Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Full-Time Faculty View Information Literacy as Important but Are Unlikely to Incorporate it Into Their Teaching

A Review of:
Bury, S. (2011). Faculty attitudes, perceptions and experiences of information literacy: A study across multiple disciplines at York University, Canada. *Journal of Information Literacy*, *5*(1). Retrieved from http://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/PRA-V5-I1-2011-1

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Abstract

Objective – To explore faculty attitudes towards information literacy (IL); in particular, faculty perception of student IL competencies, importance of IL skills and instruction, and ideal means of planning and delivering IL instruction.

Design – Online survey questionnaire.

Setting – Large public research university located in Toronto, Canada.

Subjects – 221 full-time faculty.

Methods – The author designed and distributed an online survey to all full-time York University faculty (n=1,451) in March 2007 using Zoomerang software. The survey consisted of between 26 and 36 questions depending on responses selected by respondents, and included both open- and closed-ended questions. The author hand coded the qualitative data and used SPSS to analyze the quantitative data. The survey had 221 usable responses giving a response rate of 15.2%.

Main Results – The study revealed a high degree of concern among survey respondents regarding undergraduate students' information literacy skills, accompanied by a perceived gradual increase in IL abilities corresponding to student year. Faculty ranked each of the Association of College and

Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education* as being extremely important. No ACRL standard ranked below 6 on a scale of 1 to 7, suggesting full agreement with the value of IL proficiency. Of the faculty 78.7% felt that IL education should be a joint collaboration between faculty and librarians. A considerable majority of respondents (81.7%) answered that IL instruction should be required for all students. Far fewer faculty incorporated IL teaching in practice, with 52.9% engaging in IL instruction and 47.1% not incorporating IL instruction at all. Of the faculty who incorporated librarian-led IL sessions into their courses, 85% of faculty perceived a "substantial impact" or "some impact" on their students' IL competencies.

Conclusions – The author concludes that this study adds evidence to the claim that a disconnect exists between faculty beliefs about the importance of IL and their teaching practices. Faculty consistently express concern regarding student IL abilities and support collaborative IL instruction, yet the rate of IL integration within their classes remains low. The results corroborate that faculty perceptions and attitudes towards IL remain relatively consistent when compared with other studies. The author recommends that librarians be flexible regarding IL instruction models and encourage further investigation of faculty development models to achieve wider IL integration. A stronger advocacy role is also advised to increase instruction opportunities and the promotion of information literacy at the institutional level. The author identifies four areas for future research, including examining why faculty do not incorporate IL instruction into their classes, disciplinary differences in IL attitudes and adoption, which IL instruction models faculty view as most effective, and replication of this study to test generalizability. As of the study's publication, the author was conducting a qualitative follow-up study in the form of semi-structured interviews with faculty.

Commentary

As equipping students with information literacy skills becomes increasingly essential to accomplishing the academic library's mission, LIS (library and information studies) practitioners encounter the difficult question of how to best provide this instruction. One approach to this issue is to measure faculty attitudes towards IL, thereby gaining insight into opportunities for collaboration or effective promotion. Numerous LIS researchers have examined faculty responses to information literacy instruction, beginning with Amstutz and Whitson's 1997 survey of faculty and academic professionals. In the past five years the pace of research in this area has slowed, with only one other major study completed on faculty attitudes towards IL instruction (DaCosta, 2010). Without similar research being recently undertaken, this paper makes an important contribution to the literature. Though this research was conducted in 2007 and thus results in a less timely study, the topic at hand remains highly relevant.

The author presents ample context for the study and compares the findings with other researchers' work in each section. It is not stated whether the research instrument was validated or received ethics board approval, which is problematic if LIS research is to realize a more thoroughly developed and validated assessment of faculty attitudes. The methodology is otherwise clearly described and allows for replication, and the author includes a link to the full survey. The results section is thorough, providing selected quotes from respondents and descriptive statistics including appropriate charts and graphs summarizing the data. The author correctly observes that the vast majority of information literacy research is published by librarians, for librarians, and within LIS venues, but this observation does not appear to be acted upon with this particular research.

One issue regarding the study's validity is the low response rate. The choice of a survey questionnaire necessitates a self-selected population sample, which may result in respondents who have a pre-existing bias

regarding the survey's subject. Despite this weakness, an online survey was an appropriate methodology to address the author's research questions. The response rate of 15.2% is low for this type of research, a point which the author acknowledges but notes as being only somewhat lower than similar studies conducted. Additionally, this response was observed by the author as being too small to allow for statistically significant analysis of the results. The response rate coupled with a potential self-selection bias is important to consider when evaluating the study's results, but does not ultimately render the conclusions invalid.

One area for further research, addressed in this study to a minor extent, is the disciplinary differences in faculty attitudes towards information literacy issues. Understanding faculty attitudes in general may be useful, but librarians responsible for liaising with faculty and providing course-integrated IL instruction could benefit from additional discipline-specific data. The survey results indicate a difference in responses according to respondent gender, and the gender dynamic of faculty attitudes towards IL could be an interesting avenue for additional study. Qualitative research could begin to address the major question of why faculty do not

incorporate IL into their classes, a step which the author has taken after completing this survey by conducting semi-structured interviews with instructors. Most significantly, the author describes several initiatives at her home institution that resulted from the survey data, making explicit the potential practice implications for librarians seeking to develop a more vibrant culture of information literacy at their institution.

References

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DaCosta, J. W. (2010). Is there an information literacy skills gap to be bridged? An examination of faculty perceptions and activities relating to information literacy in the United States and England. *College & Research Libraries*, *71*(3), 203-222. Retrieved 5 February 2013 from http://crl.acrl.org/content/71/3/203.full.pdf+html