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IMLS Sparks Ignite IL Framework Cooperative Project Final Performance Report, Appendix D: Focus Group Report

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IMLS Sparks! Ignition Grant: IL Framework Cooperative Project for At-Risk Student Success in Smaller Colleges

Focus Group Research Component

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Contents:

Summary Statement

The focus group research summarized herein represents a segment of the overall IMLS grant proposal process, and should be viewed not as a separate endeavor, but rather as an integrated approach to the overall research questions in the grant proposal. In conjunction with the pre-test/post-test survey driven component, the findings from the focus group research help to strengthen the case for the value of librarian-driven pedagogy in positively impacting the academic and intellectual growth of all students, and potentially at-risk students in particular, at the participating colleges.

Far from representing anecdotal accounts, the findings of the focus group research represent an integrated, structured, and disciplinarily vetted research design that uncovers systemic trends in support of the quantitative findings of the overall research endeavor. Together, the pre-test/post-test survey findings and the results from the focus group sessions help to paint a vivid picture of the positive influence that the librarians at the participating colleges are having on minority students.

Particulars of the Focus Group Research

Five focus group sessions were contributed by four participating colleges. However, because of data quality issues in one of the focus group session transcripts, findings from four sessions provided by three colleges were used to pull data. As a result, McDaniel College provided two focus group transcripts, while Washington College, and Washington and Jefferson College each provided additional transcripts.

These four transcripts represented the comments of a combined total of twenty-seven participants, representing six white women, four white men, eleven minority women (including Hispanic women, black/African-American women, one Asian woman, and one Hawaiian/Pacific Islander woman), and four minority men (including two Hispanic men and two black/African-American men). Overall, 52% of the participants were first-generation students, and 52% were Pell eligible (although the composition of first-generation and Pell eligible were not the same, in terms of race/ethnicity and gender). It should be noted that the participants were selected from the first-time freshmen classes at the contributing colleges.

The four transcripts generated fifty-five pages of single-spaced dialogue, and generated at least nineteen topics of discussion, organically, out of the dialogues themselves. It should be noted, however, that there are many more linkages between the categories than have been explored, due to practical necessity and time constraints. Also, it is possible that further categories could have been derived from the data. As a result, there is a bit of art to the interpretation process, albeit through a systematic approach to organizing the data.

The main categories derived from the transcripts include the topics of conducting research and planning research; comments on databases, including many thoughts on library databases, as well as JSTOR, Ebsco, PubMed, Wikipedia, Google, and Google Scholar; managing the broadness of research topics; use of database features, including Boolean search strings,

following keyword breadcrumbs, and availability of abstracts, among other features; contrasts between skills acquired in high school as opposed to at college; how to judge the relevance of sources for academic work; the role of librarians; and the growing technical skills of students.

Indeed, comments on the growing technical skills of students may prove to be the most exciting, as they show how students are successfully growing in their expertise, but still have much that they can learn from librarians on how to conduct research efficiently and effectively.

Data Quality

Properly conducted focus group research does not result in anecdotal stories, but rather systemically mined, data-driven results that derive from careful research designs. As a result, there are a number of data integrity issues of which one must be aware.

The first standard of research involves the internal and external validity of the findings. External validity means that the findings can reasonably be applied to a wider group than represented in the sample from which data were taken. As with quantitative research, focus group research relies on randomly selected samples of participants to achieve this end, a condition that this research has met reasonably. Two of the institutions attempted to recruit participants from their entire sample, and ultimately held focus groups with all who were able to participate. One institution held their focus group with the entire class, thus reaching all participants.

Internal validity refers to the criterion of successfully measuring the things that are believed to have been measured in the research process. For this criterion, the focus group research did hit certain challenges, as input from some of the focus group moderators at times pushed dialogue (including responses from participants) in directions that were not originally expressed by the participants. This dynamic may tend to have a compromising effect on the responses and comments of participants, if proper care is not taken. However, while this effect can be seen in some of the transcripts' dialogues, it is by no means systemic throughout any of the transcripts, and does not wholly compromise the totality of the outcomes. One simple fix to this effect has been to omit sections of dialogue from the overall findings where the moderator clearly pushes dialogue away from the comments furnished by the participants. Put another way, findings from certain portions of the dialogue have been rejected as reflecting the moderator's opinions and attitudes, rather than those of the participants. While these sections of the dialogue are not useable, they do not invalidate all observations and comments made by participants, and they do not reasonably invalidate the whole of the findings from the focus group sessions.

