

An innovative first-year instruction program at Hampshire College

Bringing students and librarians together

by Stephanie Willen Brown and Bonnie Vigeland

To appreciate the library at Hampshire College, it is important to understand some of the college's unique history and philosophy. The college opened in 1970 as a creation of its neighbors—Amherst, Mount Holyoke, and Smith Colleges and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The four colleges intended Hampshire to be an experimenting four-year liberal arts institution. Hampshire's mission is to encourage students to take responsibility for their own education and to examine and analyze issues of importance to society.

The library shares the institution's commitment to ongoing experimental, individualized instruction and interdisciplinary learning, and librarians have long been part of the academic life of the college. We work with undergraduate students who will do graduate-level work in the course of their education at Hampshire.

From the beginning, students are required to do original, independent research, and this emphasis on a non-course-based curriculum requires that Hampshire students have sophisticated library skills early in their first semester. Rather than submitting papers on preassigned topics, students work closely with their professors to build a bibliography, find

current research, and evaluate the work of scholars in the field before writing papers on a subject of their choice. Like our faculty counterparts, we librarians focus our resources and energies on teaching, working extensively with individual students.

A few examples of student research may provide a context for the challenge we face in providing reference services. A first-year student requested assistance with a paper she was writing on the foraging habits of koala bears. Another student was searching for vegetables, grains, and animals that were native to Massachusetts. A third student was interested in how Japanese contemporary dance has been influenced by African American dance traditions.

History of instruction

Over the past 30 years, we have tried many different ways to introduce entering students to the library's resources and services. We have offered small group tours and large group information sessions, and we have taught basic library orientation as a part of bibliographic research skills classes. Most of these efforts were ineffectual; too few students attended the general sessions, and those who were present retained little of what we

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taught. Our in-class instruction, focused on a very specific topic, was more successful, and we continue to provide it for individual courses. Although these classes are effective, they do not reach all entering students and are presented after some students have attempted complex research assignments on their own. We were concerned that we did not provide instruction consistent with Hampshire's mission of individualized attention: we introduced students to Hampshire's bibliographic resources and services, but not to its human resources who provide essential training and research assistance.

In the past five years, the field of librarianship has changed dramatically. At Hampshire, we experienced information and technology overload as we acquired new resources and systems. Although we had included many of these new resources in our orientation presentations, we had not really changed the way we presented them, thus we found that students retreated into their rooms, where they did much of their research on the Web without us. Many students were lost amid a sea of electronic resources and came to us claiming, "I've looked everywhere and can't find anything."

User-centered instruction

We decided to try a more individualized approach to teaching students to use our technology resources in all disciplines. We envisioned a program where we would meet with students either individually or in groups of two or three during their first week at Hampshire. The goal of this meeting would be twofold: to introduce students to a librarian and to show them basic research tools available in the library. The meeting would personalize the library experience and encourage students to come to a librarian when they were required to do substantive research. The

program provides students with a crucial bridge between library technology and the librarians who will help them throughout their college careers.

We worked with the college's orientation committee to integrate library training into the general orientation schedule. We paired each of the 360 entering students with one of six librarians and developed a flexible agenda through which we would introduce students to the library. We notified the faculty that we were implementing the program and asked them to encourage students to meet with us.

During the first week that new students were on campus, we met with them either individually or in small groups for a half-hour virtual tour of the library. We conducted the sessions in our own offices, which further personalized the interaction. We began with the library's Web page, showing students how to look for a book in the online catalog, how to use the other libraries in our consortium, and how to search a few of our journal indexes. We introduced students to databases and subject pages within their areas of academic interest. The tailoring of library orientation to a student's area of study was particularly successful because students could immediately see the relevance and value of the research process.

We did not create a specific Web page for this program; instead, we designed the library's Web page to be easily navigable and used it to conduct our training (<http://library.hampshire.edu>). In this way, we effectively integrated existing Web technology into our training program and made the experience more personal for the students.

