

# The “LEAPing” librarian’s role in a campus learning community

## Helping students get through their freshman year

by Linda St. Clair

The LEAP Program is a learning community serving freshman at the University of Utah (<http://ugs.utah.edu/leap/index.htm>). All freshmen are eligible to participate in the program, but since LEAP is not required of freshman students, students must choose to participate. Each year this successful program grows in popularity, and in fall 2001, 700 students enrolled.

### The Comprehensive LEAP Program

Typical of learning communities is the organization of students into smaller groups, “providing atmospheres or environments that are more casual or ‘intimate.’”<sup>1</sup> In the Comprehensive LEAP Program, students enroll in a freshman seminar with the same classmates and faculty member for two semesters. Students interact with other students in the class and in the program, with experienced student mentors, and with faculty recognized for teaching excellence.

The program provides opportunities for students to connect with faculty and other students who have similar interests. LEAP students study American thought and civilization by comparing American cultural traditions in selected communities. LEAP professors expect students to acquire an understanding and respect for diversity, learn critical thinking strat-

egies, develop written and oral communication skills, and experience the supportive relationships with other students and the instructor. Social events are coordinated within the program, and service-learning opportunities are offered that develop a “sense of student responsibility.”<sup>2</sup> LEAP students may fulfill a number of general education requirements, including Intermediate Writing and American Institution courses. Specific sections of these courses are linked to the LEAP freshman seminar and are open only to LEAP students.

### Students with special interests

The LEAP Program provides options for students who may be interested in variations to the Comprehensive LEAP Program. Students who live in campus dorms may prefer to enroll in sections made up of their dormitory colleagues, and LEAP has designed sections for dorm students. There are also LEAP sections reserved for students who have selected majors so rigidly structured (such as Pre-Med) that these students would not otherwise be able to participate in LEAP.

Several academic departments have developed college-specific sections for incoming freshmen. At this time, freshman declaring majors in Architecture, Business, Engineering, and Health may enroll in college-specific sec-

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### About the author

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tions of LEAP. In the fall semester, these college-specific sections follow the Comprehensive LEAP curriculum, but during the spring semester, the content of these sections is discipline-specific, and LEAP faculty work with librarians who are subject specialists to design library visits and assignments relevant to the topics being studied in classes.



LEAP classroom in the Residential Village (site of the 2002 Olympics).

### The library's role

With the library's participation, which began in 1995, students learn how to use basic technologies and library resources. Twelve "LEAPing" librarians and one teaching assistant work with LEAP faculty to offer a series of ten library sessions over the academic year. Meetings take place throughout the year between LEAP faculty and librarians to assure that the library visits and content integrate seamlessly with the LEAP curriculum. Each library session is designed with course readings and required student projects in mind, and as students attend each library session, their knowledge of research strategies becomes more sophisticated.

In the ten library visits, students are introduced to the concepts outlined in *ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*<sup>3</sup> with emphases placed on the research process, patterns used in searching electronic resources, structure and organization of information, and strategies used in critical thinking. During each library session, a librarian presents the relevant content with back up from a second librarian during the "hands-on" component. A LEAP peer advisor (a student mentor), as well as the faculty member, are present and also assist during the session. Each session includes a demonstration that lasts about 20 minutes and is followed by hands-on time, allowing students to practice new skills and complete a major part of the assignment.

Library visits, spaced two weeks apart, require students to master increasingly sophis-

ticated search strategies and to use these strategies to find information in relevant library databases for class discussions and projects. The LEAPing librarians develop all assignments with input from LEAP faculty. The LEAP

faculty is responsible for grading assignments.

During the fall semester, five visits cover the library's online catalog and various library databases related to course content. The databases change annually based upon faculty revisions to the LEAP curriculum.

Prior to the first library visit, students are given an assignment that requires them to attend a library tour, access electronic reserve readings used in class during the first week, activate circulation privileges, and sign up for a university network ID for access to the university's network and its resources from home or dorm rooms. Students also learn how information is organized within the library, how the classification and call number systems work, and how to identify scholarly resources.

During the spring semester, students enrolled in Comprehensive LEAP are assigned readings related to communities in Australia, South Africa, Japan, and India. Sessions for students in Comprehensive LEAP typically include a review assignment covering the research process, and later cover additional relevant and new databases, Web search engines, and evaluating Web resources.

Students enrolled in college-specific sections such as Business, Engineering, or Health work with librarians who are specialists in these areas. These librarians meet with faculty to develop the content and assignments of the library visits, and these sessions reflect the research strategies and library resources essential for success in the major.

As an incentive to do well on the library assignments, LEAP students are offered the opportunity to enroll in Writing 1060, "Methods and Technologies of Library Research," during spring registration. Writing 1060 is a one

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credit hour course taught by librarians, and the LEAP students are required to master the same competencies as students enrolled in Writing 1060. If students successfully complete all LEAP library assignments and enroll in Writing 1060, they receive credit for the work completed during the LEAP library visits.

**What participants say**

The partnership between the LEAP faculty and the librarians has been a positive experience for all parties involved. Each group learns something new, which is the hope behind any learning community. One LEAP faculty member stated, “Seminar instructors find that after completing the library work, students have a truly impressive capacity to negotiate the library’s offerings and to research successfully. Their papers in our classes and in their other classes profit accordingly. Moreover, we find our students acting as tutors to siblings and friends who have no idea how to use library resources the way our students do. They report a pride in their knowledge and accomplishments which we share. Library work has vastly improved the LEAP program and is one of its defining and most valuable components.”

