

Beyond the annotated bibliography

Engaging students with library collections

Academic librarians have long prioritized the building of relationships with faculty to interact with students in the classroom. In a period of rapid transformation in college libraries, faculty collaboration is imperative for librarians to remain relevant in the teaching and learning missions of their institutions.¹ A challenge many small academic libraries face is how to engage students with both their print and electronic collections, and faculty members are often frustrated with their students' lack of experience with library research.

Some strategies like the traditional annotated bibliography do not always afford students the opportunity to understand why evaluating a body of sources is important beyond the mundane task of completing an assignment to pass the course. Another way to engage students is to ask them to become active evaluators of a library's holdings and challenge them to make recommendations to strengthen the library's collections.

This article will present one scenario where students move beyond learning how to write annotations and take a more active role in evaluating a library's subject collection with the help of librarians and the library's administration.

Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is one of the leaders in ability-based higher education. Through its nongraded curriculum, students interact with faculty in a variety of different scenarios and are continuously assessed to achieve validations in eight different abilities.² The faculty/student relationship is quite unique; classroom attendance is essen-

tial to passing a course and lecturing is kept to a minimum. Many students know and address faculty by their first names, and faculty assume the roles of coaches and mentors as well as subject experts.

In a recent survey conducted by the library, when students needed help finding and evaluating information for an assignment they turn to instructors first, followed by their peers.³ Yearly surveys of new students conducted by the campus Technology Services group reveal similar results. Librarians are valued by students, but they consistently rank below faculty as expert sources for help finding and evaluating credible sources. So, it is not surprising that Alverno librarians spend a great deal of time cultivating faculty relationships to reach more students and make them aware of the quality resources the library offers.

Faculty collaboration

Associate Professor of History Jodi Eastberg has often sought the help of librarians to strengthen the information literacy skills of her students. Her students range from those who might move on to careers related to the field of history, such as history majors and social studies history teacher education students, to those who are taking her courses for general education credits. Librarians have

Larry Duerr is assistant director of the Alverno College Library, e-mail: larry.duerr@alverno.edu, and Jodi Eastberg is associate professor of history at Alverno College, e-mail: jodi.eastberg@alverno.edu

© 2012 Larry Duerr and Jodi Eastberg

delivered one-shot information literacy sessions to a number of her lower level courses and have experimented with an embedded librarian model in her course on Ancient World History.

Assessment criteria and objectives

When Eastberg designed an assessment for her Gender in the Early Modern World course, she added a library research component to help her students practice the historian's skill of searching for resources on a historical topic and demonstrating an understanding of scholarly historical sources.⁴ Moreover, she was guided in designing this assignment by one of the history department's advanced outcomes for the major that requires students to take responsibility for their interpretations of the past by explaining and defending them publicly in a professional context.⁵ This assessment was unique in that it invited both librarians and the library administration to participate in the process of helping students access and evaluate library resources, but with the added component of requiring students to formally recommend print and electronic sources the library should consider acquiring. The presentation of their findings and recommendations to the library provides a clear and meaningful context to students so they can better understand the purpose and importance of creating annotated bibliographies.

Students narrowed their focus to specific topics within the broad period of women in the early modern world and were encouraged to go beyond the geography of Europe. The class visited the library several times during the semester to find information, and several students arranged individual consultations with reference librarians.

The assessment focused on developing the skill of conducting extensive database searches and writing an annotated bibliography, but by also requiring students to include print resources in their results, it was for many students one of the first times they browsed and interacted with the library's physical collections.

Benefits for the library

One key part of the assessment asked students to write a formal memo to the library director detailing their evaluation of the library's collection in their chosen subject area. The memo required them to summarize their findings and include three purchase recommendations. Library administration and interested librarians attended the final class session where students shared their work. Librarians commented on the student results and were able to gain some unique insights into what criteria students apply to judge the value of a source. Similarly, students were able to learn from each other and the library staff about search strategies.

One student remarked in a post-assessment reflection, "In the future, I would utilize reference materials in a greater capacity. I noticed my classmates had discovered really interesting and relevant reference collections, and I wish I had taken the same amount of time with these items in the library."

Librarians also learned that students had little idea how much information could be found in the physical stacks and how the collection is evolving from a European-centric focus to a broad-based world history emphasis. Librarians made the point that underrepresented geographical regions such as Africa, India, and China were a result of past collection policies geared toward supporting a more traditional western civilization approach to early modern history. This reinforced some of the key concepts in the course which attempted to get students to think about why women in various non-Western regions were not written about in the scholarly literature. Librarians were also given copies of the student memos and recommendations. After reviewing the recommendations, a number of books were ordered for the general and reference collections. The student recommendations were scanned and saved as PDFs for future reference.

Caveats

The assessment and collaboration works best for small academic libraries with limited re-

search collections. It could be scaled to larger libraries, but the focus would have to be very narrow so as not to overwhelm students by the sheer volume of material. The assessment also requires library administration to seriously consider student recommendations to the collection based on sound historiographical analysis.

Conclusion

This faculty/librarian collaboration has allowed librarians to meet more students in a classroom setting and interact with them about a host of issues related to the wider world of information. For example, many students are initially very surprised by the amount of money the library pays for electronic and print materials. These sessions also allow librarians to better understand how students view the changing composition of the collection as the library makes major investments in e-book and e-reference resources. It has also sparked interest among other subject librarians to suggest a similar type of assessment in their liaison areas. Finally, being able to give students a direct and profession-based role in building the collections has provided them with a better understanding of the usefulness of an annotated bibliography while connecting them to the library as place.

As one student reflected, "I plan to build annotated bibliographies not only for my

finished work but also to aid me in the process of research. Having a bibliography with a short description to go back to would be beneficial if I would need to flesh out certain arguments or expand on specific examples. I really enjoyed this assignment. It renewed my love for books and libraries."

Notes

1. Stephanie S. Brasley, "Effective Librarian and Discipline Faculty Collaboration Models for Integrating Information Literacy into the Fabric of an Academic Institution," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* no. 114 (2008): 71-88. Accessed March 26, 2012. <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.topcat.switchinc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=32750177&site=ehost-live>. Trudi E. Jacobson and Thomas P. Mackey, *Information Literacy Collaborations that Work* (New York: Neal-Shuman Publishers, 2007).
2. Alverno College, "Ability-Based Learning Program," 2005.
3. Alverno College, "Alverno College Library Student Survey," 2010. The complete survey results can be obtained by sending an e-mail to larry.duerr@alverno.edu.
4. A copy of the assessment can be obtained by sending an e-mail to larry.duerr@alverno.edu.
5. Alverno College, "Advanced Outcomes in the Major Area, Discipline: History," 2011. ♪

(*"Serving those who served us," cont. from page 473*)

Notes

1. "Infoplease: Active Duty Military Personnel, 1940-2011," retrieved from www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0004598.html.
2. "Infoplease: American Veterans by the Numbers," retrieved from www.infoplease.com/spot/veteranscensus1.html.
3. Leo Shane III "VA figures show steep decline in number of homeless veterans," *Stars and Stripes*, retrieved from www.stripes.com/news/va-figures-show-steep-decline-in-number-of-homeless-veterans-1.179016.
4. Timothy Williams, "Suicides outpacing war deaths for troops," *New York Times*, retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/us/suicides-eclipse-war-deaths-for-us-troops.html/>.
5. National Institute on Drug Abuse, "Topics in brief: Substance abuse among the military, veterans, and their families (April 2011), retrieved from www.drugabuse.gov/publications/topics-in-brief/substance-abuse-among-military-veterans-their-families. ♪