

ZEROING IN ON A MOVING TARGET: STRATEGIES FOR REACHING TRANSIENT TEACHERS

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Instruction librarians agree that effectively reaching faculty is crucial to the success of any library instruction program, yet reaching all faculty can be more difficult than initially anticipated. Increasingly larger numbers of college teachers are either non-tenure-track or graduate teaching assistants. Unfortunately, these groups can be notoriously difficult to reach since they often act like “moving targets.” Graduate teaching assistants usually move on to other institutions or employment, and non-tenure-track positions are indefinite. How do we reach transient teachers who often teach in less than ideal circumstances? Who are they, what do they want from library instruction, and how can we meet their needs in ways that ultimately will best serve students? To address these questions, we have reviewed literature on higher education employment and library outreach to teaching faculty. We also conducted an online survey of teachers responsible for rhetoric courses at the University of Illinois at Urbana – Champaign (UIUC). This paper presents results from this research and offers strategies for communicating with these often transient—but still vital—teachers.

WHO ARE THE TEACHERS?

More than 630,000 full-time faculty were employed in the United States in fall 2003, according to Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data collected from more than 6,500 postsecondary institutions by the National Center for Education Statistics. Of these faculty, 35% are non-tenure-track. More than 888,656 faculty have primarily instructional duties; 381,609 are full-time and 480,914 are part-time. Add the almost 294,000 graduate assistants employed in fall 2003, and we see a significant number of non-permanent employees involved in postsecondary teaching (Knapp et al., 2005, pp. 9-12).

Non-tenure-track teaching faculty can go by many names: adjuncts, instructors, lecturers, visiting, contingent faculty, teaching associates. Their primary role is to teach courses, rather than to conduct research or administrative duties. Teaching loads vary from school to school and can be as much as five or six courses a semester. According to the *2004 National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty* (NSOPF), an NCES survey that occurs every five years, full-time instructional staff in humanities fields work an average of 52.9 hours a week; “part-time” instructors average 38.4 hours a week (Cataldi, et al., 2005, p. 28). Their positions can be tenuous, as their contracts are often on an academic year or semester-to-semester basis. Part-time instructors often teach on more than one campus in order to approach a full-time income. At times hired only weeks or days before a term, they can receive little or no orientation to campus resources. They may teach similar courses at each institution, utilizing the same syllabus and assignments, unaware of the varied library resources available at each. Many are practicing professionals called upon by smaller institutions to teach one course per semester. They may rarely be on campus beyond the teaching time for the course. Shared or no office and computer access can make them difficult to reach by phone or campus e-mail.

Graduate students who teach also can have several names: teaching assistants or TAs, graduate instructors, graduate assistants. They generally teach 1-2 courses a semester, with duties ranging from grading to leading discussions to full responsibility for planning and teaching courses. They often have no training in teaching, other than a week or less of orientation that seldom introduces them to the library resources that their students will need to access. Many TAs are responsible for subjects in which they have little background; for instance, graduate students studying literature usually teach first-year composition. Often new to campus, TAs can be unfamiliar with library resources outside of their immediate specialty and might send freshman rhetoric students to inappropriate specialized sources (Forys, 1999, p. 232).

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All of these teachers are very busy, dividing their energy and time among competing priorities. They often are taking two or more classes, studying for qualifying exams, writing dissertations, and/or applying for jobs. Yet in many institutions they are primary points of contact for new students on campus. The Association of Departments of English noted in its *Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing* (1999) that "... adjuncts and TAs normally teach the most contact-intensive courses, such as first-year writing or lower-level literature courses, where they encounter large numbers of freshmen and sophomores" (p. 21). These same instructors often have little knowledge of the library and its resources.

Most undergraduate campuses in the United States have first-year composition courses that serve as many students' first encounters with academic libraries and research at the college level. At UIUC during 2004-2005, for instance, TAs taught 63.1% of these first-year courses, with 21.4% taught by "other": non-tenure-track faculty (Division of Management Information, 2006). Nationally, a 1999 Modern Language Association survey indicated that graduate assistants and non-tenure-track faculty taught 94% of first-year writing courses in programs granting doctoral degrees and 80% of these courses in MA-granting programs (Laurence, 2001, p. 216). Because TAs and non-tenure-track faculty offer so many of the courses that require students to develop information literacy skills, academic librarians have a chance to build relationships that can significantly impact undergraduate education.

FACULTY AND STUDENTS: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES

For instruction librarians, transient teachers present both an opportunity and a challenge. By acquainting these teachers with what our libraries and information literacy programs have to offer, we can help them understand their students' needs more effectively, prepare assignments better suited to our resources, and even make their jobs easier. A March 2006 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article reports that 84% of surveyed faculty feel students are unprepared or only somewhat prepared for college (Sanoff, p. B9). While 91% of faculty encourage students to use computers "very much or quite a bit" in their work, 73% emphasize making judgments on the value of information "very much or quite a bit" (*Liberal Education Outcomes*, 2005, sec. 3).

Teachers and librarians recognize these needs; however, undergraduates often do not. The *Pew Internet and American Life Project* reports that 86% of incoming students have gone online, and 73% use the Internet more than the library (Jones, 2002, p. 2-3). Their judgment about the quality of sources falls short, for 80% use search engines for most assignments, two-thirds say they know best what Internet information is acceptable, and 20% find no difference in quality between sites with commercial advertising and those without (*OCLC White Paper*, 2002, p. 4). A Wellesley study found that fewer than 2% of students consider non-Internet sources yet feel very confident in their abilities to find information; "overwhelmingly susceptible" to advertising and misinformation, they consider finding information more important than evaluating information (Graham & Metaxes, 2003, p. 72).

