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Library Instruction

“One of the more difficult problems facing many colleges has been the retention of students after their freshman year.... A special faculty committee [at John Jay College of Criminal Justice] was formed to study the problem and it recommended the establishment of a pilot program called ‘Linkage.’... As an added support component there was created a special adjunct faculty line for a part-time librarian attached to the program as a liaison between all the groups. This so-called ‘Freshman Librarian’ would work out of the library as a combination academic counselor, tutor and research advisor for the students....Over the course of the semester the linkage students became efficient and frequent users of the library in pursuing their assignments and were the largest number to sign up for individual help....The success of the linkage program became obvious after its first semester.... The library lost some of its mystique.... [T]he students I was involved with seemed genuinely grateful and relieved for the opportunity to learn needed basic library skills.”

Robert Grappone, R. (1987). Linkage: Library involvement in a program for freshman retention. *Urban Academic Librarian*, 5(2), 31-35.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AND THE UNDERPREPARED COLLEGE STUDENT

by

Jean S. Kolliner

The underprepared college student enrolled in remedial or developmental courses in reading, writing, and study skills presents challenge and opportunity for librarians involved in skills instruction. Despite the commitment to library instruction that has developed during the past two decades among academic librarians, the challenge of the underprepared student has not been widely recognized; and the opportunity to introduce large numbers of these students to the use of library resources has been neglected. A review of the literature of library instruction as well as the literature of developmental/remedial education supports the view expressed in the Spring 1981 issue of the Journal of Developmental and Remedial Education.

Most college and university basic skills programs include reading and writing. Often they are expanded to include math and thinking skills. However, one area that is usually ignored is instruction in basic library skills.¹

There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization, for within the City University of New York (CUNY) instruction librarians have been increasingly involved in library skills instruction for remedial students since the advent of open admissions in 1970. More recently, in September 1981 the Instruction Committee of the Library Association of CUNY in a report submitted to the Council of Chief Librarians recommended university-wide library instruction for remedial students. Overall, however, the concern for the underprepared student, as manifested nationwide by the large number of remedial and developmental courses in colleges - both public and private, two- and four-year² - has not been accompanied by a commensurate involvement of librarians in these programs.

Classroom faculty and librarians have failed to realize that library skills and reading, writing, and study skills are interrelated and can be mutually reinforcing. Classroom instructors, aware of the serious deficiencies of their students, may be reluctant to yield

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valuable class time to instruction in skills which they regard as peripheral to their major objectives. Librarians, aware that remedial students will make only minimal, if any, use of library resources, are content to defer library instruction until reading and writing deficiencies are overcome. However valid these points of view may seem, they do not take into account that library use instruction, even at the most elementary level, can impart concepts and reinforce skills which relate directly to reading, writing and study. For example, teaching the use of multivolume encyclopedias to students with severe language deficiencies can provide practice with alphabetizing (a serious problem for many high risk students), introduce these students to the manner in which information is organized, expose them to bibliographic references, and provide practice with accurate notation. These are skills and concepts which carry over to the use of other library resources. They also relate directly to reading, writing, and study skills, especially when the classroom instructor requires students to summarize or outline specific encyclopedia entries.

Whatever the level or content of the remedial courses, a cooperative relationship between library and remedial faculty is essential in order to develop library instruction that is truly an integral part of remediation in language skills. The desired relationship requires that librarians seek out and exploit areas of common interest. The evolution of this relationship will vary from college to college and will reflect the organizational structure of the remedial program. Regardless of how the relationship evolves, the presence of underprepared students on our campuses provides an opportunity for librarians to become contributing partners in their remediation.

Involvement in remedial/developmental instruction challenges librarians to be imaginative and flexible in designing the library component. They must become familiar with the syllabi of the remedial courses and the learning strategies involved. Above all, they must be sensitive to the special needs of these academically disadvantaged students and the circumstances of their lives.

In CUNY, students enrolled in remedial classes are predominantly Black and Hispanic; they come from high schools that graduated but did not adequately educate them; many have part-time jobs and are saddled with family responsibilities.³ Although the profile of the remedial population may vary somewhat from college to college, the students share the hope that education will lead to escape from the precarious condition of their lives. Despite behavior that sometimes suggests otherwise, they recognize their deficiencies and are motivated to correct them. A recent CUNY study of the graduation rates of open admission

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students in two- and four-year colleges affirms their motivation and perseverance.⁴ Librarians, no less than the remedial faculty, must build on and reinforce that motivation by developing instruction appropriate to the students' academic level and teaching strategies which arouse and sustain their interest - a difficult task for which there is no formula that can guarantee success.

Typically, remedial students are not skilled or patient listeners, nor are they inclined to take notes. The traditional library lecture in which the librarian talks at the class is likely to produce many pairs of eyes glazed over with boredom. Even worse is to talk down to these students. They are, after all, adults and sensitive to what may be perceived as condescension. When the library instructor interrupts the lecture to generate lively class discussions in which the classroom instructor participates, the tedium of the lecture is minimized. Skillfully guided discussion can lead to an understanding of library concepts and the whys and wherefores of library procedures and, at the same time, sharpen thinking skills.

Although visuals - filmstrips, films and videotapes - may augment instruction, they are not a substitute for hands-on exposure and practice in using library resources. Admittedly, learning by doing can be difficult to implement. When large numbers of students are involved, they may intrude on normal library operations. Also, hands-on practice causes considerable wear and tear on reference sources. However, it provides practical application and reinforcement of what has been taught in class or explained in workbooks, and it sustains students' interest more effectively than the passive learning associated with lectures and textbooks. In addition, it brings students into the library and into contact with reference librarians, builds their self-confidence about using library materials, and helps to overcome their isolation from the college mainstream.

The introduction of discussion into library skills classes - that is, talking with rather than at students - and hands-on practice with library materials are but two of the strategies which librarians may wish to consider in their effort to maximize the effectiveness of their classes. A strategy which succeeds on one campus may fail or be impossible on another. The challenge for the library instructor is to keep trying and to communicate failures as well as successes to others involved in the same endeavor. Above all, the library instructor should remember that academically disadvantaged students, despite their lack of preparation and their need for special attention, are no different from other college students in at least one major respect: they are in college to learn and they will respond to well-designed, stimulating instruction. Just as they are challenged by the goals they

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seek, librarians are challenged to share in helping them attain those goals.

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