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TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

## **The Role of Librarians in Guided Pathways Reforms**

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## **Abstract**

In the book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), the authors briefly noted the role that librarians might play in informing and supporting guided pathways reform. In this short essay, one of the book's authors joins with a librarian to provide updated and revised thoughts on the role of librarians in guided pathways. First we discuss the importance of embedding critical thinking into guided pathways curricula and librarians' unique position to support that goal; then we discuss various models by which colleges might leverage librarians' expertise and which models seem more or less compatible with the guided pathways framework.

## **1. Introduction**

In the book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), the authors argued that as part of their guided pathways efforts, colleges need to leverage the experiences and insights of professionals whose positions are not strictly instructional but who work with students every day and thus possess a rich trove of information about how students think, what they care about, what obstacles they encounter, and how to help them learn. In an early draft of the book, the authors highlighted the role that librarians in particular might play in guided pathways design; however, much of that discussion was trimmed due to space considerations. As the guided pathways movement has unfolded across the country, many librarians have asked for copies of that apocryphal content. In this essay, one of the authors of the book joins with a librarian to provide an updated and revised version of our thoughts on the role of librarians in guided pathways. First we discuss the importance of embedding critical thinking into guided pathways curricula and librarians' unique position to support that goal; then we discuss various models by which colleges might leverage librarians' expertise and which models seem more or less compatible with the guided pathways framework.

## **2. Critical Thinking and the Library**

Throughout *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, we emphasized the importance of building students' metacognitive and critical thinking skills across their academic program curriculum. Students need these skills not only to succeed in coursework but also to identify and pursue a best-fit major, career, or transfer destination. Librarians are particularly concerned with critical thinking because it is foundational to the research skills that libraries are designed to support. Although librarians often use the term "information literacy" rather than "critical thinking" to describe research-related skills, the two concepts are very similar, with information literacy focusing on the critical, reflective, and analytical use of information and the creation of knowledge (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016). Information literacy provides a

strong foundation for success in both academic coursework and future employment (Katz, Haras, & Blaszczynski, 2010; Weiner, 2012). Recognizing the value of information literacy, in recent years many of the six regional accreditation agencies have incorporated these skills into their guidelines or requirements, the American Association of Community Colleges (2008) has endorsed their importance, and several states have considered requiring the integration of information literacy into colleges' curricula (Cunningham, 2012; DaCosta & Dubicki, 2012).<sup>1</sup> In general, college instructors also believe in the importance of these skills, but few explicitly and intentionally integrate them into their courses, because they are complex and challenging to both teach and assess (Everett, 2010; Haas & Keeley, 1998). Happily, librarians are perfectly positioned to help faculty in these efforts.

Many librarians identify themselves as teachers who take it as their mission to help patrons develop curiosity, synthesize information, and build a passion for lifelong learning (Walter, 2008). This may be particularly true of librarians at community colleges, who are attracted to these jobs by their focus on open access, community, and learning, in opposition to the explicitly scholarly focus of many university libraries (Cunningham, 2012). For example, in her qualitative study of information literacy coordinators at California community colleges, Cunningham quoted one librarian as she described her sense of mission:

We believe we do instruction all the time—in casual conversation with someone on the bridge or student in town. . . . But we have [students] try to reflect on their own learning and ask them more questions even as they're serving us our tacos. Having students really reflect on their own learning we think will help them be lifelong learners and so we look for every opportunity to do it. (p. 159)

Given librarians' implicit professional interest in student learning, many libraries are eager to work with instructors to help integrate information literacy into the

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<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, many states also have become concerned with skills associated with "computer literacy" and have bundled these under the general rubric of information literacy. While well-intentioned, this tactic can have an unfortunate diluting effect: Computer literacy is easy to teach and assess, while information literacy is complex and challenging to both teach and assess. Thus, information literacy requirements in some colleges have been dumbed down into a computer course or workshop (see Cunningham, 2012).

curriculum. In practice, librarians' teaching expertise can manifest in several different ways.

