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Information literacy beyond the library: The National Forum on Information Literacy

Sharon A. Weiner
sweiner@purdue.edu

Lana W. Jackman
National Forum on Information Literacy, lj@infolit.org

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College and Undergraduate Libraries column: “Information Literacy Beyond the Library”

The National Forum on Information Literacy, Inc.

<http://infolit.org>

By Sharon Weiner, EdD and Lana Jackman, PhD

Introduction.

The purpose of this column is to highlight information literacy activities that are occurring in organizations and institutions outside of libraries. Academic libraries have done much to advance information literacy in postsecondary institutions. Much activity is occurring outside of academic libraries in relation to information literacy, too. This column will feature some of those organizations and activities so that academic librarians may share information with them and develop new partnerships that will further advance the goals of information literacy.

This column describes the purpose and activities of the National Forum on Information Literacy, Inc. (NFIL). This year, the National Forum celebrates its 20th anniversary of promoting the philosophy and practice of information literacy worldwide. The National Forum, as a non-profit social enterprise organization, is dedicated to the global integration of information literacy competency in citizens from all sectors of society. NFIL originated in 1989 as a volunteer membership organization. This occurred after the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy produced a report that explored the “social, educational, and economic effects of the information explosion” (Gibson 2004). One of the six recommendations in the Committee’s report was to form “a Coalition for Information Literacy...in coordination with other national organizations and agencies, to promote information literacy” (ALA 1989). Dr. Patricia Senn Breivik, a leading authority on information literacy, was the Chair of NFIL for its first fifteen years. She and the other founders represented a diverse group

of educational organizations: Robert Wedgeworth (Dean of the School of Library Service, Columbia University); Roy D. Miller (Executive Assistant to the Director of Brooklyn Public Library); Lou Albert followed by Barbara Cambridge (American Association of Higher Education); Sylvia Seidel (National Education Association); Carol Smith (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education); and Howard Simmons followed by Oswald Ratteray (Middle States Commission on Higher Education). A continuing strength of the organization is its ability to bring together diverse perspectives.

The National Forum has grown to be a coalition of more than ninety national and international organizations. It exists “to address all major educational and societal issues connected to information literacy, including the allied concepts of lifelong and resource-based learning” (Gibson 2004). Meetings address diverse topics in relation to information literacy including: teacher education standards; service learning; small business development; citizenship; workforce; information and communication technology (ICT); and healthcare. The founders hoped that the Forum would “work itself out of a job,” as they expected that information literacy would quickly become ubiquitous. Unfortunately, societal integration of information literacy remains a significant challenge in the U.S.

NFIL meetings.

The Forum usually meets three times each year in Washington, D.C. That is the location for the home office of many national organizations that are (or should be) interested in information literacy. Hosting the meetings there is a way to raise the visibility of information literacy on a national level and influence key decision-makers. The meetings are open to all who are interested.

The purpose of the Forum meetings is to “advance the most expansive and compelling sense of information literacy by initiating conversations among member organizations, lending specific support for defined agendas and initiatives, and forging a common purpose among a large sector of educational, business, non-profit, and governmental communities to improve the lives of all citizens” (Gibson, 2004,

p. 16-17). The Forum deliberately reaches out to organizations outside of libraries to promote information literacy and to provide opportunities for coalition-building and networking. Typically, the invited speakers at Forum meetings are leaders in government, healthcare, business, and education. During the meetings, “lively discussions provoked by guest speakers and special topic presentations often lead to new insights about information literacy educational reform, and especially important, opportunities for cross-organizational collaboration” (Gibson 2004).

Organization of NFIL.

The National Forum became incorporated in 2009. As a social enterprise non-profit organization, it uses market-based strategies to advance a social mission and sustain its organizational viability. It can now pursue public and private funding to further information literacy initiatives. The Forum does not charge dues and relies on partnerships, collaborations, and in-kind donations to support its programs and activities. The meeting speakers and attendees fund their travel and meals, evidence of their commitment to information literacy. The home organizations of the leadership of the organization provide support for hosting and updating the Forum web site, maintaining a list of contacts and an email distribution list, organizing new initiatives, and performing other operational tasks. Now that the Forum has incorporated, the officers and board of directors are developing a strategic plan.

Forum Activities.

NFIL is “a clearinghouse for information, a support network for connecting diverse organizations and sustaining the information literacy agenda over time, and an incubator for ideas to promote information literacy nationally and internationally” (Gibson 2004). The goals of NFIL are:

- To promote societal integration of information literacy as central to the U.S. competitive advantage in the world marketplace.

- To advocate for the importance of information literacy in preparing citizens for active involvement in a democratic society.
- To offer conferences, workshops, training, and consultation services in support of mainstreaming information literacy.
- To serve as a clearinghouse for resources about information literacy philosophy and practice.
- To participate in inquiry, research, experimentation, and publication in information literacy and lifelong learning.
- To collaborate with local, state, national, and international organizations associated with information literacy and lifelong learning.

An example of a recent partnership occurred in 2006 when NFIL, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the Committee for Economic Development, the Institute for a Competitive Workforce (an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce), and the National Education Association invited experts to participate in an Information Literacy Summit in Washington, D. C. ETS is a nonprofit organization that develops, administers, and scores standardized educational tests (<http://ets.org>). ETS had recently released its ICT assessment, now called “iSkills™”. This was the first commercially-produced scenario-based ICT assessment. The purpose of the Summit was “to raise awareness among policy makers and the media about the importance of an information-literate society in the 21st century; to develop a comprehensive strategy to increase the number of highly-skilled information literate people in the United States; and to establish information literacy standards and assessments nationwide” (Perrault 2007). It was clear from the reports at the Summit that information literacy has wide societal and global implications; it is essential to social change and lifelong learning; and it should be embedded in K-16 education as well as postsecondary education (Perrault 2007). The Summit showed that information literacy is a critical issue for multiple sectors and must be addressed with multiple strategies.