Internal reliability refers to the consistency with which the focus group research was conducted. This criterion is important because, without consistency in the questions asked and the way questions are asked, there are diminished chances for consistency in the outcomes that derive from the overall research endeavor. While a uniform interview instrument (questionnaire) was devised, the transcripts indicated that questions tended to be posed in different ways during the different focus group sessions, and that not all moderators followed strictly the agreed-upon interview instrument. However, total uniformity in delivery of the focus group sessions cannot be wholly expected to begin with, as the method relies on naturalistic, though structured,

conversation. Further, while moderators tended to vary in style and content of questions asked, all transcripts generated comments from participants that hit on consistent themes. For example, many of the participants from across all four sessions noted that the use of Google turned out to be of limited value as they grew in their awareness of college-level academic standards. Across all transcripts, participants tended to agree that Wikipedia was particularly inappropriate for use in academic work.

External reliability will be a matter for future research that further extends exploration on the topic of the impact of librarians' support of potentially at-risk student populations at participating institutions. As such, there is an opportunity, going forward, to consciously conduct valuable, data-driven research on this topic through continued focus group research. Such research should be carefully planned and vetted, however, in order to ensure a successful continuation of this research topic, and should be conducted in such a manner as to extend the current research, rather than breaking with it.

Summary of Findings

During the analysis phase of this focus group research, two general topics of interest were selected for concentration: confidence in knowledge, and the perceived roles of librarians.

Both of these general topics are easily supported through the analysis of the focus group transcripts, across the multiple categories that arose from the dialogues in them. For example, one major theme that arose from the focus group interviews was how the participants were successfully growing their knowledge and skills, but still only developing incomplete understandings of the research process. However, rather than being the end point of their research capacities, one should recognize that these first-year freshmen were demonstrating detailed, specific, and embedded understandings about the research process that arose directly from a combination of the training they were receiving and the practical experiences that they were being pushed, academically, to accrue. Far from representing negative news, then, their partially-completed knowledge sets are actually testament to the ongoing and successful process of learning solid library research skills through their interactions with librarians at their colleges.

Participants also made many comments about actual experiences they had with librarians, along with the lessons that they learned during these interactions. Many of their accounts referenced special sessions in classes, in which the librarians came to instruct them specifically on topics central to library research at the college level. Other accounts detailed experiences in which participants learned valuable lessons through direct research that librarians helped them complete. At one point, participants learned about interlibrary loan options at their college library while directly participating in the focus group session, demonstrating the impulse of the moderator to teach effective library skills even while exploring the effectiveness of their impact on students. This instance highlights the enthusiasm that college librarians typically show toward supporting students toward academic success. It stands to reason, therefore, that the librarians at the participating colleges are a great academic resource for potentially at-risk students in particular.

What follows is an encapsulation of the findings on three central topics. It should also be noted that random pseudonyms were assigned to the respondents in order to provide a more personable facing for their comments and preserve anonymity. Any direct correlation between these pseudonyms and the actual names of any of the students is merely coincidental.

Following the demographic data are comments and observations in blue font by the primary analyst of the focus group transcripts. These comments are meant to pull out a running set of observations that should tie the vignettes of actual dialogue together in a meaningful fashion. Following these comments, of course, are the vignettes of actual dialogue themselves, set apart in red italics. These vignettes represent examples of the themes pulled from the naturalistically derived categories, as re-organized into the two basic themes listed above. It should also be noted that the natural flow of comments has been cleaned up, in order to aid the legibility of the dialogue. However, wherever possible, the naturalistic tone of the language used has been preserved in order to maintain as much fidelity to the actual dialogue, as recorded in the transcripts, as possible.

Topic 1: To what degree does information literacy instruction affect a student's attitudes towards research and how it supports their success in college?