## **2.1 Librarian as Teacher**

**Stand-alone workshops and courses.** In community colleges, the most popular form of information literacy instruction occurs in a stand-alone workshop or course taught by a librarian (Cunningham, 2012; Warren, 2006; Zachery, 2010). Some are short, lasting only an hour or two and covering a very specific skill, such as how to find information using a particular online database or using citation managers; others extend for an entire semester and can incorporate a much wider array of critical thinking skills. But as voluntary stand-alone experiences, most are independent of students' other coursework; to the extent that the information learned in the workshop connects to a students' other courses, the student must make that connection on his or her own.

Community college librarians report that they enjoy the ability to design and teach their own courses, but also feel frustrated by the impossibility of connecting student learning in their own course with students' critical thinking performance in other courses—which is the ultimate outcome they care about (Cunningham, 2012). Librarians teaching workshops typically have no access to their students' assignments in other courses, and faculty of other courses rarely refer to, reinforce, or build on students' learning in the information literacy course. Because stand-alone information literacy courses are not contextualized and integrated with students' disciplinary course activities and assignments, their impact is likely to be limited in the long-term.

To link information literacy more closely with disciplinary coursework, some community colleges package information literacy courses within a learning community, by, for example, pairing a one-credit information literacy course with a first-year composition class. In Cunningham's study, librarians thought these structures were an improvement over a stand-alone experience, because librarians could better understand students' assignments in a disciplinary course, and the paired disciplinary instructor could better understand the expertise and resources librarians had to offer. Still, linked courses were not always well-integrated—often because the disciplinary faculty member viewed the information literacy component as an independent add-on rather than as an intrinsic part of the course experience.

**Course-embedded instruction.** Librarians are frequently called upon to provide instruction within the context of a disciplinary course. At the light-touch end of the spectrum, disciplinary instructors might ask a librarian to visit the course as a guest lecturer in order to teach a customized information literacy or library orientation. When instructors intend to build on this instruction throughout the course, the process can be quite collaborative and the orientation very useful. But when instructors are minimally collaborative or do not provide adequate consideration to the timing, context, or purpose of these orientations, they can be a waste of time for the students and the librarian (Cunningham, 2012). In addition, some faculty may assign a limited role to the librarians' expertise, believing that librarians can only teach skills such as searching databases or the library catalog. However, an experienced librarian can nimbly identify and leverage resources relevant to critical thinking within the context of any given introductory-level course; they can also help select topics for an assignment, develop a research question of an appropriate scope, and cultivate critical and reflective ways of thinking about information (Reale, 2019). For example, Cunningham cites a community college librarian who, in order to help career-technical faculty understand the relevance of information literacy to their students' future work lives, created various career-oriented workbooks for integration into career-technical courses.

Recognizing the wide range of librarians' expertise, some faculty embed librarians more deeply in their course, asking a librarian to teach a series of modules or workshops, with each tied to specific course assignments or learning outcomes (e.g., Black, Crest, & Volland, 2001; Bowden & DiBenedetto, 2001; Dhanesar, 2006; Henderson, Nunez-Rodriguez, & Casari, 2011, Kim & Dolan, 2015; Silverman & Williams, 2014; Zachery, 2011). For example, at Hostos Community College, biology instructors wanted to incorporate complex student-driven team-based research assignments into their introductory biology courses, but suspected that their students would need additional scaffolding and support in order to succeed with this new challenge (Henderson et al., 2011). Thus, in addition to their own efforts in this regard, the instructors required students to attend two workshops taught by a librarian. The first workshop was generic (covering topics such as how to find articles in the library's online database), while the second was contextualized to the research project assignment. In the

end, the instructors were quite pleased at the progress their students had made in terms of both writing and critical thinking, but also concluded that students need more than one semester's worth of practice in order to absorb and apply information literacy skills.<sup>2</sup>

Although the evidence is largely qualitative and anecdotal, embedded instruction seems to be more effective than stand-alone workshops and courses (Dhanesar, 2006; Lindstrom & Shonrock, 2006). However, the embedded instruction model presents a problem in terms of scale-up, because each faculty member relies on a librarian to deliver the information literacy component of instruction, semester after semester. Given limited resources, these collaborations necessarily remain small-scale, and the majority of instructors across the college remain unaware of the value that librarians can add to their courses (Bird, Crumpton, & Ozan, 2012; Cooney, 2005). In general, the key barrier to incorporating information literacy into the curriculum on a large scale may be the perception that librarians alone are responsible for delivering information literacy instruction (Grafstein, 2002). While the embedded instruction model may be effective in and of itself, it does not solve this larger problem.

