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What's in a Frame?

Perspectives of high school librarians and first-year college students

Introducing the First Years Meet the Frames project, a statewide, multi-institutional research project exploring the role of certified school librarians in providing resources and instruction to students and identifying equity issues among first-year college students' preparation for college research.¹

It began with an existential question. If school librarians addressed information and digital literacy skills and dispositions throughout the K-12 experience, were those efforts in any ways related to positive learner outcomes at the university level? In other words, does the information literacy (IL) work of school librarians make a difference?

As a high school librarian for 25 years, Joyce Valenza often received lovely notes from alumni thanking her for her role in their college preparation, yet she was unaware of any published research that followed students from effective high school library programs into the beginning of their academic experience. While she always believed that uncovering such evidence would be important, she felt it was critical at a time when librarian positions were seriously threatened across the country. She engaged in conversations and gathered a team of K–12 colleagues and academic librarians to answer the existential question and determine what skills some first years carried with them.

Our project actually began in 2017 with continuous discussions of IL skill gaps we were observing in first-year students. Our anecdotal evidence, compounded by concerns raised locally by Maureen Donahue and James Keebler relating to a nationwide decline in professional school librarian positions, led to the following questions:

- What impact do effective high school library programs have on student preparation for academic research?
 - Knowing the potential impact, how might we better communicate the value of the IL efforts of high school librarians?
- What IL skills and dispositions do credentialed librarians teach and model at the high school level?
 - What is the disconnect between what is emphasized in high school and what is expected in the first year of college?

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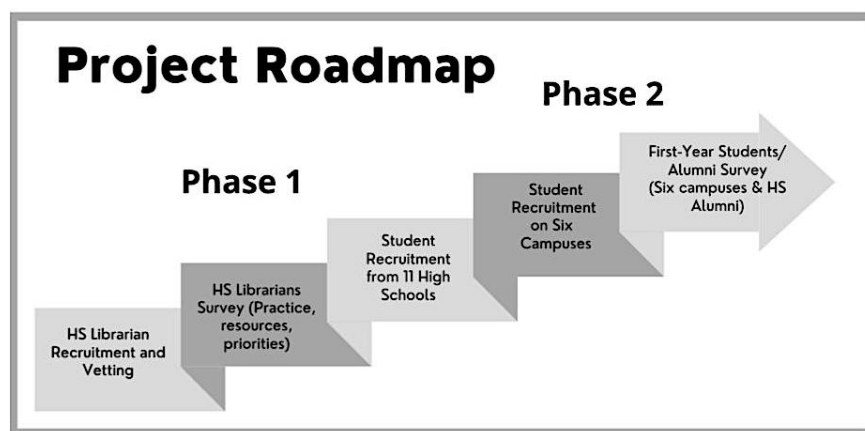
- In what ways do students exposed to IL-rich K–12 library programs demonstrate their learned skills and dispositions at the college level?
- How can academic librarians address different levels of preparedness and personalize learning experiences for first-year students?
- How might we develop meaningful bridges between high school and academic library experiences?

Since then, Keith Curry Lance and Debra E. Kachel’s 2021 “School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?” Slide research project similarly found that 20 percent of full-time school librarian positions were eliminated nationally between 2010 and 2019, with the impact felt most acutely in large urban areas and small rural communities.³

The First Years Meet the Frames study provides evidence that this decline is not only concerning, but that more specifically, these inequities impact students’ preparedness for postsecondary academic expectations.

Project background

Following our informal conversations, the New Jersey colleagues formed a research group in 2018. The team represented multiple academic institutions, working alongside a high school librarian team and two library and information science (LIS) professors. In 2019, using a rubric based on AASL’s 2018 “Definition of an Effective



First Year Meets the Frames project roadmap.

School Library,”⁴ the high school librarian team recruited and vetted a sample of high schools with school library programs identified as effective. The High School Librarians Survey explored the resources and instructional practices of the librarians from these high schools. In spring 2020, these librarians recruited volunteer graduating students for future participation in the first-years survey by collecting their email addresses.

Continuing into 2020, the college team prepared the first-years survey with questions designed to explore preparedness and information literacy of first-year college students. The survey was adapted to include questions specific to the compromised access to library facilities and face-to-face librarian services and instruction brought by COVID-19. In the spring semester of 2021, the survey was distributed to first-year students in six diverse New Jersey colleges (Bergen Community College; Raritan Valley Community College; Rider University; Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey; The College of New Jersey; and William Paterson University). To follow the aforementioned alumni volunteers recruited from the vetted high school programs across the country into their first college year, these students were invited to participate in this survey.

Novice/non-novice/alumni non-novices

To explore the impact of high school librarians on students and determine if groups had been differently prepared, we operationalized the terms *non-novices* and *novices*. Over the course of multiple conversations, we considered a variety of factors to determine what makes a participant a non-novice. Participants were considered a non-novice if they interacted often or all the time with their library databases, librarian-created resources, and librarian recommendations, or if they visited their high school library website daily, once a week, or once a month. Participants who visited the library to do research or asked the librarian for help with projects were also considered non-novices. Many of our participants were non-novices; we suspect that is because those who had experience with the library would be more interested in completing a library-related survey for a digital gift card incentive.

