

# In the Shadow of the ACRL *Framework*: Current Instructional Practices of Community College Librarians

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## ABSTRACT

While much has been written about information literacy instruction in higher education, community colleges and community college librarians have received less attention. A survey of 163 instructional librarians at community colleges in Florida and New York was undertaken to investigate instructional practices in community colleges as college and university librarians are working to incorporate the new *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2016) into their instruction. Findings from this survey will be of use to librarians in high school, community college, and four-year college/university environments. They will also inform pedagogy in MLS programs preparing librarians for instructional work.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS AND AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Information literacy, academic libraries; specific populations

## INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Community colleges represent more than half of the postsecondary institutions in the United States. They are unique in that they prepare students for a variety of goals. Some students are training for careers, some are earning associate-level degrees (AA/AS), and some will transfer to a four-year institution of learning. Others may be doing remedial education to earn a General Education Diploma (GED), or they may be dual-enrolled high school students taking college courses that will put them ahead in college when they graduate. Community college students are often older, currently employed, responsible for children, and have limited resources (Dougherty, Lahr, & Morest, 2017; Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Rosenbaum, 2016). The variety of backgrounds and goals these students represent offer special challenges for community college librarians concerned with equipping them with information literacy (IL) skills. The literature on

IL is expansive, yet little is known about current instructional practices in community colleges (Reed, 2015).

We are also in a time of transition as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has made effective a new definition of IL by adopting the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2016). Moving away from a skills-based approach, the *Framework* asserts that “Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (Introduction, para. 5). The *Framework* requires new thinking not only about what IL is but also how it should be taught and evaluated. This has created a profession-wide discussion in which some have questioned the appropriateness of the *Framework* for learners at community colleges, voicing concerns that it is “too complex,” not relevant to students’ career goals, and not possible to fully teach in two-year programs (Ludovico, 2017; Nelson, 2017; Reed, 2015). Others, such as Swanson (2014) disagree, asserting that the *Framework* should be used in the community college context. Now is a critical time to find out how community colleges are transitioning to the new ACRL *Framework*, as well as to document librarians’ perceptions of community college learners’ educational, occupational, and personal contexts and how these diverse needs are being met.

To begin to fill this gap in understanding, and provide a snapshot of current instructional practices that includes data on the implementation of the *Framework*, librarians at community colleges in Florida and New York were surveyed in the fall of 2019. These are the researcher’s home states, which, like other states, have strong community college systems that serve diverse populations (City University of New York (CUNY), 2019; Florida Department of Education, 2019; State University of New York (SUNY), 2019). The survey instrument was based on a survey employed in a national study of instructional librarians in the United States but tailored to the community college library environment (Julien, et al., 2018). The research questions addressed in this study are:

**RQ1.** What are the instructional practices of community college librarians responsible for IL instruction?

**RQ2.** What are the perceptions of community college librarians about student IL needs?

The objectives of this survey are broader than those of the recent Wengler and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) survey, which focused on librarians’ use of the *Framework* in community colleges, but did not explore librarians’ beliefs about student IL needs. However, this survey, the previous national U.S. survey (Julien et al., 2018), and national surveys of Canadian librarians (Julien, 2000, 2006, Julien & Leckie, 1997; Julien, et al., 2013; Polkinghorne & Julien, 2019) do provide points of comparison for the study reported here.

## **METHOD**

The first phase of this mixed method IMLS-funded project employed a survey of community college librarians in Florida and New York exploring their instructional practices and objectives, the effect of technology on their work, and their perceptions of their students’ IL abilities and needs. Preliminary results from the first phase of the project are reported here. In the

second phase of the mixed method design interviews were performed with 34 community college students enrolled in Florida and New York discussing their self-perceptions of their IL needs related to their educational, occupational, and personal contexts and future success. This phase of the study is reported elsewhere.