Where are the librarians when students start to research? The 2002 *OCLC White Paper* reports that when students need help finding information on the Web, 60% go to friends, 33% go to professors or TAs, and only 20% go to librarians (p. 5). Although it might be desirable to present arguments to faculty about the benefits of library instruction, concrete proof that library instruction will improve the quality of their students' research is elusive. However, a 2002-2003 survey asking journalism and mass communications faculty about the impact of information literacy programs provided some promising evidence: 55.2% indicated students' research processes improved (Singh, 2005, p. 300). A University of New Mexico study that compared student research papers before and after the introduction of an inquiry-based instruction program noted little difference. Small trends in the improvement of student research choices were encouraging, as was increased collaboration between librarians and faculty (Emmons & Martin, 2002, p. 560). Discussions with librarians and faculty will provide anecdotal evidence of the connection between library instruction and the quality of student research.

SURVEYING TRANSIENT TEACHERS AT UIUC

At UIUC, we wondered what the people teaching Composition I classes—mostly non-tenure-track faculty and TAs—expected from their students and from library instruction. Our online survey went to 89 teachers via two departmental listservs in November and early December 2005. A portion of this survey focused on teachers' expectations about students' preparation for conducting research, their experiences with Undergraduate Library instruction, and the best ways to communicate information about library instructional services.

We received 32 responses, for a response rate of 36%. Respondents included Master's level TAs (25%); PhD-level TAs (53%); and adjunct instructors or lecturers (22%). Their teaching experience varied from 2 years or less (41%); 3 to 4 years (31%); and 5 years or more (31%). Overall, they believe incoming students have little previous experience with academic research tasks. Most felt that fewer than half of their students have background finding books in online catalogs; 91% of respondents believed that 25% or fewer students come to college with experience searching article databases; 78% believed that 25% or fewer students can distinguish scholarly and popular periodicals. Yet most of their students must perform these tasks by the end of the semester. All respondents expect students to locate articles, 91% expect their students to locate books, and 72% expect students to locate Web pages on their topics. Clearly an instruction program focusing on information literacy skills is vitally important to student success.

WORKING WITH TRANSIENT TEACHERS: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

In many ways building positive relationships with our target groups differs little from working with full-time tenure-track faculty. Librarians generally work much more collaboratively than do many faculty, and it serves us well to become acquainted with

what Larry Hardesty calls the “prevalent canons of faculty culture” (1995). Among the most important is professional autonomy, which can be partially responsible for a faculty member’s unwillingness to share classroom time and resistance to change. In many settings faculty do not view librarians as equals, even when faculty status of librarians is the norm. A faculty member’s actual or perceived lack of time may also contribute to an unwillingness to share class time with someone from the outside, as can a sense of insecurity. These canons, along with the less than ideal working situations of our target groups, provide further perspective in understanding transient teachers.

Additionally, laying the foundation for good faculty/librarian relationships with full-time faculty plays an important role in building positive relationships with transient teachers, as faculty support of library instruction can be passed along to others, including their own students who teach. Further strategies include establishing strategic partnerships with program directors, chairs, or respected faculty within a department. Official liaison relationships between individual librarians and academic departments can provide the opportunity to attend departmental faculty meetings and open the lines of communication. Being aware of campus initiatives and the library’s role in their development assures both library presence and exposure. Formal introductions to the library for new faculty and review sessions on library resources for all faculty increase both library awareness and visibility. Reaching part-time faculty can hinge on the relationships established with full-time faculty and administrators, who can provide guidance.

Reaching TAs often requires additional techniques, as they might not have access to the same campus opportunities afforded faculty. Establishing relationships with departmental and program coordinators is the most expedient means of reaching this population. Most institutions that employ TAs will provide training sessions before fall semester begins. Both TAs and program coordinators often welcome librarians to these sessions. Assigning specific librarians to serve as liaisons to individual teaching assistants can promote instruction, individual consultations, assignment reviews, and other library offerings. Workshops of interest to TAs can be offered as professional development seminars. Given the generally shorter time span of many TAs’ affiliation with a department, relationships with supervising faculty and program directors are especially crucial for working with this population.

When provided the opportunity to do so through our survey, the UIUC teachers offered several suggestions for reaching them. These respondents indicated e-mail messages are the most effective. E-mail addressed personally to teachers might get more attention than listserv messages: 78% rate personally addressed messages as either highly or extremely effective, but 72% rank listserv messages at least as effective. Almost half rated flyers/notices received through campus mail as somewhat effective. Almost no respondents found announcements on the library’s Web site or flyers posted in the English department particularly effective. In many cases, it was persistent e-mail communication on the part of the library that made the difference.

CONCLUSION

Although building relationships with adjunct and part-time faculty and graduate teaching assistants can be challenging, these teachers are certainly worth pursuing. The contact hours they have with freshmen in particular justify additional efforts to reach out to this constituency. The methods for reaching these transient teachers may require added persistence on the part of librarians, but the advantages provided to our students dictate doggedness on our part. Moments of frustration are certain to occur, but our outreach to all teachers, transient or otherwise, will serve to benefit all at our institutions.

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