Antonio provided one of the most direct examples of the impact that the librarian-led pedagogy had on participants. Evoking the non-linear phase of the research model that he learned, he demonstrated how his approach to conducting library research has become more flexible as a result of the instruction that he has received at the college level.

At the same time, Rachel indicated that the information sessions led by librarians were effective enough to "get her started" independently conducting college-level library research. This theme, about how the librarian-led pedagogy helped participants start the process of independently conducting quality research, can be found throughout all four transcripts.

Both participants demonstrated some level of agility, when faced with possible dead ends in the research process.

Moderator: What do you do if you don't find good sources? Have you ever been in that predicament?

Rachel: Yeah. That's when I would, like, change my question. Like, if I'm finding bad sources on a topic, maybe I'll change what I'm searching, or just look up something else, like rephrase it.

Moderator: So, if you can't find good sources, you might rephrase, like, the key words, and think about sort of refining the topic. Antonio, what would you add to that?

*Antonio: I'd do the same thing. **That's part of that research process they showed us in the library. The research process isn't just a line. At one point there's a circle, and you're constantly changing what you're looking up to try and make it the best article you can.***

Moderator: Oh, good. Sometimes it can be difficult to find sources, if your topic is too large, right? So, you had a really good point about key words and narrowing it down, and that sort of thing. Can you think about a time when you're doing library research? What roles did the college librarians play in your research project?

Rachel: Well, it was those information sessions that kind of showed me…how to use the library database, and like where to find it. So, once I finally got to my individual research, I didn't really run into any issues where I needed help from somebody else. But they definitely helped me get started.

Many of the respondents demonstrated, through their comments, how they were developing greater capacities to judge the viability of sources as their technical skills and knowledge about library research grew. For example, Carlos recounted the difference in his approach to judging sources before coming to college and after learning at the college level.

Moderator: Have you become more skeptical about the research that you're reading?

Carlos: So, basically in high school, you would just look up in Google and search for articles; but basically, when I started college here, it's like I specifically started only going to the Hoover database, so that every single article I looked up was scholarly. **I guess that coming here made me a little more skeptical of the information I was reading.**

Moderator: Do you all agree with that?

All nod yes.

Some participants indicated that they learned foundational research concepts and skills as a direct result of the librarian-led instruction that they received. Others indicated that, even if they came to college with developed research skills, the pedagogy they received improved their existing repertoire.

Note that Alexa is first-generation and Pell eligible, while Carla falls into neither category. It is significant that both likely come from different academic backgrounds and bring different needs with them to college. However, it is also significant to note that the librarian-led pedagogy gave both participants something valuable that positively impacted their college-level research skills.

Moderator: Okay. So…in that class you've had training about how to do research. Do you think the way you approach research has changed since taking that class?

Many yeses.

Alexa: Before I came here, I didn't know what a scholarly article was or what a peer reviewed article was, so that really taught me how to do research and get good sources for how to do a project or a paper.

Carla: When I came here, I already knew how to do research because I had to research papers for high school, but, like, when I got here, I learned more about researching and how to do it. So, that's pretty good too.

Some participants noted that the amount of time required to find sources changed because of their new understandings about how to conduct library research. The normative response was

that the new knowledge and tools that they acquired from librarian-led instruction cut down the time it took to find acceptable sources. However, note Owen indicated that the process took longer for him. Owen's case may highlight a kind of corrective that can come out of the librarian-led pedagogy, in which higher standards and more complex methods communicated to students noticeably pushes them toward greater scholarly standards for themselves.

Moderator: Tell me about the skills you brought into college. What sort of library set skills? If you had to rate it on a scale from one to ten, ten being you knew it, and one being you struggled, how do you rate yourself?

Elena: I think a six, 'cause I knew a lot of things. I knew that you had to search with certain terms, but I didn't know all the filters to use, and it would have taken me more time to figure everything out. Now it takes me less time.

Robert: I would rate myself a six or seven, or maybe in between, like 6.5. I would have an idea on what to look for, but sometimes I was not entirely confident with what I was using or what I found.

Natasha: I would rate myself maybe a seven because researching is a little difficult if you don't know your topic, and finding key terms, 'cause before this research, I had to do research for a different class for English, but it was driving me crazy with what I couldn't find. I figured it out a day or two later, so I say a seven.

