

BLUEPRINT FOR A SOLID INFORMATION LITERACY FOUNDATION: BUILDING A PROGRAM FROM THE GROUND UP

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Information literacy (IL) programs abound in today's academic library settings. It is common, even expected, that such programs will be in place and available to college and university students, both at the incoming freshman level, and at more advanced levels. These programs vary greatly in scope and extent, from one-shot sessions to semester-long credit courses. While the library profession views information literacy as an imperative offering, its existence as an essential component of higher education is not guaranteed. This paper will describe the information literacy program at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, from its modest beginnings to its current status and plans for future growth. It will also detail changes to the library's physical space to accommodate instruction, and provide an explanation of Belmont's method for tying information literacy to the library's budget allocations.

Belmont University is a small teaching university situated on the grounds of an antebellum estate in the heart of Nashville. Its current student population numbers approximately 5400, and continues to grow. The university offers strong curricula in both liberal arts and professional programs. Its largest numbers of majors study in the music business and commercial music programs. Graduate programs in nursing, business, education, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and pharmacy attract large numbers of students. A College of Law will open at Belmont in 2012. Despite rapid growth, the university maintains the feeling of a small college environment and community.

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ORIGINS OF THE PROGRAM

The present information literacy program originated in the spring of 2006 at the "Transformation of the College Library" workshop sponsored by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the Council on Library and Information Resources. Provost Dr. Marcia McDonald (who was the Associate Provost at that time), Library Director Dr. Ernest Heard and English professor Dr. Andrea Stover attended the workshop. They returned to Belmont with a three-year action plan to initiate and sustain information literacy instruction through the Lila D. Bunch Library.

The plan comprised three major goals: 1) To infuse information literacy into the university curriculum; 2) to enhance the library as an educational environment; and 3) to strengthen academic and library faculty collaboration in the development of information literate students. Objectives to address these goals were defined in terms of the administrative and organizational structures, curriculum, academic faculty, library faculty and staff, facilities, collections, and budget. A campus information literacy team was created to facilitate the plan's implementation. The 12-member team consists of librarians, coordinators of General Education courses, and faculty members from various departments.

In the fall of 2006, Reference Librarian Jenny Rushing began contacting faculty members to begin the conversation, explaining how the library could work with them to improve their students' understanding of critical thinking about information resources and evaluation and use of information. The instruction program built slowly, with Jenny and Courtney Fuson, Education and Electronic Resources Librarian, handling the classes. In the summer of 2007, Rachel Scott and Judy Williams joined the reference team. These four individuals (hereinafter referred

to as “the librarians”) worked together to develop a more structured information literacy curriculum.

TARGETED CURRICULA

Belmont’s General Education curriculum (BELL CORE) was targeted as an area where the library could reach the most students. The BELL CORE includes required courses at each level of a student’s college career. All freshmen take the First Year Seminar and First Year Writing courses, and all juniors take the Junior Cornerstone and Third Year Writing courses. In addition, sophomores participate in Linked Cohort classes, and seniors produce a capstone project. The library has targeted the freshman and junior levels for specific information literacy instruction.

First Year Seminar (FYS) courses are designed to introduce students to the intellectual skills necessary for success in college and beyond, with an emphasis on critical thinking and effective communication. The overarching theme of the course is “Ways of Knowing,” which is translated by faculty from across the disciplines into courses related to their particular specialties. Instructional elements of the course include a common book, film series, and argumentative paper assignment. The information literacy curriculum for FYS is mapped to ACRL Standards One, Three and Four:

I. The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.

III. The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.

IV. The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.

Instruction emphasizes the research process, evaluation of sources, and finding substantial sources. The librarians customize their instruction according to each faculty member’s topic and/or requests.

