

The Quarterly Interview: April Cunningham

Palomar College

-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Can you please provide a little background on where you currently work and what you do there?*

Cunningham: I'm the Instruction and Information Literacy Librarian at Palomar College in San Marcos, CA. I've been here since 2013 and in my position I not only coordinate the library's instruction program but I also serve on college committees including the Faculty Senate, the Professional Development Advisory Board, and the Learning Outcomes Council. I'm also working on a college grant-funded project with two colleagues in the library to create information literacy tutorials that faculty can integrate into Blackboard, our LMS. Thanks to the work of my colleague, Katy French, these tutorials received funding as a result of the info literacy institutional learning outcomes assessment that the college completed in 2012.

In addition to my role at Palomar, I've also contributed to the profession by serving as the chair of our regional instruction interest group, being the representative for community college librarians and the advocacy liaison to our state chapter of ACRL, being a facilitator for ACRL's Assessment in Action (AiA) program, and being a mentor and facilitator for our regional accreditor's (WSCUC) annual workshop on assessing critical thinking and information literacy. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to earn an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership in 2012, and that experience broadened my perspective on higher education so that I understand the role of the library in higher education more than I did before. And I've been able to bring that perspective to my work on assessment with librarians. It's through this combination of my education and my work with AiA and the accreditor's workshop that I've learned the most about information literacy assessment and the wide range of needs that institutions have for data that can inform their practices.

You are currently working with Carrick Enterprises, which licenses the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (aka SAILS), and who is also now creating an information literacy assessment inspired by ACRL's new Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. Can you tell us how you got involved in this effort? (For more info about SAILS see: <https://www.projectsails.org/Background>)

During one of the WSCUC workshops in 2013, I had the pleasure of meeting Carolyn Radcliff, who runs Carrick Enterprises with her husband, Rick Wiggins. Because of our work together at the workshop, Carolyn invited me to a brainstorming retreat that she and Rick organized in early 2014 to start envisioning what a test inspired by the Framework for Information Literacy (then in its first draft) could be like. I was honored and intrigued to meet with librarians from across the country who were all interested in what the emerging Framework would mean for the future of information literacy assessment. Since Carolyn and Rick were planning for a whole new test, rather than an update to SAILS, I was eager to lend my ideas to the project with the hope that we could create a test that would

provide meaningful information about students' skills, knowledge, and metacognition. That's a combination that SAILS was not designed to deliver.

Now I'm the project lead on the development of the Threshold Achievement Test of Information Literacy. I assembled an Advisory Board of educators, including librarians and professors from other disciplines in 2014, and I've been working closely with them to define the construct we're testing and to write test items.

How will the new Threshold Achievement Test of Information Literacy impact the life of SAILS and what features of this new test will be important to instruction librarians?

Project SAILS, for the foreseeable future, will be available in its current form. There are institutions using Project SAILS for longitudinal studies and so they need to continue to administer the test until their assessment projects are complete. The Threshold Achievement Test is inspired by the Framework and is designed to provide insight into students' knowledge (as Project SAILS does) as well as students' information literacy dispositions. This is an important influence that the new Framework has had on the development of our test and it is inspiring us to use a variety of structured response formats to get at higher order thinking as well as increase students' engagement with the test, leading to test results that more fully represent student understanding. We believe that by testing students' knowledge and their dispositions we will provide the profession with new insight into the relationship between these two dimensions of information literacy.

What materials (e.g., books, interviews, articles, or web sites) are you using to create the new Threshold Achievement Test?

In order to help us make decisions about how we're going to define and assess learners' IL dispositions, we've drawn extensively from the book: McCoach, D. B., Gable, R. K., & Madura, J. P. (2013). *Instrument development in the affective domain: School and corporate applications*. New York: Springer.

This test also uses a variety of different types of selected response questions to assess students' knowledge and higher level thinking. In order to learn about structuring test questions, we used the following books:

- Downing, S. M., & Haladyna, T. M. (2006). *Handbook of test development*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum.
- Haladyna, T. M. (1997). *Writing test items to evaluate higher order thinking*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Haladyna, T. M., & Rodriguez, M. C. (2013). *Developing and validating test items*. New York, NY: Routledge.

These books describe the types of selected response questions that are supported by research showing they are valid and reliable when used appropriately.