Only 25 percent of our advisees were on campus during the first week; many students were involved in precollege trips. We had hoped to make appointments with the remaining students early in the second week, but scheduling conflicts prevented such early contact. Instead, we made various attempts to reach them individually and met with them one-on-one. We sent e-mail and snail mail letters inviting them to come to the library for a research session. Some students came shortly after receiving our invitation. Others came later in the semester when they had a specific research assignment, and still others

came at the urging of their professors. Many came because their classmates had a research advisor and they wanted the same attention and service; a second-year student lamented that she had not been assigned such an advisor. At the end of the semester, we had met with approximately 50 percent of our advisees.

Student and faculty response

The comments of two students illustrate the importance of this early orientation to library service. One student was shown the online catalog and then the electronic journal indexes. She asked the librarian to explain the difference between the two. Her innocent question reflected a serious flaw in her understanding of how libraries work. The fact that she was sitting in the librarian's office enabled her to feel safe enough to ask that basic question; she may never have grasped the fundamentals if she had been in a large group session or had no introduction to the library at all.

Another student met with his library advisor later in the semester, after he had attempted to do some research on his own. When the librarian asked if he had used the library's catalog, he nodded and pointed to the shelf-list catalog, commenting, "It's kind of out of date." He was thrilled to see the Five College catalog with its nine million records and flexible searching options.

The college's dean of advising provides a further example of the success of our program. Students in his first-year linguistics seminar reported that working with their library advisor made the process of researching and writing papers easier and less intimidating than they had anticipated.

Our anecdotal evidence suggests that students have indeed learned much from our training. Now students are more likely to ask us, "Are you one of the reference librarians? Can you show me again how to use the journal indexes? Where are those subject research pages?" Several students have come back to their library advisor for help with new research projects. Many return to the library to do research and appreciate our friendly faces along with the research assistance we provide.

There is also an indication that the library advisor program is improving the college's

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Students now understand more clearly that librarians are an important part of their success at Hampshire and also that research skills are not the same as Internet skills. They return to ask us all kinds of questions, about both library issues and finding their way in the academic program. Students come to us for other reasons, too, as they do their faculty advisors. They have asked us questions such as, "Where's a good place to go mountain biking?" and "Can you join the university dancers if you're not a student at the university?" Most students come to Hampshire College because they want personal attention and want to shape their own education, and we are pleased to meet this need.

The future of our orientation program

The pilot of this library advisor program was a great success. It is clear that the students were receptive to our training and that many of them learned useful research skills. Additionally, we greatly enjoyed our contact with the entering students, which was a boost to our own job satisfaction. However, some elements need to be modified. We must be sure to include nontraditional first-year and transfer students in this program; February entrants and transfer students are especially receptive to the individual attention and independent research that are Hampshire hallmarks. We also want to have more follow-up with students after the initial meeting. Finally, we need to meet with a larger
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3. *U.S. Code*, vol. 17, sec. 110(2).

4. Note that ALA has not endorsed any multimedia fair use guidelines at this time. Note also the distinction between fair use doctrine, a part of copyright law, and fair use guidelines. While the guidelines are inspired by, they are not part of, copyright

law. This distinction is important: while courts may consider such guidelines, their ultimate judgments are based on law, not agreements.

5. *Basic Books, Inc. v. Kinko's Graphics Corp.*, 758 F.Supp. 1522 (S.D.N.Y. 1991).

6. *U.S. Statutes at Large* 112 (1998):2886. ■

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percentage of the entering class so that all new students can benefit from the program. We expect that the college's revision of its first-year program will easily accommodate our modified orientation goals.

Moreover we must continue to solicit faculty support. Faculty who mentioned the library advisor program early in the semester reinforced our contact with students and encouraged students to meet with us in the library, and this support should continue. Most important, we need to develop longer-term evaluation methods. We will meet with faculty to see if second- and third-year students' work reflects better-developed research skills. We also hope to design and implement evaluative tools to provide quantitative data on the program's effectiveness.

Conclusion

The library advisor program reflects our emphasis on service to students, our focus on individualized instruction, and our sense that technology must be balanced by direct and personal contact. In an undergraduate environment that emphasizes research, independent study, and the use of primary sources from the beginning of a student's career, the need for a close relationship with a librarian is often as important to the student's success as his or her relationship to a faculty advisor.

Our new library program encourages a solid relationship between librarians and entering students and makes the librarian an essential connection between technology and academic success. ■

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