One outcome of the Summit was the formation of the National ICT Literacy Policy Council by NFIL in partnership with ETS. The new iSkills™ assessment provided a measure of a student's ICT skill level, but it did not indicate what scores represented a minimum level of performance. The purpose of the Council was to recommend a set of national ICT literacy standards to serve as the basis for the ETS iSkills™ assessment. The eighteen-member panel included secondary and postsecondary educators from a variety of institutions and organizations. ETS incorporated their findings into a report that indicated that the foundational scores for information literacy competency were 165 (on a scale of 0–300) for the Core iSkills™ assessment and 575 (on a scale of 400–700) for the Advanced iSkills™ assessment. The Core standard described the minimum ICT literacy skills a student should have when entering the first year of postsecondary education. The Intermediate standard described the minimum ICT literacy skills a student should have when entering upper-division postsecondary coursework or the workforce (Tannebaum and Katz 2007). This was an important accomplishment that occurred because of the collaborative relationships developed by the National Forum.

Global Activities.

Many organizations that advocate for information literacy world-wide are members of the affiliated International Alliance for Information Literacy (<http://infolit.org/activities.html>). The Alliance evolved from a request made by several international organizations to become members of NFIL. The Forum leadership established an affiliate status to affirm the contributions of those organizations to the mission of the National Forum on Information Literacy. In 2003, the Forum co-sponsored a meeting of information literacy experts with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the National Commission on Library and Information Science (NCLIS). The outcome of that meeting was the “Prague Declaration: Toward an Information Literate Society” (<http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/19636/11228863531PragueDeclaration.pdf/PragueDeclaration.pdf>

). This document formally expanded the role of information literacy beyond education to the governmental, economic, and societal level. It stated that information literacy was required for participation in the Information Society, and the Information Society was essential for the social, cultural and economic development of nations and individuals. It proposed an International Congress on Information Literacy. In 2005, the NFIL, UNESCO, and the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) held a second meeting to discuss issues such as the convening of the International Congress on Information Literacy. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt, hosted the meeting (Gardner 2006).

NFIL Highlights.

The National Forum, although a volunteer organization, has done much to promote information literacy. Since the 1989 ACRL information literacy standard, NFIL members have influenced a number of information literacy milestones. Table 1 is a timetable that reflects the steady progress of efforts to mainstream information literacy in U.S. society.

Table 1. Timeline of Selected Information Literacy Milestones.

1991	The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development adopted a resolution demonstrating its commitment to the importance of information literacy.
1992	The ERIC education database (http://eric.ed.gov) began to use “information literacy” as a descriptor.
1993	The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Higher Education became the first accreditation agency to promote this core skill as an essential undergraduate learning outcome.
1994	The American Association of School Librarians adopted national standards on information literacy.
1997	The National Education Association made a commitment to embed information literacy in their teacher education initiatives.
1998	NFIL published the first information literacy progress report (http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/whitepapers/progressreport.cfm).
1998	The American Association of School Libraries and the Association of Educational Communications and Technology published <i>Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning</i> for students in K-12.

1999	The American Association for Higher Education endorsed the ACRL <i>Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education</i> .
2000	The American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) endorsed the ACRL information literacy college standards, one of only two times that AAHE endorsed a policy position.
2003	NFIL, UNESCO, and NCLIS held the first international information literacy experts meeting in Prague, resulting in the Prague Declaration (http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/19636/11228863531PragueDeclaration.pdf/PragueDeclaration.pdf).
2003	NFIL established the International Alliance on Information Literacy.
2004	The Council of Independent Colleges endorsed the ACRL <i>Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education</i> .
2004	The Partnership for 21 st Century Skills identifies information literacy as a key student learning outcome.
2005	UNESCO/IFLA/NFIL sponsored symposium of information literacy experts in Alexandria, Egypt, producing the Alexandria Proclamation.
2006	NFIL held the first U.S. Summit on Information Literacy. The National Center for Education Statistics Academic Library Survey began to include questions about information literacy.
2007	Purdue University established the first endowed chair in information literacy, named for W. Wayne Booker, past Chief Financial Officer of Ford Motor Corporation.
2007	UNESCO published <i>Understanding Information Literacy: A Primer</i> by Dr. F. Woody Horton, one of the conveners of the 2003 Prague conference.
2008	The <i>Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 2008</i> included information literacy as a necessary skill for teacher professional development.
2008	The American Association of Community Colleges published a position statement on information literacy (http://www.aacc.nche.edu/About/Positions/Pages/ps05052008.aspx).
2008	The National Council of Teachers of English included information literacy skills in its <i>Framework for 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment</i> (http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Positions/Framework_21stCent_Curr_Assessment.pdf)

Future Plans.

The leadership of the National Forum on Information Literacy has revised its mission not only to advance information literacy, but to advance it within the context of a social enterprise agenda. NFIL will develop an agenda for research that will inform its priorities and influence its activities. There is a need for a stronger body of research on many aspects of information literacy, so that there is sufficient evidence to influence policy- and other decision-makers.

The National Forum has an ambitious agenda. It has accomplished much through collaborations and partnerships. Through continuing to build and foster relationships, the National Forum will

continue to work to promote and integrate information literacy in the healthcare, education, business, and government sectors.

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