Those alumni followed from our select 11 high schools, where certified librarians met AASL criteria for effectiveness, formed a third, smaller, but significant group of first-years. We identified these students as *alumni non-novices*.

Framing preliminary findings

While our future articles will discuss details of these findings, our research demonstrates that high school librarians *do* make a difference in the students' preparation for college research. Non-novices were more comfortable than novices with their ability to credit and cite research sources at the start of their college experience. They also rated themselves more prepared for college research. Interestingly, there were no notable differences in their level of comfort with navigating the college library websites or navigating the quantity of information and services available through college libraries.

Since we had knowledge that our alumni non-novices attended a school with an effective library program, we anticipated they would be more comfortable and prepared than the larger group of non-novices from other high schools. This proved true. None of the alumni non-novices rated themselves as *not prepared* for college. Attending a high school with a highly effective school library program further increases the students' preparedness.

What's in a Frame?

In the spirit of the title of our project, we, of course, addressed students' experiences with the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.⁵ We gathered data on this with two lenses: high school librarians and first-year students.

While high school librarians are not expected to explicitly teach the Framework, to explore their perspectives on IL instructional strategies and the resources they made available, we gathered data through a High School Librarian Survey (referenced above). While only 5 of the 11 librarians considered teaching the ACRL Framework, and there is no direct or one-to-one match with AASL's National Library Standards, their teaching priorities indeed aligned with the Framework's knowledge practices and dispositions. Hence, while they use different terminology, our study shows that high school librarians *do* address the concepts with their highest priorities being "Authority is Constructed and Contextual" and "Searching as Strategic Exploration."

The student survey participants were asked to rate their familiarity with knowledge practices and dispositions within the six Frames. A higher percentage of non-novices indicated familiarity with the Frame concepts. Overall, students were most familiar with "Information

Creation as a Process,” “Research as Inquiry,” and “Scholarship as Conversation.” While many students could articulate these research strategies in their own words, they did not recognize them as ACRL Frames.

What’s next?

This First Years Meet the Frames project presents a wealth of data that can be examined from multiple perspectives. One of the first papers to come from this research examines what impact intentional interactions with academic librarians and the resources they created had on students’ ability to accomplish research tasks in the COVID-19 environment. Another paper in preparation discusses information privilege and inequity.

The first paper to come from this research appears in the *Journal of Information Literacy* and examines what impact intentional interactions with academic librarians and the resources they created had on students’ ability to accomplish research tasks in the COVID-19 environment.⁶ Another paper, accepted for publication in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*,⁷ discusses information privilege and inequity in the differently packed information literacy backpacks of first years.

As we dig into the data, other areas ripe for investigation include community college transition to four-year institutions, first-generation students, critical thinking as it relates to expectations for first-year research efforts, and comparative cohorts in a “normal” semester. Furthermore, there is the potential to look closely at the demographics of the participants and their varying experiences. Indeed, multiple points of view continue to be revealed as we analyze our data.

With the nationwide trend of eliminating school library positions, the gaps in student preparedness are likely to grow. Academic librarians and college professors need to anticipate increasing numbers of students who present varied skill sets as they undertake college-level research. Moreover, high school and college librarians need to work collaboratively to identify bridges to facilitate the students’ transition to college and meeting the Frames. //

Notes

1. Joyce Valenza, Cara Berg, Brenda Boyer, Rebecca Bushby, Leslin H. Charles, Heather A. Dalal, Joan Dalrymple, Megan Dempsey, Ewa Dziedzic-Elliott, and Gihan Mohamed, “First Years Meet the Frames,” School of Communication and Information, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 2022, <https://comminfo.libguides.com/FirstYearsFrames/>.

2. Maureen Donohue and James Keebler, “School Library Programs in New Jersey: Building Blocks for Realizing Student Potential with ESSA Legislation Opportunities,” 2016, <https://njasl.org/resources/Documents/2016ESSAandNJSchoolLibraryPrograms.pdf>.

3. Keith Curry Lance and Debra E. Kachel, “Slide: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?,” in *Perspectives on School Librarian Employment in the United States, 2009–10 to 2018–19*, 2021, <https://libslide.org/publications/perspectives/>.

4. American Association of School Librarians (AASL), “Definition of an Effective School Library,” 2018, https://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/advocacy/statements/docs/AASL_Position_Statement_Effective_SLP_2018.pdf.

5. Association of College and Research Libraries, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” 2015, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

6. Heather A. Dalal, Leslin H. Charles, Megan Dempsey, Cara Berg, Rebecca D. Bushby, Joan Dalrymple, “Intentional Librarian-Student Interactions during COVID-19,” COVID-19 special issue of *Journal of Information Literacy* 16, n. 1 (June 2022): 144–64, <https://doi.org/10.11645/16.1.3156>.

7. Joyce Kasman Valenza, Heather Dalal, Gihan Mohamad, Brenda Boyer, Cara Berg, Leslin H. Charles, Rebecca Bushby, Megan Dempsey, Joan Dalrymple, Ewa Dziedzic-Elliott, “First Years’ Information Literacy Backpacks: What’s Already Packed or Not Packed?,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 48, no. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2022.102566>.