

**Buy Low, Sell High, Get in Now: Low-Stakes/Low-Investment  
Information Literacy Initiatives Pay Off Big**

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**Abstract:** Librarians are often limited to low-stakes situations (extra-credit for information literacy assignments attached to larger [high-stakes] course assignments; contests and prizes; small-point-value research process assignments like research logs and bibliographies) when participating in curriculum design. One approach to using these opportunities might be to plan correspondingly low-effort, fun activities and exercises in the hopes of gaining buy-in from students. A more effective approach might be to create rigorous and ambitious assignments for these low-stakes opportunities. At Trinity University, the latter approach has paid off, with students responding with a higher amount of effort and demonstrating higher-order information literacy outcomes. One implication of this is that students and faculty are more likely to perceive value in tasks and assignments that have challenging, course or context-appropriate outcomes explicitly tied to a disciplinary standard, in this case information literacy.

**What We Did:** In the Spring of 2008, the Office of Student Affairs asked the library to create a substantial annotated bibliography assignment for new students to complete as part of the Trinity University summer reading program, Reading TUgether. Urged by the VP of Student Affairs to “up the ante” for information literacy outcomes for First-Year students by making the ungraded assignment substantial in length, rigorous in its expectations, and explicit in its documentation, the library created:

- an annotated bibliography assignment situated within the context of the summer reading text (Greg Mortenson’s Three Cups of Tea) and with learning objectives derived from the First-Year seminar and Common Curriculum guidelines .
- A related First-Year student library orientation which used humanitarian aid scenarios as the basis for a set of research tasks which applied library tools and resources to conceptual and procedural learning objectives.

In the Fall of 2008, librarians leveraged low-stakes opportunities to deliver challenging information literacy assignments for three courses in the Department of Political Science:

- American Politics
- Elections and Campaigns
- Film, Literature, and Politics of the Third World

## **Outcomes:**

- The incoming class of 650 completed 400 annotated bibliographies, the ten best of which were selected for special mention at an event featuring the author of [Three Cups of Tea](#). Many First-Year Seminar faculty were moved by this unexpected rate of participation to incorporate the bibliography and/or a similar assignment into their coursework for their seminars.
- 95% library orientation task completion rate and 90% participation in bonus questions, drawing heavily on a cultivated relationship with student Resident Mentors.
- The success of the annotated bibliography and the positive response to the library's role in the NSO program served as useful starting points for new collaborations with teaching faculty. Three low-stakes low-investment assignments, created by a liaison librarian, were accepted by political science faculty and included in courses in the fall semester.
- While only one of the assignments was for credit, they all required students to demonstrate an understanding of select information literacy concepts and were, on the whole, taken seriously by the students and embraced by the faculty members. The success of these assignments was helpful in generating an increased level of cooperation and coordination between the liaison and the department.

## **Conclusions and Future Plans:**

- Low stakes assignments can engage students in informal, non-graded information literacy activities that combine active learning situations with practice exercising critical thinking skills; these assignments can help prime students to undertake higher stakes research assignments during their first year.
- Although low stakes opportunities remove the element of risk for students, the actual assignments created can involve students in challenging higher-order information literacy tasks. In the case of the summer reading assignment, students were asked to define a topic, navigate a series of resources, and consider the authority, credibility, and relevance of the sources they located.
- Low stakes did not result in low effort. Our students met the challenge by completing the work assigned, demonstrating the value of higher stakes information literacy projects to campus units and members of the teaching faculty.
- When partnerships are perceived by the university community to carry a "low investment" and yet be both rigorous and rewarding in their outcomes, the door opens for future collaborations between liaison librarians and the teaching faculty.
- Instruction librarians plan to continue placing higher-order information literacy outcomes into available low-stakes opportunities while pushing participating teaching faculty towards more ambitious collaborations on high-stakes projects and assignments.

## Links to Instruction Materials:

<http://www.trinity.edu/shoover1/ampolinfolit.pdf>  
<http://www.trinity.edu/shoover1/filmliteval.pdf>  
<http://www.trinity.edu/shoover1/elections.pdf>  
[http://www.trinity.edu/departments/student\\_activities/fy08/home.html](http://www.trinity.edu/departments/student_activities/fy08/home.html)  
<http://www.trinity.edu/jdonald/NS08/index.html>

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