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Librarians in the Hall: Instructional Outreach in Campus Residences

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Abstract

There is an old proverb, “If the mountain will not come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must go to the mountain.” It can be a challenge to reach out to incoming undergraduate students who are often overwhelmed by the high expectations of scholarship at the college level and the complexities of the modern information environment. Unconventional and creative approaches are needed to reach millennial learners where they are, both physically, in terms of where they reside on campus, and pedagogically, by employing innovative and engaging teaching methods that they can appreciate and understand. In the fall of 2007, two librarians with rather unique positions at Purdue University coordinated, developed, and implemented an instructional pilot program to reach out to and engage undergraduate students. Strategic partnerships among librarians, residence hall staff, faculty fellows, and the students themselves led to effective and well-attended educational sessions that were conducted in the study lounges of campus residence halls and addressed major concepts pertaining to research, information literacy, and critical thinking.

Keywords: outreach, residence halls, instruction, programming, undergraduate students, marketing

Undergraduates and the Digital Information Age

In today's dynamic information environment, most undergraduate students would be challenged to define libraries or librarians' roles in research and in finding information. Many lack the skills to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, and synthesize information. As high school students, the majority of undergraduates rely heavily, if not entirely, on free Internet search engines for finding information. When postsecondary instructors express expectations for scholarly, authoritative information sources, students rarely seem to understand the distinction between these sorts of sources and *Wikipedia* articles, let alone where to find them. Yes, they are able to access a wealth of information via Google, but are they able to differentiate the "good" information from the "not so good" information? Can they synthesize the information into something useful for them and for others? Do they use information ethically?

To help conquer the lack of information literacy skills among undergraduates, academic librarians offer a variety of instructional services. Efforts vary, depending on the size of the undergraduate student population and the availability of instructional librarians to teach and develop instructional resources. Many academic libraries establish formal information literacy and other instruction programs; some offer requisite courses for credit on research and information literacy. Still others teach elective courses, and many supplement in-person instruction by creating online courses or tutorials. In addition, most academic instruction librarians, regardless of the type or size of the institution, teach a variety of so-called "one-shot" targeted sessions as part of lower-level English and communication courses. The focus of the targeted one-shot guest lecture is typically specialized instruction in order to assist students with finding sources for a particular assignment. While librarians frequently contribute to campus-wide orientation programs, distributing library marketing materials or speaking briefly with incoming students, the focus of this sort of instruction is usually on basics such as the location of the library, its collections, and what services are offered there. Within these traditional library instruction models, it can be challenging for librarians to provide students with essential, core information literacy skills such as evaluating and using information ethically. These sorts of skills, however, provide an essential background for any academic discipline, as they support critical thinking in academics and in everyday life.

Since most students do not seek out librarians for research help, librarians must transform their traditionally passive roles as information providers and actively seek out and serve users while continually assessing changing information needs. Particularly for undergraduate students, librarians must make efforts to engage, to meet students where they are, and to provide information and services that are relevant and useful to them. Therefore, librarians at Purdue ventured outside the traditional models to teach core information literacy skills by offering instructional sessions in the residence halls.

Residence Outreach in the Library Literature

In recent years, many articles have been published describing academic librarians' efforts in taking on new roles and implementing outreach services and programs on campus

(Cawthorne 2003; Davidson and Peyton 2007; Nelson 2007; Norlin and Morris 2000; Walter 2005; Williams and Walters 2003). Arant and Mosley's (2000) compilation cites a variety of examples of librarians partnering and reaching out to underserved populations, as does Kelsey and Kelsey's book (2003). Librarians are also reaching out to a variety of groups, from honors students to international students, student organizations, K–12 school groups, and more. In addition to reaching out, librarians are developing specialized services, creating welcoming and collaborative learning spaces, hosting social and gaming events, and utilizing engaging instructional pedagogies such as problem-based learning.

