already existed.

One thing that has changed about our enrollment since COVID hit is an increase in international students studying from international locations (rather than relocating to campus). This shifts the dynamic with regard to students' ability to access course textbooks. We have also seen students who study on campus (like in the stories we shared) struggle to afford textbooks. The COVID crisis has made us more aware of the need to take steps to provide course texts for our students. We've done this by increasing our investments in multi-user e-books and developing a textbook rental program.

Another need that became apparent in recent years was the level of food insecurity among our students. At the initiative of various persons on campus, including our Director of Campus Ministries and a teaching faculty member who were concerned about student needs, our library was able to provide space for a small food pantry with a shelf and freezer for donated foods. Placing this in a low traffic area of the library wing allows students to come and select food items without being observed. This wouldn't fall into the traditional view of "library services." But as we've discussed, if our goal truly is student success, then we have to find ways to address the various issues that might interfere with that success. And again, this includes issues of equity, justice, and cultural adaptation.

## REFERENCES

- Blankenstein, Melissa, Christine Wolff-Eisenberg, and Braddlee. 2019. "Student Needs Are Academic Needs: Community College Libraries and Academic Support for Student Success." Ithaka S+R. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.311913>.
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