

The Liberal Arts and Information Literacy: Thinking Critically about Research Practices

The Laurence McKinley Gould Liaison Librarians, February 22, 2007

The curriculum review offers an opportunity to consider integration of information literacy across the curriculum. Sparked by the five-department Mellon grant in 2001, librarians and faculty have engaged in rich conversations and thoughtful collaborations leading to more integration of information literacy into the curriculum. Through our discipline-centered liaison model, we continue to build our understanding of when students have opportunities to do research--particularly in preparation for comps--and to gain the critical and reflective capacities characteristic of a liberal arts education. Our statistics show that the depth and frequency of librarians' interactions with students have increased dramatically to include, last year, over 900 individual and small group consultations (a four-fold increase from five years ago), 171 classroom sessions, and over 3120 questions at the reference desk. These interactions afford us a distinct perspective on how Carleton students interpret assignments, work through and understand disciplinary research, retain and transfer skills across the curriculum, and gain confidence in building knowledge.

Our students arrive on campus with great intellectual curiosity, eager to engage in a liberal arts curriculum that pushes them to participate in the adventure, discovery, and synthesis of the scholarly information they encounter. Because of Carleton students' potential and their vast array of experiences, it can be surprising when they lack basic experience with research practices. Through our interactions with students, we see some of the ways that they are unevenly prepared for advanced research. The following selection of inquiries from students at all levels illustrates the importance of addressing these (sometimes basic) research issues.

"I have a topic, but I don't know where to start." Carleton students are encouraged to be intellectually ambitious, but they do not always possess the experience needed to develop an appropriate research question or to explore a subject to refine their topic. Additionally, students may hesitate to reveal their inexperience to their instructors and peers. Together, faculty and librarians can help students understand that while research is difficult, familiarity with the literature, methodology, lexicon, and discourse in their fields of study can provide pathways to approach research.

"I have an assignment for my distro course and I don't know how to use this database." In order to become well-rounded scholars in the liberal arts and to be prepared for comps, Carleton students need to learn how to transfer their research experiences between fields of study. Assignments that reveal disciplinary conventions of research can help students learn about the ways in which research is conducted in a particular field and can prepare them more adequately for independent research.

"My professor says I need to include more sources for my paper, but I've already found all the articles on my topic from JSTOR." Carleton students need to understand that research is an iterative activity that takes time and that they must continually reevaluate what they've discovered and refine or expand their research accordingly. This requires knowledge of the diverse resources available to them as well as experience with various search strategies.

"I Googled my topic and found this Wikipedia article." Carleton students should be familiar with the breadth of knowledge available in all types of sources. They need to be able to evaluate the appropriateness of sources to scholarship. Carleton students benefit from deliberate and integrated assignments that encourage the sophisticated use of rich and diverse sources.

We believe intentional collaboration between faculty, librarians, and the greater campus community leads to a learning environment that encourages deep understanding of disciplinary research in preparation for comps, as well as the ability to transfer these skills and habits from course to course, from discipline to discipline, and from Carleton to the outside world. Meeting the needs of students to be more information literate requires looking at the curriculum as a whole. As the curricular review progresses, we look forward to discussing the issues this document raises and engaging with faculty in the campus effort to address them.