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Daniel K. Blewett¹

ABSTRACT

Even though a community college library rarely attempts to offer the same depth of support found at a university, it can still serve the needs of local graduate students in two ways: through the library's core collection of print and electronic resources, and through its on-site services, spaces, and librarian expertise. Graduate students need to know that these resources are available to them. The knowledge and ability of the librarian is key to supporting this patron group. This article is informed by the author’s experiences at the College of DuPage, a large comprehensive community college in northeastern Illinois.

Keywords: community colleges, reference, public service, databases, resource sharing, study spaces, graduate students

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SERVING GRADUATE STUDENTS AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE LIBRARY

Located in northeastern Illinois, the College of DuPage (COD) Library is a large community college library, with approximately 250,000 print volumes, 150,000 ebooks, over 60 staff members, and 10 full-time faculty librarians. It is open to the general public and serves a range of information-seeking patrons.

Three types of graduate students visit the COD Library; to some degree they will likely be familiar patrons in other community college libraries as well. The first type consists of members of the full- or part-time COD faculty or staff working on graduate degrees, for advancement either at COD or elsewhere. They utilize the Library’s collection, especially the electronic resources, along with the resource sharing services at both COD and where they are taking courses. Salvo-Eaton (2018) discusses the importance of interlibrary loan to graduate students. When these requests at COD reach the five-article limit for individual journals, students are then directed to use their home academic library or public library.

Like most graduate students, they know a lot about their subject area, but may need to learn more about new or updated subject-specific databases and resources, specific research methods and strategies, analysis tools, or interdisciplinary library resources outside of their subject expertise. Who better to turn to than their familiar librarian? The COD Library has a traditional liaison librarian structure, so sometimes these subject librarians are approached directly by graduate students requesting help.

At COD, the Nursing & Health Sciences liaison librarian gets many of these requests, because many faculty members in this division are working on advanced degrees. She frequently helps them create or refine search strategies used in systematic reviews. Evener (2018) talks about the importance of scholarly journal articles for graduate work in the health sciences. The COD Library is fortunate to have a substantial selection of medical databases that include full-text articles. Therefore graduate students’ journal needs can often be met with existing resources.

A librarian is currently the head of COD’s faculty professional development program, which offers assistance to faculty in improving their teaching and research efforts. Every week she arranges a time and space in the Library where faculty can gather to work on their writing projects and ask for advice from their colleagues. Attendees are working on dissertations, presentations, papers, articles, or books. Not only are their writing efforts advanced and improved, but so is the sense of belonging to a community of both teaching faculty and librarians that supports and understands them.
The second type of student might be one who is taking graduate courses elsewhere while enrolled in one of the 170+ continuing education or specialized certificate courses offered at COD. Because such individuals are classified as COD students, they have full access to the various resources available at the Library.

The third type of graduate student to utilize the COD Library is likely a frequent visitor. This is a person who lives in the nearby surrounding area and finds the COD Library to be both convenient to use and better able to meet their academic information needs than a public library. They may be taking graduate courses online or may attend a nearby university in person but, for whatever reason, not be able to physically visit that university’s library. Many online graduate programs do not require utilizing a brick-and-mortar library, instead providing resources electronically. Maybe they are just visiting home during a break and need a quiet and comfortable place to work. If they do not self-identify as a graduate student, the library does not know their academic status. This is a common occurrence for libraries.

**UTILIZING THE LIBRARY’S COLLECTION**

Even though a community college library might not have a lot of primary research material (e.g., manuscripts from the founders of a religious faith), the library’s core collection, supporting many disciplines, will likely prove to be useful to a graduate student. Biographies and classic works in a subject come to mind. Most community college libraries focus on building smaller, current teaching collections, and a deep or broad historical coverage on every subject may not be available. But because many community colleges offer specialized certificates for adults returning to college to refresh their skills, their libraries often have more advanced materials in their collections to support certificate work (e.g., cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, geographic information systems).

Graduate students may desire materials on how to conduct research. A community college library could have some materials available. Many courses and programs at community colleges are incorporating more research activities into their curriculum, especially for upper-level courses. One thinks of what is happening in the natural and health sciences, computer science, engineering, and business analytics, and how library collections reflect these changes. Works on data literacy, preparing presentations, and visualization/infographics would also be included here.

