



A Reaction to "Information Literacy and Higher Education"

by Diane Zabel

Information Literacy and Higher Education" serves as a fine companion to Mr. Owusu-Ansah's earlier article recounting the controversies surrounding the definition of information literacy.¹ The volume of publishing related to information literacy and library instruction is staggering. I was stunned to learn that more than 300 articles were published on these issues alone in 2002 and that more than 5,000 works on these topics have been published and reviewed since 1973.² I am sure that I am not the only practitioner finding it impossible to keep up with the instruction literature. "Information Literacy and Higher Education" provides an extensive review of the literature. One of the strengths of this article is the author's documentation of the instructional role of librarians. In particular, I appreciated the additional background information contained in the "Notes."

Some type of instruction is a necessity given that students, especially undergraduates, often lack the skills to find, evaluate, and effectively use information. Multiple studies have confirmed what many of us have observed: students rely on the Internet as the primary source of information for coursework, neglecting library databases and print resources.³ Another study of undergraduate research behaviors found that about 20 percent of college seniors never make a judgment about the quality of the information that they obtain from the Internet or other sources.⁴

Regardless of these statistics, there are many reasons for librarians to be optimistic. Students' research habits may not be as ingrained as we fear. An experiment in delivering library instruction in a capstone course for business majors at Oakland University resulted in increased usage of print resources as well as students report-

ing greater facility in using the Web after receiving instruction.⁵ This article is particularly interesting as it is coauthored by a librarian and a management professor, serving as a great example of a collaborative effort between a library and an academic department. An important longitudinal study of undergraduate student research behaviors over the past two decades revealed two encouraging trends: a significant increase in the number of students using indexes and databases to obtain information and a slight increase in the number of students seeking assistance from librarians.⁶ What I think is most heartening and significant is the publication of a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on librarians partnering with faculty (in some cases, through the use of course management software) to wean students from Google and other Internet search engines.⁷

While I concur with Mr. Owusu-Ansah's position that the academic library should play the central role in developing more information-literate students, I do not believe that mandated instruction is the solution nor do I believe that teaching faculty are the recalcitrant partners he portrays them to be. I would also like to

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note that collection development, reference, and research assistance are not (or should not be) passive functions. These

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are all collaborative activities when done well and are ways for librarians to introduce faculty to the instructional role of librarians. My professional experience (one shared by many of my colleagues) is that it is very possible (and rewarding) to forge meaningful partnerships with teaching faculty. I think it does a disservice to our profession when librarians lament about the lack of respect teaching faculty have for librarians. This negativism only marginalizes librarians and continues the perception that librarians are on the peripheral, taking a backseat to faculty when it comes to instructional issues. At my institution, many librarians (generalists and specialists) have successfully partnered with teaching faculty and they view information literacy as a joint venture.

Additionally, librarians have a long history of serving as members of the university committee approving curricular changes, as well as on subcommittees responsible for major curricular initiatives such as the freshman seminar requirement, the implementation of writing intensive courses, and the major restructuring of general education courses to include elements such as active learning, critical thinking, and information literacy.

As noted by Kuh and Gonyea, librarians have played an integral role in undergraduate education since the mid-1990s with their increased involvement in programs targeted for undergraduates, such as first year seminars and general orientations.⁸ Librarians have also been the beneficiaries of strong support for information literacy from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and other accrediting bodies. An analysis of the standards of regional accreditation commissions in higher education found that "most of the standards revised in the last three years have strengthened the teaching role of libraries and made the connections clearer between the use of libraries and information resources and an excellent learning environment".⁹ While Mr. Owusu-Ansah regards the Middle States Commission's revised standards as a rationale for the development of required credit library instruction, I would argue that these standards stress flexibility in the delivery of information literacy instruction as well as collaboration between librarians and faculty. Instruction at the reference desk, course-related and course-integrated instruction, online tutorials, and credit instruction have all been identified as

appropriate strategies that librarians can use to address the information literacy requirements contained in the 2002 Middle States Commission accreditation requirements.¹⁰

In response to Mr. Owusu-Ansah's call for mandated credit instruction, I would like to play devil's advocate for a moment and think about this from a student's perspective. Librarians need to be mindful of the students (and parents) who are already finding it difficult to pay for tuition and graduate in four years time. These are factors that come into play when debating any new curricular requirement. Mr. Owusu-Ansah does not address the impact an added requirement makes on the tuition-paying student. There is in-

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creased pressure from universities to be accountable and make it possible for students to graduate in a reasonable amount of time. These are not trivial points. A cover story in a recent issue of the Sunday *New York Times* reported that students are finding it difficult to graduate on schedule already because budget cuts have severely curtailed the number of courses being offered.¹¹ At the same time, there is growing discontent over escalating tuition costs. In a recent poll, 74 percent of respondents favored governmental intervention in the form of federal limits on tuition increases.¹² There is likely to be increased backlash over the spiraling cost of higher education. Members of Congress, California Representative Howard McKeon in particular, are proposing mechanisms to track tuition increases as well as the monitoring of graduation rates and a linking of minimum graduation rates to funding.¹³