The First Year Writing (FYW) course allows students to develop research skills through the construction of written arguments. Here the instruction relates to ACRL Standard Two:

II. The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.

It focuses on keyword vs. subject searching and Boolean searching, applied to the library’s catalog and general databases. Students are also taught how to identify citations as to type of source, and how to locate the full text of cited materials. These objectives are addressed in the library’s online tutorial, “Building Information Literacy Skills” (BILS). The tutorial is not required, but is strongly encouraged and promoted in these classes; when possible, students should have completed it prior to the FYW library instruction. The tutorial contains a module

that addresses ACRL Standard Five:

V. The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

At the junior level, the instruction is more flexible. The Junior Cornerstone course employs problem-based learning experiences, where students work in groups to investigate, research, and solve problem scenarios, and present their findings to a wider audience. Because the topics vary widely, the library provides a menu of information literacy competencies, from which the course instructors select those which they feel best fit their assignments and their students’ needs. This menu includes competencies such as evaluating web sites, conducting literature reviews, identifying scholarly literature, and tracking citations.

Finally, the Third Year Writing course uses thematically linked assignments to further develop critical thinking, writing, and research skills, building on those acquired in First Year Writing. Information literacy objectives for this course address advanced features of subject-specific databases, expanded instruction on reading and identifying citations, and locating items from a printed bibliography. Review of the techniques for finding full text is also included.

The information literacy program has been very successful in the General Education curriculum. 95% of the First Year Seminar and First Year Writing classes schedule instructional sessions, and approximately 50% of the junior level classes do so as well. The library is now working towards expanding instruction into specific disciplines. As the pilot for this undertaking, the Psychology Department has created a plan that identifies an introductory course and an upper-level research course in which IL competencies are addressed. The librarians work with specific assignments in these courses to teach the use of standard resources for the field of psychology. Other discipline-specific instruction is currently being provided to students in the health sciences, communication studies, and education fields. The aim is to integrate IL into required courses for majors in all departments.

ASSESSMENT

In the spring of 2007, the librarians created a test of 30 multiple-choice questions, based on the BILS tutorial. The test was piloted in several of the First Year Seminar classes, and with the library’s student employees. Students were asked to complete the test questions, and also to supply feedback on the test itself, noting any questions that were ambiguous or confusing. In the fall of 2008, after revision, an electronic version of the test was added to the university’s battery of computer proficiency tests, which all students must pass in order to graduate. Its inclusion speaks to the importance of information literacy in the students’ overall education.

Test results have been difficult to analyze. Because students may register for the test at any time during their first two semesters, it is unclear whether or how information literacy

instruction has affected student performance. At this point, there is no way to provide all freshmen with two instruction sessions prior to their taking the tests. What is known is that 50% of freshmen fail the BILS test the first time they attempt it. The librarians are investigating other assessment methods that will provide more substantial and reliable evidence of student learning at the freshman level and retention as their education progresses.

Informal assessment of the information literacy program's impact through the use of faculty surveys has produced positive results. Comments such as "...when I see the majority of my students using ...reputable scholarly sources I can be nothing but thankful for the work you have done" are evidence of the faculty's appreciation for the importance of IL development, and their willingness to continue collaborating with librarians to make that happen.

DEDICATED INSTRUCTIONAL SPACE

In the beginning, Belmont's information literacy instruction took place across campus in individual classrooms. This was challenging, due to the variety, or lack of, technology in the rooms. Computer lab space was limited and in demand, so the majority of instruction sessions took place where students were unable to engage in hands-on learning. Most classrooms offered only a demonstration computer and data projector. In a few cases, even that equipment was unavailable. Librarians either borrowed portable equipment or made do with handouts. As the IL program grew, it became clear that a dedicated instruction space was needed.

Without the prospect of new construction or major renovation, some creativity was required. A computer lab existed in the library building, and was open to anyone in the Belmont community. This lab was repurposed to become the information literacy classroom. It contains 30 workstations, an instructor station, and a Smart Board. IL instruction takes priority over other uses of the room, but the space may be reserved by classroom faculty or support services if needed, and it is opened for overflow use when classes are not scheduled. To replace the computer lab, the library's reference area was reconfigured. Where previously only eight computers for research were available, an open-space lab was created, with 28 workstations and tables for study space and group work. The entire area was redesigned to provide attractive and comfortable work space. Pods of five computers dot the space, interspersed with comfortable furniture for laptop use. Internet access, library research resources, desktop publishing applications and printing are available. Students seem quite pleased with the new arrangement, and the wider availability of technology-related uses.

