Information Literacy in Transition: Self-Perceptions of Community College Students

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ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with community college students in Florida and New York, two large, demographically diverse states, in order to determine students' self-perceptions of their information literacy needs. Understanding students' own perceptions of their information literacy needs can help colleges more effectively respond to those needs with instruction and support programs. The findings from this study have the potential to inform and transform the way we educate LIS students who are preparing to become instruction librarians, especially in community college settings.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

information literacy; academic libraries; specific populations

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

community college students; community college librarians

BACKGROUND

Interviews were conducted with community college students in Florida and New York for the purpose of determining their self-perceptions of their information literacy (IL) needs. Research has shown that community college students greatly overestimate their IL skills and that they are unlikely to gain proficiency on their own (Gross & Latham, 2011, 2012). Little is currently known about how these students perceive their own IL needs and how they perceive these needs in relation to their academic and career goals. Community college students represent a variety of backgrounds and have a range of personal and educational goals. Moreover, they are often older, working full or part time, with children to support (Dougherty, Lahr, & Morest, 2017; Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Rosenbaum, 2016). Their ultimate success in meeting their goals hinges on a number of factors, one of which is undoubtedly their ability to find, evaluate, use, and create information effectively and efficiently. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about community college students' self-perceptions of their IL needs and the role of IL in students' successful transition from one phase of their life and education to the next.

IL instruction in institutions of higher education is also experiencing a time of transition. In 2016 the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) replaced its *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2000) with the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2016). While the former was largely prescriptive and skills based, the latter is more conceptual and focuses on threshold concepts, knowledge practices, and dispositions. Some have criticized the *Framework* as being "too complex" and not really relevant for community college students (Ludovico, 2017; Reed, 2015). The extent to which the *Framework* is being used in community colleges
and its potential relevance (or lack thereof) to community college students is largely unknown.

To address these gaps in the research literature, students at community colleges in Florida and New York were recruited for interviews in spring 2020. These states both have large community college systems with diverse student populations (City University of New York (CUNY), 2019; Florida Department of Education, 2019; State University of New York (SUNY), 2019). The findings from these interviews are intended to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the self-perceptions of students concerning their IL needs?

RQ2. Do students' self-perceptions of their IL needs vary based on their educational and career goals (transfer to university, enter the general job force, practice a trade, or join a profession)?

RQ3. Do students' self-perceptions of their IL needs vary based on the type of instruction they receive (skills-based vs. threshold concepts)?

METHOD

Students were recruited from six community colleges—three in Florida and three in New York—in spring 2020 for interviews about their IL needs. To recruit participants, flyers were posted in key locations at each campus and announcements were made in general education classes. Students were told that they would be compensated with a $30 gift card for participating in a 45-minute online interview to be conducted in Zoom. In the interview, students were asked about their educational goals; their experiences with searching for, evaluating, and using information; their experiences with IL instruction; and their perceptions of their IL needs. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed. Two members of the research team used NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QSR International, 2020) to code the interviews. The two coders independently coded a small subset of the interview transcripts and achieved a Kappa of 0.70. They then divided the remaining transcripts among them and completed coding on their own. Other members of the research team then analyzed the coded transcripts in order to address the research questions.

Participants

Thirty-four students participated in interviews—22 (65%) from New York and 12 (35%) from Florida. Twenty-three (68%) of the participants are female; 11 (32%) are male. Eighteen (53%) of the participants reported entering community college right after

graduating from high school. Most of the students (24 = 71%) are either in the middle or at the end of their degree program. Many different majors were represented among the participants, including humanities, music performance, math, biology, chemistry, journalism, accounting, childhood education, machinery, and mortuary science. The programs most frequently mentioned were computer science (3 = 9%), nursing (3 = 9%), and occupational therapy assistant (3 = 9%). Twenty-seven (79%) of the participants reported they are planning to pursue a bachelor's degree either immediately after they graduate from community college or at some point in the future. In terms of motivation, 19 (56%) stated they decided to attend community college for financial reasons (i.e., to get a better job in order to make more money), while three (9%) said that they were motivated by the desire to help other people.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The results of the interviews provide important insights into the self-perceptions of the participants concerning their IL needs (RQ1). Interestingly, there were no discernible differences in students' self-perceptions of their IL needs based on their educational and career goals (RQ2). By the same token, it was not possible to determine whether students' self-perceptions of their IL needs might have varied based on whether they received instruction based on skills vs. threshold concepts, as none of the students indicated they had received instruction based on the ACRL *Framework*'s threshold concepts (RQ3). Preliminary findings are presented and discussed below.

