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Let the faculty do it

Responsibility and collaboration in developing an information literacy program

Creating a stable information literacy program that can stand the test of time is challenging even when all the stars align.¹ With a diverse, requirement-averse curriculum and a strong faculty-governance structure, the Smith College Libraries found a way to develop a multileveled program tailored to the needs of individual majors. How did we do it? We simply let the faculty do the writing. How and why we did this is the story this article tells.

Background

Smith College is one of the “Seven Sisters” schools with high academic standards and treasured traditions. The four campus libraries and two highly active special collections serve 2,600 female students along with those of both genders from other area colleges. A shared library catalog with weekday book delivery to all campuses, consortial purchasing of some electronic resources, and much hard work to develop user-friendly Web interfaces have made a rich array of materials easily available to students and faculty. Library collections and services are usually ranked at or near the top in student-satisfaction surveys.

Faculty relations

The Smith faculty is highly motivated and hard-working; both teaching and research are revered and rewarded. Traditionally, faculty members have been actively involved in library affairs, especially in collection development and by serving on an advisory committee on the library along with the director of the libraries, the provost, and student representatives. Issues of concern are brought

to the regular faculty meetings, at which matters relating to the college’s curriculum are adjudicated.

Librarians act as liaisons to each department, assisting with collection development and faculty research queries. A highly active bibliographic instruction program had made librarians frequent visitors in many classrooms long before the development of information literacy. Thus cordial relations with many departments had already been established.

However, even with the good will of many, the challenges were numerous. Faculty actively governed all facets of the curriculum. With a few exceptions, Smith College librarians do not have faculty status, and the idea of a nonfaculty group developing a campus-wide program was considered audacious. Aside from the director of the libraries, most other librarians were not permitted to attend faculty meetings, nor have they been allowed to attend most departmental meetings. The lines between faculty and staff were invisible but very real.

To make matters even more challenging, a recent campus-wide attempt to establish a writing-across-the curriculum program had not gone well. Few doubted the need for improving student writing skills, but any attempt at enforcing a requirement from on high resulted in resistance at the departmental level. This was the landscape the libraries faced as they pondered the best way to begin and implement an information literacy program.

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Early steps

In 2001, with the strong support of the director of the libraries, a committee of librarians reviewed the quality of teaching within the libraries and the need for a formal information literacy program. In the following year this group recommended that a proposal be made to the faculty curriculum committee to begin the discussion at the college level. A joint ad hoc faculty/librarian subcommittee prepared a report opting for a two-tiered program aimed at basic skills for all students and more advanced training for declared majors. With the significant support of the provost—a former government professor whose students had benefited from several library instruction sessions—the proposal was presented to and supported by the faculty in 2003. We now had a program—in theory. But this was the point at which previous attempts of this sort had foundered on the rocks of departmental privilege. How could we make the faculty truly buy into this new program?

Taking the plunge

Our smartest move was to send our instruction coordinator to ACRL's Immersion Program. The several days devoted to learning and planning in the summer of 2003 have proven invaluable. We now ask all teaching librarians to apply for acceptance at Immersion and continue to be grateful and impressed at its continuing high quality. Shortly thereafter, the Smith College Information Literacy Team was formed to develop, nurture, and assess the program. The committee was initially composed of librarians and a representative from Information Technology. Later a faculty liaison from the Committee on the Library was added.

Not all went well at first. An attempt at integrating information literacy into newly created “writing intensive” classes proved only moderately successful, and for the most part did not address more advanced student needs. Clearly we still required an approach with more faculty participation. So in 2004, the Information Literacy Team decided to ask each department at Smith to create its

own information literacy “research skills for majors” document. The ultimate goal was to insist that ownership of each program was the responsibility of the teaching faculty—not that of the libraries—a stance to which no department has objected. Faculty were thus asked to create and formally adopt a research skills statement—and then to participate in its development.

We asked that the following three questions be addressed: What skills do your majors need in order to conduct research in your discipline? In which classes will these skills be taught? How will you know that student have mastered these skills?

The library liaison who routinely teaches in each area was responsible for initiating the process of writing each statement, but with the caveat that only the faculty should do the majority of the program creation. Initial contacts were usually made with faculty library liaisons or those whose classes had often come to the library. Depending upon the department's size, from there the discussion often moved to the chair or to a committee. The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and some program models were usually provided. Once momentum was established, completed Smith research skills statements served as the most successful models.

