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Building Bridges: Integrating the Library into General Education Reform

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Abstract

General education has been a source of controversy within and outside the academy for several decades. In recent years, a number of Oregon universities, including Oregon Tech, have undergone or are undertaking general education review. This paper explores the role of the library in general education review. At Oregon Tech, librarians have been included in the general education review process and have leveraged this position to advocate for information literacy education on campus. In addition to sharing the successes and challenges faced by Oregon Tech librarians, this article investigates some of the opportunities that a general education review process provides for incorporating information literacy across disciplines through formal integration into the university curriculum.

Background

In order to demonstrate their relevance on campus, academic libraries must work closely to align library services with institutional and faculty goals (Pritchard, 1996; Chiste, Glover, & Westwood, 2000). Information literacy is integral to both the academic library mission and the university charge to educate lifelong learners. While traditional one-shot instruction sessions continue to dominate information literacy instruction at institutions around the country (Artman, Fiscaro-Palowski, & Monge, 2010; Mery, Newby, & Peng, 2012) and in the Pacific Northwest (Phelps, Senior, & Diller, 2011), both library and instructional faculty are beginning to see the limitations of this model and are seeking ways to



integrate information literacy more broadly. Jacobs and Jacobs, reflecting on their experience, state that they “have come to understand that if we are indeed committed to teaching IL skills to students, IL needs to be fully integrated into a course” (2009, p. 74). While some libraries (Hall, 2012; Holderied, 2013) have found success incorporating information literacy into existing first year experience programs, Oregon Tech does not currently have such a program that can be easily expanded to include information literacy instruction. Instead, librarians must work with all departments on campus to encourage information literacy. The push for general education review at Oregon Tech presented a unique opportunity to better integrate information literacy campus-wide.

General education has been a source of controversy within and outside the academy for several decades (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011). In recent years, several Oregon universities (White, 1994; Weikel, 1999), including Oregon Tech, have undergone or are undertaking general education review processes. In April of 2013, Oregon Tech’s Provost appointed a task force charged with reviewing and reevaluating Oregon Tech’s overall general education requirements. The university’s Essential Student Learning Outcomes (ESLOs) were revised as part of this process.

Oregon Tech’s Essential Learning Outcomes (ESLOs)

Oregon Tech’s ESLOs reflect expectations of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students will acquire during their time at Oregon Tech. They are the basis for the General Education requirements that lay the foundation upon which the major curricula build. By engaging in these ESLOs, Oregon Tech graduates will develop the habits of mind and behaviors of professionals and lifelong learners. After a year-long process, Oregon Tech adopted the following ESLOs.

Oregon Tech students will:

- Communicate effectively orally and in writing;
- engage in a process of inquiry and analysis;
- make and defend reasonable ethical judgments;
- collaborate effectively in teams or groups;
- demonstrate quantitative literacy; and
- explore diverse perspectives.

(Oregon Tech, 2015)

Oregon Tech’s ESLOs were adopted with minimal input from librarians who felt that the expectations of information literacy in the institutional ESLO’s were low. The librarians worried that, as written, the ESLOs failed to address the breadth and depth necessary for students to become critical users and creators of information. The critical thinking and information literacy components, which were included as essential learning outcomes from the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2011) LEAP campaign, were not adopted at Oregon Tech. The rationale behind this decision was that the number of ESLOs was becoming unwieldy and should be limited to something more manageable. Instead, the decision was made to include critical thinking and information literacy skills in Oregon Tech’s Communication and Inquiry and Analysis ESLOs.

To advocate for information literacy, librarians drew upon longstanding relationships with key instructional faculty. This effort resulted in librarians being included in two subcommittees where much of the work to define general education outcomes is happen-



ing. Serving on these sub-committees has allowed for more direct librarian involvement in Oregon Tech's General Education review. The AACU LEAP Value Rubrics are being heavily consulted in the subcommittees and the librarians are actively advocating for integrating information literacy and critical thinking content into the existing ESLO categories.

