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Six Questions and a Strategy for Campus-wide Information Competence

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Abstract

[Excerpt] At Cornell University Library (CUL) a committee was set up in January 2005 to address the issue of information literacy at the university. The committee did extensive research on this topic and developed an approach for seeking solutions. In the course of these deliberations, I volunteered to create two items to serve as the basis for ensuing discussions.

1. a conceptual framework for this policy initiative (included in this article)

2. a document that outlines the basic or core competencies common to all constituents of what is called the Cornell community (the result was the six questions which are the focus of this article).

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Six Questions and a Strategy for Campus-wide Information Competence

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At Cornell University Library (CUL) a committee was set up in January 2005 to address the issue of information literacy at the university. The committee did extensive research on this topic and developed an approach for seeking solutions. In the course of these deliberations, I volunteered to create two items to serve as the basis for ensuing discussions.

1. a conceptual framework for this policy initiative (included in this article)

2. a document that outlines the basic or core competencies common to all constituents of what is called the Cornell community (the result was the six questions which are the focus of this article).

In addition, I knew from my years of experience in providing public service both as a documents librarian and a reference librarian that a strategy would have to be developed so that faculty, in particular, would embrace this initiative. The best of intentions coupled with good reasoning are not enough to motivate faculty to work with librarians.

Luckily, my experience at the ILR School (School of Industrial & Labor Relations) taught me that you can get people to do the right things for the wrong reasons. For example, my school does research that gets companies to treat their workers well by showing them that this will improve their bottom line. In other words, the moral issue of worker treatment is bypassed in favor of arguing for pursuit of profits through good treatment of workers. The result is the same (good treatment). However, the motivation chosen to get the good result is practical rather than moral.

Given the above introduction, the following three exhibits are provided:

A. The conceptual framework for information competence

B. The six questions that outline the basic or core competencies

C. The strategy for implementing a campus-wide effort

Exhibit A: Conceptual Framework

(Please note that the wording for this framework was changed by the committee to reflect the political sensitivities at Cornell. I present them in their original state to reflect better the thinking that went into the effort).

Basic or Core Information Competencies: Finding Appropriate Information at Cornell University

Information Fluency Strategic Priority Team

Definition:

Information Competency is directly related to the ability of the members of the Cornell community to function successfully in the complex information environment at Cornell, as well as meet and surpass performance expectations.

- Performance at Cornell University can be divided into several types including but not limited to -
- Classroom expectations for students
- Teaching expectations for instructors
- Research expectations for students, visiting fellows, and residential faculty
- Cornell employment expectations for administrators, service and office staff
- Future employment expectations for students

These expectations can vary by discipline, department, school, occupation, and position and are set by faculty, departments, schools, accrediting agencies, governments, associations and/or industry. In accordance with the ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education -- available online here- CU Library can play a significant part in helping the Cornell community to become even more information fluent by working with faculty and administrators to integrate information fluency into the curriculum at different levels.

Despite the variations by level, subject area, etc., those competencies that are common to all the groups are the BASIC or CORE COMPETENCIES referred to below.

Exhibit B: Six Questions

BASIC or CORE INFORMATION COMPETENCIES

In addressing the issue of information competencies, the following questions - in the first person -- tend to identify or clarify specific competencies.

i.	**What information resources or tools are provided via Cornell that can help me perform efficiently and effectively? And, how do I use these both on campus and off?** [Essentially, this is an environmental scan]

ii.	**Is there a way to pose a question when seeking information that is more likely to get me a desired result in a timely manner? What is it that I have to know or think about before asking my question?**

iii.	**How can I make a distinction between reliable, authentic, scholarly information and information that is less trustworthy?**

iv.	**Once I find desirable information, how do I determine which formats are most easily accessible and/or appropriate for what purposes and why?**

v.	**How do I acknowledge or credit the resources that I choose to use so that others may check my work or verify my facts if necessary?**

vi.	**How do I use the material that I find in a legal and ethical manner?**

The above are better explained by looking at the following outline that is currently being used for teaching, particularly in my classes:

Methodical Approach to Finding Scholarly Information

By Stuart Basefsky

The following is a methodical approach to finding scholarly information given any level of expertise at the outset.

Ask these six questions. In answering them, the necessary resources to meet your defined need will emerge.