I would have liked Mr. Owusu-Ansah to concretely lay out how a library can go about changing the curriculum, especially requiring a credit course in information literacy. It is naive to believe that it is easy to add a required course to the curriculum. My concern is rooted in personal experience, having served on my university's curricular affairs committee for several years. The approval of new

courses, majors, minors, and changes in the number of credits required for graduation is a rigorous process. Curricular changes must be justified, requiring the completion of a detailed proposal explaining how a change meets educational objectives and strengthens existing programs. Proposals are also expected to indicate outcomes, an indication of what students may expect to accomplish as a result of the proposed change. The unit proposing the change is expected to consult with other academic programs and units on campus affected by the proposed change. Additionally, there must be some cost analysis in terms of faculty, staff, facilities, and other resources. Although my institution's curricular process is complex, I would generalize that most colleges and universities have a similar process in place.

One side note is that at my university, there are student representatives on this committee. My other concern is that required library instruction would force a considerable number of students to pay for something they do not want. A study of faculty and student attitudes toward credit library instruction at Oregon State University found that students were least receptive to credit classes, indicating a preference for Web-based tutorials, written guides, and assignments.¹⁴ Faculty also ranked credit instruction as the least useful teaching method in this survey.

Additionally, I would like to know how Mr. Owusu-Ansah proposes to find money and staffing for this mandated instruction. These are not issues that can be dismissed given current budget constraints. Many public institutions of higher education have experienced drastic cuts in state funding this fiscal year. Even after raising tuition 5 percent, the University of Illinois projects that it will have to cut more than 900 full-time jobs, including approximately 200 faculty positions.¹⁵ The University of Illinois is not alone in raising tuition. A recent survey found that tuition has increased at public colleges and universities in thirty-seven states.¹⁶ What is most disturbing is the sweeping impact of state deficits on higher education spending. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities has found that this is the second year in a row that higher education funding has been slashed in twenty-four states, and the Association has concluded that "with no sign of an upturn in state revenue, another round is likely next year".¹⁷ Most

institutions are now at the point where something has to be given up if a new service is offered. What would librarians select not to do to offer the instruction that Mr. Owusu-Ansah proposes? Also, who is going to teach this required course? Many librarians already feel overextended, juggling a myriad of responsibilities. Some libraries use graduate students in library science to teach or assist with basic credit instruction. Many libraries do not have that option, having no library science students on their campus. Also, who is going to train librarians to become effective teachers? I do not accept Mr. Owusu-Ansah's implication that this does not matter since faculty receive no training in teaching. Many teaching faculty have at least been teaching assistants in graduate school.

The instruction that Mr. Owusu-Ansah proposes (or any other library user instruction at all for that matter) is meaningless unless teaching faculty require students (especially undergraduates) to do research as part of their coursework. I was pleased to see the author's reference to Boyer's landmark work on undergraduate education (i.e., *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*). However, one point Boyer made in his book (not mentioned by Owusu-Ansah) is that undergraduates typically make little use of the library because their coursework does not require them to do so. This is a critical issue. It would have been helpful

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if Owusu-Ansah discussed the changes teaching faculty need to make to reinforce the value of information literacy instruction. Kuh and Gonyea found that students in academically challenging environments where faculty assigned projects requiring students to integrate ideas and apply what they learned in class to other activities were more likely to use indexes and databases, consult a librarian, and evaluate information.¹⁸ These researchers also found that students enrolled in large doctoral level research institutions, as well as those majoring in business, math-

ematics, or science, were less likely to be frequent library users. Honors students as well as students enrolled in preprofessional programs are more likely to be frequent library users, and those students attending baccalaureate level liberal arts colleges are most likely to critically evaluate information.¹⁹

This linkage between information literacy instruction and coursework is the basis of any meaningful instruction by librarians. In their work with business students, Lombardo and Miree found that the key to success was delivering instruction directly oriented toward the student's research projects.²⁰ This, of course, required close collaboration between faculty member and librarian. In a collaborative effort to introduce an information literacy component in an introductory biology course, librarians at Villanova University found that students regarded library instruction as an isolated activity unless they were required to apply what they had learned.²¹ Information literacy cannot survive in a vacuum. Librarians need to work with the teaching faculty to ensure that students have opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned about finding and evaluating information. What is interesting is that our colleagues in school libraries have often had more success in integrating information literacy into the curriculum. It also seems that these colleagues are more comfortable with their instructional role. I am always struck by the use of the term “teacher librarian” rather than librarian by these professionals. In fact, one of the core journals in this profession is even entitled *Teacher Librarian*. A recent article in this journal on the relationship between teacher librarian and those preparing to become teachers noted that these teacher education students “learned that teacher-librarians’ expertise in information literacy and technology instruction rests on carefully planned experiences connected to the classroom rather than on isolated experiences as in a ‘library skills’ model”.²² It also seems that teacher librarians have been successful in broadening teachers’ definitions of information literacy. I was impressed with an article in *The Reading Teacher* on tools that classroom teachers can use to integrate information literacy into classroom activities.²³ Obviously, information literacy is no longer seen as the domain of school librarians.

