STEPP into the Library: Research Assistance for Students with Multiple Learning Disabilities

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Overview

Librarians strive to address the information needs of diverse populations. At East Carolina University's J. Y. Joyner Library, we are collaborating with Project STEPP to improve our information literacy services for students with multiple learning disabilities. Project STEPP (Supporting Transition and Education through Planning Partnerships) is an innovative program that offers comprehensive academic, social and life-skills support to a select number of students with learning disabilities who have shown the potential to succeed at the college level. In fall 2011, Project STEPP relocated to a space with office areas and study rooms in Joyner Library. Our collaboration began with a survey of enrolled STEPP students that included questions about library use. Building from the survey, we began designing a program of instruction and outcomes assessment for the ten incoming first year students.

Background

East Carolina University, located in Greenville, North Carolina, is a public, coeducational, doctoral/research university. With a student population of 28,000, it's the third largest and fastest growing university in the University of North Carolina system. Joyner Library is the largest library east of Raleigh and offers state-of-the-art research services and resources. Our extensive collections include more than 1.9 million volumes, 2.1 million pieces of microfilm, 500+ databases, and 61,000

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print and online serial subscriptions. Our librarians are regular, tenure-track faculty.

Project STEPP is a comprehensive program serving college students with documented learning disabilities. They offer academic, social, and life-skills support to a select number of motivated and committed students who demonstrate the potential to succeed in college. The program provides intensive support beyond what is normally offered at the university level. Ten new students are admitted each year and students can enter as freshmen or as transfers. There is no extra charge for the students and no restriction on their choice of majors.

The program has a capacity for 50-60 students and there are currently 40 students enrolled. As freshmen, they spend twenty hours a week in the STEPP office. Sophomores spend fifteen hours a week there and juniors spend ten. They are required to take five independent study classes with STEPP to improve their study skills. A STEPP staff member makes contact with admitted students during their senior year of high school. They help students prepare for college life by sending newsletters, discussing roommate expectations, and helping with organizational skills. Before they arrive on campus, students are expected to set personal goals, make a plan for personal wellness, and keep a college transition notebook. STEPP staff advises students about majors and a full-time graduate assistant is employed to help manage their time and to proofread papers. Project STEPP offers one hour a day of tutoring and encourages the students to work with the campus tutoring center which is currently located in the library.

Collaboration

The initial planning for library/Project STEPP cooperation began with a meeting of the Project STEPP

Director, Head of Reference, and Outreach Librarian in the fall of 2010. The discussions in this meeting provided the librarians with an overview of the program and the students. Initial proposals for collaboration were also discussed. The library started by surveying current Project STEPP students to gauge their use of library services and to get feedback about moving to a new space (see Appendix 1).

Because of rapid growth in enrollment (fall enrollment in 2001 was 19,412 in 2011 was 27,836) space is at a premium on campus. Before the arrival of Project STEPP, the library had already made space for the campus tutoring and writing centers.

In preparation for Project STEPP's move and to make space for their new offices and study rooms, the library withdrew about 50,000 journal volumes between January 2010 and February 2011. We also relocated 10,000 oversized volumes and 60,000 volumes in bound serials. We then shifted the rest of the general stacks across the third and second floors to make space for the new construction. The construction for Project STEPP included three offices, a large study area, and eleven new group studies. The large study area and studies are available to all students after 5 pm and on weekends.

During the summer of 2011, our committee met with the Project STEPP staff regularly to discuss student needs and plans for the upcoming year. The learning differences of all the incoming freshmen included dyslexia. Based on our conversations, the committee focused on slowing the pace of library instruction and offering more individual consultation time. We conducted an affective survey of the students about their opinions concerning the move.

Early in the fall semester, the new freshman came to three library instruction sessions. The first was a general introduction to services and a tour. The second focused on using the catalog and locating books on the shelf. The last was using databases to find articles, understanding the differences between scholarly, popular, and trade publications, and evaluating websites. They also came to the library for regular instruction with their freshman English classes. In addition to the classes, all of the freshmen were offered research consultations in the fall and spring.

ASSESSMENT

We have used a variety of assessment methods to evaluate our program with Project STEPP and have adapted our plans based on our experiences. At the beginning of fall 2011, we planned to use pre- and posttests, weekly journals, a video survey, and skills test during freshman composition library instruction sessions as assessment tools.