1. **What information resources or tools are provided via Cornell that can help me perform efficiently and effectively? And, how do I use these both on campus and off?**

    A. Scope of resources

        1. BearAccess

        2. Internet

            a. Assorted browsers recommended for what purposes?

            b. Deep Web

        3. Library Catalog and Gateway

            a. Databases

            b. e-Journals

            c. more

        4. Data sets CISER and more.

    B. Campus contacts and networks

        1. Library Reference Service

        2. CIT

        3. School, Department, and Administrative Offices

        4. Associations, clubs, and more.

2. **Is there a way to pose a question when seeking information that is more likely to get me a desired result in a timely manner? What is it that I have to know or think about before asking my question?**

    A. Knowledge of how information is organized and made available is sometimes a necessary requisite

        1. Types of publications and how they differ

            a. Articles

            b. Books

            c. Reference material encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc.

            d. Data Sets

            e. Law & Public Policy

            f. more

        2. Types of publishers and how they differ

            a. Government

            b. Associations

            c. Educational Institutions

            d. Commercial Publishers

            e. More

        3. Types of controlled or controlling vocabularies or codes associated with the information

            a. Subject Headings

            b. Thesaurus Terms

            c. Codes for data

            d. Classifications for Legal Material

            e. more

    B. Determining what type of material and publisher can best answer a particular kind of question

    C. Knowing in advance what the desired or acceptable outcome possibilities might look like and the audience to whom the information needs to be presented (If you do not know what you need, it is difficult for anyone to provide assistance)

3. **How can I make a distinction between reliable, authentic, scholarly information and information that is less trustworthy?**

    A. Original source documentation what is it and who produces it?

        1. Fundamental sources government documents, etc.

        2. Newspapers, radio, television, Internet, personal contacts (interviews), etc.

    B. Peer Reviewed materials what are these and how to recognize them?

    C. Reputable publishers who are they and how to recognize them?

        1. Finding aids

        2. Government, Associations, Educational Institutions, more

        3. Bias? (For example, Think Tanks)

    D. Reliable methods of producing data who does this and how to recognize it?

4. **Once I find desirable information, how do I determine which formats are most easily accessible and/or appropriate for what purposes and why?**

    A. The audience to whom the information will be presented often dictates the format.

    B. Sometimes the ease of manipulation of data or literature determines the format.

    C. Knowledge of formats and their differences are important competencies.

        1. Print

        2. Digital Versions of Print (electronic)

        3. Digital information with no print equivalent (examples: Internet, more)

        4. Databases for data

        5. CDs

        6. Video

7. more

5. **How do I acknowledge or credit the resources that I choose to use so that others may check my work or verify my facts if necessary?**

    A. Know the standard citation practice in your field APA, MLA, Blue Book, etc.

    B. Know how to add information that helps identify, distinguish, and locate the material that you have found for others (for example adding URL and/or date found) in a consistent manner.

6. **How do I use the material that I find in a legal and ethical manner?**

    A. Plagiarism as an issue

    B. Copyright as an issue

Exhibit C: The Strategy

The strategy is simple:

    A. Approach faculty members with the following offer:

"During this semester or next is there not a conference or meeting that you would like to attend except for the fact that you are teaching classes during that day or time? If this is the case, please note that I (the reference librarian) would be very happy to teach your class for you. If somehow my teaching would improve the outcome of your assigned project(s), I would be delighted to have the opportunity to convey appropriate research skills while you take the opportunity to attend the conference."

I have found that this gets the faculty member to jump at the offer who would otherwise not bother to put information competence training into their syllabus. They know that this would be beneficial. But they say to themselves "Why bother?" Now they have a reason to bother - their own self-interest.

    B. Provide excellent teaching when given the opportunity. It is extremely important that the students be impressed with the session. Their enthusiasm will be conveyed to the faculty member whose class you just taught.

    C. When talking to the faculty member after having taught their class, tell them that your service is always available whether or not they have a conference to go to. This often results in your teaching being incorporated into their syllabus. Some semesters you will be teaching with the faculty member present. During others, you will be substituting for them while they attend to other matters. Note: this is a win-win situation.

As stated earlier, the faculty member is now doing the right thing for the wrong reason - at least the motivation for their positive action is less than our ideals would expect.

The result

Many of my colleagues and I make a practice of doing precisely what I outline above. As a consequence, there is a huge following of faculty members who ask for our services repeatedly. Our students are grateful for the training they have received. Where I work the administration sees the value in my work. I feel useful and appreciated. Of course, the reward for good work is more work.

Is there more?

The committee on which I serve endorses this kind of effort. However, there is much more to be done if one is committed to creating an academic culture that incorporates information competence in all its aspects.