As well as requiring that information literacy be applied, there is ample evidence that information literacy must occur throughout a student's academic career. Like any skill, it requires practice. A study of effective information literacy strategies with undergraduate students concluded that information literacy skills “are best developed through regular exposure to assignments that are process oriented and that require critical thinking”.²⁴ One expert attributes the inability of students to master information literacy skills to the lack of opportunities for them to practice these skills in a variety of ways over time.²⁵ In fact, this researcher urged public, school, and academic librarians to collaborate to improve students’ information literacy skills.

I concur with Owusu-Ansah that information literacy is not discipline specific. In fact, as established by Snively and Cooper's highly cited model, it is imperative that information literacy not stand in isolation but be integrated across the curriculum.²⁶ However, this does not mean that information literacy and library user education are not linked to knowledge about a discipline. As a subject specialist, I would argue that I teach much more than generic information literacy skills. I do a great deal of course-related and course-integrated instruction, and in business librarianship, reinforcing core business concepts is very central to library instruction. It is not uncommon to have to provide background information on how businesses are structured, the difference between public and proprietary data, or what the numbers mean when trying to determine whether a company had a good or bad year from a financial perspective. I would contend that subject specialists in other disciplines do the same. As a result, I disagree with Mr. Owusu-Ansah's view that discipline content is the “purview of the teaching faculty.” Teaching faculty in business oriented programs have done little to help students understand and utilize the importance of secondary data. A classic study done in marketing education almost 25 years ago found that two-thirds of business students could not find a balance sheet for a public company, that is, one issuing stock.²⁷ While this study has not been replicated, I would venture that this situation has not measurably improved. This is unfortunate as the development of information gathering skills is essential to two core business processes: problem solving and strategic planning. Many business faculty use textbooks that include at best a superficial

chapter on research skills. Consequently, it is critical that librarians work with business faculty to integrate research and information literacy skills into all the major components of a typical business curriculum: accounting, finance, management, marketing, and strategic planning.

I am convinced that it is critical to deliver information literacy instruction in a variety of ways throughout a student's academic career. Many teaching faculty

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across the country incorporate library instruction into mandated freshman seminars or other curricula geared toward the first year experience. This strategy addresses Owusu-Ansah's concern that librarians reach students in the “early stages of college life.” It is also imperative that information literacy be integrated as students progress through general education courses and courses specific to their majors. I do not buy into Mr. Owusu-Ansah's arguments that the one-shot instruction session is a waste of time. I think many librarians have worked very hard to improve instruction through the inclusion of active learning techniques and the use of hands-on technology classrooms. In addition, much noncredit instruction is being enhanced by the addition of Web-based tutorials so learning can be reinforced. A librarian at Texas A&M University has made the important observation that the economics of higher education make it more likely that librarians will be offered the chance to meet with classes in a fifty-minute session rather than in multiple sessions throughout a course. This librarian notes that multiple library sessions become impractical even in disciplines that stress library resources simply because teaching faculty are being “confronted with teaching more sections and larger classes . . . and in-class time takes on greater importance”.²⁸ It is essential to keep in mind that there is a need for a variety of instructional methods given students' different learning styles. This is particularly important with the changing demographics of higher education. A good example of this is the Web-

based tutorial developed by librarians at San Francisco State University. Librarians decided on this self-paced approach largely because their library serves students who “work part time or full time, are the first from their families to attend college, are older than average, and speak a first language other than English”.²⁹ To a large degree, this fits the profile of a growing number of twenty-first-century college students.

For information literacy instruction to succeed, it must be integrated, relevant, ongoing, collaborative, and applied. A recent commentary in *Portal* concurred that “there is no one solution to the problem of how to help students improve their research skills, library skills, or information literacy skills . . . academic librarians may need to use a combination of approaches and, above all, be persistent in their efforts to aid students' information literacy”.³⁰ Librarians at Purdue University have written about the need to integrate discipline based information literacy skills into the curriculum since tools such as basic tutorials are often designed to meet the needs of first year students, rather than upper level students.³¹ These librarians developed a prototype to teach in-depth, subject-oriented information literacy skills. A resounding theme in many of the information literacy success stories across the nation is collaboration. Partnerships include teaching faculty, librarians, campus administrators, academic counselors, students, and others making up the academic community. In fact, the word “community” expresses it best.

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