

20 years of credit-bearing courses

Reflections, takeaways, and next steps

The Z. Smith Reynolds (ZSR) Library at Wake Forest University (WFU) has been teaching credit-bearing information literacy (IL) courses since the spring of 2003. What started as a single section of a one-credit course titled LIB100: Accessing Information in the 21st Century has since grown into a much larger and consistently successful elective, credit-bearing program. In the 2021–2022 academic year, we taught 43 sections of credit-bearing courses that enrolled a total of 606 students. Over the past two decades, we have renamed LIB100 to Academic Research and Information Issues and added more than a dozen special topics and discipline-specific credit courses to our regular repertoire. At conferences and in other professional interactions, we are often asked to share more about how we've managed to sustain a robust, elective credit-bearing program. As our library celebrates our 20th anniversary of teaching credit courses, we decided to take the opportunity to reflect on our program and share some of our takeaways, best practices, and next steps.

Thinking through barriers

Credit-bearing courses and programs often encounter barriers in content, logistics, personnel, or enrollment (and sometimes all four). Here are some ways we have thought through these issues as our program has developed.

When we started planning our first course in 2002. The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education were just coming out and our library director felt strongly that libraries would be most successful if they participated actively in the academic teaching mission of the institution. Our initial course was a fairly standard 1-credit half-semester information literacy course co-taught by several librarians, each of whom took ownership of a couple of class sessions. We stayed very close to the IL standards and focused on how to use library resources in an increasingly online information environment. Since that initial course our curriculum has grown and new requests have come from students (I'd love to have this kind of course for business majors!), and new issues have arisen (mis- and disinformation, for example), and that has guided our development of new courses. The success of our original course has made the path smooth for us as we broadened out to 1.5 credit courses and courses on a wide variety of information topics. Sticking to what you know best and centering your courses around needs that are being expressed on your campus give you the best chances at getting courses off the ground.

Rosalind Tedford is director for research and instruction at Wake Forest University, email: tedforrl@wfu.edu. Joy Gambill is an instruction librarian at Wake Forest University, email: gambiljm@wfu.edu. Amanda Kaufman is learning and instructional services librarian at Wake Forest University, email: kaufmaaf@wfu.edu. Elizabeth Ellis is an instruction librarian at Wake Forest University, email: ellisea@wfu.edu.

Next, you need to determine where in the curriculum your courses will sit. Will they be taught within an existing program or department (would your school of education offer them?) or are you going to create your own “department” for listing these courses? There is no right or wrong way, and much of this decision is determined by the configuration of your institution. But if you think there is an existing department that would be open to this, you can start by talking to the chair or curriculum coordinator for that department. Subject liaisons are good to enlist in this as they are often the ones who know the curriculum, students, and faculty best and might be able to identify a gap (e.g., history students are having a hard time distinguishing primary and secondary sources, maybe we could offer a course specifically on finding and working with primary sources).

If you want to create your own “department” for listing courses, as we did, it is best to start with the school or college and work from there. In our current institutional setup, all undergraduate degrees are granted through the Wake Forest College, of which most academic departments are members. ZSR Library is not a member, so we needed to gain permission from the college to offer our courses for undergraduate credit, which we did through an established procedure they have for non-departmental courses. We had to be approved by the whole college faculty to teach these courses because the faculty body also approves new courses, changes in credit hours, or other policies (like placing a limit on how many LIB credits can count toward graduation, for example). Another great way to start is to look for examples in your curriculum where non-departmental courses already exist (maybe learning strategies, career preparation, personal skills like self-defense, etc.) and talk to those folks to see how they developed their course(s).

What to teach and where the courses will live are only part of the process. Next you need to determine who will teach the courses. Some institutions may require particular credentials (e.g., MLIS or PhD) and others may require something like faculty status. At WFU in 2002 there was already the precedent set that instructors with the terminal degrees in their disciplines were eligible to teach, so MFAs taught many of our music, art, and theatre courses, for example. This meant that in the beginning we could make the case that librarians with the MLIS degree had the terminal degree in our field, and that was enough for our institution. At ZSR we have since gotten faculty status (but are not members of our college faculty) and any new librarian who is hired with this status is automatically approved to teach credit courses, although not all of us do.

Then there is the question of balancing the workload. The success of our courses in the first 5 years meant that we were able to make the case to hire some adjunct faculty to teach, and then eventually to request full-time positions for teaching librarians. We now have two librarians who are focused solely on teaching our LIB classes (they each teach 12 sections per year) and then 12 other library faculty who teach regularly (but not necessarily every single semester). Because we are our own “department,” we can control who teaches when, and that gives us a good deal of flexibility. Our faculty are not compensated for the courses we teach over and above their regular salary, with the exception of summer courses (when we teach them), as those are considered the way all summer courses are on campus. Since our courses are offered through the college and are essentially “free” credits for the college, the salaries of our two teaching librarians are partially funded by money from the college.