Andrew: I think I'll rate myself as a seven, because I'm alright with finding good sources, like how it's published, and reliable sources, but I'm still struggling with some things like [name omitted] citations.

Owen: I think I came in here with a seven out of ten, but when I actually got down to it, finding the key terms for a topic really got me struggling, made the process a little bit longer, so it's more like a five out of ten.

Bradly: I would probably say a ten, because in high school, I had a teacher, she basically made it her business for us to know how to research and how to do it, in a way. Coming into college, I would just say a ten.

Much like Elena and Owen, Rachel indicated that she learned how to refine her search skills and provided one of the clearest statements of how librarian instruction in the classroom directly resulted in a breakthrough for her.

Moderator: Do you have any real memories about using the library databases, like a real aha moment? Like oh, I have this topic [that] I was searching for information [on], and now I really know how to find information in library databases?

Rachel: I think it was after we had our session about how to refine what you're looking up, like put quotations around phrases. It's not just phrases, but it can help.

While Elena and Owen, above, indicated that awareness of specific search features (use of filtering and choosing effective key terms) tended to shorten the length of time in searching for relevant sources, Owen and Natasha also indicated that they learned basic skills for how to quickly judge the relevance of potential sources.

Moderator: What is your takeaway from [the course], in terms of helping you with doing research? What is your general takeaway? What did you get?

Owen: The abstracts are a very good way to save time. I never knew about abstracts until I came to college.

Moderator: So, before you just sometimes read it?

Owen: I skimmed it, but now you have the abstract, and then you see if it is worth it, and you skim that too. So, you have, like, two confirmations that you can use.

Natasha: I do that as well. Like, I learned that, and the librarian also told us to use the conclusion too, and the results, to see whether or not it's actually accurate of what you're researching.

Topic 2: Participants' Increasing Confidence in Knowledge

Early into one focus group session, as referenced earlier, the moderator asked the participants if they would be able to pick out "valid" articles from a stack of articles. The participants expressed some uncertainty, and explained to the moderator that they were just beginning to learn about how to judge the suitability of articles. However, throughout all of the four transcripts, when participants were pushed for specific details, all were able to provide insightful comments on the research process, involving, at various times: how to judge the scholarly integrity of sources; facing the problematics of effective research, such as narrowing topics down in order to conduct effective and timely research; and general critical thinking skills and healthy academic skepticism. Oftentimes, they would directly invoke concepts such as language that reflects scholarly intent, the credentials of the authors, the appearance and quality of citations in the source they were considering, the use of abstracts, management of key terms and the use of advanced database search features, and many other aspects of research.

In conjunction with this early exchange about valid sources, in which participants expressed uncertainty, the ensuing, detailed comments spanning all transcripts paint a vivid picture of effective, yet still-emerging research skills.

Bradly and Owen show the complexity in experiences likely to be had by black/African-American men during their first year of college. Likewise, Natasha and Elena show how gender interacts with race and ethnicity to create a more complex tapestry of confidence and comfort among the participants. Note that both Bradly and Owen are first-generation, Pell eligible students. However, while Bradly expressed a great deal of confidence in his research skills coming into college, Owen noted that he quickly learned how the research process proved more challenging than he initially assumed.

It is significant, however, to note that Owen, one of the black/African-American men in the study, ranked his initial research skills considerably lower than his co-participants. However, in following the narrative about this particular student throughout this report you can see how his skills are developing and his understanding of information literacy concepts is improving.

7

Moderator: Tell me about the skills you brought into college. What sort of library set skills? If you had to rate it on a scale from one to ten, ten being you knew it, and one being you struggled, how do you rate yourself?

Elena: I think a six, 'cause I knew a lot of things. I knew that you had to search with certain terms, but I didn't know all the filters to use, and it would have taken me more time to figure everything out. Now it takes me less time.

Robert: I would rate myself a six or seven, or maybe in between, like 6.5. I would have an idea on what to look for, but sometimes I was not entirely confident with what I was using or what I found.

