The Role of Librarians in Academic Success

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ABSTRACT

Librarians address all levels of information needs for the university: its acquisition, its production, its storage, and instruction for its safe and gainful use. Most of today's college students have a high degree of computer literacy but are weak in their abilities to determine the quality of the information that is so readily available. Students need to be taught to find, evaluate, and use information in an academically-oriented manner in order to solve complex problems. Good library skills are integral to academic success. In conjunction with research and teaching faculty, librarians create a framework for knowledge acquisition in the evolving university education.

Keywords: Libraries, librarians, information literacy, critical information literacy, student success, academic success, career readiness, impact, outcomes

INTRODUCTION

In a world that is rapidly leaving paper behind and moving toward electronic information access, many students do not see value in learning library skills. Information is freely accessible on the internet, and the sphere of knowledge is growing exponentially. A Google search brings up lots of responses, so why should a student learn to use the academic library? To graying professors, this predilection of undisciplined research is frightening. To younger instructors, it is often not surprising.

The fundamental questions remain: What role do librarians play in academic success? Do they serve a useful function in the 21st century university? If intellectual maturity is the traditional hallmark of an educated person, what do librarians contribute beyond the unearthing of academic content in the student's chosen field?   This paper will argue that certain skills are essential to the acquisition, evaluation, and presentation of knowledge for academic success in a university and for a lifetime of continued learning. Given those goals, the paper will examine how librarians promote inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary education in the behavioral and community sciences to students at a major university in Florida. In addition, librarians are encouraged to pursue scholarship in their own field. Lastly, this paper will argue for synergy among librarians, research and teaching faculty in creating a framework for knowledge acquisition in the evolving university education. Librarians as scholars and practitioners bring a perspective to information seeking and evaluation that are important skills in 21st century academia.

1. LIBRARIANS AS GATEKEEPERS

Libraries have always been concerned with information, whether it was kept on clay tablets, papyrus, sheepskin, or paper. The evolution from print to electronic delivery has little to do with the function of the library, even though the appearance of the library continues to evolve.   The modern university library is no longer the warehouse of print that it used to be. The "book morgue" is ceding its former floor space to WIFI study areas where students may study collaboratively or independently, using an increasing quantity of electronic books, articles, diagrams, graphs, and 3-D animations.

Today's college students have never known a time in their lives without computers or the internet, offering them answers, entertainment, and a shared electronic environment.   Google was incorporated in 1998, six years before this year's eighteen-year-old freshmen were born. In their eyes, Google has

been around forever. It is just one of many sources of free information on the internet. From their perspective, it is a fair question for incoming college students to ask, "What is a librarian good for?"

The problem is this: the abundance and easy availability of information doesn't mean that the information is useful for scholarship. Fifty years ago, the college library was the only source of information for research. Librarians had carefully selected the tomes; the information at hand for student consumption had been vetted. Students learned to format a paper and cite references according to well-known rules. Let us fast-forward to the 21st century when information is no longer scarce but college students are still naïve about intellectual bias. The internet has vastly expanded the resources available to them but it is not necessarily good nourishment for young and non-discriminating minds. Students are accustomed to searching the internet for information; using the library catalog is a new experience for many of them, as are the electronic databases that give access to many of the articles in the library holdings. Although there are reviews for books and impact factors for journals to guide one's assessment of value, websites do not have a ranking system.

The university recognizes that information literacy must be taught because the library no longer has control over the information available for scholarship [1]. The internet has dramatically changed the world of information. Consequently, the role of librarians has been refined: whereas fifty years ago they created collections of reliable paper-based resources, they now also teach students how to think about a research problem, how to recognize their information needs, how to evaluate the information they collect from a bewildering variety of sources, and how to use that information responsibly.