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We are also using a range of response actions, which are the ways that students record their answers to the questions. We're taking advantage of the newest browser capabilities to create interactivity (like selecting text and moving items on the screen) that we believe will increase students' engagement with the test.

At the same time, we're keeping an eye on accessibility. We have spoken with an assistive technology specialist and students with vision impairments to learn about the current state of educational technology. And as we developed item prototypes, we returned to these consultants to learn more about how the items worked with common assistive software and how students with different skills and challenges perceived the items. We have also found guidance in the growing literature about accessibility and computer-based testing. Two sources with useful advice:

- Almond, P. et al. (2010). Technology-enabled and universally designed assessment: Considering access in measuring the achievement of students with disabilities—A foundation for research. *Journal of Technology, Learning, and Assessment*, 10(5).
- Dolan, R. P et al. (2013). *A universal design for learning-based framework for designing accessible technology-enhanced assessments*. http://images.pearsonclinical.com/images/tmrs/DolanUDL-TEAFramework_final3.pdf

For content of the items, our advisory board members drew from the Framework and research about learners' information literacy development, like the [Project Information Literacy](#) reports. We collaborated to compile a list of learning outcomes, dispositions, performance indicators, and research scenario topics that our test-item writers use. These allow us to ask questions that are relevant across students' varied experiences and environments. The test items require students to demonstrate their knowledge, dispositions, critical thinking, and problem solving.

What would your advice to librarians be with respect to assessing information literacy initiatives through the new lens of the Framework?

The Framework challenges us to think in new ways about students' development of information literacy practices and dispositions. It reinforces what most of us have believed for a long time, which is that information literacy is a powerful set of skills and values for students to develop not for its own sake but for the ways that it facilitates learners' participation in discourse

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mance, I would urge you to give this tool a try. Although you still need to do the intellectual work of identifying and establishing the criteria and standards that meet your assessment goals, this tool makes the process of constructing and then using the resulting rubric to evaluate student learning a snap. It eliminates formula errors that you might make in Excel, and after grading is complete, ForAllRubrics makes it easy to share well-formatted feedback with students, as well as to analyze the trends in student performance. Overall, it has the potential

communities. Acknowledging that learning is not a solitary activity but that we still work within an educational system that prioritizes evidence of individual achievement, my advice is to try out a variety of approaches to assessment. This way, you can do assessments that not only inform your own instruction but can also provide insight into student learning that will be relevant at the institutional level and influence decisions and instructional approaches across campus. That often means something as simple as making sure to collect student ID numbers along with evidence of their learning so that you can relate their results to other data that the institution collects about their educational experiences. Or something as complex as re-envisioning the instruction program so that students engage in emerging forms of information creation as well as information use, or getting a seat at the table when institutional learning outcomes are being defined/revised/assessed so that you can influence them in the direction of the Framework. A test like the Threshold Achievement Test of Information Literacy should be just one tool in a full array of assessment techniques.

It is hard to see into the future, but what might be your best guess as to the impact of Carrick Enterprises' efforts in the area of outcomes assessment using the new Threshold Achievement Test of Information Literacy?

Even for librarians at institutions that won't choose to use our new test right away, the work the advisory board has done to define the information literacy construct will be valuable. When they are complete, we will share the outcomes and performance indicators that we have written. These will be an asset to the profession as we work in the coming years to make meaning from the Framework in our own educational practices.

For institutions that do use the new test, the results will provide new evidence to consider internally when making decisions about the library's instruction as well as results to share with institutional leaders. Tests like this one allow educators to consider their students' performance in comparison with the results of students at other institutions. As long as the circumstances under which the assessments are administered are similar, this comparison can inspire new collaborations. Because of my close ties to our nearest popular transfer institution, Cal State San Marcos, I'm interested in how the results of a test like ours could facilitate research about the skills of transfer students and help us to make decisions that will make them even more successful when they begin their upper division courses.

to be a very useful tool for instruction librarians teaching classes where they intend to assign and formally evaluate student work.

Additional Resources

- Brookhart, S. M. (2013). *How to create and use rubrics for formative assessment and grading*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Stevens, D. D., & Levi, A. J. (2011). *Introduction to rubrics: An assessment tool to save grading time, convey effective feedback, and promote student learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.