Natasha: I would rate myself maybe a seven because researching is a little difficult if you don't know your topic, and finding key terms, 'cause before this research, I had to do research for a different class for English, but it was driving me crazy with what I couldn't find. I figured it out a day or two later, so I say a seven.

Andrew: I think I'll rate myself as a seven, because I'm alright with finding good sources, like how it's published, and reliable sources, but I'm still struggling with some things like [name omitted] citations.

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Bradly: I would probably say a ten, because in high school, I had a teacher, she basically made it her business for us to know how to research and how to do it, in a way. Coming into college, I would just say a ten.

Later in the focus group session, Owen confides that he finds the totality of the research process in college to be a challenge. However, even in the process of voicing his concerns over doing college-level library research, he displays a budding knowledge of the process, and he is able to categorically speak about his experiences utilizing very specific research strategies.

Note as well that Natasha, who initially rated her entry level research skills higher than Owen did his own, agrees with Owen's assessment of the difficulties of doing college-level library research. Likewise, Robert scored himself higher, but still amplified, and elaborated on, Owen's initial comment that college-level library research was harder than initially anticipated.

In the case of all three respondents, one can see how these students are grappling with the research process while simultaneously growing their research skills out of their difficult initial experiences in exploring topics for course papers. Rather than communicating bewilderment and futility, however, all three respondents uncover very specific technical skillsets that are arising from their experiences. Likewise, their concerns uncover how their judgement in the research process is evolving into a college-level understanding of how to retrieve relevant data for course papers.

Moderator: What challenges are you running into, in terms of your research?

Owen: Personally, all of it, because researching is hard to me: key terms, weaving in and out quotations, knowing when to paraphrase, summarize, or cite. It's all a challenge.

Likewise, Bradly, Owen, and Andrew comment on their levels of comfort engaging in library research after learning more about the process through college-level instruction on the topic.

Owen couched his response in terms of being "pushed" to use the library website, which he did not like because it required greater technical skill and judgement to use effectively.

Commenting off of Owen's response, Andrew and Bradly point out that library research at the college level is proving to be more challenging. However, both Andrew and Bradly can clearly see the benefits of these higher research standards, including greater focus on one's topic and greater persuasiveness.

Note that Owen ends by inadvertently identifying a possible focus for a librarian-lead instructional class session, reflecting not only his persistent unease with the process, but also the positive impact that these class sessions have had on him to begin with.

Moderator: So now that you're taking this class, how has it influenced your thinking about how to do research? If you compare it to before you took the class, has there been a difference in how you approach class research as a result of this course?

Owen: They definitely push you to use the [name omitted] Library website, and personally I don't like it because of how specific you have to be. I already struggle with finding keywords with my research topic.

Moderator: So, you must use [specific Library name]?

Owen: They push you to. You don't have to.

Moderator: Ok. Anybody else? Differences before and after?

Andrew: I'll jump on what Owen said. They do push you to use [specific Library name] more, but I think they're looking at it as in, you know, that [name omitted] Library will have more things that are more specific, and really, like, [narrower] than going on your own [and] finding some things, which in some ways can be helpful or it can be a disadvantage.

Moderator: Have you found it helpful or not helpful?

Bradly: I found it helpful because they push you to use scholarly sources, which will make your writing more believable, like, more persuasive.

Owen: Of course, it's generally helpful because of what Bradly said, but I find it difficult because, again of, like, key terms. We do the classes on how to distinguish if your source is scholarly or not, but I don't think we've had a class—at least I haven't—where they say find this, and we can help you find key terms on the subject or topic.

However, notice that Owen, despite voicing his discomfort with the process of doing library research at the college level, speaks directly and knowledgeably about how he is more effective as a researcher specifically because of his college work to date. In his further response, one can see how he is developing powerful skills to evaluate information and arguments as acceptable at the academic level.

In one context, then, Owen seems to be less confident about his research skills directly because he realizes that more is expected from him at the college level. In another context, though, one can clearly see how he is gaining solid technical skills and powers of judgment directly because of the instruction that he is receiving.

Note that Owen's comments here resonate with the other participants in the focus group session. Especially in Natasha's reflection on Owen's comments, we can see the impact of the instruction that the participants are receiving directly from the librarians. This theme, regarding the value of the in-class instruction sessions, can be found in all four focus group transcripts.