Today's academic librarians are uniquely positioned to help students become knowledgeable users of the information at their command. At the University of South Florida (USF), librarians are faculty, in recognition of their role in teaching students to find, analyze, and present information. Understanding information is recognized at the highest levels of academia as a fundamental and essential component of higher education and a life-time skill. The university goals include the terms "interdisciplinary research", "critical thinking", "intellectual inquiry",

"scholarship", "professional responsibility", and "career-readiness" [2]. All of these hallmarks of education require the ability to understand and work with information at a highly-skilled level. In this age of increasing accountability, the university, of which the library is a part, acknowledges its responsibility to its stakeholders, who include the students, their parents, employers, communities, and all levels of government [3].

The library is still a valued institution on campus. Librarians are still responsible for selecting and maintaining the intellectual content of the library. Electronic format for books and journals is increasingly popular. It is not prone to deterioration as is paper; it liberates floor space for other purposes; it is accessible around the clock. The University of South Florida's interlibrary loan program is largely electronic; hence, resources not available on campus seldom are hindered by the pace of the postal process. The community of lending libraries is extensive, so there is practically no excuse for not getting a particular research text. In addition, the university's electronic academic repository provides access to scholarship produced by its own faculty and students. The repository is open access, making in-house research and publications available worldwide without financial barriers. In short, the ubiquitousness of the online environment has changed the format and the delivery of information, and the university has adapted to its advantages for scholars.

2. LIBRARIANS AS TEACHERS

Research librarians, cataloging librarians, and library administrators are all concerned with the acquisition, evaluation, and presentation of information. At the university level, librarians specialize in fields of knowledge to better serve the interests of their assigned disciplines. At the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute Research Library, the librarians primarily serve the research interests of students and faculty in the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences at the University of South Florida (USF), but they also respond to requests from the state legislature, guest researchers, and the public. However, by far, the greatest numbers of users are students.

Academic success depends upon the students' abilities to evaluate the information that they can access, to understand the quality of their

information sources, and to organize diverse sources into a coherent theme. Various terms are used to describe these abilities, including "research skill", "information skills"," information proficiency", "critical thinking", and "information literacy". The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has considered the problems of teaching information literacy and has issued guidelines. The *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* defines "information literacy" as proficiency with a set of skills that enables a person to navigate the universe of information, to make sense of "unfiltered formats, raising questions about its authenticity, validity, and reliability… [because] the sheer abundance of information will not in itself create a more informed citizenry without a complementary cluster of abilities necessary to use information effectively" [4].

The Standards of Information Literacy define behaviors that demonstrate successful performance of each of the skills. Proficiency includes determining how much information is needed, how to find it efficiently, how to evaluate its quality and usefulness as part of a research inquiry, and how to use the information responsibly. This last point concerns "the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use [of] information ethically and legally" [4].

Critical information literacy is a different paradigm in that it recognizes the importance and implication of the use of information within a specific context. It acknowledges the political nature of information and focuses on the evaluation of bias, as well as discipline-specific classifications, ontologies, and frameworks [5; 6]. The University of South Florida Libraries do not promote one philosophy of information literacy over another; the librarians employ the method that best suits their students and disciplines. When working on transdisciplinary research, critical information literacy is the preferred approach. Most of the library skills instruction at the Florida Mental Health Institute Research Library is framed within critical information theory because students are interested in the intersections of child and family studies, rehabilitation and mental health counseling, aging studies, communication sciences and disorders, mental health law and policy, social work, and criminology.

At USF, research librarians teach on average 70% of the time. Teaching is defined as classroom instruction, one-on-one consultations, email and phone help, reference transactions, video tutorials, subject and course guides, and how-to worksheets. The reference librarian's role is not defined as support for faculty but rather as an active agent in the mission of the university [7]. As students progress in their education, they need more refined skills. Librarians tailor their content to the needs of the user in order for him/her to achieve academic success. A consultation with a freshman is quite different from one with a doctoral candidate, but both are focused on the individual's needs, and both provide a faculty-student interaction. The purpose of the information literacy curriculum in the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences at USF is to teach students to think broadly about their topic, look for corresponding interests in other disciplines, search databases, refine their topic, write their work in a specific citation style, and avoid plagiarism and copyright issues.