A few articles specifically highlight library outreach in residence halls. Rudin (2008) describes a variety of programs for which librarians are reaching out to users where they are, from residence halls to student unions and departmental buildings on campus. In fact, Rudin notes that a relationship between residence halls and libraries is not new, but rather a concept that has been "rediscovered" (65) since a variety of campuses have historically included libraries within residence halls before the prevalence of digital information. Dent (2000) describes a pilot project called Interactive Reference Assistance (IRA), which enabled students to connect—visually and via voice—to the University of Michigan's Shapiro Undergraduate Library's reference desk remotely from residence hall computers using a web cam and microphone. Tag, Buck, and Mautino (2005) describe library workshops offered in the residence halls for new students at Western Washington University, and Cummings (2007) highlights efforts at Washington State University, including a collaborative program with the Residence Life office titled "The Library in Your Room" that featured award-winning marketing materials.

Outside of the published literature, a Google search revealed additional academic libraries involved in outreach programming in campus residences. The University of Illinois Libraries have an established presence on the University Housing's website, featuring links to the libraries' blog as well as collections and resources, and providing information about the Residence Hall Libraries, eight libraries on campus that serve the needs of first- and second-year students. At the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse, each residence hall is assigned a librarian as a point of contact for residents to ask reference questions, receive one-on-one research assistance, and meet in groups, while instruction librarians at the University of Texas at Austin advertise to resident assistants (RAs) potential library instructional services available for residents.

New Partnerships, New Roles: The Purdue University Libraries and Undergraduate Info Lit Instruction

In the fall of 2007, 7,913 freshmen students enrolled at Purdue University's main campus in West Lafayette, Indiana. Of those, 81 percent opted to live on campus during their first year (Purdue University 2007). The sheer number of students and the university's lack of a core curriculum are two challenges Purdue librarians face in providing information literacy instruction for undergraduate students. Purdue's subject specialist librarians primarily work with upperclassmen and graduate students and provide instruction on more advanced topics in research and information literacy. Librarians in the Undergraduate Library offer a host of one-shot information sessions within traditionally freshmen-based

courses such as Introductory Composition. Information literacy instruction in freshmen classes is inconsistent, however, since it is not a required element of each section. Instructors for these courses are also teaching assistants who move on every few years; therefore, connections and partnerships are constantly in flux. To help meet some of these challenges, librarians strive to target particular user groups, and strategic partnerships prove essential for the effectiveness of targeted library programs and services.

The Purdue University Libraries' most recent strategic plan calls for "a dynamic information environment" that advances three primary goals of learning, engagement, and discovery. The goal of *learning* relates to supporting information literacy and lifelong learning, in terms of fostering competencies in critical thinking as well as information and communication technology skills. *Discovery* pertains to collaborative and interdisciplinary initiatives with colleagues across campus, while *engagement* refers to involvement in educational outreach initiatives on and off campus. (Purdue University Libraries 2006.) Several new and unique librarian positions, such as instructional outreach librarian and interdisciplinary research librarian, were created to support these goals.

The Program: Instigators and Collaborators

Instructional Outreach Librarian

In the fall of 2006, the libraries hired an instructional outreach librarian to support the goals of learning and engagement. Charged to develop partnerships and implement new services and programs for underrepresented groups both on and off campus, this position reports to the head of the Hicks Undergraduate Library, a library that focuses primarily on the learning and information literacy needs of first- and second-year students. The role is an exciting one, designed for experimentation and collaboration. Since 2006, the instructional outreach librarian has formed partnerships and developed new and engaging learning opportunities for a variety of groups, ranging from incoming freshmen to regional home-school students, adult learners, and K–12 school groups. The librarian's role in the residence hall pilot program was to develop the content and visuals for each of five sessions. She served as the primary instructor, led the sessions, and stayed afterward to consult with students one-on-one. In addition to designing presentation visuals, the librarian also designed promotional materials and supplemental handouts.

