Institutionalizing Information Literacy

by Sharon A. Weiner

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There is increasing recognition that information literacy is essential for individual and community empowerment, workforce readiness, and global competitiveness. However, there is a history of difficulty in integrating information literacy with the postsecondary educational process. This paper posits that a greater understanding of the organizational functioning of different types of colleges and universities can identify targeted strategies to address this issue. It applies Birnbaum's descriptions of four models of higher education organizations and strategies for effectiveness in each to the problem of institutionalizing information literacy. It proposes strategies for the institutionalization of information literacy based on the differences in these models.

Sharon A. Weiner,
Purdue University Libraries, 504 West State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA
Tel.: +1 765 496 3128; fax: +1 765 494 6744.
<sweiner@purdue.edu>.

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Introduction

There is a growing consensus that information literacy and its related competencies, such as media and digital literacy, critical thinking ability, ability to engage in lifelong learning, and problem-solving ability, are essential for individual and community empowerment, workforce readiness, and global competitiveness (American Management Association, 2010, p. 1; Lloyd, 2010, p. 29; Zhang et al., 2010, p. 721; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009, p. 2; Achieve, 2008, p. 5; Crawford and Irving, 2008, p. 29; Perrault, 2007, p. 2; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2005, pp. 5–6; Goad, 2002, pp. 16–17). A standard definition of information literacy is the ability to:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally (ACRL, 1989)

Advocacy for information literacy is occurring not just on local or national levels, but through international collaborations. The Alexandria Proclamation, developed by an international group of leaders in 2005, stated that information literacy is:

- Essential to lifelong learning
- Empowers people in all walks of life
- Is a basic human right
- Promotes social inclusion of all nations (Garner, 2006, p. 3)

Several years after the Alexandria Proclamation, Boekhorst and Horton (2009, pp. 224–230) organized and presented eleven "Training-The-Trainers in Information Literacy" workshops, each in a different part of the world. Sponsored by UNESCO (United Nationals Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) and IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), more than 750 participants from 99 countries participated (Boekhorst and Horton, 2009, pp. 224–230; Horton and Keiser, 2008, pp. 10–27). UNESCO is developing international information literacy indicators because information (and media) literacy empowers people "to make their own decisions and to be more engaged in civic and economic life" (Moeller et al., 2011, p. 15). These examples of global collaborative efforts related to information literacy convey its continuing importance and growing urgency.

Ideally, the habits of mind necessary for information literacy should be developed progressively throughout the formal educational process (Weiner, 2010). Since information literacy is best learned in specific contexts, such as the academic disciplines, its inclusion in curricula is

rarely comprehensive. The advocacy of individuals, rather than organizational assimilation, often determines the degree to which it is adopted. It is possible that the integration of information literacy may happen most effectively in different ways in different types of institutions. This paper focuses on four models of organizational functioning in institutions of higher education. The paper proposes possible strategies for success in these types of institutions to establish information literacy as an integral and lasting aspect.

Differences in Institutions of Higher Education

Non-profit institutions of higher education in the U.S. have three commonalities: a faculty governance structure, an administrative hierarchy, and academic departments that are specialized and place a high value on their disciplines (Duryea, 2000, p. 13). But they differ in many ways, too, such as cost, the number of students attending, the demographic composition of the student body, the mechanism for governance, sources of financial support, primary institutional mission, geographic location (rural, urban, online), socialization, strategy, and leadership (Morphew, 2009, p. 243; Tierney, 2008, p. 30; Clark, 1990, p. 24). Kezar and Eckel (2004, p. 376–378) traced the development of academic governance structures from early 20th century when the sub-units of an institution were closely bound and dependent on each other, to the 1960's, when the size of campuses grew dramatically and became increasingly decentralized. Further study of the effects of this "bureaucratization" led to the concept of the organized anarchy in the 1980's. This model is a loosely coupled system with units that have much independence from each other (Wieck, 1982, p. 384). "Unpredictability, turbulence, resource scarcity, competitiveness, and periods of declining resources" characterized the 1990's (Cameron and Tschirhart, 1992, p. 100). In this environment, institutions tended to act in three ways: by "protecting the legitimacy of the core activities, goals, and customers of the institution" (domain defense strategies); by "enlarging the core activities, goals, and customers by initiating actions aggressively" (domain offense strategies); or by "adding related domains through activities such as innovation, diversification, or merger" (domain creativity strategies. Management strategies, such as participative decision-making, can mitigate the negative effects of the environment because good decision-making occurs through invoking varied information resources and perspective (Cameron and Tschirhart, 1992, p. 90, 100, 102).