Information Literacy Experiences

In order to understand the context in which students are (or are not) using IL skills, they were asked to describe the kinds of school assignments they are given. The top four assignments were research papers (29 = 85%), tests (22 = 65%), essays (21 = 62%), and presentations (14 = 41%). Students were also asked about the kinds of IL skills and knowledge they felt one needed in order to be successful in school. The top skill by far was the ability to evaluate sources and information for credibility, currency, and relevance (21 = 62%). Other skills included writing skills (13 = 38%), accessing information (8 = 24%), using information (8 = 24%), and technology skills (7 = 21%). Several students mentioned skills that might be more properly considered study skills, such as how to study, how to manage one's time, and how to persevere in the face of challenges.

Almost all of the students expressed the opinion that IL was valuable in life, school, and work. In relation to their personal lives, students mentioned a variety of examples where their IL comes into play: gathering information about current events and politics, personal needs (ranging from hair care to health care), parenting, cooking, housing, product information, hobbies, and entertainment news. Several indicated that they often sought information in order to learn new things, develop their personal beliefs on various issues, and satisfy their curiosity. When searching for information, most of them use Google, YouTube, and other forms social media, although several noted the importance of going beyond social media in order to verify information. In terms of their school work, students reported using IL to accomplish a variety of tasks: using the

library, using databases, doing keyword searches, finding credible sources, citing sources properly, and avoiding plagiarism. They reported looking for information for class assignments, of course, but also for information to assist them with investigating four-year colleges, dealing with fake news, and forming their own opinions. Clearly, when it comes to information seeking and information use, students' academic lives and personal lives sometimes blend together. Students also commented on two other important skill sets related to IL in the school context—writing skills and computer skills. They anticipate IL being important on the job as well. In searching for a job, they realize they will need information to help them develop a resume and information about job openings. On they have a job, they expect that they will need to be able to conduct research, keep up with new advances in their field, and engage in problem solving that will require multiple information sources. In addition, many of them assume they will have to write and do presentations as part of their job, both of which will often require research.

Students also reported encountering a number of challenges related to finding, evaluating, and using information. Interestingly, most of the challenges they identified were related to finding information. Some of these were clearly connected with their level of IL, such as choosing a topic to fit the assignment instructions, knowing which databases to use and how to use them, selecting effective search terms, and even having basic computer skills. Additional challenges were finding too much information or not finding enough, finding current and relevant sources, and finding sources that were not biased. Information on very recent topics and very narrow topics could be especially hard to find. Other challenges with finding information were less related to IL per se, but were significant nonetheless. For example, several students had trouble accessing the library's website from home because of poor internet service. Others complained that sources they needed were not always available at their library. As for information evaluation, the biggest challenge students reported facing was determining which information is credible and which is not, but they sometimes encountered difficulties in finding relevant information in a form they could understand. The two biggest challenges with information use were knowing when and how to cite sources and being able to communicate their ideas effectively in writing.

When asked about the IL knowledge and skills they would like to improve, students focused mostly on the school context. Some of the skills were related to finding information: knowing where/how to find sources, becoming familiar with more databases and web search engines, getting better at developing keyword searches. Other skills related to evaluating sources, comparing sources, and determining the most relevant sources. And a few students mentioned critical thinking skills as an area they would like to improve on. Other skills were more related to effective information use: writing skills (including grammar and strategies for overcoming writer's block), following assignment instructions, and public speaking and debating skills (both of which were mentioned in relation to the work context).

Information Literacy Training

Students were asked how they learned what they know about IL. Most said that they had learned in a one-shot session provided by a librarian, typically within the context of a course they were taking. While several students reported that they had

received instruction in elementary, middle, and/or high school, most interviewees said that their IL instruction had occurred in college. The college courses most frequently mentioned were English composition and student success, but other courses were mentioned as well, including courses as diverse as accounting, environmental studies, and public speaking. Sessions that were embedded in a student success course (a course focusing on basic study skills, etc.) often included a tour of the library and basic information about how to access resources. Sessions provided in conjunction with other classes usually included more in-depth instruction on topics such as using a specific database, formulating a search query, evaluating sources, and citing sources. Six students (18%) said that they had taken a standalone course on IL.

