



Student, Librarian, and Instructor Perceptions of Information Literacy Instruction and Skills in a First Year Experience Program: A Case Study



Sung Un Kim *, David Shumaker ¹

Department of Library and Information Science, The Catholic University of America, 620 Michigan Ave., N. E., Washington, DC 20064, USA

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ABSTRACT

As more and more academic librarians have adopted the practice of teaching information literacy in first year experience programs, there has been a growing number of studies assessing this practice. However, few studies have compared the views and assessments of students, librarians, and instructors. Through survey methods, this case study was conducted to understand student, librarian, and instructor perceptions of information literacy instruction and students' information literacy skills in two different types of courses at the Catholic University of America. The results indicate that notable differences are associated with the respondent's role as well as the course involvement of the respondent. Students who were involved in a course with consistent inclusion of a substantive information literacy-related assignment tended to rate the effectiveness, importance, and impacts of information literacy instruction, and their own information literacy skills, higher than those in a course with an inconsistent level of engagement with information literacy. Students' assignment grades were positively correlated with their self-ratings of information literacy skills in both courses. In addition, students rated their own information literacy skills higher and rated the importance and impacts of information literacy instruction lower than librarians or instructors did. Implications and recommendations are also addressed.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many institutions of higher learning have created “first year experience” (FYE) programs. These programs are specifically designed to create an engaging learning experience for students, and to improve both student academic success and retention. As these programs have grown, academic librarians have found them to be hospitable forums for information literacy instruction. Information literacy, or its siblings information fluency and critical thinking, are widely agreed to be essential for students' success in undergraduate programs and beyond (ACRL, 2000; Grassian & Kaplowitz, 2010). Librarians have thus delivered instruction in information skills in the context of FYE programs using a variety of methods and approaches.

At the Catholic University of America (CUA), the FYE program began in academic year 2009–2010, and librarians have been involved, or “embedded” in the FYE program since academic year 2011–2012 as a way to foster the development of essential academic skills. An embedded librarian is assigned to an individual section of English (ENG) and Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) courses to provide his/her instructional role throughout the semester. The instructional role is planned collaboratively

with the section instructor and is customized to the needs of each section. Besides their formal instructional role, embedded librarians frequently participate in the co-curricular aspect of the FYE program.

In the second-year of the embedded librarianship program at CUA, this case study was conducted to assess its current status and to seek possible ways to improve the instruction by obtaining feedback from the involved participants — students, librarians and instructors. The authors discussed various assessment methods with the FYE committee, which included surveys, focus-group interviews, and pre- and post-tests of information literacy skills. As an initial step for the program assessment, the authors decided to survey students, librarians, and instructors who participated in the FYE program. The objective was to understand their perceptions of information literacy instruction and students' information literacy skills in the current FYE program, with a particular focus on whether any significant differences are associated with the respondent's role (student, librarian, and instructor) as well as the course involvement of the respondent (ENG vs. TRS).

The specific research questions to be addressed in this paper are:

RQ1. How are the role and the course involvement of students, librarians, and instructors associated with their perceptions of information literacy instruction in the FYE program, in terms of 1) the information literacy skill competency areas addressed and 2) the effectiveness of instruction?

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 202 319 6040.

E-mail addresses: kimi@cua.edu (S.U. Kim), shumaker@cua.edu (D. Shumaker).

¹ Tel.: +1 202 319 5551.

RQ2. How are the role and the course involvement of students, librarians and instructors associated with their perceptions of information literacy skills, in terms of 1) students' skills, 2) importance and impacts, 3) students' confidence, and 4) correlations between these three factors and students' assignment grades?

This paper describes one university's experience and efforts in launching and fostering embedded librarianship in an FYE program. The authors expect that the procedures, findings and implications of this case study are beneficial for other academic institutions, including those who are planning to launch information literacy programs or seeking to modify their existing program for improvement.

LIBRARIANS IN FYE PROGRAMS

American institutions of higher education have been focusing special attention on freshmen, or first-year students since the early 1980s (Alexander & Gardner, 2009). The creation of special programs for students making the transition from secondary education is commonly traced to the University of South Carolina, which initiated its "University 101" course in the early 1970s as a response to campus divisions that led to riots in 1970 (National Resource Center, n.d.). By the early 1980s, the success of this program, and rising interest on the part of other institutions, led to the first national meeting of 175 educators on the "first-year seminar" concept (National Resource Center, n.d.). The University of South Carolina went on to establish a resource center for such programs, and has conducted a series of surveys to document their spread and development. Its 2012–2013 survey collected responses from 804 two- and four-year institutions claiming to offer some form of first year seminar (Young, 2013).

