Reaching Out to Transfer Students: USC Upstate's Foundation in Information Literacy

ANDREW KEARNS AND CHRIS VIDAS

Introduction

Reaching all of our students in a timely manner is one of the goals of our library instruction program, and one that we doubtlessly share with many others. We have spent much time and effort building up our First-Year Information Literacy Program and developing instruction in upper-level disciplinary courses. It was, therefore, jarring when our Chancellor remarked to a faculty gathering two years ago that fully half of our new students that fall were transfer students. Say again? Half!? That meant that quite a significant part of the student body had not benefited from a timely orientation to the library and its resources. This "aha" moment suddenly put into context the perception that we needed to repeat quite a bit of basic information in a research methods class or the student at the reference desk who somewhat sheepishly admits that he has not used the library before senior seminar. Why had we not reached out to these students?

Although the library and education literature contain studies on transfer students dating back several decades, the response of academic libraries in general has been minimal. This, in spite of the consistent finding that initiatives for transfer students need to be separate from initiatives for freshmen. A recent article by John Phillips and Thomas Atwood of the University of Toledo finds that our efforts are still inconsistent across the profession, and calls for a dialogue among librarians on how we can better serve the transfer student population.[1] We hope that our presentation today helps to further that dialogue.

Kearns (Coordinator of Library Instruction) and
Vidas (Electronic Resources Librarian)
University of South Carolina Upstate [Spartanburg, SC]

Transfer Students at USC Upstate

The University of South Carolina Upstate, located in Spartanburg, is the largest branch campus of the University of South Carolina system. Our metropolitan mission focuses on the needs of Upstate communities, and many of our students are first-generation students. We are essentially an undergraduate institution, offering 22 bachelor's degree programs and one graduate program in education. In addition to our Spartanburg campus, we are one of seven institutions offering programs at the University Center in nearby Greenville, where we have the strongest undergraduate presence, offering 12 degree programs. Our graduate program in education is also offered at USC Sumter, which offers no graduate degrees, and our distance education and online course offerings are rapidly increasing.

All of this has attracted transfer students. Currently, transfers make up around 48% of new students. They have historically persisted at higher rates than students admitted as freshmen. In Spring 2010, 53% of graduating students entered as transfers. Because of the nature of the degree programs at University Center Greenville, which typically offer the disciplinary core and electives, most students there are transfer students. On the main campus, about 40% of students are transfers. Articulation agreements and a new Upstate Direct Connect program with area technical and community colleges, above all those in Greenville and Spartanburg, have facilitated students transferring to Upstate. About half of all transfer students come from community and technical colleges.

Library Instruction at Upstate

Our library instruction program at USC Upstate has two components. The First-Year Information Literacy Program is a collaboration with University 101 (the first year seminar),

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and English 101 and 102 (the first-year composition sequence), and includes three mandatory library instruction sessions at which basic library and research concepts and skills are taught. Library instruction sessions for general education and upper-level disciplinary courses are taught by library subject liaisons at the request of the teaching faculty. In practice, we have a good number of research methods courses and senior seminars in several disciplines that regularly schedule sessions, but such a system by no means catches every student, and a significant portion of students in upper-level courses have not had a systematic introduction to information literacy or the library at Upstate.

This does not mean, of course, that these students have not had any instruction in information literacy and research skills. In fact, we suspect that some may have had quite a bit of instruction at their former institution and in high school. Others may have had very little, depending on their choice of courses and teachers. Although our articulation agreements assume some degree of consistency for a course like English composition, it is difficult to know how this plays out in practice. Even if we could coordinate our efforts better with other institutions, we would still face two further issues. There are some aspects of using the Upstate Library that are specific to our situation—our catalog, the physical layout and facilities, our specific selection of databases, and how one finds electronic journal issues in our library—that need to be explained to new students. More importantly, there seems to be a disconnect in the minds of most students where information literacy concepts and skills are concerned. Put simply, librarians and teaching faculty on all levels—K-12, community college, four-year universities—attest to teaching information literacy skills, but students seem to retain very little of it beyond the level of building a repertory of survival strategies for completing assignments.

IDEAS FOR FIL

We asked ourselves, what could we do to fill in this gap in our program, to ensure that transfer students have at least heard of the concept of information literacy and have had some form of orientation to the library and its resources before they hit a research-intensive course. We began our discussion with Mary Theokas, the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Success. Following that meeting, we decided to form a group consisting of four librarians who would identify ways in which we can enhance the information literacy skills of our transfer students. In a meeting with this committee of librarians, the idea of an online tutorial emerged, and Mary suggested that it might be linked to the admissions process. In subsequent meetings with Donette Stewart of Enrollment Services we solidified a plan for reaching out to incoming transfer students.