Electronic resources may be the most desirable parts of the library’s collection for graduate students (Rod-Welch, 2018, p. 6). Online access to the same core academic article
databases are now commonplace in both community college and large university libraries. In part that is possible due to the sliding scale of database subscriptions that some vendors offer based on library budgets or the number of full-time equivalent students. Usage of these electronic resources will depend on the license agreements with the vendors, which might restrict usage to just the college faculty, staff, and enrolled students. E-book collections from EBSCO and ProQuest come to mind as having such limitations. If the Overdrive database is available to the broader community, graduate students might find useful books there. Many journal databases, on the other hand, are searchable by anyone with access to the library’s building.

Sometimes graduate courses from another institution may be taught on a community college campus. The College of Lake County, in Grayslake, IL, has in fact devoted an entire building, the University Center, to this effort. In such cases, the library may want to purchase specific materials to support the graduate courses, especially if they might also be applicable to courses offered by the community college. This could prove to be expensive, and can generate much discussion among the librarians as to how to effectively allocate the collections budget. While graduate courses are currently not taught on the COD campus, some courses at the junior and senior level are, due to the 2+2 and 3+1 agreements with other institutions. These agreements allow for the smooth transfer of students from COD to four-year institutions for specified programs, after completing two or three years of relevant coursework at COD. In some instances, advanced undergraduate courses are taught on the COD campus, to make it easier for former COD students to complete their bachelor’s degree. The COD Library does purchase some materials for these courses, but there are usually not many of these items, and they support subject areas already of interest to the college (e.g., criminal justice).

Perhaps the other institution will send materials to be shelved in the course reserves section, so that they are available for just those specific students. The students do not care where the materials come from; they just know that the course is taught at the community college, and so expect some kind of support from its library, in addition to whatever is available at their home library.

A graduate student might make a purchase suggestion, and the librarian responsible for that subject area will evaluate the title for its appropriateness in the collection (Crumpton & Bird, 2013, p. 91). Such suggestions are appreciated and keep librarians aware of supplemental material that might also serve their core audience. The COD Library strives to keep its collection up-to-date and, within limits, appropriately deep and wide, in order to support the college’s faculty, students, and curriculum.
While one thinks of the scholarly portion of the collection as being most useful to graduate students, they may also be interested in library materials for their own enjoyment: magazines, current fiction, self-help, cookbooks, popular movie DVDs, music CDs, etc. After all, libraries are all about encouraging reading, discovery, and lifelong learning for everyone.

**TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE LIBRARY’S SERVICES**

While some might equate a library with its location, collection, and space, the services provided by a library are perhaps more important to graduate students. The easiest thing that a community college library can do to serve graduate students is to provide comfortable and quiet study areas. Many times graduate students have contacted the COD Library, wondering if they can just use it to study. This is despite the fact that some non-serious undergraduate students (which every library has on occasion) might prove distracting (Kinsley et al., 2015, p. 765). The COD Library is fortunate to have a lot of space and seating, so there is plenty of room for non-COD students to study in the Library. The group study rooms are also available to graduate students and the public on nights and weekends, when there is less demand from COD students. Most community college libraries do not have enough demand by graduate students to dedicate valuable space for their use alone, as a university library might provide (Collard, 2018).

The next easiest thing is to allow the public to use the computer workstations inside the library. Maybe a student does not have their own computer or a reliable internet connection, so the library is a natural place to turn to. (And the library may be a more productive research environment than a nearby coffee shop.) A library may choose to provide guest passes to non-college patrons or may not limit who can utilize the computers. However, it may have to be explained that some electronic resources are restricted to just the faculty, staff, and students of the college. Students who want to attend their online class while in the COD Library are informed that they must use a headset, so that other patrons are not distracted.

Public access to the campus Wi-Fi network is a valuable service, allowing graduate students to utilize the internet and connect to electronic resources at their own academic library, via their own device. This will of course depend on the policies and technical capabilities of the institution.