Librarians also recommend the experience of working with LEAP students and faculty to colleagues. A participating library administrator states, “It helps me understand what seems to work best for teaching students—that is a sequential series of library sessions building on each other and resulting in learning about a complex system of processes, not just about specific sources of information. . . . It gives me experience in what other librarians are experiencing in dealing with workload challenges. Good teaching takes time, practice, confidence, and a desire for positive educational outcomes.”

One of the most rewarding aspects of working with the LEAP Program is the ability of participating librarians to develop working relationships with both LEAP students and faculty. Other LEAPing librarians agree with what one librarian

adds, “I enjoy meeting with the class and getting to know the faces of the students.”

LEAP students who have completed the program list learning to use the Marriott Library’s resources and gaining computer literacy skills among the top items they value most from the program. Recently a student stated that after a LEAP library session, “How do other students do library research? I wouldn’t have a clue where to begin without these library visits.” Another student commented, “It’s reassuring to be one of the few people who doesn’t break into a cold sweat when someone says ‘research paper.’”

**Opportunities for change**

The partnership between LEAP and the Marriott Library provides unique opportunities to try out new services as librarians work to improve the quality of the library visits. Two years ago, the Marriott Library, with the support of LEAP faculty, was awarded funding for a university teaching assistant. This award is given to innovative programs that support excellent teaching and learning environments. The teaching assistant participates in negotiations with LEAP faculty concerning the curriculum, deepens his or her understanding of library research strategies and library resources, serves as primary instructor in two sections, serves as assisting instructor in three other sections (studying the teaching styles of different librarians), and schedules research labs specifically for LEAP students.

By working with faculty and librarians, the LEAP university teaching assistant experiences good teaching through readings and observation, collaborative techniques, and using technology to enhance student learning. The university teaching assistant gains experience in teaching while supporting student learning through the LEAP labs, developing content, and providing research consultations.

Each semester, the LEAP faculty offers a special lecture series in the Marriott Library’s Gould Auditorium. These lectures are intended to supplement information provided in course readings, class discussions, and class lectures. This fall the library offered to mount these lectures on the video server located in the library’s Technology Assisted Curriculum Center. Thus, students who are unable to attend faculty lectures may view them in the

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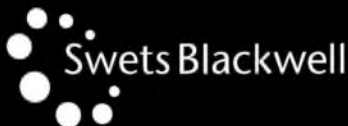
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## Call for Participation

ACRL seeks the best ideas of our profession and invites proposal submissions on a variety of topics facing academic and research librarians. Program session formats include: contributed papers, panel sessions, preconferences, workshops, poster sessions, and roundtables. The Call for Participation for the Charlotte conference is online at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/charlotte/cfp.html>. Proposals for panel sessions are due May 31, 2002.

their questions others of my own, and share them as questions that we *may* ask them. That gives them a mental head start, but I request that they not prepare detailed answers in advance or not write down what they plan to say, in order to preserve spontaneity. I also tell them that I may not ask them all of these questions, and may think of new ones as the program proceeds.

I've tried to arrange tables on the dais so that I'm in the middle and the panelists fan out on either side of me. We usually end up with the tables arranged in a large "U" or "V," with the moderator at the bottom, the panelists on either side, and the audience at the top. It's important to have enough microphones so that panelists can respond easily to a statement or question. At some point I invite members of the audience to step to the microphone with comments and questions of their own, to which one or more of the panelists may respond. At the end I thank each panelist by name for participating and thank the audience for coming.

What's missing from this model is the short *NewsHour* set-up piece. I've actually seen

pretty effective videotaped pieces, including interviews, at the start of some ALA programs. I'd recommend using one at the beginning of a panel discussion if and only if it were planned carefully and done well.

Panels that have been done this way have consistently received positive evaluations. Some of these sessions have been two hours long with audiences of more than two hundred. My experience has been that very few attendees have left these sessions early. ■

(*The LEAPing . . .* cont. from page 26)

library's student computing labs, dorm rooms, or at home. The library benefits by being able to test and improve this service with feedback provided by LEAP students and faculty.

Another librarian points out "that we used LEAP students for some very useful focus groups. They were by far the most successful attempts to get undergraduates in, and the students had enough to exposure to the library that they were able to make a number of astute observations. Two things stand out in my mind from the focus groups and general observation through the years of LEAP students: we who work here forget how big and complex this place is. The physical environment/how things work parts of the library experience are extremely important to students. Feedback from the focus groups has made a documented difference in library procedures and policies." To more effectively measure student learning, the instruction librarians also developed pre- and post-tests this fall that will allow the library to better assess student skill acquisition.

As ACRL President Mary Reichel states in "ACRL: The learning community for excellence in

academic libraries," "the idea of learning community is a powerful concept."<sup>4</sup> Reichel also notes "[s]tudents and faculty who participate in learning communities benefit from the intentional and coherent nature of clustering the courses, as well as the engagement with each other and the learning process."<sup>5</sup> The partnership between the LEAP Program and the LEAPing librarians in the Marriott Library benefits students, faculty, and librarians and places the library in the middle of a successful campus learning community.

### Notes

1. Donald G. Frank, Sarah Beasley, and Susan Kroll, "Opportunities for collaborative excellence: What learning communities offer," *College & Research Libraries News* 62, no. 10 (2001): 1009.

2. Ibid.

3. View *ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/ilcomstan.html>.

4. Mary Reichel, "ACRL: The learning community for excellence in academic libraries," *College & Research Libraries News* 62, no. 8 (2001): 818.

5. Ibid, 819. ■