Moderator: What is your takeaway from [the course], in terms of helping you with doing research? What is your general takeaway? What did you get?

Owen: The abstracts are a very good way to save time. I never knew about abstracts until I came to college.

Moderator: So, before you just sometimes read it?

Owen: I skimmed it, but now you have the abstract, and then you see if it is worth it, and you skim that too. So, you have, like, two confirmations that you can use.

Natasha: I do that as well. Like, I learned that, and the librarian also told us to use the conclusion too, and the results, to see whether or not it's actually accurate of what you're researching.

As was mentioned in Topic 1, Carlos became *"a little more skeptical of the information I was reading."* To which other participants in the session agreed. Participants in another focus group session echoed Carlos' thoughts on judging the credibility of sources.

Moderator: So, how do you tell if a source is scholarly?

Rachel: It'll come from a university, like, [the author] will specifically have some kind of degree, and it'll be peer-reviewed, so it goes through this process of making sure it's legitimate. That's the main thing, I think.

Moderator: Antonio, is there anything you would add to that?

Antonio: I just click journal article and peer-review before I even look at them, so that it's more likely to be scholarly than not. And then I kind of look at who the author is, and how they…I don't know…if the author seems credible, like, they have to have some reason for knowing what they're talking about.

Further, one can see how the respondents are beginning to interweave judgment skills in order to make better arguments in crafting research for their class papers. For example, in explaining the difference in her approach to doing research between high school and college, Elena states that she now looks specifically for scholarly, peer reviewed sources rather than whatever she can find through a simple Google search on a topic.

Moderator: What's different between college and high school, in general, in terms of research? What have you found to be different?

*Elena: **In high school, I mostly used Google. I didn't go on the library website in high school, but now I go on the website to make sure everything is scholarly and peer reviewed.***

Moderator: So, when you searched, and something came up on Google in high school, did you find out what it was?

Elena: Nah.

Moderator: You just used it.

Elena: Yeah.

Moderator: Anyone else, between high school and college?

Robert: I did the same thing as Elena did.

Participants in another focus group were specific about how they approached judging the suitability of sources. In some instances, their accounts revealed how they worked through problematic areas in their research projects by re-focusing their efforts in slightly different directions. It should be noted that the problem-solving skills that they recount here are hallmarks of the kinds of instruction that participants throughout all four sessions mentioned, such as the use of synonyms and careful selection of keywords, and working from broader, less reliable sources (such as Google) to narrower, but more academically suitable platforms (such as college library databases).

Moderator: If you choose a keyword, and you find lots of stuff, but it might not be relevant, how would you go on from there? Think about your topic in health and technology, how do you start then?

Andrea: In the databases, they have little words that you can click on that basically advance what you're looking at. Those helped me a lot in my research, because it was, like, things I wouldn't have thought of, like, keywords I could use. So, those really helped me further my research, if I was stuck in a dead end or anything like that.

Moderator: If you did your mapping, how would you extend your mapping?

Rebecca: Well, with the three aspects of health, I listed them out and then just looked for synonyms […] and just kept mapping it out, and used those words to do my research.

Carter: I searched way too specifically, and nothing of use would come up in the database. So, I'd search [for] the app that I used[,] "my fitness pal." I searched, "my fitness pal and its influence on calorie intake," or something like that, and nothing would come up.

Moderator: And then you did what?

Carter: I just shorten it down, because after that, I came to class, and it was like, "broaden your search more and you'll find things."

Moderator: Alright, you touch on another point. So, you went keywords, links, mapping, extending your search or narrowing it. Ok, and when you extended your search what did you find?

Carter: I found things more relevant to my paper. I didn't find exactly what I needed, but I found things that strengthened my points.

Moderator: So, you went to Google Scholar, you just went to the internet, and then everybody seemed to have ended up eventually in the library databases. How was that different?

Lana: The library databases provided more scholarly journals, so I didn't go there until I was ready to find specific sources that I was definitely going to use in my paper.

Moderator: And what'd you find in Google?

Andrea: Google just has everything. Like, everything that is on the internet is on Google that you'll find on your topic, so it's really just broad, and it might not be as reliable though.

