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The Journal of Academic Librarianship

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jacalib

The New National School Library Standards: Implications for Information Literacy Instruction in Higher Education

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Information literacy
 School library standards
 School libraries
 Professional standards
 Academic libraries
 Standards

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the new American Association of School Libraries (AASL) National School Library Standards relative to the information literacy pipeline as K-12 students reach university-level learning environments. Shifts in the standards, and therefore eventual shifts in this pipeline, are examined. The new school library standards integrate standards for learners, school libraries, and school librarians. This paper will focus exclusively on the standards for learners, as this is where the primary crossover between high schools and academic libraries takes place. Potential implications and future directions for academic librarianship, especially relative to information literacy instruction, are discussed.

As the arena of K-12 library instruction shifts, academic librarians feel the effects as first-year college students transition to college-level research demands. Studies demonstrate that students who had a school librarian in high school are better prepared for library use at the university level, and in states where school library funding has been cut, academic librarians find themselves offering remedial information literacy instruction to provide students with the skills they need to be successful in a collegiate environment (Huisman, 2015; Smalley, 2004). With the unveiling of the new National School Library Standards at the 2017 American Association of School Librarians (AASL) annual conference, another shift in the information literacy pipeline is pending.

The information literacy landscape

Academic librarians are no strangers to college students' lack of necessary information literacy skills at all levels of higher education. Studies confirm that while today's college students are expected to have technology proficiency (Watulak, 2012; Wilkinson, 2006), "such prowess does not translate to conducting academic research" (Jenson, 2004, p. 108). By and large, first-year college students are entering higher education ill-equipped with the information literacy skills needed to succeed (Purcell et al., 2012; Taylor, 2012; Varlejs & Stec, 2014). What's more is that students with below-average information literacy skills tend towards a falsely inflated self-perception of their own competency: they don't know what they don't know (Gross & Latham, 2012). Students know how to use technology for their preferred uses, and consider themselves proficient, but are often not competent beyond those tasks.

Employers, too, bemoan that members of the newly-minted workforce were "prone to deliver the quickest answer they could find using a search engine" without any of the "patience and persistence" required to truly analyze an issue. Employers also mention that these new hires rarely used "more traditional forms of research, such as picking up the phone" and "rarely looked beyond their screens" (Head, 2012, p. 3). Jenson argues that students lack the ability to discern different types of sources in a digital environment because their prior knowledge of traditional search methods is nonexistent (pp. 108–109).

This dearth of skills extends to collaborative working environments as well. The Project Information Literacy survey of employers found that "graduates were reluctant to iterate through solutions by involving multiple, experienced team members" (p. 97). This was later confirmed in another study by Cyphert & Lyle (2016, p. 71). It has been demonstrated that information literacy skills being taught at the university level differ from those that employers desire (Head, Van Hoeck, Eschler, & Fullerton, 2013). Some of the skills that employers desire, but report that students lack, include "the ability to find patterns and make connections, the ability to apply knowledge to real-world contexts, and the ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds" (Raish & Rimland, 2016, p. 99). The new school library standards address a number of these concerns in accordance with college and career readiness. The challenge will be implementation.

AASL standards and the ACRL framework

As a result of the plentiful research demonstrating that students often enter higher education ill-prepared to take on the demands of

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2018.05.005>

Received 16 February 2018; Received in revised form 4 May 2018; Accepted 4 May 2018
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college-level research assignments, librarians at the K-12 and academic levels have long been “called upon to work together” to address this issue (Farmer, 2013, p. 174). Efforts have been made in this direction and in fact, in its development, the ACRL “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education” took inspiration from the previous AASL “Standards for the 21st Century Learner” (Filbert, 2016). Aspects such as the “developmental approach, inquiry-based learning, knowledge creation, incorporation of the affective domain, and collaboration” were impressed upon the ACRL Framework (ACRL, 2015; Farmer, 2014, p. 1). How these standards support student learning, and where the standards intersect and diverge, is a natural topic of interest and concern for school and academic librarians as they serve students at different parts of their experience along this educational continuum.

As Burke (2017) highlights, despite similar themes, the former AASL standards and the ACRL Framework operated on two different theoretical planes. While the ACRL Framework made a major shift towards social constructivism, the former AASL standards were structured around behaviorism. It is worth noting, then, that the new AASL National School Library Standards have come full circle in alignment with the ACRL Framework, moving away from “point-and-click skills practice” (Burke, 2017, Effects on Pedagogy section, para. 15) and towards higher-order thinking skills which rely heavily on student engagement and self-direction.