Communication

Artman et al. (2010) argue that writing instructors have begun to recognize the importance of information literacy and the ability to thoughtfully incorporate research into writing assignments. This is certainly the case at Oregon Tech where the majority of information literacy instruction has historically been integrated into freshman and sophomore level writing courses. A report, prepared by the Executive Committee of the Assessment Commission at Oregon Tech in 2011, tasked writing and library faculty to collaborate on improving support and documentation in student writing. Librarians took up this charge and have been providing information literacy instruction in writing classes since. While there has been a history of successful collaborations between Communication and Library faculty, information literacy instruction has been incorporated into the writing curriculum piecemeal at the discretion of individual faculty.

As the Communication subcommittee explored options for restructuring general education writing requirements, information literacy was repeatedly recognized as an important component in the success in these courses. The subcommittee's final recommendations focused on better integration between writing courses and discipline course content, at both the intermediate and capstone levels, to motivate students to select meaningful topics and conduct relevant research as a part of the writing process. The focus on the research proposed by the subcommittee creates a renewed need for research assistance and a natural access point for integrating information literacy instruction in the curriculum.

Inquiry and Analysis

Initially the Inquiry and Analysis subcommittee adopted a narrow interpretation of inquiry and analysis focused primarily on the scientific method. Over the course of several meetings, significant progress has been made in educating faculty about the importance of research skills and the subcommittee is now open to having a stronger information literacy presence in the general education curriculum. An internal report written by the Inquiry & Analysis ESLO subcommittee during the Spring of 2015 demonstrated increased recognition that more work needs to be done in the area of information literacy. One of the sub-committee's goals for next year is to reflect further on research and information literacy requirements. In addition, the sub-committee plans to more fully explore the possibilities of an inquiry seminar and stated "this course could support research and information literacy skills that remain somewhat 'homeless.'" A library of assignments is another recommendation that was presented to the sub-committee and that will be considered next Fall. Initiatives like these present an opportunity to introduce the new ACRL framework and to give faculty sample research assignments. Librarians have pushed for assignments and courses that build information literacy skills for many years but have lacked the mechanism to make them a reality.

Oregon Tech's Curriculum Planning Commission recently approved a three credit, junior-level library and information science class (LIS 305). This will be the first time that the library is responsible for a regularly offered, credit bearing course. LIS 305 was specifically mentioned in the Inquiry & Analysis ESLO subcommittee Spring 2015 report as




having substantial inquiry and analysis components. On a campus which has been slow to integrate information literacy into the curriculum this is a tremendous improvement and one which we hope will help make information literacy and critical thinking more of an institutional priority.

Discussion

Oregon Tech's general education subcommittees will continue to meet regularly over the next two years. During that time, librarians will continue to advocate for information literacy on the Communication and Inquiry and Analysis subcommittees with particular attention paid to finding ways to integrate ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2015) into the campus conversation.

Serving on Oregon Tech's general education subcommittees has provided librarians an opportunity to advocate for information literacy on campus. Perhaps equally important, however, have been the conversations with faculty about research processes and methods that occurred throughout the general education review process. Teaching is still the central focus for Oregon Tech faculty but there is a growing push to create a role for applied research. Librarians can help advance knowledge creation on campus by including research design and methods in instruction. That librarian expertise in this area is being recognized by instruction faculty further strengthens the library's role on campus.

Conclusions

General education review offers librarians a unique opportunity to have a voice and build relationships on campus. If librarians are not immediately invited into the review process, capitalizing on existing relationships with instructional faculty may open doors and provide access. While assisting with general education review can be time consuming and frustrating, at times, the chance to integrate information literacy systematically within the curriculum and the opportunity to educate a range of faculty, assessment coordinators, and administrators about the importance of information literacy to lifelong learning make the effort worthwhile. 

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