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Information Consulting Approach

Final published version available at Taylor & Francis website

http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J106v14n03_04#.UmVon1Mphgg

**Developing Information Literacy Instruction for Honors Students at Oakland University:
An Information Consulting Approach**

By Elizabeth W. Kraemer

ABSTRACT. Entering the university setting can be daunting for even the brightest of students, given the increased coursework and research expected of them as compared to high school. To support these significant research needs and help Oakland University honors students meet their academic goals, a librarian liaison position was created to work with Honors College students and faculty, with information literacy instruction being the focus of the services the Library offers to the Honors College. This article describes the development of the information literacy instruction program for the Honors College at Oakland University and discusses plans for future growth of the information consulting relationship.

KEYWORDS. Information literacy instruction, library instruction, information consulting, honors college, honors students, liaison relationships, marketing

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Entering the university setting can be daunting for even the brightest of students, given the increased coursework and research expected of them as compared to high school. In addition, honors students tend to place high demands on themselves, thus amplifying their performance expectations (Snaveley and Wright 2003, 298). To support these significant research needs and help Oakland University (OU) honors students meet their academic goals, a librarian liaison position was created at OU's Kresge Library during the 2001-2002 academic year to work with Honors College (HC) students and faculty. Because of her background as a graduate of the honors college at her undergraduate alma mater, and the wish to create an outreach niche for herself, this author was approached about taking on the role of library liaison to the Honors College.

Building from the ground up, a partnership unique at Oakland University has been developed between the Honors College and Kresge Library to give particular attention to the school's highest-performing undergraduate students, with information literacy instruction being the focus of the services the Library offers to the Honors College.

Information Literacy Instruction Needs of Honors Students

In 1990, Bush and Wells noted that “very little exists [in the literature] on the library instruction needs of university honors students” (137); this observation is true even today, fifteen years later. It is important to report, however, that what research has been done indicates there is a vital need to provide honors students with library instruction at the college level. Yee (1984) suggests that if honors students “are to be challenged and provided opportunities to excel in academic areas, it follows that early in their honors programs they should be provided the opportunity to develop and refine skill in critical thinking and skill in library research” (1984, 4). She further remarks, “By incorporating a solid library research experience in honors

programming, these gifted students are provided with additional motivation to improve and apply their skills in finding and using information, and to become independent learners and researchers” (15). Wilson and Mulcahy (1987) agree, pointing out that because honors students are “potential scholars” even as they enter the university, “an advanced comprehensive training in research techniques is considered essential for their future work” (1987, 700). Wilson and Mulcahy go on to conclude that, in actuality, honors students “require more focused attention than the average student due to their high research expectations” (702).

It is often presumed that honors students have a familiarity with library systems and services beyond that of the mainstream undergraduate students (Bush and Wells 1990), but a review of the literature indicates that honors students “are equally as likely as mainstream students to experience ‘library anxiety’ and to be ill-informed about information gathering techniques and strategies” (Snaveley and Wright 2003, 299). A number of studies support this statement, indicating that honors students do not, in fact, possess a greater grasp on the research process than other undergraduates (Bush and Wells 1990; Wiggins 1994; Wilson and Mulcahy 1987; Woodard 1996), in spite of the high expectations that faculty members and librarians are likely to place on such academically motivated students. This holds true at Oakland University as well, where many honors students request one-on-one research consultations with the librarian liaison after in-class library instruction sessions, in order to gain confidence as researchers and navigate library resources more efficiently.

Designing a Library Instruction Program for Honors Students

As Woodard (1996) discovered of honors students, “these relatively sophisticated undergraduates knew little about the cognitive process of defining a research topic” (1996, 136-137). Therefore, it is essential that librarians not only explain what resources are available to

students and how to use the resources, but also focus on the development of students' analytical skills. Using such a method in library instruction can reach even the most reluctant of honors instructional groups, as illustrated by Loomis and Herrling (1993) who noted of the students in their study, "they were honors students who prided themselves in being above average, who were extremely competitive, and who, though they might grumble while doing it, worked well with a problem-solving approach" (1993, 86). Emphasizing problem-solving and evaluation of resources over mere memorization of databases and tools will provide students with "a solid background in library use that is transferable to many subject areas," (Yee 1984, 14) which will help them succeed in graduate school and on into their professional lives.

