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A Pragmatic and Flexible Approach to Information Literacy: Findings from a Three-Year Study of Faculty-Librarian Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

While faculty often express dismay at their students' ability to locate and evaluate secondary sources, they may also be ambivalent about how to (and who should) teach the skills required to carry out quality undergraduate research. This project sought to assess the impact of programmatic changes and librarian course integration on students' information literacy (IL) skills. Using an IL rubric to score student papers ($n = 337$) over three consecutive first-year student cohorts, our study shows that when faculty collaborate with librarians to foster IL competencies, the result is a statistically significant improvement in students' demonstrated research skills. Our study also reveals a collaboration "sweet spot": the greatest gains accrue when librarians provide moderate input into syllabus and assignment design, followed by one or two strategically placed hands-on library sessions. Successful collaboration thus need not entail completely overhauling content courses so as to make library instruction the centerpiece. Quite the opposite, librarians can help reduce the potential burden on faculty by supporting discipline- and course-specific research goals, as well as by sharing resources and best practices in IL pedagogy.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a growing understanding that fostering college students' critical thinking and writing hinges in large part on fostering their ability to find quality information from reliable, credible, and authoritative sources. Indeed, teaching students how to critically engage with source materials and weigh evidence is a central tenet of the long-standing information literacy (IL) movement among librarians in higher education (Association of College & Research Libraries, 1989). Recognition of IL as a core competency can now be found in a number of departments and in a number of disciplines (Kuglitsch, 2015; Weiner, 2014), including history and art history (Cassidy & Hendrickson, 2013; Garland, 2014; Gendron & Scippa, 2014; Hein & Miller, 2004; Hicks & Howkins, 2015), political science (Bob, 2001; Cavdar & Doe, 2012; Fitzgerald & Baird, 2011; Gilbert, Knutson, & Gilbert, 2012; Marfleet & Dille, 2005; Stevens & Campbell, 2008; Williams & Evans, 2008; Williams, Goodson, & Howard, 2006), psychology (Dold, 2014; Lampert, 2005), and sociology (Caravello, Kain, Kuchi, Macicak, &

Weiss, 2008; Dodgen, Naper, Palmer, & Rapp, 2003; Proctor, Wartho, & Anderson, 2005). IL is also now a common goal of first-year programs at large public universities, community colleges, and private liberal arts institutions (Fain, 2011; Gawalt & Adams, 2011; Gross & Latham, 2012; Karshmer & Bryan, 2011; Kim & Shumaker, 2015; Manus, 2009; Moore, Black, Glackin, Ruppel, & Watson, 2015; Rinto & Cogbill-Seiders, 2015; Samson & Granath, 2004; Wilkes, Godwin, & Gurney, 2015).

Despite growing evidence of the positive link between promoting IL skills and students' demonstrated ability to think critically and express this in writing, many faculty remain skeptical of the benefits of adding an information literacy component to their courses on top of everything else that they want and need to cover. Given "competing agendas" and "divergent priorities," IL may be seen as just another add-on required by administrators (Snively & Cooper, 1997). While faculty may agree that nurturing "student research, writing, and critical thinking competencies... related to the concept of information literacy" (Stevens & Campbell, 2008, p. 225) is a laudable goal, they also understand that integrating IL into courses—especially in large survey classes and courses already heavy with content—presents its own set of tradeoffs. A primary concern is the potential for increased faculty workload in the face of uncertain gains in student performance (Marfleet & Dille, 2005; Robinson & Schgel, 2005).

Our three-year study of papers from 44 courses specifically designed for first-semester first-year students and taught by faculty across disciplines reveals that thoughtfully integrating a library component goes a

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long way in helping students develop IL “Habits of Mind” (Claremont Colleges Library, 2013). Importantly, faculty-librarian collaboration, when calibrated to support discipline- and course-specific IL goals, need not be extensive or, as some faculty may fear, burdensome. That is, integrating IL need not entail a complete overhaul of course content and/or extensive modification of course scheduling (for example, by adding a semester-long laboratory component) in order to have an impact. Instead, an *intermediate level* of collaboration between faculty and librarians in designing and scaffolding assignments to build students’ IL skills can produce statistically significant gains. Librarian-faculty conversations about the goals of the course, about faculty experience and comfort level with IL, and about the specific ways that librarians can help faculty achieve their goals were crucial to successful collaboration.

In this article, we describe our institution’s flexible approach to IL and the results from the first three years of our study. We place our experience with and faculty concerns about IL within the broader literature on faculty perceptions of undergraduate research, faculty ambivalence toward teaching research skills, and ambivalence in the IL literature regarding how much faculty-librarian collaboration is required to have an impact on student learning. We then provide some brief background on the institutional setting that forms the context of our study, as well as an overview of the range of collaborations that we offer faculty at our institution, including specific examples. Thereafter we describe the results of our annual authentic assessment of student IL, as demonstrated in representative writing assignments.