Motivating departments to participate

Some departments needed very little motivation, grasping quickly the advantages of having a written, publicly accessible program statement. However others required more prodding. Liaisons were asked to be politely persistent in communicating with faculty who might speed the process along. The provost and library director spoke with departmental chairs, stressing the importance of written programs for the accreditation process. After the first few programs had been written, a certain amount of peer pressure was evident as faculty saw what their colleagues had already produced. In the end the knowledge that the issue would not go

away until addressed was probably the most powerful motivator.

Surprises

Initially we had hoped to complete the process of program creation in five years. We thought this would be a reasonable amount of time for our liaisons to stagger discussions with their departments—and therefore made that commitment to the faculty. We kept our promise of initiating discussions with all, but our estimate of the time needed to finish was overly optimistic.

At first we were surprised that the response from departments was generally positive. Very few were outwardly negative, agreeing that putting something down on paper was a good idea. We quickly learned that patience and good humor were vital. One department created its program in a week. But other conversations about information literacy opened up Pandora's Box. Before one can incorporate library-related instruction into a curriculum, one must agree on what that framework should be. Departmental reviews and campus-wide accreditation muddied the waters further. Key faculty sabbaticals or sickness and occasional library liaison work overloads slowed the process further. One of the first departments approached in 2004 is still wrestling with producing a document seven years later. Here a year, there a year, and before you know it a long time elapses.

Ironically we were disappointed at having little access to the program creation process. Of course this was exactly what we said we wanted, so one must be careful about one's wishes. Here the faculty prerogatives tended to kick in, with librarians excluded from faculty meetings. So the library liaison would generally get the process going—and then await the final result with little clue as to its content.

Although this occasionally resulted in surprises, or even disappointments, the end product was the result of the combined efforts of the faculty, and in the long run this was the most important outcome. Occasionally liaisons had the opportunity to make suggestions about a draft; in many cases, librarians suggested specific research tools (databases, etc.) to include

in the document. But in all cases we treat the final text as the property of the department, to be changed only after consultation with that body. Statements are mounted on both libraries' and departmental Web pages.

Each document reflects the department's culture, varying widely in form and content. One is brief and entirely conceptual, but specifies a required class. Other lengthier descriptions suggest specific outcomes and resources, but are vague about in which classes all this is to be learned.

Current program

Education and Child Study became the first department to create its program in April 2005.² Since then 31 of 42 possible programs have been written, with discussion ongoing with the rest. These research skills statements are the heart of the Smith Information Literacy Program. In addition entering students take a required quiz to begin learning basic skills and academic integrity. This is supplemented by dozens of lower-level classes in English, First Year Seminars, and several other key subjects.

At the other end of the spectrum, each student completing an honors project (about 15 percent of the graduating class each year) must complete a required research appointment with a librarian or archivist. In addition to reviewing specific resources needed for the project, students review an Honors Project Information Literacy Checklist, which is based on the ACRL standards.³

Benefits and challenges

Faculty ownership of information literacy has some obvious benefits. Writing or revising a program statement educates faculty in the relationship between information literacy, student learning, and the curriculum. More faculty integrate information literacy into their own teaching and are willing to collaborate with librarians, who still shoulder the greatest percentage of the teaching responsibility. Written statements are also useful in alerting new faculty that information literacy is an accepted and required part of the curriculum. Most important, if a department has identified specific courses in which

certain skills are to be taught, the librarian has an easy entree into working with faculty who teach those courses. Ultimate responsibility for perpetuating the program lay with the faculty, as long as the library reminds them of that duty on a regular basis.

The greatest challenge has been sustaining the energy to incorporate newly developed programs into librarians' workload. In our case, the unexpectedly slow pace of program creation has been a benefit, giving teaching librarians more time to develop new teaching strategies and course materials.

Assessment of multiple programs is certainly the biggest challenge. One size does not fit all. We have tested graduating majors in departments with long-standing programs and are also using student bibliography analysis in key seminars to identify areas of weakness in student learning outcomes. This is still a work in progress.

Conclusion

The involvement of Smith College's teaching faculty in the documentation of research skills

for majors in each discipline has resulted in a stable superstructure for its information literacy program. Despite taking longer than anticipated, this process has strengthened collaboration between faculty and the libraries and has resulted in mutually understood expectations for student learning outcomes. Despite the challenges posed by multiple programs, the end result has been positive for an information literacy program in a faculty governance institution.

Notes

1. Thanks for reviewing this article and also for years of effort on the Information Literacy Program go to Christopher Loring, director of library, and the members of the Information Literacy Team: Pat Billingsley, Sharon Domier, Rocco Piccinino, and Pam Skinner.

2. To see the complete program description, including individual departmental statements, visit www.smith.edu/libraries/services/faculty/infolit/program.

3. See www.smith.edu/libraries/services/faculty/infolit/honorschecklist. *zz*

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