As honors students advance in their college careers, not only will their research needs change, but similarly, the manner in which they prefer to receive assistance will change as well. In his study on conceptual level development of honors students, Skipper (1990) reported that "Freshmen expressed a significantly greater preference for lecture than seniors, while seniors expressed a higher preference for independent study" (1990, 8). His results showed that honors freshmen prefer learning "factual information that should be recalled and examined by objective tests" and that seniors would rather learn alone in the library, learn through simulation, and tend to value professors who require independent learning (9). Skipper explains, "Being in a new environment and a prestigious program that demands a very high grade point average to continue may create insecurity that is reduced by professor dominated classes when factual information is valued for its certainty" (10).

One way in which a problem-solving model and the learning environment structure concept can be tied together smoothly in library instruction is by using small group work. For example, students' analytical skills can be developed "by allowing them to carefully define their research topics, either individually or in small groups, by preparing a list of questions which will

need to be answered for each of their topics” (Yee 1984, 8). Groups in lower level honors classes can be provided with lots of feedback and guidance on the development of their topics from both the professor and the librarian, and higher level students can “be provided opportunities to explore more advanced types of reference sources, and to produce a more complete final product” (Yee 1984, 11-12).

Situating Information Literacy Instruction in the Honors College Curriculum

Simply put, not even the most transformative information literacy teaching technique can be integrated effectively into an honors curriculum without faculty buy-in. Therefore, promoting the need for honors library instruction is the key to a successful partnership. Yee (1984) observed, “In order to successfully structure student experiences with research, a close alliance with the university librarians is beneficial for all involved” (1984, 4); the trick is developing such an alliance.

In the early 2000s, Donald G. Frank and colleagues (Frank and Howell 2003; Frank et al. 2001) applied the concept of information consulting to academic libraries, thus providing a proactive model for building bridges between the library and the students and faculty on campus. Whereas the traditional departmental liaison is often a passive role for the librarian, information consultancy draws on different skills, as “the consultant takes the initiative to develop active partnership with scholars, conferring and deliberating on important instructional and research issues” (Frank et al. 2001, 92). Frank and fellow researchers noted in 2001 that information consulting “facilitates the integration of libraries into critically important teaching, learning, and research processes” (90); moreover, information consulting “helps us move beyond traditional ways of thinking about libraries and toward innovative ways of meeting the changing needs of our user communities” (95). And finally, information consulting challenges librarians to market

and offer relevant, timely services, which increase the Library's "efficacy, visibility, and image" on campus (90). Describing how information consultants take an active role in the scholarly community, Frank and Howell explain in their 2003 article that consultants spotlight "content, with value-added information tailored or customized for scholars," they advocate for "the information needs of a specific clientele," and that information consultants focus on the learning process, "working closely with faculty to develop and shape student learning experiences at all levels" (2003, 26). These features of information consulting make it an ideal approach to partnering with an honors program for the purpose of developing an effective information literacy program.

Honors Library Instruction at OU

At Oakland University, courses are offered by the Honors College during the fall and winter semesters, and are categorized into one of the following Core Curriculum disciplines: Art; Literature; Western Civilization; Global Perspective; Social Science; Formal Reasoning; and Natural Science or Technology (*Oakland University 2005-2006 Undergraduate Catalog* 2005).

Instructors for the courses are primarily drawn from within OU, though occasionally outside faculty are sought as well. A few instructors teach in the honors program every semester, but otherwise the Honors College faculty revolves continuously. Marketing the value of library instruction directly to incoming Honors College faculty is key, for as noted by Yee, "an active public relations campaign will facilitate librarian involvement with these courses, especially through contacts with new honors faculty" (1984, 8). To this end, the author contacts honors faculty at the outset of each semester in order to offer library instruction tailored to the needs of their students. This is also an excellent opportunity to promote the Library's group study rooms, meeting and presentation space, and display cases that are available for spotlighting student

projects. At the beginning of each term, the Director of the Honors College often hosts a luncheon for the honors faculty and the library liaison in order to share informational items, to allow a forum for discussion, and to build community between the faculty. This provides the librarian liaison an opportunity to introduce herself to the honors faculty and once again encourage library instruction sessions and promote relevant services.

