The citizen in the information age

Georgia State University's creation of a librarian-led freshmen learning community

by Laura G. Burtle and Tammy S. Sugarman

In the second article of this series, the authors stated that although a significant number of academic libraries have some role in the learning community within their institutions, "the results of these initiatives have not been generally reported in the literature . . . [and these] need to be recorded."[1] This article describes two librarians' development and implementation of a Freshman Learning Community (FLC) at Georgia State University (GSU), centered on the theme of "life in the information age."

Background

GSU is a large, urban research institution in the heart of downtown Atlanta, offering about 50 undergraduate- and graduate-degree programs in 217 fields of study. Each year, approximately 24,000 students are enrolled, including more than 2,300 freshmen.

GSU students come from all over Georgia and more than 130 countries; approximately 35 percent of the students are minorities. While this rich diversity and urban location provide many benefits for student learning, freshmen often find the environment intimidating and experience difficulty becoming a part of the GSU community.

FLCs were initiated at GSU in 1999 with the goal of improving the assimilation, retention, and learning of traditional freshmen.[2] Each FLC is centered on a broad theme consisting of a complement of five or six courses that reflect the theme, as well as English 1101 (freshman composition) and GSU 1010 (freshman orientation).

Learning communities are generally limited to 25 students, which encourages the formation of a tight peer-group. The FLC advisor for each community is a full-time faculty member, and all of the colleges within the university that offer undergraduate programs participate. Consequently, beginning with their first semester at GSU, students enrolled in FLCs have direct contact with faculty who are experts in their discipline, unlike many other freshmen-level courses that

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are taught by graduate students, part-time instructors, and adjunct faculty.

The freshman orientation class, GSU 1010, features many guest speakers on topics ranging from advisement to sexual health to diversity. Since its inception, an introduction to the library and basic research skills has been a required component. In the spirit of introducing freshmen to scholars and specialists in their learning communities, the subject specialist librarian for the topic area that most closely matches the FLC theme generally teaches the library session.

In the fall of 2000, the Freshmen Studies Office, which manages FLCs and GSU 1010, asked if any library faculty would be interested in teaching an entire section of GSU 1010. In addition to the GSU 1010 courses included in the FLCs, several "generic" or "stand-alone" sections of GSU 1010 are offered for freshmen who are not enrolled in a learning community.

With the support of the library administration, four librarians agreed to teach these sections. Colleagues in the department allowed each librarian to be relieved of approximately five hours of general reference desk duties per week to compensate for teaching responsibilities. These librarians had an unprecedented opportunity to learn about managing and teaching a semester-long class. Needless to say, the students in these classes learned more about using the library than students in the other sections!

Creating a new FLC

After extensive discussions about their experiences in teaching the generic GSU 1010 courses, librarians were eager to find additional ways to build upon this initial inroad into making librarians equal teaching partners with faculty and reach students in ways other than through traditional 50-minute library instruction sessions.

Two of the librarians who cotaught a section of GSU 1010 attempted to incorporate information literacy objectives into their course. However, they were not convinced that the generic GSU 1010 was the appropriate place to do this because of the large number of predetermined modules, and because the students in the generic GSU 1010 were not part of a learning community, they were all enrolled in different classes. This made

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it difficult to focus assignments on a particular theme that was of interest to all students.

After discussion with the director of the FLC program, we developed a proposal to be co-advisors for our own learning community focused on "life in the information age." This involved putting together a group of core courses for the FLC, teaching the GSU 1010 course, and developing and teaching a two-credit seminar as one of the FLC courses.

The two-credit seminar course, which we named "The Citizen in the Information Age," was offered as a "Perspectives" course. These courses, part of the GSU core curriculum, are special topics classes that fall into one of two areas: "Perspectives on Comparative Culture" or "Scientific Perspectives on Global Problems." We felt our proposed course would fit well in the first category, since the intended focus of the classes is to impart students with a better understanding of the contemporary world.

Although we were excited to have the opportunity to create and teach a content-oriented course in our own area of expertise, as well as advise the freshmen in the learning community throughout the semester, we were nervous about taking on the challenge of providing services that went well beyond the bounds of what we were familiar with as academic librarians.

Choosing a textbook, writing a syllabus, creating PowerPoint slides for our lectures, putting content into WebCT, and devising meaningful assignments and exams were tasks with which we had little or no practical experience. However, we believed that this would be a great chance for us to incorpo-

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rate at least some of the ACRL "Objectives for Information Literacy Instruction"[3] into a semester-long course.

Keeping these objectives in mind, we looked at examples of course syllabi from other universities, as well as books and articles from various disciplines (information science, business, and history), determined the goals and learning outcomes based on competencies we wanted students to be able to demonstrate by the end of the course, and decided on a lecture and discussion topic for each of the 15 class sessions.

We planned the course to introduce students to the economic, cultural, ethical, and sociopolitical issues surrounding information and information technology in today's global environment. Our intention was to teach students to be aware of the structure and impact of information and information technology on their lives and of the importance of critically thinking about the information they use to make everyday decisions.

The course learning outcomes included the ability to identify key issues in the information age and their implications in a global society, demonstrate an ability to analyze Web sites and published material for credibility and accuracy, access needed information effectively and efficiently, and evaluate information critically.

