

Developing a program of information literacy

How California State University did it

by Susan Carol Curzon

In the early 1990s, librarians at California State University (CSU) became increasingly concerned about the information literacy skill level of the students. The librarians found themselves instructing in ever more basic concepts in information literacy—concepts that the students should have mastered prior to university life. CSU librarians worried that the information literacy skill level of many of our students would eventually have a serious impact on their academic achievement.

The CSU environment

The concern of our librarians coincided with a shift at CSU regarding the development of CSU's information and technology resources. Observing society's change towards a heavy use of technology and electronic information, CSU launched a plan called the Integrated Technology Strategy. To guide the academic initiatives established under this plan, CSU created the Commission on Learning Resources and Instructional Technology, which was charged with recommending policies on the use of learning resources and technology throughout our 22 campuses.

As the same time the CSU Council of Library Directors (COLD) determined a course of action that would have a dramatic impact on the CSU libraries. COLD created a plan, "Transforming CSU Libraries for the 21st Cen-

tury," which outlined projects that would benefit the libraries. One area identified for action was information literacy. COLD's plan stated that CSU needed to "establish basic competence levels in the use of recorded knowledge and information and processes for assessment of student competence."

The commission approved the plan and agreed that information literacy was a priority. At the request of the commission, a work group was formed to develop a program of student information literacy, or information competence as we called it.

The Information Competence Work Group, comprised of university and library administrators and faculty began work in April 1995. The work group determined early that we had three main tasks. First, we needed to establish a common understanding of what information competence was. Second, we needed to understand what the current state of information competence was on our campuses. Third, we needed to create a strategy that would enable CSU to develop a program of information competence.

A common understanding

The first task, developing a common understanding of information competence, took longer than expected because we decided that we would issue a report containing a

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definition of information competence, the significance of information competence, and our goals. It was easier said than done.

The most challenging task was the creation of a definition of information competence. Today, the efforts of ACRL and many individuals have greatly improved the definition of information competence. However, in 1995, it was not easy to create a definition that would work across 22 campuses.

Defining information competence also was initially stymied, but finally enriched, by the backgrounds of the work group. A few members had never really thought much about the subject before. Even the librarians in the work group had enough variation in background to have different perspectives on the topic.

As we hammered out a definition, we also improved our understanding. Moreover, experiencing the many views on information competence within ourselves gave us an indication of what was to come when the program was launched with 25,000 faculty.

Finally, the report entitled "Information Competence in the CSU" was issued as we had planned. Credit for much of the writing of the report belongs to Lorie Roth, a work group member and CSU's senior director for Academic Services and Professional Development.

Issuing the report was a good start. The acceptance of the report by the commission and the appearance of the report on campuses and before the CSU Academic Senate gave us a sudden profile. Additionally, it set the stage for ongoing funding for our efforts. Moreover, the long time spent in understanding the issues of information competence bonded the work group. The issuance of the report made us feel as if we had arrived.

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tion competence was confused frequently with computer literacy and, in spite of our repeated explanations, people did not hear the difference between content and tools. It has only been in the last year that I have heard the term used more precisely.

Assessing student skills

Next, we felt that the most powerful argument to win ongoing support of our program would be to demonstrate, statistically, the level of student information competence skills. We intended to complete this task early on, but it is only now underway. The delay occurred because it took us awhile to realize that until we had a definition, faculty awareness of the issues of information competence, and an agreement on the strategies for developing a program of information competence, launching a study would not be successful.

However, in the spring of 1999, Kathleen Dunn, assistant university librarian, CSU Pomona, agreed to serve as chair of the Information Competence Assessment Committee. Once again, the challenge was to understand the task. We had to think about how the results would be used, what and who would be tested, and how the survey would be carried out.

At first, this very willing committee was supposed to design and implement the assessment. However, we became increasingly aware of the massive amount of time and effort in implementation. It was at that point that the committee transformed into a steering committee and contracted out the implementation of the survey. Our hope is that there will be funding for a longitudinal study to see if our students' skills are improving over time (see sidebar).

The strategy

The next task of the work group was to develop a strategy for bringing a program of information competence to CSU. CSU is a large institution with a myriad of projects always underway. As we were a group with no authority to mandate and a brief history, we recognized early on that we had only our powers of persuasion. Therefore, we decided that our strategy would be to encourage and nurture a program of information competence. With this in mind, the work group developed a four pronged approach.

The first approach was to encourage information competence programs on the campuses. While the CSU libraries have robust bibliographic instruction programs, there had never been external support to develop programs on information competence. Moreover, information competence was mostly the domain of librarians with few college faculty involved. We decided that the best way to stir up interest was to take most of our budget and put it towards the awarding of grants.

To obtain a grant, awardees had to meet requirements that included the creation of a product at the conclusion of the grant that could be shared with other campuses and a Web presence so that other campuses could easily access the information. We awarded only one grant that first year in 1995–96, but it was to five campuses that proposed the creation of interactive tutorials in information competence. Under the direction of Paul Adalian at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, this flagship project became so successful that it received ACRL recognition as one of the top ten tutorials of the year by ACRL's Instruction Section.

Once the academic community became aware that funding was available, interest in our grants accelerated and eventually 21 of 22 campuses had a grant. Additionally, the grants fostered considerable multicampus participation, as many of the grants involved more than one campus. Since the first grant, \$285,201 has been given out for 30 projects. The projects ranged from the creation of courses in information competence to the development of discipline-specific skills in information competence, such as in nursing, music, or journalism. Despite the variation in the projects, the project leaders had their enthusiasm and commitment in furthering information competence in common.