## **2.2 Librarian as Instructional Partner and Expert**

Ideally, colleges would define critical thinking or information literacy as a key learning outcome for all their associate degree programs, and integrate relevant learning outcomes into most or all courses in each program (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Hammons, Brooks, Chesnut, & Warner, 2019). Consequently, most faculty would need training and preparation to teach these skills in the context of their discipline. In a nod to this idea, many institutions ask librarians to develop and deliver faculty development programming through workshops or presentations.<sup>3</sup> This “train-the-trainer” model is appealingly inexpensive; however, if workshops are short, decontextualized from specific courses, and incorporate no long-term follow-up, then they will have limited utility in terms of transforming instructor practice (Murray, 2002; Waskow, 2006). Models in which faculty work collaboratively with librarians on course and assignment (re)design have greater potential for influencing classroom practice and

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar effort within a university biology department, see Bowden and DiBenedetto (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Lance (2016) reported that 60% of instructors at community colleges in North Carolina who responded to his survey indicated that their librarians were already offering this kind of programming.

producing strong gains in students' information literacy (e.g., Bass, 2012; Bernstein & Greenhoot, n.d.; Cook-Sather & Shore, 2007; Hammons et al., 2019; Herring, 2014; Lindstrom & Shonrock, 2006; Junisbai, Lowe, & Tagge, 2016; Millet, Donald, & Wilson, 2009).

In order to incentivize and support faculty to collaborate on course redesign with librarians, colleges may wish to consider several approaches. First, it is vital that a college elevate the importance of critical thinking or information literacy within key documents such as its strategic plan, guided pathways plan, or Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). For example, Hammons et al. (2019) noted that the incorporation of information literacy in their college's QEP "suddenly gave the library a platform and an audience for something that had been a talking point for decades, sometimes to deaf ears" (p. 10). Second, academic leaders can identify influential faculty across a variety of disciplines and recruit those faculty to participate in intensive and sustained professional development opportunities—such as multi-day course redesign workshops or year-long Faculty Learning Communities—with the incentive of special recognitions, small grants, stipends, or course buyouts. For example, Hammons et al.'s college recruited ten "information literacy ambassadors" to participate in a three-day summer workshop, incorporate relevant learning objectives and assessments into one of their courses, and serve as ambassadors to their programs, in return for one course release and a \$500 stipend. While the program was successful in terms of influencing the classroom practice of faculty participants, it was limited in its impacts on non-participating faculty. As Hammons et al. recount: "While on paper it seemed completely feasible for one ambassador to enact change within a program's curriculum as it related to information literacy integration, this may have been too ambitious. A few ambassadors have enjoyed some small success in this area, yet others have had little to no success" (p. 10). Thus, as a third approach, colleges also need to consider how to incorporate information literacy outcomes and assessments into the larger guided pathways framework of continuous instructional improvement. In particular, in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, we recommended implementing department-sponsored "faculty inquiry groups," in which instructors work together to identify student learning challenges, brainstorm about potential classroom approaches which may address those challenges, and iteratively test



out those approaches while lending each other personal and professional support. If colleges adopt such models, then librarians can collaborate with an entire department as a whole, rather than attempting to influence individual faculty members in isolation from their professional community and context. Similarly, librarians might partner with the teams of advisors and faculty who manage meta-majors or first-semester “college success” courses, in order to embed information literacy in ways that improve students’ capacity to explore and weigh their major and career options.

### **3. Conclusion**

Traditional perceptions of the librarian’s teaching role are limited to models such as embedded instruction or single-course design partnerships. While these models may be effective, they do not address the larger need to scaffold and sustain information literacy development throughout all students’ academic journeys. In order to fully leverage the expertise of library professionals, many administrators and faculty need to expand their understanding of the expertise and value that librarians can bring to their institutions. In turn, librarians need to be willing (and explicitly communicate their willingness) to push beyond traditional perceptions of their teaching role, and to collaborate with faculty and departments in instructional and curricular design on a larger scale. Finally, administrators must also consider how they can wield their power in highlighting the importance of critical thinking and information literacy, and in encouraging the creation and support of frameworks for large-scale instructor and librarian collaboration.

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