WIDESPREAD AGREEMENT ON THE NEED FOR IL, BUT AMBIVALENCE ABOUT HOW TO TEACH IT

The extant literature on information literacy, including the focus on best practices and the measurable impact of IL-targeted instruction, reveals a general consensus about the importance of fostering information literacy among college students. In particular, both professors and librarians seem to agree that there is a real—if perhaps unmet—need for students to become critical consumers of information and competent researchers. In a recent study of four-year colleges and universities in the United States, nearly half of faculty surveyed across disciplines strongly agreed that “[their] undergraduate students have *poor skills* related to locating and evaluating scholarly information” (Housewright, Schonfeld, & Wulfson, 2013, p. 53 [emphasis added]; see also Schonfeld, Wulfson, & Housewright, 2012). Such assessments suggest that many undergraduates are completing their degrees without having learned how to select and evaluate materials, including scholarly sources, when conducting research projects (Centellas, 2011). If faculty are providing opportunities for students to practice cultivating IL-related skills, and if the achievement of these skills is an accepted pedagogical goal, what is preventing students from mastering them (Baglione, 2008; Cavdar & Doe, 2012; Stevens & Campbell, 2008; Williams & Evans, 2008)? As members of a democratic polity and “knowledge economy,” moreover, young adults need to develop critical thinking and information assessment skills while *in college* so as to meet the expectations associated with citizenship and the workplace *after college* (Dolowitz, 2007; Fitzgerald & Baird, 2011; Thornton, 2010). As Bob argues, “[i]f [faculty] can strengthen [their students’] critical thinking and writing skills, [they] will have contributed something that lasts [far] after substantive knowledge fades” (2001, p. 653).

AMBIVALENCE #1: HOW SHOULD STUDENTS BECOME INFORMATION LITERATE?

Despite a broadly shared normative belief in IL, as noted above, it is not clear where the responsibility for teaching IL-related skills lies. How should we go about teaching IL, and who should be doing the teaching? Faculty responses to the 2013 survey reveal ambivalence regarding these basic questions. A clear majority of faculty in the social sciences and humanities—about 65% and 85%, respectively—assign a research

paper in their courses (Housewright et al., 2013, p. 48); yet only about 40% strongly agree that it is their responsibility to teach students the skills to accomplish the task set before them. Just two-fifths of faculty surveyed acknowledge that “developing the research skills of my undergraduate students related to locating and evaluating scholarly information is principally my responsibility” (Housewright et al., 2013, p. 53–55).² In addition, only 20% feel strongly that this responsibility lies with their institution’s academic library³—despite the fact that nearly 60% rate the library as “very important” in “help[ing] undergraduates develop research, critical analysis, and information literacy skills” (p. 67).⁴ These contradictory statements suggest that faculty, while generally in agreement about the importance of undergraduate research, are far less certain of either their own role or that of the library in helping students cultivate the habits required for success.

Earlier studies confirm faculty sentiments as revealed in these data. As with the 2013 survey of U.S. faculty referred to above, professors in a 1992 survey of faculty at York University in Ontario, Canada, emphasized the need for improving undergraduate research skills (Cannon, 1994). Most of the faculty rated their fourth-year students’ research skills as “satisfactory,” and only 3% described third or fourth year students as “very good” at conducting research (p. 528). Interestingly, while faculty tend to agree that students should be developing IL skills, they appear reluctant or unsure about explicitly cultivating these skills in their content- and discipline-specific courses, as opposed to skills-related courses in the first year (Gullikson, 2006). Furthermore, according to McGuinness (2006) and Cannon (1994), faculty often assume that students will develop information literacy competencies on their own and that the primary responsibility for becoming information literate lies with the students themselves. Weiner similarly finds that faculty share “the expectation that students [already] know how to avoid plagiarism, find articles and books, and define topics for their projects before... tak[ing] their courses” (2014, p. 5).

AMBIVALENCE #2: FACULTY-LIBRARIAN COLLABORATION IS THE SOLUTION, BUT AT WHAT LEVEL?

As we have seen above, various surveys highlight faculty ambivalence as to where the responsibility for teaching research skills lies. One solution, as demonstrated in numerous empirical studies, is for faculty and librarians to work collaboratively to promote information literacy. Indeed, a growing body of research indicates that student learning is enhanced when faculty and librarians work together (Cassidy & Hendrickson, 2013; Gilbert et al., 2012; Hearn, 2005; Hein & Miller, 2004; Lampert, 2005; Lindstrom & Shonrock, 2006; Mackey & Jacobson, 2005; Manus, 2009; Maybee, Carlson, Slebodnik, & Chapman, 2015; Pierce, 2009; Rinto & Cogbill-Seiders, 2015; Stevens & Campbell, 2008). Yet, here, too, we are faced with ambivalence. Across the board, collaboration is touted as an effective way of reaching out to students, promoting quality research, and supporting the learning goals and activities of specific courses.

However, there is implicit disagreement about how much faculty-librarian collaboration is needed to achieve palpable results. Some studies take a maximalist approach, suggesting revamping student learning outcomes at the curricular (or campus) level, integrating multiple (five or more) library instruction sessions into courses, meeting individually with students at each step of the research cycle, faculty-librarian team teaching, or adding a hands-on semester long research lab to existing courses (Atwong & Heichman Taylor, 2008; Cassidy & Hendrickson, 2013; Gilbert et al., 2012; Hearn, 2005; Lampert, 2005; Lindstrom & Shonrock, 2006; Mackey & Jacobson, 2005). Others suggest that requiring students to attend just one library session makes a noticeable

² 12% of those polled strongly disagree with this statement (Schonfeld et al., 2012).

³ 32% strongly disagree (Schonfeld et al., 2012).

⁴ In sharp contrast, 95% of library directors surveyed described this as one of the library’s central functions (69).

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