We developed a series of 15 questions that is called the Foundation in Information Literacy, or FIL. FIL is an inventory that targets students with less than 60 hours of transfer credit. Historically, these students have persisted at a lower rate. Because FIL is to be taken through the admissions process, we limited the inventory to only 15 questions so that it would cover essential research skills, but only take about 30 minutes to complete. FIL is not a mandatory test that all transfers must complete, so the minimal time required to complete FIL is meant to encourage as many students as possible to answer the questions. The idea is to address a series of information literacy skills that we hope all students will possess by the completion of their first year at USC Upstate. It is customary for students to learn these skills in University 101, English 101 and English 102, which are classes in which transfer students are generally not enrolled.

Originally, we had conceived each question of FIL as presenting a short research scenario that ends in a multiple-choice question. We selected questions to address skills related to each of the five information literacy standards, covering topics such as information literacy as a concept, beginning research and keywords, choosing search phrases and interpreting results for the library catalog and an article database, evaluation of sources, and quotation and documentation. We provided explanatory material only for those questions that we felt we could not reasonably expect students to have learned previously, including information literacy as a concept, the Library of Congress classification system, and things unique to our library such as our journal management database, needed to find individual journal issues.

FIL has been integrated into Blackboard, which is supported at USC Upstate and is a tool to which our students are introduced during the admissions process. Any testing software will work with a tutorial like FIL, assuming the program provides some of the valuable features available through Blackboard. We can also determine who began the questions but did not complete the process, which happens on occasion. One benefit of Blackboard is that feedback can be provided to the students after all of the questions have been answered. We incorporated this feature so that students can receive input on which questions were answered incorrectly and why the correct answer applies to the scenario presented for the question. Another benefit of using Blackboard for FIL is that we are able to determine who has taken the test and how each student has scored. Specifically, we can see which questions are answered right or wrong. Blackboard also makes it easy to compile and report the results of the test. Ultimately, FIL is designed to benefit both students and librarians. The students gain some insight into the research skills required to succeed at USC Upstate and the librarians discern the strengths and weaknesses of transfer students, thereby allowing us to modify how we are addressing areas of concern.

The first three administrations of FIL have given us an insight into the information literacy skills of incoming transfer students. Average scores were close on all three administrations: 56% for Spring 2010, 58% for Fall 2010, and 60% for Spring 2011. With the exception of three questions, a majority of students selected the right answer, though in most cases the percentage of correct responses is far below what would be acceptable in a normal course-based test. Students did best on designating where they would look for certain types of sources, distinguishing the features of scholarly and popular periodicals, interpreting location and status in the library catalog, and

choosing an appropriate subject heading from a catalog record. They did less well on questions having to do with the term "information literacy" and the five standards, beginning research, and using Journal Finder, our journal management system.

In order to assist transfer students who have taken the inventory, we offer several solutions. While the feedback provided at the end of the series of questions is beneficial to the students, we want to go beyond that single solution. Students who do not answer all of the questions or who do not begin the inventory will never see the valuable feedback at the end of the set of questions. We decided to offer sessions for those who want to come to the library to learn more. We have not gotten a large response to that offer, but it is an option that we have explored. We also created a LibGuide that covers a multitude of information literacy skills in an organized and intuitive format based on the FIL questions. This is very beneficial, because it allows our transfer students to receive assistance on their own time and in areas that they select to explore. Statistics from the LibGuide suggest that the guide has received limited use after we market it to students. In addition, the library now has a Transfer Student LibGuide that introduces library services and resources and is linked to the announcements for FIL in Blackboard.

At this point, FIL has been offered to our transfer students for the past three semesters. There are several factors that seem to determine the number of students who complete the inventory. Marketing is critical. For the first two semesters we sent out postcard announcements several weeks before the semester began, then followed up with an email reminder sent out through Blackboard. Our response rates were 19.7% in Spring 2010 and 9.6% in Fall 2010. Our lowest response rate, 4.4%, came this past spring, when we did not receive postcards that were designed to promote FIL to our incoming transfer students.

Where We Go from Here

The team of librarians who works with FIL refines the inventory each year, which is an ongoing process that improves the questions over time. We continue to offer FIL to our transfers and the data provided by FIL has led us to discuss options for the future, both regarding FIL and the ways in which we follow up with the students to whom the inventory is offered. We would like to see FIL taken by more transfer students, but the trend towards removing barriers to admission precludes making it a requirement, at least for now. We can, however, better coordinate our marketing of FIL with the admissions process: distributing the announcement cards in welcome packets as they are sent out, having a presence at orientations for transfer students, and including FIL on the "to do" list on the transfer student admissions page. We also want to make FIL more attractive to students by redesigning it as more of an interactive game in which students will play until they have discovered the right answer. At the same time, we are planning on targeting a version of FIL to students in the Upstate Direct Connect program, which allows students at selected community and technical colleges to choose Upstate as a destination to complete their degrees early in their careers.

FIL is very much a work in progress, and we may be headed in more than one direction with it. What is most exciting for us is that our collaboration with admissions has given us a new way to reach students that is likely to continue for years to come.

Endnotes

1. Phillips, J. C., & and Atwood, T. A. (2010). Transferring students, transferring skills: A call to academic libraries. *College & Undergraduate Libraries, 17*(4), 331-348. DOI: 10.1080/10691316.2010.525394