Since a desire of employers is that college students are prepared to function as a “flexible, easily trainable workforce” engaged in “lifelong learning” (Cyphert & Lyle, 2016, p. 52), then a movement away from the rote memorization of push-button skills in our school library standards is a good place to start. With AASL and ACRL aligning their standards towards higher-order thinking, instructional librarians at all points in a student’s K-16 career are encouraged to take up the mantle of guide on the side rather than sage on the stage. With the unveiling of a new set of school library standards, what new influences will carry over into the academic library environment to better serve students? To answer that question, we need to dive deeply into what sets the new school library standards apart from previous iterations.

How the standards were developed

The new AASL National School Library Standards are a forward-looking upgrade to the former “Standards for the 21st Century Learner.” It has been ten years since the last revision. AASL states that the new standards are designed to “ensure school librarians are working within a framework for dynamic learning leadership” (AASL, 2017a). The revision process involved incorporating feedback from over 1300 school librarians and stakeholders. The standards committee focused on user-expressed desires such as consolidating the various standards support documents, eliminating repetition, and incorporating accessible language that resonates with stakeholders (AASL, 2017b). What sets these new standards apart is the application towards future learning environments, an increased focus on diversity and inclusion, and the introduction of growth mindset and iterative design.

How the standards are structured

The new standards are not a curriculum; rather, they are meant as a framework upon which school libraries can formulate curriculum that responds to their learning communities’ unique needs. The standards support documents also include an assessment tool along a continuum of practice where school librarians assess their current standing and aim for improving their current practices. The standards consist of six shared foundations: inquire, include, collaborate, curate, explore, and engage, which were developed from research and stakeholder feedback. For each of the six foundations there are four domains of mastery: think, create, share, and grow. The domains are connected to the stages of the inquiry process and mirror the domains of Bloom’s Taxonomy from cognitive to developmental. Developmentally appropriate

activities can be interpreted from each domain for individual grade-levels (Mardis, 2017, p. 84). The new standards establish a groundwork on which school librarians can build and grow.

The new AASL standards

The new AASL National School Library Standards present both the “evolved and familiar” (AASL, 2017b). The standards are still heavily focused on the hallmarks of inquiry-based learning: formulating questions, gathering information, seeking a variety of sources, using information ethically, evaluating information, and sharing it with a global learning community. The standards support “questioning and the creation of new knowledge focused on learners’ interests and real-world problems” (Mardis, 2017, p. 84). New additions to the standards address workplace and educational dynamics that have shifted over the past decade and continue to transform across disciplines.

Like the previous standards, there remains a focus on cognitive skills. However, where the previous standards highlighted an *individual’s* information seeking process, the new standards emphasize a *collaborative* approach to the entire process. For example, former standard 4.1.5 urged learners to “connect ideas to own interests and previous knowledge and experience,” which is in stark contrast to the new competency: “establishing connections with other learners to build on their own prior knowledge and create new knowledge” (AASL, 2018, III.B.2). These new standards reflect a modern office environment focused on working together to solve problems. While the essence of the standard remains the same, the approach is more conducive to addressing complex issues facing modern society.

The new standards also present an entirely new emphasis on design thinking. Iterative problem-solving, a hallmark of the information technology world, is discussed in the “explore” shared foundation, where learners innovate by “problem solving through cycles of design, implementation, and reflection” (AASL, 2018, V.B.1). While the incorporation of design thinking is new to school library standards, it complements the cyclical nature of inquiry. Along the lines of many information-seeking models, student expectations still include “formulating questions,” “seeking a variety of sources,” “questioning and assessing the validity and accuracy of information” and “generating products that illustrate learning” (AASL, 2018, I.A.1, IV.B.1, IV.B.3, I.B.3).

Another novel concept in the new standards is the inclusion of “growth mindset”—a psychological theory based on perceptions of the malleability of intelligence. With the new standards, AASL has formally positioned libraries within the growth mindset movement. While this call towards the mindfulness movement is not a major shift from the former standards’ emphasis on lifelong learning, it does provide a more concrete context for emphasizing these skills; where lifelong learning is a general concept requiring self-motivated, voluntary learning, growth mindset has the potential to help students and educators actualize lifelong learning in tangible ways.

The new standards also expand how diversity is treated in the context of learning. The standards posit a renewed “commitment to inclusiveness and respect for diversity in the learning community” which expands upon the former emphasis of “seeking divergent perspectives” (AASL, 2007, 1.3.2; AASL, 2018). While the previous standards urged an awareness of global and cultural contexts, the new standards increase the call for diversity and inclusion through demonstrated “empathy and equity.” The former standards asked that students include diverse perspectives in the inquiry process, however, the new standards expand upon this by encouraging learners to “seek interactions with a range of learners,” “demonstrate interest in other perspectives,” and “reflect on their own place within the global learning community” (AASL, 2018, II.D.1-3). This reflects the shift from inquiry being represented primarily as a solo practice, where diverse perspectives were merely consulted, to a collaborative and inclusive environment throughout the entire inquiry process.

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