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Fall 2007

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McLaughlin, Jean, "The (Un)familiar Library: Managing the Transition for a Growing Number of Honors College Students" (2007).
Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive. 46.
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The (Un)familiar Library: Managing the Transition for a Growing Number of Honors College Students

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One consequence of the substantial growth in honors programs and colleges that perhaps gets too little attention is the challenge of teaching library research skills to large numbers of students in a way that captures their interest and prepares them to do serious undergraduate work in a variety of fields. Yet these skills are the foundation for college success. This paper attempts to give some perspective on the exciting challenges of extending expertise in library research skills to a growing number of honors scholars.

All students arrive at a university with a preconception of what a library is based on their high-school or community library. Libraries feel familiar; students have been using them all their lives. The familiarity factor can impede development of research skill competency. As students enter this new world, they may feel that the comfortable milieu of their youth has grown into an incomprehensible and impenetrable fortress of knowledge. Honors college students new to a university research library observe the size of the book collection alone with trepidation. Many have never seen a library that contains millions rather than thousands of physical volumes. When they are then exposed to hundreds of thousands of items available virtually, many feel overwhelmed by these “invisible” resources. Effective introduction to and guidance in navigating these scholarly portals is essential for honors college students, who need to embark on research in their first semester.

In contrast to the daunting resources of a university library, Google and other search engines are seductively easy, reinforcing feelings of competency in information retrieval. Even though the breadth of information available on the Web is also unimaginable, students feel successful when they retrieve thousands of “hits” and grab a couple from the first page or two. It is not surprising that many students start off thinking that retrieving 181,000 Google results for a Social Informatics search is better than finding a few relevant books in the library catalog.

THE (UN)FAMILIAR LIBRARY: MANAGING THE TRANSITION

When required to find scholarly information on a specific topic without using Internet sources, students' comfort with their level of research competency diminishes. Faced with an assignment to find U.S. and foreign newspapers from the years 1850 to 1900, students may find their sense of competency challenged even further. They have not yet discovered how to find newspaper indexes or foreign publications or database options to set date limits.

Honors students faced with these assignments are not in upper-division courses but are typically in their first semester as new matriculating members of a fast-paced community. They are just starting to absorb a diversity of information about many subjects, develop critical thinking skills, discover the vast expanse of knowledge, and appreciate scholarly activities. They face all these new challenges, and they do not have the tools to traverse the terrain.

Information literacy skills taught in courses and cooperative efforts with librarians significantly influence how quickly students can move forward with real research, develop a love of learning, and feel confident in their own abilities as scholars. A solid grounding in the expanse of library resources and in how to access resources beyond the library walls, both physically and virtually, is essential to acquaint students with the world of college and university research.

Library orientation sessions in the first semester are helpful in providing a glimpse into resources at hand. Librarians hope to stem the fascination with Google by introducing efficient and effective methods for finding information that meets course requirements. Students may only have a few weeks to acquaint themselves with scholarly publications before their initial resource lists, outlines, and draft bibliographies are due. Librarians can guide students to more effective research strategies.

As the Honors College Librarian at the University at Albany, State University of New York, I offer tours, orientation sessions, and basic instruction. Some of these sessions are listed as Honors College activities, of which seven are required each semester. The sessions are meant to offer an introduction to the library for first-year students who are not enrolled in Information Literacy classes. Basic instruction takes place as a cooperative effort with faculty teaching Honors College courses.

Since this is only the second year for the Honors College Librarian position, both the position and its duties are evolving. As the Honors College grows, so does the need for more support, including support for senior theses. Managing this growth, while continuing to offer quality instruction and guidance, is a challenge. This challenge provides incentives to continually reevaluate how the library can most effectively respond to developing scholars through cooperative efforts with faculty, online tools and tutorials, and one-on-one and classroom instruction. The fact that my position was established

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is a very positive and proactive step in a growing Honors College and one important way to manage growth for the benefit of the students.

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