In the end, even past the lack of precise language that the participants used to comment on the topic of college-level library research, comments from across all four focus group sessions tended to indicate a common practical knowledge about how to conduct effective research, even while demonstrating at times some lingering uncertainty about the process.

Moderator: How can you tell if a source is scholarly? 'Cause this is what's going to help you in selecting your source, right? Yes, Carter?

Carter: Citations from other authors?

Moderator: Citations, yes. How can you tell if it's scholarly?

Rebecca: Also, if the authors have a Ph.D. in that specific department?

Moderator: Yes, if they are experts in that area.

Lana: Sometimes, the organization name is on the document.

Moderator: Yes. Organization. Yes.

Lisa: It's usually peer-reviewed.

Moderator: Peer reviewed. Yes.

Paul: Um, this isn't as important as the others; it uses language that reflects scholarly intent.

Moderator: That is [as] important as the others. That the language does reflect the subject or the level of a research.

Topic 3: Perceptions on the Roles of Librarians

Focus group participants from across all four sessions gave accounts of interactions with college librarians, both in terms of receiving instruction and in terms of receiving assistance in conducting actual research. From these accounts, librarians fulfilled their roles as instructors both within the contexts of formal classroom instruction and in terms of their general value as knowledgeable support staff.

For example, both Rachel and Antonio expressed their initial skepticism about receiving classroom instruction from librarians. However, both voiced their opinion that the instruction that they received turned out to be of practical value for them.

Moderator: That's all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd wanna communicate to me, about the experience or how it could be better, or concerns that you have?

Rachel: I was initially kind of skeptical because I was, like, "Oh great. Another dumb library thing." But it worked out. It was helpful.

Antonio: They seemed like they are nice people, and they helped us out with figuring how to go about this big research paper we have for class. Overall, I thought it worked really well.

Both Rachel and Antonio were further able to provide accounts detailing what they learned in these librarian-led class sessions, including directly learning from the librarians about what kinds of support they could receive from them.

Note that these in-class sessions did not simply impart knowledge about librarians. Toward the end of the series of sessions, students were given an opportunity to learn practically about librarian assistance while actually working on their research topics. Thus, librarian-led pedagogy was intertwined with actual practical assistance. Accounts across all four transcripts support the idea that interactions with librarians were both helpful in practical terms and instructive at the same time.

Moderator: What did your class do in the library? How many trips to the library did you make? Did you have multiple sessions in the library?

Rachel: Yeah. I think, like, three.

Antonio: Yeah, three or four.

Moderator: Do you remember, what did you do at those sessions?

Rachel: Well, I missed the first one, but at the second one, we talked about scholarly articles and what they are, I think. And then about how the research process works. And, so, I did learn what a scholarly article is, and that. And I think the next one we actually used the database and figured out how that worked.

Antonio: I think at the first one, they told us what a librarian does.

Rachel: Like, the ways they can help, I guess.

Antonio: In the last one that we went to, after explaining the research process, we were sort of left to use what we learned for our research paper in FYS. And they were there to help us if we needed their help.

Carla echoed Rachel and Antonio's accounts of how instruction and practical support tend to go hand in hand, when librarians were concerned.

Moderator: So, how do you get started with these topics? How do you know what kinds of words to use when you do a search?

Carla: Well, we took library courses on how to do research, so I, like, kinda used what they taught me to go on to the database. But, I also went into the library to get help from one of the researchers, and that really helped a lot too. They told me what to do. Like, told me what to do to put quotations around [my search terms], or if I need to use other words that mean the same thing.

Indeed, many of the participants recounted stories of how they sought out support for the librarians for specific help. For example, Owen recounted how librarians helped to pull knowledge out of him that he hadn't realized was inside of him.

Moderator: Has there been anything a librarian has done for you that really stands out in your head?

Owen: I didn't know what to talk about in my essay, so I went to a librarian, and I was surprised. She got so much information out of me when I didn't know what to talk about. She asked questions that made me rethink and bring out information that I didn't have.

Likewise, Natasha and Bradly spoke very highly of their experiences in seeking out the help of librarians.

