3-11-2010


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The Educational Role of Research Libraries in Higher Education:
A White Paper for the Directors of the Greater Western Library Alliance

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March 11, 2010

Every day, we are inundated with vast amounts of information. A 24-hour news cycle and thousands of
global television and radio networks, coupled with an immense array of online resources, have
challenged our long-held perceptions of information management. Rather than merely possessing data,
we must also learn the skills necessary to acquire, collate, and evaluate information for any situation.
This new type of literacy also requires competency with communication technologies, including
computers and mobile devices that can help in our day-to-day decision making. National Information
Literacy Awareness Month highlights the need for all Americans to be adept in the skills necessary to
effectively navigate the Information Age.

NATIONAL INFORMATION LITERACY AWARENESS MONTH, 2009
BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
A PROCLAMATION

The National focus on higher education is at an all time high. Politicians ask, “what is the value
added from our investment in public higher education?” Employers pose the same question and
add their concern for a prepared workforce. Parents and students alike are demanding to know
the return on their investment in their child’s or their own education.

Undergraduate education reform is focused on the kinds of learning outcomes that libraries have
been talking about for more than a decade, tidily summed up for our profession in the term
“information literacy” and how to integrate these intellectual and practical skills across the
curriculum. Reform initiatives address not just what is taught within the curriculum but how it is
taught, requiring culture shifts in teaching and learning and a focus on faculty development as
well as on high impact educational practices that offer multiple opportunities for library
involvement. The centrality of student engagement is also part of this reform, and the intentional
linking of the co-curricular with the curricular can play a key role. For the first time since the
Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education were approved in 2000, the
higher education community is clamoring for something libraries can provide. This is the best
time ever for libraries to step up and help undergraduate education initiatives succeed, and it is
especially timely as our work in information literacy is dependent upon this broader reframing of
undergraduate education. Librarians alone are best positioned to provide connections to
collections by placing them at the center of student learning.

This white paper provides background about the convergence of disparate undergraduate
education movements in higher education that affect GWLA individual institutions, particularly
those initiatives related to the reinvention of undergraduate education in research universities. It
provides suggestions for how individual GWLA member libraries can take advantage of an
unprecedented interested in education reform to assume leadership roles on our campuses, and in
doing so, provide greater security for libraries during fiscal uncertainty as they position
themselves, their collections, and their services as an integral part of the instructional agenda as
well as the research agenda. Finally, it suggests some ways that GWLA as an organization might
leverage its collective strengths to advance the educational role of libraries in higher education.
**Background**

One of the most controversial and much publicized initiatives under the Bush administration was from the U.S. Dept of Education—the Spellings Commission—led by and named after then Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings. The Spellings report references the perceived need for national benchmarking and student testing and initiated strong reaction within accreditation and higher education organizations. As a pre-emptive move, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU—then the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges)—two higher education associations which collectively represent all of public higher education—developed the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). Member institutions can volunteer to participate, which means they agree to administer one of four surveys used to measure the college student experience to a random sample of seniors for student engagement data, and to measure “student learning gains” using one of three approved standardized tests. Eighteen GWLA institutions have signed on to the VSA. There is also a corresponding “private college accountability system.” In 2007, AASCU, APLU, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) received a $2.7 million FIPSE grant to “examine the multiple purposes of learning assessment and to test the validity, comparability, and appropriate uses of a variety of assessment approaches.”

Federal government interest in education reform did not abate with a change in administration. Specific learning outcomes for “reading, writing, speaking, and listening” have been articulated in a 2009 initiative led by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, “Common Core Standards Initiative.” However, as is often the case with learning outcomes, the labels are less relevant than the actual learning outcomes. The outcomes listed below extracted from the section on “writing” overlap with information literacy:

- Extract key information efficiently in print and online using text features and search techniques.
- Gather the information needed to build an argument, provide an explanation, or address a research question.
- Synthesize information from multiple relevant sources, including graphics and quantitative information when appropriate, to provide an accurate picture of that information.
- Evaluate the reasoning and rhetoric that support an argument or explanation, including assessing whether the evidence provided is relevant and sufficient.
- Represent and cite accurately the data, conclusions, and opinions of others, effectively incorporating them into one’s own work while avoiding plagiarism.
- Make strategic use of multimedia elements and visual displays of data to gain audience attention and enhance understanding.