The pretest was administered during the first instruction session with the incoming freshman Project STEPP students. The test was comprised of ten qualitative and quantitative questions. Students were asked their confidence level with using a variety of research tools such as library databases. Additionally, students were given five questions relating to evaluating resources.

The posttest was e-mailed to students after completing their major English paper at the end of their fall semester. The posttest asked the same questions as the pretest in order to easily gauge the group's progress in using library information. The results showed that the STEPP students had improved in their confidence level with working with library resources and asking for assistance. Additionally, students improved on answering applied questions like "a summary of a journal article is called," and "When you're evaluating a website, which of the following criteria should you use." While the students improved in most areas, they continued to have difficulty with identifying plagiarism and reading call numbers (see Appendix 2).

The students also took two freshman composition courses during the academic year and attended two library instruction sessions. These classes covered the information presented in the STEPP library instruction sessions. However, the English composition library instruction sessions also provided information specific to their assignments. At Joyner Library, we regularly assess at least 50% of our library instruction sessions using a variety of assessment tools. For the sessions with the Project STEPP students, we used our standard assessment quiz for their course level. The majority of students improved between their first and second assessments. For example, in the first assessment 75% of students correctly responded with databases when asked where they should begin to search for an article. In the second assessment, 100% of students responded correctly to this question. For another question, the students preformed better on the first assessment versus the second assessment: When asked where to search for books on our website, 60% of students correctly answered the catalog for the first assessment and only 50% correctly answered the catalog for their second assessment. The second bibliographic instruction sessions tend to concentrate heavily on using databases to find research materials. However, it was mentioned that some databases, like Credo Reference, contain reference books and encyclopedias. This may have confused the students about the best place to search for books.

Another assessment we did this year was a video interview with the Project STEPP students where we asked them a few general questions about their library use. Most of the students mentioned group study rooms, reference assistance, and databases as resources they have used in the library.

As part of our last piece of assessment, we asked four questions related to their research practices and library use. When asked about researching a topic, most of the students said they would get background information from the internet and then go into the library databases to locate more scholarly materials. When asked how their habits have changed since attending library instruction sessions, the majority of students noted that they pay more attention to assessing the credibility of resources and more attention to citing their sources. When asked about the effect of the library on their studies, most students appreciated the study space in the library. They found that the library provided the best atmosphere for completing their homework and studying.

FUTURE PLANS

Originally, we planned to set up individual consultations with students through e-mail. Unfortunately, we were not successful in reaching all of the students. At the advice of a Project STEPP staff member, we instead met with students for consultations during their study hours required by the program. We tried this in the spring and it was very successful.

Looking ahead, we intend to improve our Project STEPP instruction program to address the students' skill deficits. After reviewing our assessments and feedback, we plan to focus more on plagiarism and website evaluation during our instruction sessions and conduct a citation analysis of their second semester research paper. Additionally, we plan to adjust our activities to include more Universal Design for Learning, especially for concepts such as Library of Congress Classification which can be challenging for students with learning disabilities.

Ultimately, we hope to continue to expand our program with Project STEPP and incorporate what we learn into our services for all patrons. Ideally, we hope to become a model for library initiatives with assisting students with learning disabilities.

APPENDIX 1

Initial affective survey of STEPP students with selected responses (fall 2010)

1. If Project STEPP moves to Joyner Library in the future, in what ways do you feel your use of the resources in the library will change? Please provide specific information and examples.
    - "I will most likely use the Pirate Tutoring Center more and consult with the Writing Center."
    - "I would use the library more if Project STEPP was there. I don't go there now because I'm never on that side of campus..."

2. If Project STEPP moves to Joyner Library in the future, in what ways do you feel your use of the library would stay the same? Please provide specific information and examples.
    - "In no way would it stay the same. I have been to the library only once."
    - "The same use of the library for use of books would stay the same. I would just be used more often than I regularly do."

3. What do you think some advantages would be of Project STEPP relocating to Joyner Library in the future?
    - "The kids would use the library more and I think more people will know what Project STEPP was."
    - "They would have access to all the library's resources within reach."