In addition, to the one-shot workshop and the standalone course, other contexts for IL instruction were mentioned as well. A number of students stated that they had had one-on-one consultations with a librarian, instructor, or classmate. The kinds of help received ranged from developing search terms and locating sources to evaluating sources and formatting citations. Many students also mentioned working with tutors. Tutoring services were typically staffed by peer tutors, and often were located within or adjacent to the library. Interviewees talked about working with tutors in writing centers in order to get help with writing, grammar, and citations. Though writing centers were most frequently mentioned, several students also said they had consulted with tutors in math, accounting, and computer technology.

When asked about who had trained them in IL, 32 (94%) students identified their community college instructors, and 31 (91%) identified their community college librarians. By way of comparison, 16 (47%) recalled receiving IL instruction from K-12 teachers, while only 4 (12%) remembered receiving instruction from K-12 librarians. Students also mentioned learning from friends, peers, and classmates (9 = 26%) as well as from a family member (6 = 18%). Thirteen (38%) students said that their IL skills were mostly self-taught. They reported using Google a lot, and several noted that they had been using computers since they were young children. One said they felt that they already knew what they needed to know about IL.

Students were also asked about their preferred way to learn IL skills and concepts. Several strategies were identified, including watching someone else first, getting hands on practice, being able to ask questions, and learning from and with peers. In terms of format, many said that they preferred one-on-one instruction, but others said they preferred group sessions and at least one expressed the desire for an online tutorial. Several students noted the importance of passionate instructors, and one student offered the opinion that peer tutors were actually more effective than instructors and librarians. One participant made the astute observation that IL training should begin much earlier— in middle school, for example.

Finally, students were given the opportunity to describe what they found useful about the IL training they had received and what suggestions they had for improving that instruction. Thirty-three (97%) students expressed appreciation for the instruction they had received. They mentioned the helpfulness and availability of librarians, teachers who care, and peer tutors. One stated that they appreciated being forced to go to the library as part of class because otherwise they would not have done so on their own. As far as what they learned that they found useful, students discussed many different things: knowing about the various resources available, effective searching skills, evaluating sources, using

databases, using citation generators, and developing computer skills. Twenty-two (65%) students also offered suggestions for improvement. Some of the suggestions were more handouts on the resources available, more academic support for adult students going back to school, writing workshops in the library, librarians visiting classes, more one-on-one instruction, more online tutorials, and more computer skills instruction. One student suggested that IL instruction be incorporated into existing required classes, while another expressed the opinion that a library research course should be required of all students. Some of the suggestions had to do with increasing the availability of existing services. For example, one student discussed the importance of the library being open on weekends, another felt that instruction sessions should be offered more frequently, and yet another felt the library should do a better job of advertising its services

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The community college students in this study value IL, not just for school but also in their personal lives and for their anticipated work lives. They describe their IL experiences in terms of skills—finding, evaluating, and using information—rather than threshold concepts as articulated in the ACRL *Framework* (2016), which is not surprising given that there is no evidence that these students have been exposed to the *Framework* terminology. The information sources they prefer differ, depending on the context. In their personal lives, they tend to rely on Google and social media, while in their schoolwork they understand the importance of using databases and finding peer-reviewed publications.

The students feel that they need to improve their skills in finding, evaluating, and using information. This suggests that they are open to receiving IL instruction as well as instruction in improving writing and presentation skills. Many of them indicated that one-shot instruction sessions, while helpful, were not enough, and several advocated for a required IL course.

These findings have implications for both practice and research. They suggest that librarians have opportunities to incorporate threshold concepts into instruction, but also that they should not totally abandon skills-based instruction. The findings also suggest that working with instructors to embed IL into courses, while not a new idea, can be a most effective way to provide IL instruction and also that more time should be devoted to it than typically occurs with the one-shot session. The findings suggest additional research opportunities as well—conducting interviews with community college librarians, for example, and comparing skills-based approaches to approaches based on threshold concepts. Such research can contribute further to the field's understanding of how best to meet the IL needs of community college students, an understudied but important specific population in higher education. And, finally, the findings from this study have the potential to inform and transform the way we educate LIS students who are preparing to become instruction librarians, especially in community college settings.

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