Interdisciplinary Research Librarian

Also in the fall of 2006, another unique position—interdisciplinary research librarian—was created to reflect the University Strategic Plan's high-level objective of expanding interdisciplinary research capacity and visionary initiatives (Purdue University 2001). This position would contribute to the learning, discovery, and engagement mission of the university in three ways. First, he would act as the library's liaison to meet the information needs of the eleven interdisciplinary research centers that make up Discovery Park, a 40-acre facility within the main Purdue campus that was created to integrate researchers, students, and businesses from different disciplines to work together to solve "grand challenge" problems facing society, such as curing cancer and creating renewable energy resources. Second, he would work to integrate library science into the mix of interdisciplinary research and help

domain scientists partner with librarians as collaborators, writing and facilitating proposals for new research. Last, he would contribute to the research agenda of the libraries in applying the principles of library science and defining new roles for librarians in e-science and research data curation. To be effective in this role requires a sense of entrepreneurship and a great deal of networking in order to make connections between librarians and potential collaborators. It was in the capacity of trying to create visionary initiatives that the interdisciplinary research librarian made the connection between the work of the instructional outreach librarian and his volunteer position as a faculty fellow as a new opportunity to provide information literacy outreach to the residence halls on campus.

Faculty Fellows

The faculty fellow program was established by Purdue President Frederick L. Hovde in 1966 to give students and faculty opportunities to interact outside of the classroom setting. Purdue faculty and staff volunteers are each assigned to a floor of a residence hall on campus, and they work with their floor's RAs to plan social and educational events to engage the students residing on their floors. There are currently over 110 faculty fellows in thirteen residence halls. Each hall has one senior faculty fellow who is appointed to coordinate the program and recruit new fellows to the hall. Over the course of the academic year, faculty fellows develop meaningful relationships with students and serve as resources for informal mentoring, helping to develop students' leadership skills, and improving students' integration into campus life. Faculty fellows receive a meal card, and most of them join their students for lunch or dinner in the dining halls on campus once a week.

The fellows are often asked by their RAs to give lectures on their research and work to students as a part of the educational programming that takes place in the residence halls. The instructional outreach librarian and interdisciplinary research librarian happened to be faculty fellows at the same hall. The librarians offered to give a lecture on information literacy at the hall, and the enthusiasm of the response from the students and residence hall administrators led to their developing a new instructional program, Research Project Survival, and delivering it to five residence halls in October and November 2008. Although the program began with the faculty fellows, the planning, support, and execution of the program was a true collaboration with many different groups on campus such as the Residence Hall Association (RHA) and University Residences.

University Residences and the Residence Hall Association

The University Residences department and its staff manage the operations of the residence halls on campus. Each residence hall employs a residential life manager who supervises the RAs and works with them to foster a sense of community in each hall. In addition, every hall has its own student club that elects officers to convene meetings for the purpose of hall governance and also to plan and produce social activities. Every club sends one representative to the Residence Hall Association, a student organization that serves the same functions as the clubs for all of the residence halls together. The staff of University Residences and the students in their clubs and the RHA work together as a part of the residence community system at Purdue.

Planning and Development of the Program

Goals

The primary goals of this instructional program were to introduce freshmen students to the libraries and to core information literacy skills in an engaging, nonthreatening, and relevant way; to provide informal instruction; and to help communicate the relevance of the libraries and these skills to students' academic and everyday lives. The librarians also chose to cover skills with which new undergraduate students frequently struggle when working on their first research in projects in college, including time management, project planning, topic development, and finding and evaluating information. While planning the sessions, the librarians aimed to cover what they believed to be some of the most important basics: useful, relevant research tips related to critical thinking that would improve students' information literacy skills, research projects, and, ultimately, grades. The librarians wanted to plan a program that would support the development of students who understand the complexities and challenges of the digital information age, and how these issues affect how they find and use information not only for assignments but also in their everyday lives.