4. What concerns would you have about Project STEPP relocating to Joyner Library in the future?
    - ""It would be a bigger environment with a lot of people around. The more people, the more distractions."
   - "None. I hope it happens."

APPENDIX 2

Research skills test results

**How confident do you feel finding books in the library on a particular research topic?**
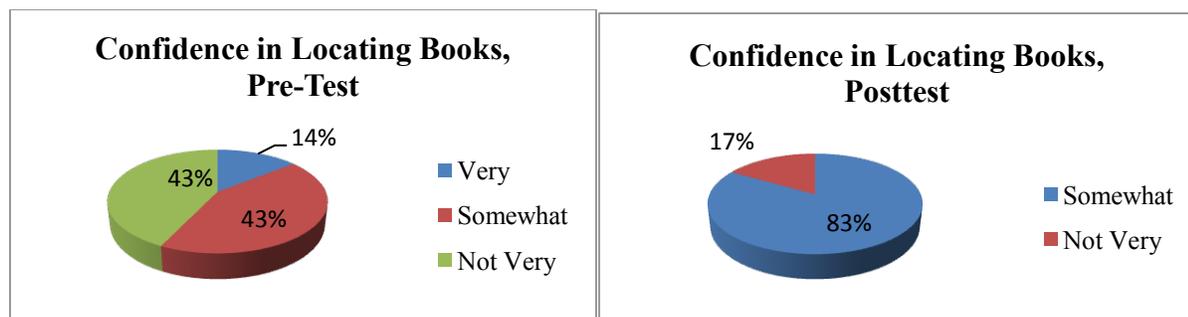
How confident do you feel using library databases to find relevant articles on a topic?
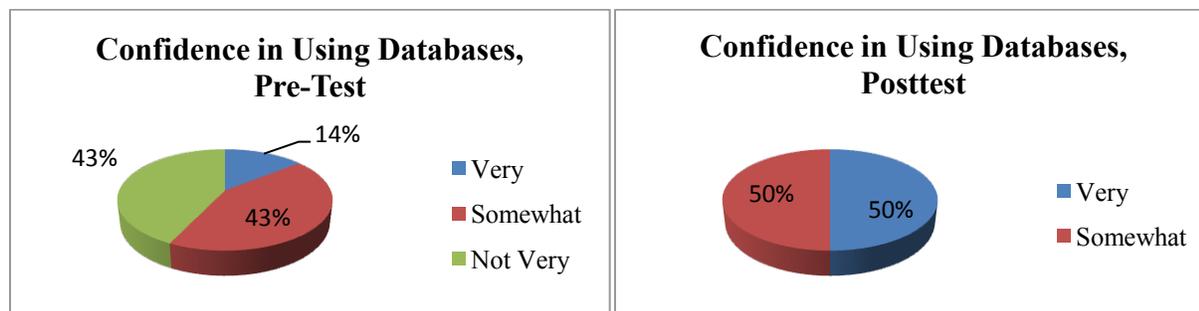
How comfortable do you feel asking for research assistance in a library?

Comfort Level for Requesting Research Assistance, Pre-Test

43% Somewhat
57% Very

- Very
- Somewhat

Comfort Level for Requesting Research Assistance, Posttest

33% Somewhat
67% Very

- Very
- Somewhat
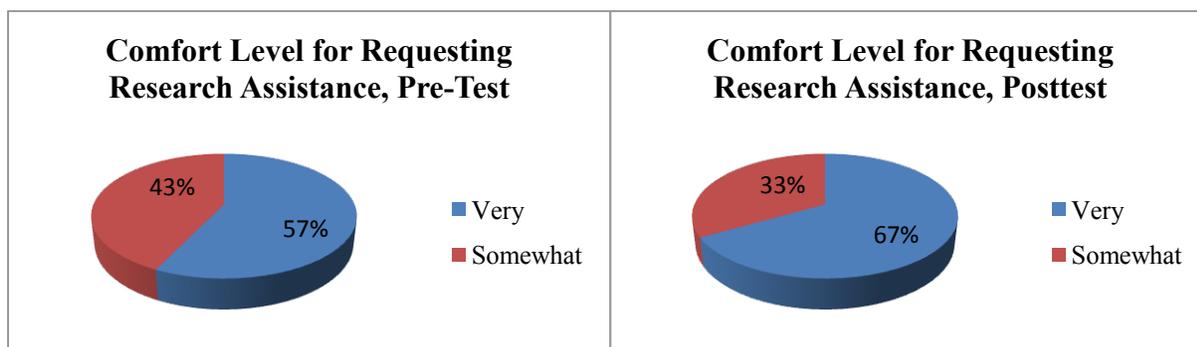
How familiar are you with avoiding plagiarism in your papers?