The most important report addressing undergraduate education in research universities specifically is the 1998 “Boyer Report” sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation. Ultimately, the Boyer report is about a fundamental shift in the way faculty at research universities teach, advocating specific educational practices such as research based learning and inquiry learning. The principles in the Boyer report have been promoted through the work of the Reinvention Center, which hosts regional meetings for top research universities, sponsors a national “VPUE
network” for Vice Presidents or Vice Provosts of Undergraduate Education, and hosts national conferences on undergraduate research.

Many of the principles advocated in the Boyer report were also referenced in a 2006 book on “Our Underachieving Colleges,” by Derek Bok, President Emeritus and research professor at Harvard University. In the introduction, he claims that:

> Large majorities of college seniors do not feel that they have made substantial progress in learning what they need to know to become active and informed citizens...and that students improve much less than they should in: writing, critical thinking, quantitative skills, and moral reasoning.

Bok calls for foundation skills and abilities applied across disciplines that form the foundation for life-long learning and says that “certain familiar qualities of mind and habits of thought may help resolve a wide range of problems” and that every student would benefit from acquiring them.

Bok specifically calls for the ability to:

- recognize and define problems clearly
- identify the arguments and interests on all sides of an issue
- gather relevant facts and appreciate their relevance
- perceive as many plausible solutions as possible
- exercise good judgment in choosing the best of these alternatives after considering the evidence and using inference, analogy, and other forms of ordinary reasoning to test the cogency of the arguments

Those familiar with the Information Literacy Competency Standards will recognize similarities.

Another major force for undergraduate education reform in universities of all types is the AAC&U, specifically their LEAP (Liberal Education and America’s Promise) initiative report—College Learning for the New Global Century, which focuses on “the kinds of learning that will truly empower students to succeed and make a difference in the 21st century.” Beyond conducting research and generating reports, this member organization has an extremely robust infrastructure to provide individual campus consultation and professional development for campus leadership teams.

College Learning for the New Global Century identifies “essential learning outcomes” in the broader categories of knowledge, skills, and personal and social responsibility, and it underscores the importance of creating an integrated learning experience. The skill clusters, identified as “intellectual and practical skills,” are: inquiry and analysis; written and oral communication; critical and creative thinking; quantitative literacy; teamwork and problem solving; and information literacy.

The identification of these essential learning outcomes was informed by a 2006 research study that AAC&U commissioned to survey business leaders and recent graduates. The survey asked what outcomes universities should place more emphasis on. Sixty-three percent of employers
agree that “too many recent college graduates do not have the skills to be successful in today’s
global economy.” Amongst the list of learning outcomes noted as most important yet lacking,
70% of employers said that colleges should place more emphasis on information literacy.

Information literacy is front and center in the undergraduate education work of AAC&U. For the
past five years, I have been on the faculty for one of their institutes and a repeated plenary
presenter at their conferences, addressing how to integrate and assess all of these learning
outcomes, including information literacy, across the curriculum. Every year, three times a year,
colleges send teams of campus leaders to an AAC&U institute to address an aspect of
undergraduate education reform for their campuses and to create action plans to bring back for
implementation. In four years I have seen over 120 college teams and only 3 librarians.

LEAP and Boyer engage faculty and academic administrators in education reform. Another key
group working on similar goals comes from those involved in student life. Learning
Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience, and Learning Reconsidered 2:
Implementing a Campus Wide Focus on the Learning Experience, were produced by the
American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student
Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Although they focus on the co-curricular learning
environments, they are concerned with the same issues and learning outcomes and like AAC&U,
they advocate for the intentional linking of curricular and co-curricular experiences. Their
framework of learning outcomes looks remarkably similar to that of AAC&U. The first report
notes that:

> Learning is a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic
> learning and student development, processes that have often been considered separate,
> and even independent of each other.