Planning

First, a proposal was submitted to the libraries' administrative committee and the RHA, describing the need as well as the general idea, preliminary plans, and timeline for the pilot program. Funding was requested to support printing costs and giveaways from the libraries and food and consumables from RHA. After the program was approved by both administrative bodies, the librarians began the extensive process of coordinating logistical details, planning content, and marketing. Some of the most time-intensive elements involved with this project included the planning and coordination of all five sessions. Planning and coordinating logistics, communicating with stakeholders including the RAs and residence hall staff regarding the theme of the program and soliciting their assistance with marketing, involved major time commitments. The librarians spent hours writing and responding to emails in order to effectively coordinate logistical details and marketing. Significant time also went into writing the program proposal and presenting the program idea at meetings of the library and residence life administrative bodies for funding, support, and approval of the program. However, the work and time invested paid off in terms of program attendance and potential benefits for students.

The librarians decided to offer forty-five-minute evening sessions in five undergraduate residence halls, and they targeted halls with high percentages of freshmen residents. To entice residents, they arranged to provide food at each session (sub sandwiches, chips, cookies, and soda). They scheduled most sessions around dinnertime on Sunday evenings, when the residence hall cafeterias are closed. All five sessions were held between the middle of October and the beginning of November 2007. In December, the librarians assessed and evaluated the pilot, summarizing their impressions and recommendations in a written report for the libraries' administration and the RHA.

Marketing

Librarians worked with collaborators in the residence halls to market the sessions. This collaboration proved especially beneficial for marketing efforts. A Facebook event page was created for each session. Promotional flyers were also designed, printed, and distributed to every resident's campus mailbox. The most effective marketing, however, was the result of buy-in from RAs and staff. RAs designed their own posters and posted them in the halls (Fig. 1). They, along with faculty fellows and hall staff, encouraged residents to attend and reminded them of the events as they drew near. RA support proved invaluable in terms of attendance, marketing, and generally getting the word out.

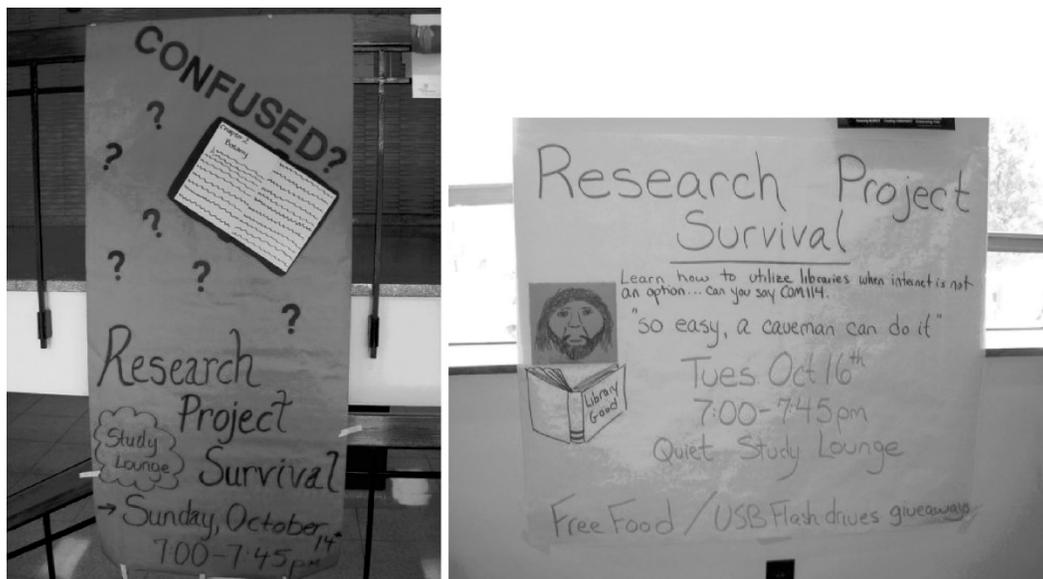


Figure 1. Sample promotional posters created by the RAs.