Familiarity with Avoiding Plagiarism, Pre-Test

14% Not Very
43% Very
43% Somewhat

- Very
- Somewhat
- Not Very

Familiarity with Avoiding Plagiarism, Posttest

50% Somewhat
50% Very

- Very
- Somewhat
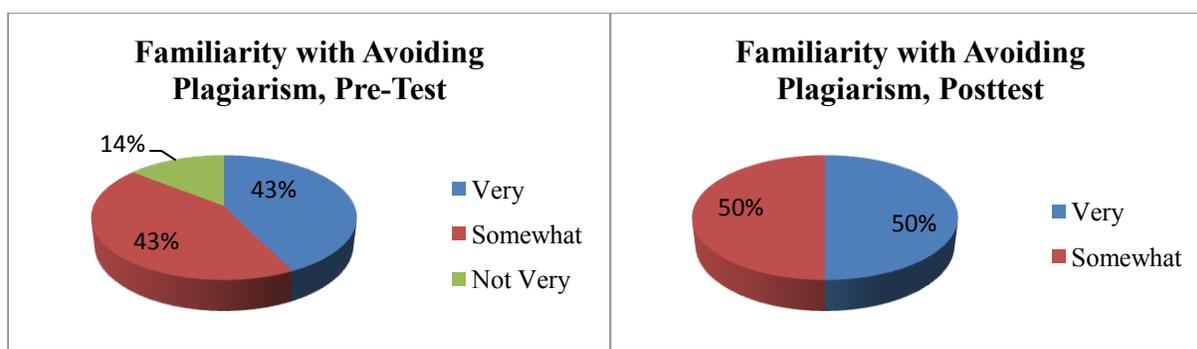
When you're evaluating a website, which of the following criteria should you use? (Check all that apply)

Criteria Use for Evaluating a Website

Bar chart with categories: Author's Credentials, Bias, Date of Publication, Search Engine, Layout/Design. Legend: Pretest, Posttest. Y-axis: 0 to 100.

A summary of a journal article is called:

Name of the Summary of a Journal Article

100
80
60
40
20
0

Index   Abstract   Periodical

■ Pretest
■ Posttest
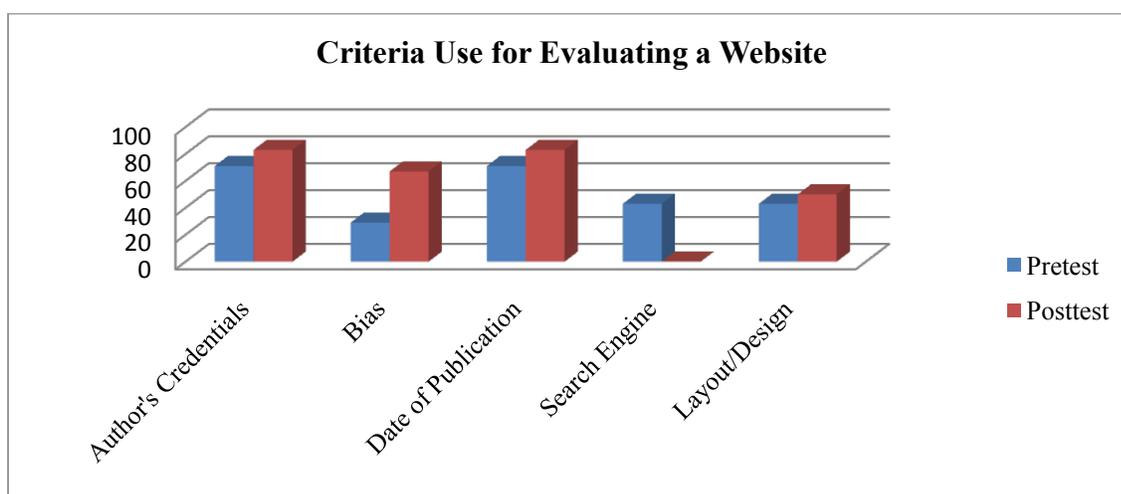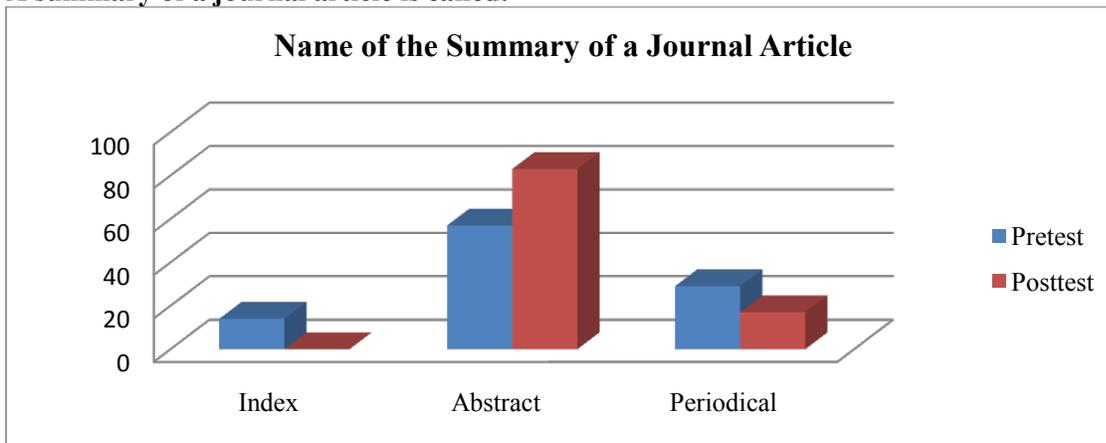
Books in the library are shelved according to Library of Congress Classification. Library of Congress Classification arranges books primarily by:

Arrangement of Books in Library of Congress Classification

100
80
60
40
20
0

Topic   Author Name   Title   Date of Publication

■ Pretest
■ Posttest
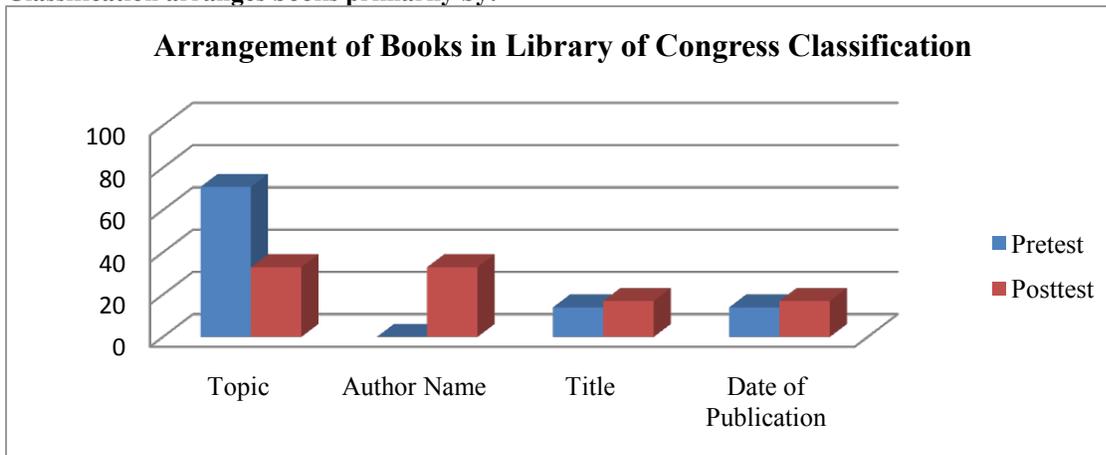
The following citation refers to what type of materials: Sheffield, P.E., & Landrigan, P.J. (2011). Global Climate Change and Children's Health: Threats and Strategies for Prevention. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, **119 (3), 291-298.**

Citation

100
80
60
40
20
0

Journal Article   Book   Website   Book article

■ Pretest
■ Posttest