3. LIBRARIANS AS SCHOLARS

USF faculty librarians are expected to be scholars in their own right. Library faculty not only teach; they must also adhere to the research standards they promote by contributing articles and chapters to publications, making conference presentations, and joining panel discussions. One of the challenges facing librarianship is the quantification of value added by the library to the university. How does a librarian contribute to students' academic success? How can they quantify the value of teaching research skills? How can they measure the long-term effects of an in-class presentation about the use of a bibliographic content management system like EndNote or RefWorks on a four-year college career? These are the types of questions librarians are grappling with as they try to measure the impact of their work. Librarians engage in controlled studies, analyses of pedagogies and processes, cost-benefit studies, and many other types of research one would expect in a large enterprise.

Publication outside of the field of librarianship is also honored, so that faculty may publish solo or in conjunction with students and/or faculty in other disciplines. The diversity of publications is limited only by the expertise of the librarian community. Many library faculty have advanced degrees in

fields other than librarianship, and they may have facility in foreign languages. The additional knowledge may add depth and dimension to the conceptualization of a research question, and offer new lines of inquiry for the student. Membership in the broader professional network of fellow librarians, encountered through participation in professional associations and conference attendance, extends the resources the librarian may call upon for the benefit of the researcher.

4. LIBRARIANS AS COLLABORATORS

Given their expertise in academic and librarianship fields, it is no surprise that librarians are highly desirable partners for research collaboration. The following scenario depicts the type of collaboration that occurs frequently at the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute Research Library: a librarian teams up with teaching faculty and research faculty on a topic that spans disciplines, to examine a problem concerning feeding disorders in young children (ages 0-3). It is a good fit for the critical information literacy approach because the method captures the synergy of the three contributors. One might conceptualize the problem from a variety of disciplines, including Pediatric Medicine, Clinical Psychology, Applied Behavior Analysis, Nursing, Nutrition, and maybe Physical Therapy [8]. Each discipline has its own language, methods and measures, and each discipline will approach fundamental questions in a discipline-ordered way: What is causing the problem? Who can resolve it? What interventions (education, drug therapy, or behavior modification) have been tried and have they worked? Further assessment of the interdisciplinary problem might identify a number of populations: children who have trouble with the mechanics of feeding; children who have developmental problems; children who have behavior problems during feeding; and children with genetic conditions that impair oral motor skills.

The thesaurus of subject headings in a database is essential to understanding the language of a discipline. To pursue this example, the subject heading "feeding disorder" in the PubMed database returns a mental disorder definition, while PsycInfo treats the terms as a NOT a medical condition; by implication, the problem is psychosocial in nature. Using a variety of subject headings as search terms, the librarian can design a search strategy that will encompass pertinent disciplines in order to search the literature thoroughly. Critical discipline literacy encourages the broad examination of the problem from within disciplines; the transdisciplinary approach enables members of different disciplines to create a common understanding of a shared problem.

Librarians are invited to attend course curriculum planning meetings, hiring interviews in academic departments, and discussions about the evolving vision of a university education. They are creating instructional videos that are used as teaching components in courses. Librarians work in collaboration with a teaching faculty member to shape the syllabus for a course, so assignments include meaningful learning opportunities using library skills in conjunction with academic content. Librarians also work with a department chairperson to design the curriculum that enables the students to evaluate and work effectively and efficiently with the academic content of their field. Good library skills are integral to academic success.

The university recognizes that facility in working with information is essential for its graduates. According to a research poll, employers want employees who can communicate effectively, who can analyze and solve complex problems, and who can locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources [9]. All of these skills can be built into the syllabi and curricula to enhance both academic and lifetime success. The library has become a teaching venue. The goal of the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences, with which the Louis de la Parte Research Library is associated, is to prepare tomorrow's mental and behavioral health practitioners to be informed consumers of information and creators of new knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown librarians in their roles as gatekeepers, teachers, scholars, and collaborators. However, I want to emphasize all these roles are bundled into my academic role of librarian as faculty.

Therefore, in answer to the initial question, "What is a librarian good for?," consider navigating the world without an understanding of useful information. Life without a librarian is unthinkable.

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