Topics covered included communication methods, digital divide, privacy, intellectual property, copyright, plagiarism and e-commerce, as well as research methods and Web site evaluation.

"The Citizen in the Information Age"

Our seminar course had a total of 37 students (the students from our FLC and another FLC), all freshmen in their first year of college. We were pleased that students willingly participated and shared their relevant experiences during class lectures and discussions. They seemed particularly enthusiastic about several of the topics, including how communication methods have changed since the advent of the Internet and the implications of these changes, and issues surrounding intellectual property, such as copyright infringements by Napster and the subsequent shutdown of that service.

At the beginning of the semester, the students did an in-class writing assignment describing how they used the Internet. We assumed that these freshmen would be "net savvy," that is, very familiar with surfing the Web, participating in chatrooms, and engaging in e-commerce; however, we were surprised to discover that many of them did not use the Internet regularly for any of these purposes nor did they know how to use search engines to locate Web sites.

The integrated learning community

In addition to the GSU 1010 and the Perspectives course we taught, we included three additional classes in our FLC: American Government, English Composition, and Media, Culture, and Society. Unfortunately, our FLC description was not appealing to incoming students, and only 15 enrolled. That meant that with the exception of GSU 1010, all of the classes included students outside of the FLC.

In most learning communities, the English composition class can be linked via writing assignments. Most of these focus on form, not topic, so using FLC themes is an easy way to tie the community together. Given the mix of students in the English class, we were unable to create this link. However, we did create a couple of related assignments between the Perspectives and GSU 1010 courses. The capstone assignment for GSU 1010 was a bibliography, and we were pleased to see that the students were adept at integrating the information they learned in the Perspectives course about searching for and evaluating sources into their work on the bibliography.

The library was also a significant component of our FLC throughout the semester. Our students knew that we were librarians and that we expected them to use the library. The GSU library, as with many academic libraries, is a scary, intimidating place for many freshmen. Coming to the library with us and visiting us in our library offices hopefully helped our students feel more at ease and more likely to seek librarian assistance.

When we submitted our proposal for another FLC next year (yes, we are going to do it again!), we reworked it to appeal to more students. We replaced the government class with a math class to attract students interested in computer science and business. We also renamed the FLC from "Information Odyssey" to the "Internet and the Information Age."

Most FLCs this year had much more descriptive titles than ours, so we hope the more straightforward name will appeal to students. Our new FLC brochure narrative emphasizes how this FLC will help students succeed in college and keep their scholarships, and it now speaks much more directly to the students than our initial description. We hope these changes will result in a full community next year and provide us with the ability to further integrate the courses, particularly the English composition class, where using the library and information resources are natural emphases.

Conclusion

Reflecting on our experiences teaching the stand-alone GSU 1010 course in fall 2000 and GSU 1010 and the Perspectives seminar in our FLC in fall 2001, we believe that several important outcomes are noteworthy.

• Librarians gained new perspective about freshmen likes, dislikes, and approaches to learning and the world around them. This insight is helpful as we revise our approach to teaching students at the reference desk and in library instruction classes, and focus more on what students learn than on what we teach.

• Teaching faculty recognized that GSU librarians are, in fact, faculty members who can make valuable contributions to the university's educational mission. Since we attended faculty meetings with teaching faculty and participated in discussions about student learning, teaching techniques, successes and problems, teaching faculty have come to recognize librarians as equal partners in the teaching mission of the university.

• A positive start was made in the ongoing task of raising academic librarians' status and position to that of other teaching faculty in our university.

• We discovered the benefits of taking risks by venturing into an area unfamiliar to us as academic librarians. Discovering what doesn't work, as much as what succeeds, is an important part of lifelong learning.

The creation and implementation of our FLC was a rewarding but time-consuming process. We were fortunate that our library administration and the director of freshmen studies strongly believe in the importance and benefit of having librarians advise and teach critical thinking to freshmen. We would not have been able to do what we did, or feel free to take the risks we did, without their support. Their faith in our abilities to succeed made us more comfortable and eager to expand our roles and continue to seek new ways to contribute to the educational mission of the university.

Notes

1. Donald G. Frank, Sarah Beasley, and Susan Kroll, "Opportunities for collaborative excellence," *C&RL News* 62, no. 10 (2001): 1101.

2. Initial retention figures from the first FLC in fall 1999 show increased retention rates in fall 2000 over non-FLC students. Visit http://www.gsu.edu/~wwwugs/flcretention00and01.pdf.

3. "Objectives for information literacy instruction," *C&RL News* 62, no. 4 (April 2001): 416–28. ■

Obviously the selection processes and criterion are complex. Our colleagues involved in the selection process will work very hard within a relatively short period of time to ensure fairness, balance, timeliness, and excellence.

Working together, I know that ACRL will offer a terrific and varied collection of programs. Good luck, and I look forward to seeing you in Charlotte.

Note

1. The "Call for Participation" was published as an insert in *C&RL News* 62, No. 11 (November 2001) and is also available at http://www.ala.org/acrl/charlotte/program/cfp.html. ■