

The value of campus partnerships in redesigning library instruction

Administrators, faculty, and students get involved

by Hector Escobar Jr., Joni Kanzler, G. Margaret Porter, and Cheryl Smith

Today's academic libraries are faced with the need to be proactive and imaginative in developing instructional tools for the effective use of information technology. Ideas and comments from students provide valuable insights but may not typically be communicated to library professionals. This article focuses on the importance of gathering student input and addressing expressed academic library instruction needs. It also discusses the roles that external entities can play in guiding methodical implementations of new information technology.

Environment

The University Libraries of Notre Dame is served by a libraries advisory council—comprised of alumni and corporate and community leaders who are dedicated to supporting and underwriting the various functions of the library. Opportunities for interaction with library faculty and staff are scheduled during the advisory council's semiannual meetings.

During the spring 2000 meeting, several members of the advisory council participated in a hands-on library instruction session, which highlighted the libraries' electronic resources. One council member expressed concern that students have not taken full advantage

of these important resources. Another member suggested that students would respond well to Web tutorials, possibly designed as computer games.

Since the concerns and suggestions of the advisory council members fit with the libraries' goal of designing and implementing interactive, computer-based instructional modules, the decision was made to capitalize on the interest and possible support of the advisory council members. A library instruction task force, comprised of four instruction librarians and chaired by the coordinator of library instruction, was formed to lead the project.

Questions and assumptions

The associate director for user services directed the task force to "determine strategies and 'best practices' for involving students, faculty, and librarians in identifying issues, characteristics, goals, measures, and existing models for developing and marketing a Web-based library instruction program." The task force would also identify key issues related to the information-seeking habits of undergraduates. Three sets of questions were formulated:

1. What can students tell us about their information-seeking behavior? How, when,

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and where do they prefer to focus their information-seeking efforts?

2. How will the knowledge gathered from students affect our approach to teaching library skills and information literacy? In which formats should information be presented to reach the intended audience most effectively?

3. How do we develop, test, and evaluate library instructional programs that most effectively enable Notre Dame undergraduates to access and use information resources and services selected by the libraries?

Involving students in the process became the foundation for the work of the task force. We also identified individuals from other campus departments who would form the membership of two new groups: a project team and an advisory committee.

The project team and the advisory committee

Letters were sent to potential members of the two groups asking for their participation. The task force was rewarded with a high level of cooperation and enthusiasm from across the campus in response to the initial request letters. Although Notre Dame librarians have faculty status and serve on a variety of university committees, collaborations and coalitions are usually initiated outside of the library. This was an excellent opportunity to build support, alliances, and confidence in the libraries' role on campus and in students' intellectual growth.

The final project team includes two instructional technologists; an administrator in student affairs, who also teaches; a faculty member from the university's teaching center, who works with graduate teaching assistants and teaches in the College of Science; and the four task force members. The four individuals chosen for the advisory committee include: a member of the library advisory council, who is also a visiting professor at the university; the dean of the First Year of Studies; the director of the first-year writing program; and the director of the Teaching and Learning Center.

Members of the project team were asked to assist with the construction and implementation of the program. The advisory committee would advise us of the best paths towards implementation.

Student questionnaires and focus groups

Efforts in fall 2000 focused on gathering information from students enrolled in the required first-year composition class (FYC). To get a variety of responses and ideas from students, we decided to use two different methods of data collection: a questionnaire and focus groups. Participants were limited to first-year students (FYS) who attended at least one library instruction session in their FYC class during fall 2000.

All FYC instructors were asked if they would allow their classes to participate in this study. Of the 44 FYC sections available, 14 sections taught by 11 different instructors participated and a total of 230 students responded to the questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed and collected during a regular class period. The questionnaire, developed by task force members, was based on the three question sets mentioned earlier. Surveys conducted by other institutions and sources outlining survey design were consulted. The final questionnaire consisted of 11 questions, all with at least 3 response options.¹

Students participating in a focus group were offered a meal and a \$10 copy card as compensation. Fourteen students participated in three focus groups. Nine questions were formulated to enhance information gathered from the questionnaires.² Questionnaires were distributed and answers were tabulated in October 2000 and focus groups were held in November. The task force recorded and compiled responses, questions, and discussion from the focus groups. We gained valuable information about students' perceived difficulties with using the library and its Web pages, as well as their feelings regarding online help and tutorials.

Student findings

The task force was able to draw a number of conclusions based on students' responses to questionnaires and focus group discussion. We used the combination of responses and comments to help us answer two of the three questions we had posed at the beginning of the process.

1. What can students tell us about their information-seeking behavior? How, when, and where do they prefer to focus their information-seeking efforts?

- they rely on the Web for accessing general information;
- they rely on librarians for starting research and developing research strategies, keyword selection, and information about electronic and other resources;
- they do not wait until the last minute to begin the research process;
- they use electronic resources for most of their research; and
- they use the library's electronic resources from locations outside the library.

2. *How will the knowledge gathered from students affect our approach to teaching library skills and information literacy? In which formats should information be presented to reach the intended audience most effectively?*

- they do not use the available online help to any great extent;
- they experience great difficulty when attempting to develop effective keywords and search strategies;
- they are intimidated by the size of the library;
- they feel that locating print materials in the library is daunting and confusing;
- they believe a single library instruction session is inadequate exposure to library resources and research strategies; and
- they are not interested in using an online library instruction tutorial.

The questionnaires and focus groups did not provide us with any direct answers to our third question of how to develop, test, and evaluate library instructional programs that most effectively enable Notre Dame undergraduates to access and use information resources and services selected by the libraries.