The Program: Research Project Survival

The program, titled Research Project Survival, included a forty-minute presentation on the top five tips for better research. With only a short period of available time and without access to computers, incorporating elements of active learning would be a challenge; nevertheless, a few elements were integrated as students were presented with several problem-based scenarios and had the opportunity to answer questions and participate in discussions. An interactive game concluded the session, reiterating the research tips covered and allowing further opportunity for discussion and socializing. Engaging, real-life examples, screen shots, and humorous cartoons and images were integrated throughout the presentation. Each session began with an introduction and personal research-related anecdote given by a faculty fellow—professors of agronomy and communications, for example—from the particular hall. After the introduction, the instructional outreach librarian delivered instruction that was structured around the following research tips:

1. Have a Game Plan

The idea behind the first research tip was to expose students to the entire research process, to encourage them to plan and manage their time effectively, and to choose manageable topics for their projects in order to avoid stress and subpar products. The librarian introduced this tip by presenting students with a believable, yet fictional, research project topic—“Write a paper about obesity. Use authoritative sources.”—and asked students to brainstorm how they would start the research process and what they would do from start to finish. Most admitted they were clueless about a formal research process, despite a few hesitantly admitting they would start (and likely end) with Google. The discussion led into a presentation of six recommended steps in the research process, beginning with “Admit to yourself you have a research project to do” (arguably the most difficult step), and then “Identify and develop your topic.” The librarian compared a more narrow and manageable topic related to obesity—“Fast food as a potential cause for rising obesity rates in U.S. teens”—in contrast with the original assignment, and highlighted the remaining steps of the research process, including: find background information (encyclopedias and reference sources); find sources (websites, books, and articles); evaluate what you find; report what you find; and cite what you find.

2. Be Smart about the Web

The librarian began this segment by presenting *Wikipedia's* disclaimer—“Please be advised that nothing found here has necessarily been reviewed by people with the expertise required to provide you with complete, accurate, or reliable information. The content of any given article may recently have been changed, vandalized, or altered by someone whose opinion does not correspond with the state of knowledge in the relevant fields.”—and asking students whether they could identify from which popular website the disclaimer was copied. At every session, at least one individual accurately identified *Wikipedia*, and at least one student admitted to previously having no idea that anyone could edit a *Wikipedia* article. The disclaimer led into a broader conversation on the pros and cons of *Wikipedia* as well as examples for viewing the online encyclopedia behind the scenes. Using a clip from a *New York Times* article (Hafner 2007) titled “Seeing Corporate Fingerprints in Wikipedia Edits,” the librarian encouraged students to think beyond “Wikipedia is bad” and to explore why its nature really matters in terms of authority and credibility. Screenshots from WikiScanner that revealed scandalous article edits proved effective in engaging the students and encouraging discussion on appropriate and not-so-appropriate uses of the popular online encyclopedia. Students were also exposed to some of the most useful function of Google’s advanced search interface, including the ability to limit results to particular dates, language, and domain type. Finally, this section included examples and discussion about information evaluation. Using two websites on human cloning (one reliable, one not), the presenter asked students to evaluate the sites based on first impression, and then introduced them to five primary evaluation criteria: accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage.

3. Look for Quality and Currency

The discussion on information evaluation and popular spots on the free web provided an effective segue for introducing students to the Purdue University Libraries as a complementary (and different) source for finding information. The librarian sought to dispel library stereotypes, explaining the usefulness of research databases as search engines for articles and other sources needed for research papers and projects. She described the libraries' website as an online research portal. Using illustrated maps and screen shots, the students were introduced briefly to library locations—all thirteen libraries on campus—as well as the primary search and result interfaces of the catalog and the libraries' federated search engine. Most of the participants were astounded and expressed genuine appreciation, noting they had no idea that these sorts of resources were available online via the libraries' website.