The survey of community college librarians was intended to study what instructional practice looks like in community colleges in Florida and New York, what is happening as community colleges transition to the *ACRL Framework*, and what perceptions librarians have about the IL needs of community college students. Its content was informed by a recent national survey of IL practices in academic libraries (Julien, et al., 2018), but was tailored to the community college context and refined based on input from the project advisory board. The survey was built in Qualtrics and a link to the survey was emailed to community college librarians in Florida and New York who were identified through publicly available information. A total of 760 emails were sent. There was no incentive or compensation offered for participation. The survey took about 20 minutes to complete and reminders to complete the survey were sent two times to potential respondents after the initial request for participation. In all, 163 responses were received resulting in a response rate of 21.4 percent. The survey results provide a record of the challenges community college librarians face in serving their academic communities at this time.

## Participants

The librarians who responded to the survey included general librarians, reference librarians, instructional librarians, and librarians with managerial responsibilities. Almost half (46.6%, n=68) were working at colleges where the size of the student population was less than 10,000. About a third of respondents (31.5%, n=46) worked at colleges with student populations between 10,00 and 20,000. The remainder (21.9%, n=32) were from colleges with over 20,000 students enrolled.

In terms of who provides information literacy instruction (ILI) at community colleges, respondents indicated that responsibility is shared between full-time instruction librarians (48.6%, n=90) and reference/public service librarians (45.9%, n=85). It was also reported that other librarians on staff provide instruction (31.4%, n=58) and in the “other” category (16.2%, n=30) that ILI is also provided by part-time librarians, directors, system librarians, and associate instructors with related master’s degrees.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The results of this survey illuminate many aspects of instructional work among librarians at community colleges; among these are the topics covered and methods used to provide IL instruction, the proportion of students exposed to IL instruction, librarian views of student IL needs including the strengths and challenges students face, and the incorporation of the *Framework* into instruction.

Preliminary findings indicate that the majority of respondents (99.3%, n=147) offer IL instruction, and 94 percent offer IL classes. The most frequent topics covered include online databases (70.3%, n=130), search strategies (66.5%, n=123), library use in general (65.9%,

n=122), citation formats (60.0%, n=111), catalogue/OPAC (58.4%, n=109), and the Internet/web (53.0%, n=98). All other topics were indicated by less than 30 percent of respondents. The most frequent methods of instruction were individualized instruction (64.9 %, n=120), hands-on instruction in a computer lab (63.8 %, n=118), one-shot instruction (58.9%, n=109), lectures/demonstrations in subject classes (57.8%, n=107), and pathfinders or subject guides (55.1 %, n=102). All other forms of instruction had frequencies of less than 40 percent.

Among those who felt comfortable estimating numbers, 33.0 percent (n=43) report reaching more than 50 percent of the students on their campus with IL instruction and about 37.6 percent (n=50) are reaching fewer than 50 percent. The remaining respondents either felt they could not estimate their reach (27.8%, n=37) or entered other comments about their campus (1.5%, n=2). Respondents identified their instructional focus as mainly first-year students (62.7%, n=116), students in certain subject disciplines (61.1%, n=113), students in degree programs (53.5%, n=99), and high school students dual-enrolled at the college (42.2%, n=78). All other responses represented less than 30 percent of responses.

### **Information Literacy Instruction and the *Framework***

Use of the *Framework* to inform IL instruction has begun, but is not pervasive. Only 22.3 percent (n=21) said that the *Framework* has informed their work. About half (56.4%, n=53) said the *Framework* has had a minor influence and the remaining 21.3 percent (n=20) said their work is not informed by the *Framework* at all. Among those who say their work has been influenced by the *Framework*, this has mainly been a change in their conceptual approach toward instruction, which has resulted in a more active and hands-on approach. Opinions about the *Framework* were lackluster. Only 17.8 percent (n=33) of respondents felt it important for community colleges to make the *Framework* part of instruction. Others said that the *Framework* is not suited for one-shot instruction (24.9%, n=46), that not all of the frames are relevant for students' learning goals, that two-year programs are too short for students to assimilate *Framework* concepts (14.1%, n=26), and that the *Framework* is not suited for use in community colleges (8.6%, n=16).