LIBRARY ALLOCATIONS

Information literacy competencies are interwoven throughout the university's core learning goals. With this in mind, Provost McDonald decided to encourage the development of these competencies by linking them to departmental library budget allocations. Library Director Ernest Heard, along with

librarians Jenny Rushing and Dawn Stephen, created a scale by which each department's IL requirements could be measured and factored into the overall allocation formula. The scale and formula were reviewed by the Mathematics Department and vetted by the Library Committee, a standing committee of the Faculty Senate.

The purpose of the "Library Resource Needs Scale" (see Appendix) is to assess the needs of each department based on the amount of research required and the frequency of need for library resources to complete assignments. The scale was first applied using the 2008-2009 undergraduate catalog courses, and the resulting figures will comprise 12.5% of the total budget allocation formula for 2010-2011.

Admittedly, the scale is subjective, and the examples are only guidelines. Library liaisons and the Coordinator of Reference Services met with department chairs and collaboratively applied the rating scale to each department's course offerings. Course syllabi were also reviewed to try to insure the accuracy of the ratings, at least for those courses given a rating of 3, the highest rating. Through the use of the numerical scale, examination of syllabi, and discussion between librarians and faculty, the library hopes to gain a comprehensive picture of research needs across the curriculum, in order to improve instruction, develop relevant collections, and make the most advantageous use of budget dollars. The rating process will be repeated on a three-year cycle, and ongoing review and revision is expected.

In addition to the relationships established between librarians and classroom faculty through instruction sessions, the campus information literacy team, and departmental liaisons, there are other communication avenues in place. The library web site includes a wiki where IL news and documentation are posted. It provides links to the ACRL standards, the names of IL team members, the curriculum for each General Education course, and sample departmental IL plans. The campus team meets on an irregular basis, but is called upon to provide input when major changes or additions to the program are being contemplated. The Faculty Senate Library Committee, comprised of representatives from each of the university colleges and schools, acts in an advisory capacity and as a conduit for communications between the faculty and the library.

THE FUTURE

As with any long-range plan, there are items still to be implemented. The IL program is expected to grow, and while the present staff is unable to offer instruction to every class on campus, the library hopes to add professional staff in the next two years. Librarians will continue to work with their liaison departments to offer support for student learning, and to make information literacy an integral part of each course design. Finally, the university is considering the creation of a Learning Commons, at the center of which will be the library.

Belmont's librarians feel that great strides have been made in offering relevant instruction that is creating information literate students and citizens. Faculty and student response has been overwhelmingly positive. The library is busy, with students doing research and working on projects. The librarians are known across campus, and students feel comfortable asking for help. Administrative support at the outset has been the cornerstone upon which a comprehensive, meaningful IL program has been built, one block at a time.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

Course-Related Library Resource Needs Scale

Purpose of the Scale: To assess the library resource needs of departments based on the curriculum and assignments in each course, for courses listed in the 2008-2009 Undergraduate Catalog.

- Study Abroad courses will not be counted
- Special Topics/Studies courses will not be counted unless syllabi or detailed course descriptions are provided; if necessary, an average of the past three years' ratings will be used
- Courses that are no longer taught, or that have not yet been taught, will not be counted

Level of need will be factored into the library's budget allocation formula, and will also be considered for collection development purposes. The next assessment of resource needs will be done in 2013/14 and applied in 2014/15.

Point Values:

0 - No usage/need

1 - Light usage/need

Assignments requiring library resources 1-4 times per semester, including both research assignments and class readings

2 - Medium usage/need

Assignments requiring library resources 5-7 times per semester, including both research assignments and class readings

Examples:

- Short assignments or projects requiring fewer than 7 library resources
- Papers of fewer than 10 pages
- Presentations or performances shorter than 15 minutes

3 - Heavy usage/need

Assignments requiring library resources 8 or more times per semester, including both research assignments and class readings

Examples:

- Longer, more substantial assignments or projects requiring more than 7 library resources
- Papers of more than 10 pages
- Presentations or performances longer than 15 minutes