The growing strength of the partnership between Kresge Library and the Honors College is illustrated by the frequency with which honors classes seek library instruction. The HC Director, also an English professor at OU, regularly teaches an honors literature class and actively requests library sessions. Instruction sessions for other honors classes have covered resources ranging from science indices to online music dictionaries to medical databases.

Honors Rhetoric 160: Composition II

The Honors College introduced an honors section of Rhetoric (RHT) 160, Composition II, in 2003. The Library has a long-standing partnership with the Department of Rhetoric, Communications and Journalism to provide course-integrated information literacy instruction for all sections of RHT 160; therefore, the author can teach the RHT honors section and “regular” RHT sections during the same term. A comparison of the two versions of instruction provides interesting results: more time is spent in the honors RHT section on sophisticated research tools and techniques in order to prepare these budding scholars for future honors course projects. For example, traditional RHT 160 students tend to focus on finding articles solely for their current topics, so their instruction focuses on general-interest article databases; for the students in the honors section of RHT 160, however, the author emphasizes the importance of obtaining a comfort level with research tools in their disciplines and will spend any available time showing individual students advanced databases specific to their fields of study. Also, the honors section

completes an additional guided research assignment worksheet that directs students through locating subject-specific databases on the library web site, and students are asked to analyze their results to determine if the keyword search they used produced relevant results. The author's approach to teaching the honors section of RHT 160 puts into the practice the suggestion that librarians "might participate with honors basic studies faculty to design activities or assignments which introduce students to information sources that would be needed for research assignments at this stage and later" (Yee 1984, 8).

Work with this course has gone beyond standard library instruction as well: for two semesters, one faculty member who regularly teaches the honors section of Composition II has invited this author to speak to the Rhetoric class about her own research and publication experiences, thus allowing the author to illustrate how one person might go from performing research to getting that research published. This is one example of how the author's teaching opportunities have been enhanced by using an information consulting approach in her liaison duties with the Honors College.

Honors 390: Introduction to the Thesis

In the winter semester of 2005, the Honors College launched a new course as part of the required curriculum for honors students: HC 390, Introduction to the Thesis. Required for juniors in the Honors College, this course introduces students to the development of the thesis statement, scholarship across the disciplines, research techniques, appropriate documentation, and writing the thesis proposal (*Oakland University 2005-2006 Undergraduate Catalog* 2005, 458).

The growing strength of the author's information consulting relationship was demonstrated when the Director of the Honors College sought her input when developing the syllabus of the course for the first time, conferring with her on how to best integrate information

literacy instruction into the course. The honors thesis “is often the first extended and intensive literature review that students have conducted, so that research strategies are just being practiced and honed” (Snaveley and Wright 2003, 299); because of this, it is clear that information literacy instruction is critical for the students in HC 390. The effective integration of library instruction into this new course has become a main goal of the author, a goal that is being pursued actively. Meeting with honors students as they begin to explore their final projects will also serve as a book-end to their library instruction experiences at Oakland University and allow the author to see how their research skills have developed since working with the students in the honors section of RHT 160.

During the first semester that HC 390 was offered, the students had two library instruction sessions, one in which basic library services were introduced and general resources demonstrated, and the second session used for small group consultations according to discipline of study. It was quickly determined that this format did not provide enough time to introduce students to the research tools and techniques that would be most valuable to them as they begin their thesis research. In the second semester the course was taught, the students spent four class sessions in the library. During the first library session, students were once again introduced to general tools that would be relevant across all disciplines. In the second session, the author asked the students to browse journal holdings in the current periodicals section of the Library so that they could see what topics were being discussed in journals relevant to their fields. For the third instructional session, the author provided tips to the students on determining which journals are most relevant to their research, and gave them in-class research time while holding on-the-spot individual research consultations as the class period allowed. Finally, an end-of-the-semester consultation session was added to the syllabus, to allow the students the opportunity to ask the

librarian or their course instructor any last questions on either their research strategies or their thesis proposals.

During the first semester of HC 390, the author received no requests for additional assistance from the students outside of class; however, during the second semester of HC 390, a number of students requested additional assistance through research consultations. These follow-up questions addressed a range of needs: for example, one student asked for suggestions on how to obtain a test on learning styles, another inquired where to look to find current business trends, and one struggling student sought additional help to re-focus her thesis topic. This increase in research consultations suggests that the additional in-class contact time does, at least, allow the students to feel more comfortable with the librarian liaison and makes them more willing to ask for help.