Libraries, as the sole organizations on campus that contribute in substantial ways to the
curricular as well as co-curricular education of students, have natural academic partners across
campus.

Boyer, LEAP, and Learning Reconsidered all address the importance of student engagement,
particularly through learning strategies and the application of real world experiences. Another
important initiative that is playing a key role on the national agenda is the National Survey for
Student Engagement (NSSE)—both the survey and the center. NSSE is a tool broadly used to
measure student engagement. Over 1100 schools participate in administering the instrument
and the associated research center generates reports and uses the information gleaned from NSSE
data to inform further projects.

One of those initiatives, Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practices)
investigates what strong-performing NSSE institutions do to achieve their level of effectiveness,
and researchers have looked deeper into the practices that lead to higher graduation rates and
higher NSSE scores. Their pivotal report, High Impact Educational Practices—What They Are,
Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter, was published by AAC&U.
The research, which investigated both students and institutions, discovered statistically significant correlation between students engaged in certain “high impact education practices” and GPA. These practices include: undergraduate research; internships; learning communities (multiple courses linked to a “big question”); capstone courses; first-year seminars and experiences; service and community-based learning; and skill-intensive courses across the curriculum (writing-intensive, quantitative reasoning, oral communication, information literacy across the curriculum).

The learning environments advocated by Boyer and Bok, AAC&U, and Project DEEP, student life organizations, and librarians, all underscore the same cluster of high impact educational practices. Consensus is also emerging about learning outcomes. They may be called different things—communication, critical thinking, information literacy—but the outcomes are the same. The whole alphabet soup of higher education is focusing on reform that:

- requires articulation of specific learning outcomes,
- reflects higher order and lower order cognitive skills,
- is applied within and across disciplines,
- is developmental (sequenced over time),
- is supported through curriculum content, instructional design, and co-curricular activities that engage students, and
- is assessed by demonstration of what students can DO rather than what they know.

At long last, the library community is not alone in calling for, even demanding, reform in higher education in terms of both what and how we teach and even about the importance of student engagement. Libraries have an unprecedented opportunity to be informed on these reform initiatives and to use their language and their holistic motivations to advance our issues, placing library collections and services at the heart of student learning. In the process, librarians can emerge as leaders on their campuses, helping them to succeed by providing a welcome skill set of collaboration and synthesis.

**Tying It All Together**

Our common goal is student learning—the articulation of the knowledge, skills, and personal and social attributes that institutions expect their students to exhibit when they graduate (e.g., inquiry and analysis; critical and creative thinking; written and oral communication; quantitative literacy; information literacy.) However, the foundation for that student learning is engagement. This grabbing and holding of student interest, motivating them for prolonged interaction, and allowing them to become embedded in their educational experience happens in three important ways:

1. How they are inspired and engaged by faculty as instructors in and out of the classrooms and through learning strategies that develop each student’s own passion and curiosity; teaching methods that are student centered, research based and rooted in real life; and teaching methods that require students to navigate within the world of information as critical explorers regardless of the topic or the discipline.
2. How they are excited and motivated through the content of the curriculum, engaged in what AAC&U calls the big questions, “both contemporary and enduring.”

3. How students are engaged to take steps in their own development through a myriad of experiences available external to the curriculum, but intentionally linked to it as teaching faculty and academic partners design those learning experiences together.

I have created a model (Figure 1, below) to reflect the inter-relationships of student learning and as a reminder of the overall more complex framework for learning that extends far beyond the content of a single course. All of the learning outcomes identified in the ACRL and other outcomes documents underscore what higher education faculty, administrators, and student life personnel are finally beginning to identify and require within and across the curriculum. Libraries have been working with them for more than a decade. Librarians have the skills and abilities to design assignments that integrate them into curriculum. Libraries have collections that are diminishing in use unless and until they are intentionally placed at the heart of the curriculum. Librarians are eager to partner on course redesign and assessment to help in the way learning is structured and to connect students to the vast collections in which they have invested. And Libraries contribute in significant ways, formally and informally, to the learning that happens outside of the classroom.