4. Don't Plagiarize

For this portion of the session, the librarian covered plagiarism basics, discussing common plagiarism problems on campus, popular plagiarism-hunting software such as Turnitin, and going over definitions of plagiarism and academic dishonesty as well as potential consequences. In addition, straightforward tips for avoiding plagiarism were covered, including elements of a citation and several useful websites on writing and citation styles.

5. Ask for Help if You Need It

The final section of the presentation introduced students to the libraries' research help and reference services. Complete with slides of stereotypical librarians (older women shushing with disapproving frowns), the speaker attempted, once again, to overcome stereotypes, explaining that Purdue librarians were friendly and knowledgeable research experts available to answer their questions and assist with projects and papers. The librarian showed a screen shot of the libraries' Ask a Librarian website for digital reference assistance, and highlighted the variety of ways in which one could receive research help, including reference services via email, chat, and face-to-face, as well as on one's own via online tutorials and instructional handouts on a variety of research-related topics.

After the presentation, students were asked to complete a brief evaluation of the program. Upon handing in completed evaluations, they were invited to play a wrap-up game. The game, which reiterated the five research tips, offered students a fun way to earn giveaways, including USB flash drives, candy, and pens and highlighters. Nearly all attendees participated in and enjoyed the wrap-up game.

Outcomes and Assessment

Average attendance at each session was twenty-two students, ranging from about ten participants to more than forty, depending on the evening and level of marketing support and promotion carried out by the residence hall staff and RAs. In total, 109 students attended the program. Considering that the sessions were entirely optional and unaffiliated with a particular class or assignment, the librarians were pleased with the turnout overall, even though the number of students who attended represents a small percentage of the total

number of students living in the residence halls. Because the campus dining halls do not serve dinner on Sunday night, attendance for the Research Project Survival programs was generally better on Sundays than on other nights. Free food proved to be an effective draw. Better attendance at the sessions was often due in part to resident assistants walking their floors immediately before the sessions and reminding residents of the program.

Overall, the majority of participants found the program both informative and useful, according to responses from the formal evaluations as well as feedback received during casual conversations after the sessions. Student attendance was clearly encouraged by the incentives, including food and giveaways, as well as encouragement to attend by the resident assistants. The librarians also posted beforehand brightly colored posters advertising the sessions, food, and giveaways directly outside the room where the sessions were held. This sort of last-minute marketing may have been even more effective than marketing accomplished in advance, including the flyers printed weeks before.

The evaluation form contained two questions: (1) What is something useful you learned and/or something you enjoyed about the session? and (2) What is something you wish you'd learned and/or something you'd change about the session? Both written and verbal feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Participants completed sixty-seven evaluations, with 99% of respondents noting at least one useful thing learned during the presentation, and over half of respondents shared additional general positive feedback about the program. Specific feedback included the following:

- "It [the program] was very helpful and made me feel more confident and not as stressed about research papers."
- "It was interesting to learn about how anyone can edit Wikipedia. It was funny to view the comparisons."
- "I learned to narrow my searches on the library website to find more information relevant to my topic."

Suggestions from early sessions were incorporated in later sessions, including a request for more information about library locations and overviews on how to use the libraries' catalog and databases. A handout was provided at later sessions in response to feedback and suggestions for improvement. Success was also realized in that undergraduates took ownership of these sessions by interpreting and sharing the programs' relevance and benefit in their own terms, demonstrated in part by the creative flyers, posters, and brochures that many created to promote the program.

Students from one of the resident halls nominated the interdisciplinary research librarian for an award that semester, and described the program as

. . . beneficial for all students at Purdue. The program was centered on how to find relevant sources for a research paper which included the use of the internet, the library website, and also books in the library. [The instructors] gave reasons for why sources like Wikipedia are not reliable sources. [They] also gave us ways to refine our searches when we use a website like Google to find adequate

sources. . . . [They] went the extra mile to accomplish this program and to make it fun and entertaining while still relaying high quality information to students.