The information gathered did, however, provide a foundation for expanding our instructional program and formulating a set of recommendations. We had clearer objectives for the advisory committee and the project team and would rely on their collective expertise to develop assessment tools and testing mechanisms.

Recommendations

Along with a report on the information-gathering process, the following recommendations were sent to the project team and the advisory committee.

All FYS should complete at least two library instruction sessions. Students value the

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personal contact with librarians and time for hands-on experience with library resources. Additionally, a Web-based online exercise should be created to assess the needs of the students and their understanding of research libraries.

The path from the university's Web pages to the libraries' should be more direct. Better explanations of links are needed, as well as the development of prominently placed "How do I . . ." links or menus.

We also recommended the development of an information literacy course for all incoming FYS. Problem-solving skills, critical evaluation of information, and the ability to apply information efficiently and effectively would be key components of this course.

Implementation

The task force's report and recommendations were given to the library administration, the advisory committee and project team, and library faculty. A subsequent meeting with the advisory council revealed the difficulties in adding new required course work to an already crowded first-year studies program and the challenges of altering course objectives on an institutional level. Nevertheless, the task force report brought the need for more extensive library instruction to the attention of key members of the campus community.

As a result, the director of the writing program recommended that all FYC instructors schedule two library sessions during fall 2001. Likewise, positive student and FYC instructor response to hands-on experience justified the purchase of additional laptop computers for use in two wireless library classrooms. In response to student concerns, easy access to basic research assistance was added to the libraries' Electronic Resources Gateway Web page.

Discussions with the project team focused on the kind of online assessment tool that should be developed, tested, and implemented. Although the original goal of the task force was to develop an online tutorial, student responses and discussions with the members of the project team indicated that a better starting point would be a tool to assess student skills at the beginning of their first year.

The project team identified several campus entities that would be able to assist with the development and dissemination of the assessment tool. Project team members had been asked to serve based on their knowledge of students' learning patterns, pedagogy, and technology. With their support and advice, the task force formulated a proposal for interested members of the libraries' advisory council.

The proposal recommends an online skills assessment tool rather than an online tutorial. A projected budget details the cost of development, implementation, maintenance, and analysis. Concurrently, the task force is developing a list of possible competencies to be evaluated with the online assessment tool.

Conclusion

The University Libraries' administration and the libraries' advisory council shared a perception that a Web-based library instruction tutorial was needed. The library instruction task force was formed in part to research and develop this instructional technology. Results of our initial investigations indicated that students' instructional needs differ from the suggestions of the libraries' advisory council: students do not show tremendous interest in online Web tutorials.

Due to students' varied experiences with libraries and information-retrieval methods prior to arriving on campus, a logical first step would be a Web-based library skills assessment test. Members of the advisory committee and the project team support this idea. The latter group would assist in developing the test and the venues needed for its administration to students. To ensure objectivity, future questionnaire development and focus groups would be conducted by professionals outside the library, in consultation with the task force.

The coalition resulting from the first year's work has been an unanticipated benefit. By communicating with members of the libraries' advisory council, we were able to build support at important administrative levels. We met with students and instructors from the FYC program in larger numbers than ever before. The project team will work with librarians in new and innovative ways.

In the coming year, we hope that the task force's proposal for the assessment process will be accepted and funded by interested members of the advisory council so that work can proceed. While the most tangible result is the commitment to at least two instructional sessions for FYS, the formation of strategic alliances with external groups is equally important.

Notes

1. Please see Web site for full details: <http://www.nd.edu/~refdept/instruction/librarians/litf/index.shtml>.
2. Visit http://www.nd.edu/~refdept/instruction/librarians/litf/focus_response.shtml.

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dealing with scholarly communication issues unless it had strong leadership from the president and the board as well as active participation from the members at large. Because the scholarly communication agenda will require time, visibility, and an in-depth knowledge of the issues, the initiative cannot rely solely on volunteer efforts.

In view of these factors, the task force recommended that ACRL engage a visiting program officer to work actively on scholarly communication issues and have primary responsibility for carrying out the association's scholarly communication agenda. The officer would also serve as a visible spokesperson for the association on these issues.

In order to facilitate member participation at the grass-roots level, the task force recommended the formation of an ACRL scholarly communication discussion group. The group should provide an opportunity for general member participation and education and function as a source of ideas as the scholarly communication agenda is developed.

The success of ACRL's strategic initiative on information literacy has shown that significant initiatives need to be supported by a firm financial base. Accordingly, the task force believed ACRL should establish an annual budget for scholarly communication that addresses all planned areas of activity.

Board action

The report of the ACRL Scholarly Communications Task Force was submitted to the ACRL Board in January 2002, and its recommendations were unanimously approved by the Board at the 2002 Midwinter Meeting in New Orleans. The Board resolved that working to reshape scholarly communication will be one of the organization's highest strategic priorities and that activities will include broad-based educational work, political advocacy, coalition building, and research. A standing committee will be established, a visiting program officer will be hired, and ACRL will budget up to \$90,000 annually for the initiative.

In a separate action, the Board approved the establishment of a scholarly communication discussion group, based on a petition of members that was submitted at the Midwinter Meeting.

Next steps

Real work on the initiative begins at Annual Conference with the initial meetings of the standing committee and discussion group and the confirmation of the first year's budget. ACRL will then solicit candidates for the visiting program officer position to begin in September.

ACRL has taken strong action to address the ongoing crisis in scholarly communication. This new initiative will allow the association to play a prominent national role in shaping the future of the scholarly communication system in partnership with other groups. We ask all ACRL members to follow and support this initiative as it develops. ■

(*"The value of . . ." continued from page 348*)

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