![Figure 1. The support structure for true student learning.](image-url)
Individual campuses: What can the Library do?

Examples provided are from the UNLV Libraries. There are surely dozens of examples from other GWLA member libraries. It would be interesting to collect these examples and share strategies.

1. **Voluntary System of Accountability**: Conversations about standardized tests such as the CLA, CAAP, and MAPP provide opportunities to introduce Critical Thinking, which is the ETS-developed, performance-based instrument that is aligned with the information literacy competency standards. UNLV Libraries started with pilot projects that have now expanded to the point where all students below a certain GPA at matriculation are administered the test and provided with individual scores for referral to interventions.

2. **General education reform**: Librarians’ knowledge of higher education reform and their facility with learning outcomes, assignment design, and faculty development, have resulted in several library faculty assuming key roles in general education reform. Five library faculty are on or leading various general education and assessment initiatives, and two have been on campus teams attending AAC&U general education institutes. One librarian is on temporary reassignment to the Provost’s Office for the year to help shepherd the general education revision. One direct impact of library leadership is the articulation of learning outcomes for the new general education curriculum that include information literacy.

3. **Faculty development—shifting the culture of teaching and learning**: Instruction librarians can more efficiently impact student learning by focusing on faculty, course redesign, and curriculum reform than on large numbers of “course integrated” library instruction sessions in core courses, or worse, endless “one shot” workshops. UNLV Libraries used donor funds to collaborate with campus partners on the design and implementation of a “Faculty Institute on Research Based Learning for High Impact Courses.” Sixteen faculty who collectively reach 14,000 students through their first year high impact courses, were selected, partnered with eight library faculty, and participated in an Institute over three full days and three half days. All the core lower division courses that they taught or managed were redesigned to embed library collections and information literacy, critical thinking, and related research-based learning outcomes.

4. **Linking the curricular and co-curricular in intentional ways**: During the 2009 UNLV campus strategic planning process, library staff encouraged this issue through a variety of open forums held by our President. To help the campus advance its conversation about Las Vegas as a laboratory for learning for our students, the Libraries took the lead to work with the Reinvention Center to host the Western Regional Meeting of Reinvention for senior administrators associated with undergraduate education from research universities. The agenda developed by the Libraries for that meeting was specifically focused on “Real World as Research Based Learning.”
Offer opportunities for real data collection on student learning to inform faculty response: iCritical Thinking is but one tool that Libraries can use to collect data on student learning to share with faculty in order to inform their individual and collective efforts. The Libraries is partnering with the Harrah’s College of Hotel Administration to administer iCritical Thinking to 250 exiting seniors. Results are being used to inform the core curriculum review for the major. Changes to the curriculum will be designed through a library-led institute on course redesign for faculty who teach those core courses, partnered with librarians.

Desired Outcomes for GWLA Libraries

- GWLA directors appreciate and advance the educational role of their libraries.
- GWLA members identify opportunities and efficiencies in support of their instructional function.
- GWLA libraries promote and link their educational role with their research role within their institutions.
- GWLA libraries determine strategies to work together as well as independently to secure external funding related to their educational role (grants and gifts).
- GWLA libraries articulate measures that would be useful in assessing their impact in their educational role.
- GWLA libraries position themselves firmly as partners in the often protected instructional portion of the campus mission, in addition to the research support.

What can GWLA do to advance the educational role of Libraries?

- Create a repository of digital learning objects
- Partner on grants
- Share individual practices and strategies
- Share student data for collaborative research projects
- Host an event for ourselves—directors and instruction staff—on the role of instruction
- Host a meeting with our VPUE’s and perhaps teaching center directors or other key campus administrators
- Meet with leadership of higher education associations to discuss the library role
- Establish an ongoing educational initiatives group for our members
- Conduct or promote research on the value added of “interventions” in student learning
For Further Reference