The biggest instructional challenge of HC 390 thus far has been the broad spectrum of topics being researched each semester, contributing to the author's intuition that the overall plan of instruction for the course lacked coherence and focus. Determining the most effective use of every student's time during group library instruction sessions is challenging, as each scholar needs to learn his or her way around different databases. Because of this, the author and the HC Director have met on several occasions to discuss techniques for making the library sessions more relevant to the students. Recent meetings have also included the current instructor of the course, a faculty member from OU's English Department. Frank, Raschke, Wood, and Yang (2001) noted, "When scholars have a strong relationship with their consultants they are also inclined to invite the consultant to participate in curriculum development" (2001, 93). This statement holds true at Oakland University, as the author continues to work with the HC Director and HC 390 instructor to make information literacy instruction an integral and valuable part of the Introduction to the Thesis honors course.

Directions for Future Growth at OU

As mentioned above, information literacy instruction for HC 390 provides a special challenge, in that each student is researching a different topic, crossing the gamut of disciplines; therefore, simply providing library instruction on specific resources is not productive. Yee (1984) stated that librarians “must begin to focus less on tool usage, and more on the development of problem-solving skills which can cross discipline boundaries” (1984, 4); in other words, one must stress the “transferability of information seeking” (9). One method for helping honors students at Oakland University develop this transferability would be through an HC 390 research portfolio. Rather than merely doing exercises and worksheets during the library instruction sessions focusing on searching skills, compiling a portfolio would encapsulate the students’ research process as a whole, tracing the evolution of the topic, presenting the research itself, and also collecting in one place key articles and other sources for the honors thesis literature reviews (Snively and Wright 2003, 302). Snively and Wright reported from their use of a research portfolio in an honors course that students “were able to monitor their own progress” and develop an effective research approach for their thesis topic (302), ultimately allowing them to “see the connectedness of the work” (301). Snively and Wright indicated, “Students overwhelmingly felt their portfolio would be of great assistance to them in the creation of their honors thesis” (302). Reviewing a portfolio also enhances a teacher’s ability to assess progress and provide more meaningful feedback; additionally, faculty who worked with students from Snively and Wright’s study noted that the annotated bibliographies and literature reviews turned in were of “significantly higher quality” than in previous semesters (302). Finally, a research portfolio project follows the learning environment theory reported by Skipper (1990), who found that highly intelligent freshmen honors students prefer greater structure, while high-

performing upper level students prefer learning alone in the library and value professors who require independent learning (1990, 9), both of which would underscore the process of completing the portfolio.

Another improvement to the honors library instruction program at Oakland University will be to include more time for in-class discussion sessions for all the honors classes that come to the Library, in order to allow students to share research problems with fellow honors students, thus fostering “mutual learning” (Yee 1984, 13-14). Additionally, honors students could be granted special library privileges, such as extended loan periods on books.

The partnership between Kresge Library and the Oakland University Honors College has developed smoothly thus far, and the collaboration has strengthened each semester. However, there is work yet to be done. For one, the author would like to create more connections to the Library for lower-level honors students, so that they are less intimidated by the Library and its resources. One means to accomplish this is to reach out to students not just in the classroom, but also in the residence halls where many honors students live. To this end, the author has begun discussion with honors students about ways to bring the Library to the residence halls, be that in the form of a casual “meet and greet the librarian” program or a newsletter. Beyond this, the librarian liaison will continue to develop services proactively for the honors community at OU and “provide experiences which additionally challenge these students and add another dimension to their academic programs” (Yee 1984, 3).

Conclusion

Frank and Howell (2003) noted, “Ongoing relationships with centers of academic excellence also provide opportunities to integrate academic libraries into important activities and programs associated with excellence in teaching and learning” (2003, 24). Such valuable

relationships need constant attention, and may be best served using an information consulting approach, which, when effective, “elevates the status of librarians and libraries” (Frank et al. 2001, 95). As outlined above, the author has carried out her outreach duties with the OU Honors College using an information consulting approach, and has taken the relationship beyond that of traditional departmental liaison, thereby augmenting the partnership between the Library and the Honors College. With plans in place for future growth of the honors information literacy instruction program, the author looks forward to a continued collaboration with even more opportunities to connect with the honors community at Oakland University.

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