Institutions still retain their core identities, though faced with similar external pressures. It may be necessary to use different strategies to institutionalize information literacy depending on the predominant characteristics of an organization.

There are four long-standing models of organizational functioning in colleges and universities: the collegial, bureaucratic, political, and organized anarchy (Birnbaum, 1988, xvii; Bess, 1988, p. 2). Bergquist described six similar organizational cultures: the collegial culture, the managerial culture, the developmental culture, the advocacy culture, the virtual culture, and the tangible culture (Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008, p. 1). All institutions of higher education have characteristics of each of these models, but one characteristic usually dominates (Green and Swanson, 2011, p. 378; Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008, p. 7; Kezar and Eckel, 2004, p. 382; Birnbaum, 1989, p. 239–240; Cameron and Tschirhart, 1992, p. 91, 102). Some advocate for synthesizing models to incorporate the strengths of each (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 175–230; Meyer, 2002, p. 517). Kezar and Eckel's review of the literature on governance in higher education cited studies that differentiated between types of institutions (Kezar and Eckel, 2004, p. 375–9).

Institutionalizing Information Literacy

From the time that Zurkowski named the concept of information literacy (Zurkowski, 1974, p. 6), librarians have sought ways to integrate it into learning in institutions of higher education (VanderPol et al., 2008, p. 14; Breivik and Gee, 2006, p. 15–16; Rockman and Associates, 2004, pp. 238–239; Johnston and Webber, 2003, p. 338; Bruce, 2001, pp. 108–109; Breivik and Gee, 1989, pp. 28–29). There are several types of integration of a new concept or program possible in an organization: adoption, diffusion, and institutionalization. Casanovas (2010, p. 76) defined *adoption* as "a decision to use an innovation;" and *diffusion* as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system." Meyer and Rowan suggested that institutionalization involved "the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rulelike status in social thought and action" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 341). Institutionalization is comprehensive and deep: it is "the ongoing process in which a set of activities, structures, and values become an integral and sustainable part of an organization…Institutionalization occurs when key stakeholders are committed to a change, develop procedures to support it, and establish the change as an essential part of the organizational structure" (Casanovas, 2010, p. 76–77).

Institutionalization is the most desirable state for information literacy, since it implies the highest degree of permanence and acceptance by the organization in comparison with adoption and diffusion. To determine whether information literacy is institutionalized in an institution, one could adapt and apply the indicators from a Kellogg Foundation report on institutionalizing service learning:

- Number of courses adapted to include it
- Creation of new centers, institutions, and clinics based on it
- Policies, practices, and mission statements changed to incorporate it
- Scholarships and living–learning communities created for undergraduates focused on it
- Integration into curricula
- Development of related activities
- Addition of funding through capital campaigns, government, and in-kind support (Shrader et al. (2008)

There are particular challenges in institutionalizing learning programs that are not tied to a specific discipline, such as online learning (Casanovas, 2010, pp. 75–76; Piña, 2008, pp. 428–9), service learning (Stater and Fotherinham, 2009, pp. 11, 13), and engagement (Sandmann and Weerts, 2008, p. 183). "Writing Across the Curriculum" (WAC) programs face similar challenges, for some of the same and some different reasons. WAC is similar to information literacy because:

- Its evaluation is complex
- Some institutions have reward systems that do not value teaching
- Attitudes of key faculty and staff may be entrenched or cynical
- Expectations of the program may be unrealistic
- Administrative support and funding may not be sufficient
- There is insufficient empirical evidence for its importance

Some differences between WAC and information literacy programs are that WAC is administered differently in every institution, the programs change rapidly, and the success of the program varies based on the individual program administrator (Townsend, 2008, p. 47–50).

Information literacy is a learning program that is relevant to all disciplines, but there is a history of difficulty in integrating it with the educational process (Stubbings and Franklin, 2006, p. 2; Rader, 2000, p. 294). The reasons for the difficulties associated with institutionalizing information literacy are varied and complex. There is a lack of understanding of what information literacy is and what its value is. Some consider it to be "extra" and cite reasons such as insufficient time and not enough people to devote to it. Some faculty believe that students learn the competencies in other courses. Students themselves over-estimate their information literacy abilities (Stubbings and Franklin, 2006, p. 6). Lastly, information literacy crosses the boundaries of all disciplines, so it is difficult to determine who is responsible for it. Some believe that colleges should offer credit-bearing courses in