Ideas for Improvement

Partnerships with faculty fellows, RAs, and RHA staff proved invaluable, although librarians were partially dependent on the level of commitment and enthusiasm of the residence hall staff for the success of the program in each of their halls. Though time consuming, communicating and working with a greater number of RAs would likely improve attendance at these programs. There was a positive correlation between the dedication of an RA and program attendance in his or her hall. Collaborations and communication between faculty fellows, RAs, and staff on several different floors and even in several residence halls simultaneously could be beneficial in ensuring buy-in, adequate support, and attendance for the sessions.

Scheduling at key times of the year, such as early to mid fall semester as new students are adjusting to academics and learning about life in college, or around finals and midterms, would serve several audiences and avoid redundancy. Sessions could also be offered on more specific topics such as particular research tools or resources. Other possibilities for outreach in the residence halls include holding librarian office hours for research assistance in undergraduate halls or establishing a resident librarian program by assigning a librarian or librarians to serve as liaison and contact for each undergraduate residence hall, as at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. Needs assessment would prove valuable in better determining further improvements to this program and ideas for new outreach services.

Future Work

While the librarians considered these sessions successful overall, they hope to maximize the impact and reduce the time and effort involved in coordinating and leading regular in-person sessions in the residence halls. There is no doubt to the benefits of in-person instruction, yet budget and staffing constraints as well as a large variety of instructional priorities and job responsibilities pose challenges for establishing this type of program as a regular offering every semester at Purdue and likely at colleges and universities elsewhere. To help address these challenges, the librarians have begun adapting the successful content of Research Project Survival into a self-directed and interactive online tutorial. The goal is to convey the core research and information literacy skills presented in the program and to capture the fun and interactivity of the sessions in a lightweight widget that can be hosted on a website, plugged into a course management system, or embedded as an application into a social networking platform. As learners progress through the five information literacy topics in the tutorial, they would answer questions and win points. At the end of the tutorial, the student's total score would be presented along with other students' high scores. Students could enter the email addresses of their instructors to have the results of the tutorial emailed to them, so that the tutorial could be used as an assignment. The results would include an assessment of the students' strengths and weaknesses and recommend

resources for making future improvements. Looking beyond the Purdue campus, the tutorial could also be made available to a very broad audience of Facebook's other 175 million active users, or adapted for specific library systems at other colleges and universities. This continues the theme of taking information literacy instruction to those who need it, where they spend their time, and in a manner that is familiar and convenient.

Conclusions

These sorts of outreach efforts, whether offered in person or virtually, increase the libraries' visibility while promoting library services and resources to undergraduate students, faculty, and residence hall staff. The success of the residence hall sessions was due to dedication and creativity, as well as effective communication and coordination with strategic partners. The sessions provided a valuable framework for the more than 100 students who attended, many of whom had never used or considered using the libraries before attending. At the very least, attendees realize now that Google and *Wikipedia* are not the only (or necessarily best) options for finding information. They also understand the importance of evaluating sources and critically thinking about how they find and use information.

Innovative outreach programming is essential in providing undergraduates with the information literacy skills essential for academic success and lifelong learning in the information age. This is especially true at institutions such as Purdue, with a large student body and no general information literacy requirement. It is up to librarians to actively seek out opportunities and meet users where they are. The librarians' role must become an active one; they must make conscious, deliberate efforts to go where their users (and potential users) are and to clearly articulate the importance of information literacy, critical thinking, and research skills in a manner that is both engaging and relevant. To do this successfully, today's academic librarians must form strategic partnerships beyond the libraries, not only with faculty and teaching assistants but also with other relevant groups on campus. These partnerships and collaborations are essential for this work and for maximizing human and financial resources.

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