Natasha: I am not going to lie to you, but when it comes to librarians, they have, like, special powers. Every time I go to a librarian, they always teach me something with, like, a new little symbol. And I'm like, WOW! I went through eighteen years, and I didn't know what that little symbol meant. Wow. And I feel like, wow, there's so many things they know that we don't know that helps with research.

Bradly: Also, I like that the librarians each have specialized categories. So, like all of them are generally educated on topics, but I had my paper on biology, and I booked it with [a specific librarian—name omitted], and her specifications are in the sciences. Like, natural sciences. And she is very educated on those topics. So, she can help me better. Any major we have or classes we have, we have a research librarian that specializes in that.

Natasha: That's also very helpful.

Moderator: Do you all know who the special librarian is for the subject of your research?

Many yeses.

For some participants, take-away lessons from the classroom instruction sessions provided foundational principles for how to use citation and sources. For example, Irena recounted how she learned when and why to cite a source directly as a result of categorical in-class instruction from both her professor and the visiting librarian.

Further commenting toward the end of their session, Rachel and Antonio spoke directly to the positive impact that assistance and instruction from the librarians had on the quality of their work.

Other participants commented on the lessons that they learned directly from the instruction provided by librarians. Elena and Robert both commented on how the librarians helped them to tighten their research endeavors by narrowing their focus and better managing the use of key terms.

Notice how Elena and Robert's accounts reflect the kinds of comments common throughout all sessions, reflecting the levels of confidence and emerging practical knowledge that participants were demonstrating. While the subject of the roles that librarians play and the levels of confidence shown by the participants may seem to be separate issues, in reality, they are tightly bound up with each other, demonstrating the value of the roles that librarians play in teaching first-year freshmen how to conduct effective college-level research.

While many of the participants' accounts focused on the value of instruction and the specific lessons that they learned from librarians, many other accounts focused on the practical help that they received from the librarians at their colleges.

For example, Natasha spoke most pointedly about the value of her actual experiences in reaching out to librarians for support in her research endeavors.

Moderator: I think it was Natasha [who] talked about having a librarian walk you through how to do searches, and those sorts of things. So, let's talk about the experiences of interactions with librarians here. How many of you have had a chance to ask a question or to talk to someone physically, that is, as opposed to before you go to email?

Natasha: Like, interact with the librarian?

Moderator: Yes.

Natasha: Yes, I have. You can make appointments with them, and they will help you with a research paper and anything that you have. Anything. Like, if you need help, they will help you, and [all] you have to do is go online to the [name omitted] Library database and make an appointment with any librarian of your choice. And there are different librarians for different majors, and they will help you out in any way.

Owen echoed Natasha's general thoughts on the helpfulness of college librarians. As Owen, who generally voiced his concerns about conducting library research, pointed out, he saw the librarians at his college as, "the very first person you go to or the very last you go to." For Owen, then, a first-generation, Pell-eligible black/African-American man, librarians are clearly instrumental to his academic success going forward.

Notice, as well, how the accounts provided by the participants about their interactions with the librarians, always seemed to include a note of gratitude for the positive impact they had on their work, and for the things that they learned from the librarians in the process.

Moderator: From your own understanding, what do you see is the role of the librarians are?

Bradly: You said their role?

Moderator: Yeah.

Bradly: I think their role is to help you find things you can't find on your own...Like, if your topic is too broad, they're there to help you switch your questions up and help you find something you need.

Owen: I think they're the very first person you go to or the very last you go to. First, so you can get your bearings, and know what your topic is, and fine it down; and last, if you're struggling with the conclusion and the source page, if you have a paper.

Andrew: In some of the English [class] meetings [where we came] to the library, they emphasize that that's what they are here for: to help us. That they are like a resource. I noticed that, when I went on the Hoover website, I had to do a paper, I messaged one of them, and they responded instantly. They're always there to help you. They are great.

All in all, participants across all four focus group transcripts demonstrated emerging practical knowledge about a range of aspects related to college-level library research. However, despite their growing acumen, all participants tended to also demonstrate that their understandings of the research process were far from complete. Knowing where to go to attain the necessary assistance is a major factor in ensuring potentially at-risk students have the tools to succeed.