At the College of DuPage, graduate students have two avenues to check out materials from the Library in person, neither of which has a large impact on services or collections. If the graduate student lives within the taxing district for the college, they are entitled to a COD
Library card, which allows them to check out books and physical videos from the Library. That card is not valid at public libraries, and public library cards are not valid at the COD Library. Other community colleges may have similar or even more robust arrangements with libraries in their state or local community.

Also, in Illinois, students who attend academic institutions affiliated with the I-Share program can visit any of the other 88 I-Share member libraries, 49 of which are community colleges, and check out books and videos from that library using their registered student identification card (Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois, 2021, Section VI: Policies Applying to Library Users). Four institutions granting graduate degrees are within 10 miles of COD. Affiliated students can also designate the COD Library as a pickup location for materials requested from other libraries via I-Share. Other states may have similar arrangements.

For whatever reason, some graduate students may not be fully prepared when it comes to scholarly research, particularly in the growing area of interdisciplinary research (Bussell et al., 2020, pp. 221–222). Maybe they have not been able to access the help provided by their academic institution, an unfortunate but frequent occurrence for those taking online courses while juggling work and family obligations. Bonnand and Hansen (2015) write that online graduate students are sometimes an “invisible student population,” and review some of the problems they encounter with library research (pp. 4–5). The most important service that a community college library can offer graduate students is the professional knowledge and expertise of the librarians, whether or not they have interacted with librarians from their home library. Sometimes it can be as basic as helping the students navigate their academic library or university websites. Below are just a few examples of this service.

Some students have only a vague idea as to what is available to them in the information universe, beyond just using Google and the library catalog (Rod-Welch, 2018, p. 8). This is where the librarian can explain what various types of information are available to them, and how to access it. A good reference interview, and the availability of follow-up consultations, is crucial to figuring out how to match up patron needs with what information is available to them within the library and elsewhere.

Explaining how to do a database literature search is a standard request, but librarians can also help guide a patron to resources when his or her needs require a deeper dive in producing a scoping or systematic review. Having the student log into their own library is best, so that they can learn on those databases that are available to them. Librarians are skilled in deciphering how to search in specialized niche databases; the important thing is that
librarians are familiar with searching concepts and techniques, which can be applied to any database. The same holds true for searching library catalogs.

Helping undergraduate or graduate students construct proper bibliographic citations for their sources is a basic service for any library. The chance to work on a citation for something more advanced or exotic than just a journal article from a database should be appealing for librarians, and a community college library should have all the standard citation style books (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago). The librarian may have to interpret a reference citation for a student; the abbreviations, acronyms, and formatting conventions can be confusing to those unfamiliar with them. Explaining how to use various citation management systems could be a service needed by a student (Notess, 2018, p. 236). Citation tracing for resources may also be something that the students need help with; their home library may have a guide on how to do this (e.g., University Library, 2023). Once an item is identified, the student may need help in determining how to retrieve the item, and the librarian can explain the various ways that this can be done.

Master’s theses and doctoral dissertations are very minor components of a community college library’s collection, yet are vital to graduate research. A librarian can help students find useful theses and dissertations by doing an internet search (since more institutions are making that particular content available free online in an institutional repository), or by using a bibliographic utility such as OCLC’s WorldCat to identify relevant items. Examining the online resources of their home library may reveal that ProQuest’s Dissertations & Theses Global database is available there, in which case they should be able to access it remotely.

A community college library may want to contact a nearby higher-level institution to let them know what resources are available to their graduate students, some of whom may have been visiting the community college library. In turn, those libraries responsible for serving graduate students may want to contact nearby community college libraries to see what is available to their graduate students. The point here is that good communication and cooperation between libraries can improve access to information for the students.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, one can see that a community college library can successfully serve many of the information needs of graduate students; the students just need to know that it is an option for them. Such patrons should not be discouraged from visiting, but instead welcomed and encouraged to use the library to whatever extent possible. Sometimes it is in-person service, while other instances may involve reference chat or email. The
library’s existing collections, services, and technical networks should, within their limits, be able to serve these advanced students with little strain on staff or resources. The key to good service is the professional knowledge and helpful attitude of the librarians.

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