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Information Literacy: A Call to Action

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2009 marked the 20th anniversary of the seminal report of the ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. Since then, there have been many studies conducted to understand information-seeking behaviors. The newest report from Project Information Literacy, *Lessons Learned: How College Students Seek Information in the Digital Age* (http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fall2009_Year1Report_12_2009.pdf), is a landmark study that confirms and expands on the results of other reports.

It affirms what we know from experience in working with students daily in library instructional settings and reference. At the same time, these results are quite troubling. Students think of the information-seeking process as a rote process: they use the same small set of information resources no matter what information question they have. They rely first on course readings and Google to find information for course work; they rely on professors as "research coaches" for identifying additional sources. They use Google and Wikipedia for research about everyday life topics. They tend not to use library services that require interacting with librarians, preferring to use online library resources. They learn about a small set of these resources during their first-year orientation, but they don't expand that set of resources or consult with librarians as they continue their education. And although they begin the research process engaged and curious, they become frustrated and overwhelmed as it unfolds.

We know that these behaviors affect the quality of the academic work that the students produce, and, ultimately, their ability to find and use information competently once they graduate. However, these research findings should motivate action, not despair. We can no longer ignore the growing body of evidence that there are deficits in college students' information-seeking behaviors. What should we do with this knowledge? How should we, as academic librarians, respond?

Information literacy is included in the standards for most regional and many programmatic accreditation agencies. President Obama declared October to be National Information Literacy Month; California's Governor Schwarzenegger issued an executive order earlier this year to establish an ICT Digital Literacy Leadership Council. These are levers that should ensure that information literacy is a universal student learning outcome.

So, why is information literacy not yet fully integrated in educational programs?

Lessons Learned raises questions about whose responsibility it is to integrate information literacy into college curricula. If it is a jointly-shared responsibility between faculty and librarians, then how can we accomplish this in a systematic, comprehensive manner? Why have our efforts fallen short? What are the necessary conditions that generate success? The "elephant in the room" is that the report could lead short-sighted decision-makers to question whether there is even a need for reference and instruction librarians, given heavily strained budgets.

Most of all, this report should stimulate action though. The evidence is clear. The way that things have been done in the past is not working. With this information, librarians can use their connections on campus, in the greater educational community, and in the policy world. We can lead initiatives that will make use of existing research and propose further studies that identify practical interventions that will develop information literacy competency. We can influence scientists and vendors to develop technology solutions that better synthesize, filter, and organize the volume of information available. We can create new organizational models for our libraries that make best use of our resources to more effectively accomplish the information literacy agenda. We can partner with faculty, graduate students, and others who have teaching roles to coach them on teaching information literacy competencies.

Let's use this study to motivate new, non-traditional ways of thinking about the problem. Continuing to address information literacy issues of this magnitude in the same ways is not going to change the result.