Interestingly, when asked what frames are relevant to student success, 39.5 percent (n=73) chose Searching as Exploration, 37.3 percent (n=69) said Research as Inquiry, 33.0 percent (n=61) chose both Authority is Constructed and Contextual and Information has Value, 23.8 percent (n=44) chose Scholarship as Conversation, and 22.2 percent (n=41) chose Information Creation as a Process. Resources that these librarians have used in working to implement the *Framework* include articles about the *Framework* (26.5%, n=49), workshops (11.4%, n=21), ACRL Sandbox (8.6%, n=16), "other" (7.7%, n=13), and training provided in their library (3.8%, n=7).

### **Perceptions of Student Information Literacy Needs**

Respondents see students' primary information needs as knowing how to evaluate information (56.8%, n=105), understanding general research strategies (51.4%, n=95), and knowing how to find information in various sources (47.6 %, n=88). All other responses were under 36 percent. The highest response level concerning students' strengths is the perception that

they are aware of technological innovations (29.7%, n=55). All other perceived student strengths were noted by 1.1 percent (n=2) for understanding the concepts in the ACRL *Framework*, to 16.2 percent (n=30) for understanding general research strategies. The most common perception of weakness in student IL skills was knowing how to evaluate information (50.3%, n=93). It was the only category to reach this level of consensus. Understanding the ACRL *Framework* concepts as a weakness came in at 30.3 percent (n=56).

When asked what skills or knowledge they think students see as important to success, there was less than 50 percent agreement on any perception. The most shared responses were knowing how to find information in various resources (37.8%, n=70), awareness of technological innovations (22.7%, n=42), and understanding general research strategies (21.6%, n=40). All other responses were under 18 percent.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Survey results describe the instructional practices of community college librarians in Florida and New York who participated in the study. While the findings cannot be generalized, the data provide a snapshot of the community college context in two states that is largely similar to the findings of Julien, Gross, and Latham's (2018) national survey of librarians who do instructional work in academic libraries. One difference is that a larger proportion of these respondents say that the *Framework* is not impacting their instructional practices, even though the national survey was conducted over three years ago. This survey suggests that acceptance of the Frames in community colleges has been a slow process and that new strategies and more research may be needed to aid in its adoption at this level in higher education. That the *Framework* has yet to be embraced in this context confirms concerns found in the literature (Jackman & Weiner, 2017; Ludovico, 2017; Reed, 2015).

Findings also differ from those of a recent national survey of community college librarians (Wengler & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020), which found a higher utilization of one-shot information literacy sessions (97%) than seen in this survey and a greater frequency of respondents (19%) reporting that their institution has a credit-bearing IL course. The Wengler and Wolff-Eisenberg study also found more use of resources to aid in implementing the *Framework* as well as a stronger sense among respondents that the Frames are relevant to student success and instructional practices.

Findings also largely agree with findings from the Canadian national surveys (Julien, 2000, 2006, Julien & Leckie, 1997; Julien, et al., 2013; Polkinghorne & Julien, 2019), which was last undertaken four years ago. One difference that stands out is that more U.S. librarians have ILI as their primary job responsibility, whereas in Canada, this responsibility is shared among reference librarians. Librarians in both countries are concerned about buy-in for their work among students, faculty, and administrators. The latest Canadian survey included questions about the ACRL *Framework*, and found that for 32 percent of respondents the *Framework* has had a significant impact on their instruction (Polkinghorne & Julien, 2019).

These data are important as they capture IL instruction during a time of transition and will be of use to librarians in high school, community college, and four-year college/university environments. These data can provide a point of comparison for other venues as well as insight

into perceptions that can facilitate or constrain ILI and adoption of the *Framework* in higher education. Further, they contribute to filling a gap in the literature on ILI instruction and adoption of the *Framework*, which has not been as robust in terms of understanding the work in community colleges, which are important players in the landscape of institutions of higher education. The results of this research are also important as they will inform pedagogy in MLS programs preparing librarians for instructional work. In this way, this paper supports the conference theme of the transformation of LIS education.

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