The last main challenge to consider is how to get students to take courses offered by librarians. One strategy is trying to solve a schedule problem. In the early days of LIB100, we

purposely offered courses that began in the second half of the semester to attract students who needed to drop courses but remain full-time students. Another strategy is developing and maintaining good relationships with other student-facing services, especially student advisers. Wake Forest's academic, first-generation, and student athlete advisers were early targets of our outreach about the courses. They rapidly became supporters of our classes and sent many students our way. After around five years of marketing our courses to these groups, we no longer needed to actively recruit students into our courses. Students began telling each other about our courses, and they gained a good-enough reputation to fill in both halves of the semester. We now rarely have an empty seat in any of our courses.

Many institutions ensure enrollment by making courses like ours required. That is one way to ensure students take the course, but can also be a way to ensure students resent the course. We have never sought to make our courses required and are unlikely to do so any time soon. We appreciate having students in the courses who *want* to be there or *need* to be there, and we fear we would have to routinize our course too much (and hire many more instructors) if it ever became a required course. Having your courses as electives also allows you freedom to develop new courses, try out special topics courses, and give instructors breaks from teaching when needed.

Best practices

One of the strengths of the ZSR Library's for-credit information literacy courses has been the flexibility given to instructors to teach in a way that reflects the instructor's own style and interests. When LIB100 was first developed, a template was created and learning goals were cooperatively written, but it was never meant to be a cookie-cutter course. Current instructors consider the template only a suggestion and few adhere closely to it. As long as learning goals are met, the style and method used to get there is secondary. This same spirit of academic freedom is what has launched numerous LIB200-level courses, which focus on subjects such as business and accountancy, humanities, social science, science, mis/dis-information, critical information literacy, and archives and primary sources.

There are a variety of factors that converge to create a robust instruction program with high job satisfaction and low employee turnover. Librarians who teach new for-credit courses are given manageable workloads through course releases that allow time to create and develop new material. In addition, they are given generous continuing education budgets that allow them to attend conferences and workshops, and to stay abreast of the latest trends and teaching methods in their subject areas. Within the Reference, Instruction, and Outreach Team, there is a culture of comradery and support that has been fostered from the program's inception. When new librarians are onboarded, they are encouraged to observe library instruction classes, and lesson plans are freely shared. Instructors are encouraged to take risks and pursue areas of personal academic interest.

Woven throughout the program is a philosophy of teaching that is student-focused and compassion-driven. Capping class sizes at around 15 students enables personal connection and an engaging environment.

Future growth

Our library's parent institution is strong but not immune to the issues that currently plague higher education, including the anticipated "demographic cliff," declining social trust in

established institutions such as academia, and the high cost of a college education. While these challenges are daunting, they also provide a unique opportunity for ZSR Library's for-credit information literacy courses to grow in ways that may not have been possible previously. Rising to these challenges encourages creativity for ZSR teaching librarians and increases visibility of the library's for-credit information literacy program. For example, ZSR teaching librarians have recently created courses that address student and institutional needs, such as a seniors-only information literacy course to prepare them for conducting research after college, courses on mis/disinformation and critical information literacy, as well as First Year Seminar courses, which are mandatory for first-year students but not required for faculty to teach.

As previously mentioned, student demand for ZSR Library courses is high and partially driven by scheduling challenges that LIB courses can alleviate. Offering the course every term—Fall, Spring, and Summer—and in a variety of modalities makes it a reliable option for students with different scheduling needs, and our ability to fill sections and add more to the university's course offerings demonstrates its value to the parent institution.

Instruction librarians are faculty at Wake Forest University and use this status to both inform and advocate for our information literacy courses, especially in the wake of administration changes in the last two years that have included a new university president, provost, and undergraduate college dean. Having faculty status means that ZSR librarians are expected and given time to participate in university curriculum committees, strategic planning groups, and Faculty Senate, and participate in a variety of formal and informal faculty groups.

The 20 years we have spent developing these courses has solidified our reputation as partners in the academic mission of the university. It has allowed us to meet critical needs on campus while also allowing us to pursue our pedagogical goals and interests along the way. We would love to be in contact with other librarians who are interested in starting or developing their credit-bearing course program and encourage anyone to reach out to any of us for a conversation. ✨