Information literacy competency standards endorsed

ACRL's new "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" have been endorsed by the American Association for Higher Education. The ACRL Board of Directors approved the new standards at its 2000 Midwinter Meeting

The standards are available on the Web at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/ilcomstan.html>.

In 1999, we also decided to offer fellowships in information competence. The requirements were similar to the grants in that the fellows had to make their results known through a Web page and create tools that can be used by other campuses. Four fellows selected spring 1999 have completed their work.

Transferring knowledge

Next, the work group focused on transferring knowledge about information competence between members of the academic community.

The first of these efforts was to hold a conference on information competence. Halfway through we began to realize what an undertaking a conference really was, but we persisted and the conference was held in October 1995 in Long Beach with more than 150 attendees drawn from CSU. The conference lasted a day and a half with keynote speakers, project presentations, and small groups. It was very successful and the conference awakened yet more interest in information competence.

The next effort was an attempt to have the system-wide Academic Senate and the local faculty senates endorse a resolution in support of information competence. This proved to be controversial and had very mixed results. Eventually, there was a resolution from the system-wide Academic Senate and from a few faculty senates, but it was a challenge to obtain the resolutions. The resolution stirred up many faculty fears about programs being mandated or additional requirements being added.

On the plus side, our efforts to secure resolutions did get attention and dramatically increased our profile. It helped that two in our work group, Professor Kathy Kaiser of CSU Chico and Professor Bobby Madison of CSU Northridge, had been active in the senate and provided us with the reasons behind faculty concerns.

Not to be deterred, we focused next on faculty development. We created an opportunity for faculty to attend workshops that would enhance their skills in information competence. In the summer of 1999, two workshops, under the direction of Paul Adalian, were held in San Luis Obispo with 40 faculty in attendance. Faculty spent sev-

eral days learning how to weave the concepts of information competence into their courses. The workshops were a success and attendees raved about their experience.

Another effort that helped us to transfer knowledge about information competence was our Web presence. Initially, I had created a Web site for my own convenience but it proved so useful to people seeking grants or information about our program that we expanded the site. Now for everyone's convenience, all of the projects, grants, fellowships and reports of the work group (as well as linkages to other information literacy Web sites) are available at <http://library.csun.edu/susan.curzon/>.

The members of the work group also gave a number of speeches about our program. Gordon Smith, director of System-wide Library Initiatives for CSU; Patricia Hart, assistant to the provost at CSU Fresno; and Lorie Roth were among the speakers who shared with others our successes and our challenges.

As the chair, I also continually generated reports. A program of information competence is rarely a priority against the many issues that confront an academic enterprise.

Information competence must constantly be before people or it fades away. Many reports were issued to inform various groups as to our progress. This high profile was also necessary for us to obtain the funding to achieve our goals.

External linkages

We also thought it was valuable to establish linkages beyond CSU. Some of this was accomplished through our grant process. Several grants focused on working with schools and community colleges. This provided a forum for librarians to agree upon mutual goals, develop training and share successes and challenges.

Another area of activity for us was the new California High School Exit Examination. At this point information competence is one of the areas to be tested. The presence of information competence on an exit examination is critical to us because teachers will begin teaching about the exam and, hopefully, student information competence skills will increase as a result. We have sent documents about information

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Information Competence Skills Assessment underway at CSU

Key purposes of the assessment are to: 1) establish a baseline of information competence skills in the CSU; 2) gather reliable data as support for programs of information skills in the CSU; 3) gather reliable data as support for programs of information competence on all of the campuses; 4) provide data to create targeted information competence instructional experiences.

The assessment, important to the CSU as well as to like institutions across the nation, is now a reality through the focused efforts of CSU Information Competence Assessment Task Force.

During April and May 2000, the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at CSU San Marcos conducted telephone surveys of approximately 3,000 students representing all campuses to arrive at a baseline evaluation of information competence skills. The survey instrument incorporates a unique nonlinear approach to competence

assessment by posing hypothetical scenarios to determine how students find, evaluate, and use information. The assessment also includes questions about library usage and experiences, use of information resources, use of technology for class assignments and research, and attitudes toward class writing assignments.

Next steps for the Assessment Task Force are to analyze the results to chart baseline competence and posit a profile of an information competent student, and to study deficiencies in order to provide direction for library instruction programs at CSU. Task force members will share the results of this assessment in a variety of professional forums.

For more information, please contact Kathleen Dunn, chair of the CSU Information Competence Assessment Task Force, e-mail: kkdunn@csupomona.edu. —*Kathleen Dunn, CSU Pomona*

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Law and Political Science (LPSS)

Adoption of Proposed Bylaws: **Yes** (105) ADOPTED; No (2); **Yes** (105) ADOPTED; No (2); **Yes** (101) ADOPTED; No (6); **Yes** (101) ADOPTED; No (5); **Yes** (101) ADOPTED; No (4); **Yes** (102) ADOPTED; No (4); **Yes** (101) ADOPTED; No (3).

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Adoption of Proposed Bylaws: **Yes** (106) ADOPTED; no (6).

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competence to the committee chairs to urge the inclusion of information competence in the exam.

We also became involved in the changes in standards that are underway with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). These changes could have an impact on information competence and libraries in general. Carl Bengston, 1999 president of CARL, the California chapter of ACRL, organized a response group that was joined by a number of CSU participants in information competence who are also members of CARL.

Our future

At this point, we are preparing for the next phase of development of our program as the CSU Council of Library Directors has just issued a revision to its strategic plan. One of the goals, of course, is information competence.

Although we have traveled far, thanks to so many, we still have even further to go in realizing a full program of information competence. In particular, it is our dream that every student will graduate from CSU with a mastery of information competence. ■