FYE programs are structurally and thematically diverse, and are deliberately tailored to the unique character of the institution. They may be comprised of single seminars, short courses, service projects, and/or co-curricular activities. Still, there is broad consistency of educational objectives among programs. Young's (2013) survey found the following to be the most common objectives:

- Develop a connection with the institution (44.9%)
- Provide orientation to campus resources and services (37.8%)
- Develop academic skills (36.3%)
- Develop critical thinking skills (23.3%)
- Create common first-year experience (21.6%).

At the same time that higher education has increased its attention to FYE programs, another trend has been the increased emphasis among librarians on their teaching role (Winner, 1998). As instructors, librarians take responsibility for educational objectives that are closely related to the objectives of FYE programs. Librarians foster knowledge of the institution's library resources and how to use them, which is related to the broader goal of orientation to campus resources and services. They teach information literacy skills, which are inextricably bound up with the development of academic skills and critical thinking skills. Thus it stands to reason that many librarians have sought out, and been encouraged to participate in, opportunities to teach various aspects of library use, bibliography, and information literacy, in the context of FYE courses.

Literature discussing the role of librarians in FYE programs began to appear by the 1990s. Blakeslee (1998) documented her progression from teaching one-shot library orientation sessions, to taking responsibility for a semester-long freshman orientation course, to collaborating with other instructors on the creation of a textbook for the course. By the early 2000s, library instruction was well embedded into the framework of these courses. A nationwide survey of FYE programs by Boff and Johnson (2002) collected 368 valid responses, and found that 315 institutions (86%) included a library component as part of their FYE curriculum. Of those, two-thirds

made the library component mandatory, and 84% involved librarians as the instructors for the library component. Almost the same number (81%) had librarians participating in the curriculum development phase of the program.

Since those early reports, accounts of librarians' involvement in various manifestations of first year courses have proliferated. Some of these have focused on general and interdisciplinary programs, while in others, librarians have contributed to introductory and first year courses in specific disciplines. For example, Manus (2009) recounted her involvement with the music curriculum at Vanderbilt University. In two articles, Ferrer-Vinent and Carello (2008, 2011) have described the immediate and long-term impacts of information literacy instruction for first-year biology students. Speech courses have been the venue for embedded information literacy instruction discussed by Hall (2008) and Van Epps and Nelson (2013), while Kadavy and Chuppa-Cornell (2011) report collaborating with instructors in an on-line English 102 course.

As the practice of embedding information literacy instruction in first year courses has spread, so has the interest in assessing its effectiveness. Tumbleson and Burke (2013) document the variety of methods used, including surveys of students and faculty, focus groups involving students and faculty, administering pre- and post-tests to students, and analyzing student work, such as research papers (p. 98). Recent literature provides examples of each of these methods. At St. Leo University, a survey was administered to students immediately following each information literacy session in the university's SLU 100, Introduction to the Saint Leo Experience, course. The survey asked for students' opinions regarding the effectiveness of instruction and its relevance to their academic success, and found generally positive responses (Karshmer & Bryan, 2011). Coastal Carolina University used a combination of pre-testing and post-testing of students in first-year courses. The tests were developed in-house and consisted of 12 to 15 multiple choice and true–false questions. In a review of five years' results from these assessments, it was found that "students showed statistically significant changes on questions that dealt with resources or services that they were required to utilize as part of their research assignment" (Fain, 2011, p. 113). Librarians at Augustana College, in Rock Island, Illinois, replaced a "fixed-choice, quantitative information literacy test" for students in the first year course with a performance assessment that concentrated on students' ability to evaluate information sources through an in-class exercise immediately following a presentation by the librarian (Bluele, Makula, & Rogal, 2013). At Purdue University, Van Epps and Nelson (2013) employed a different approach to performance assessment. They analyzed the quality of resources cited in a random sample of student papers submitted for a course required of all first-year Engineering students. They concluded that "the introduction of information literacy instruction for several brief lectures in conjunction with gateways or assignments in the curriculum improves outcomes" (p. 13).

Multimodal methods of assessment have also been employed. At the University of Mississippi, librarians combined pre-tests, immediate feedback in the classroom using clickers, and a post-test delivered several days to two weeks after the information literacy instruction. Results included an increase in student scores from 48% correct on pre-tests to 64% correct on post-tests (Dennis, Murphey, & Rogers, 2011). Finally, Fuselier and Nelson (2011) report the results of a multimodal approach to assessment at Minnesota State University. In their case, a pre-test/post-test method was combined with the evaluation of student work. Students participated in a first-year Biology course, and some laboratory sections received information literacy instruction while others did not, thus setting up in effect, a control group. These assessments yielded mixed results. For example, there was no significant difference between the two groups in performance on the first laboratory research assignment, but a statistically significant difference in perceptions of improvement by students exposed to the instruction compared to those who did not receive it.

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