Candice Benjes-Small and Blair Brainard

And today we'll be serving …

An instruction a la carte menu[1]

Has this ever happened to you? You've talked with a professor about an upcoming library instruction session for his class, you've put together a script based on that conversation, and then at the beginning of the 50-minute class the professor says, "Oh, and while we're here, could you show this other database and talk a bit about plagiarism?"

Suddenly, your perfectly crafted script is no longer perfect—at least not in the eyes of the professor, whose expectations for the session have changed. You either need to decline the professor's request (never a great way to start a session) or suddenly cut short some topics to make room for the new request.

At Radford University, the five instruction librarians have struggled with ways to handle this kind of situation. We wanted to teach what the professors thought would be most helpful for their students, yet it was obvious that they did not realize how long it would take to adequately cover the proposed topics. Even during planning discussions beforehand, professors were asking that more and more resources and topics be addressed. Not surprisingly, however, they were still giving us only one 50-minute class period.

Causes of the problem

As our electronic resources collection has grown, so have the number of databases appropriate for each assignment. In a freshman English class, for example, students are now expected to go beyond a single database, such as "Expanded Academic ASAP" (a general interest Gale database), and use other resources like CQ Researcher and LexisNexis.

Topics like Web evaluation and plagiarism have become hot on campus, and professors are eager for us to cover these issues with their students. We wanted to introduce students to our valuable databases, and we welcomed opportunities to go beyond "click here, type there" bibliographic instruction sessions. We kept saying "okay, okay" to professors' requests, and each semester they seemed to want another topic or database.

Additionally, new library computer classrooms allowed us to move from just demonstrating databases to hands-on activities. Students now sit at computers and follow along with the librarian; we have incorporated hands-on exercises interspersed throughout the sessions to promote learning and retention. We are very pleased with the outcome of our active learning, but there's no denying that hands-on activities require more time than demonstrations.

Finally, there were differences among the instruction librarians regarding how long each spent on a particular database or topic. When teaching CQ Researcher, for example, one librarian might emphasize search techniques and devote at least 15 minutes to the resource, while another might do a more general overview and be finished in five minutes. Professors were understandably confused when one librarian had no problem

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covering everything requested in 50 minutes and another said it would be difficult to fit it all into one session.

A menu is born

We discussed this problem at an instruction librarian retreat in May 2004. None of us liked being put on the spot at the beginning of an instruction session; it's very hard to say no at the start of a class, but it's also terrible to try to teach something you are not pre-pared to cover. We discovered even among ourselves that there was little agreement as to how much was too much to request of a 50-minute class. We decided that professors were probably in a similar frame of mind. They weren't trying to torture us with their requests; they simply didn't understand how long it would take to cover a particular topic or resource.

We decided that it was imperative that everyone—instruction librarians and teaching faculty—understand how much time needed to be spent on each library topic. It was also necessary for the librarians to agree on those times. From this decision came the idea of an a la carte menu. We would assign a price (10 minutes, 30 minutes, etc.) to each com-monly requested topic. Professors could then choose topics according to their tastes, and then add up the cost of the "dishes" to see what their final total in minutes would be. If their total cost more than the class could afford, they could cut topics or buy two in-struction sessions.

At another meeting, we brainstormed a list of the most asked-for topics. The more challenging task was coming to consensus as to how long each topic should take to teach. Knowing that we could tweak individual "costs" from semester to semester facilitated this process. If we had underestimated or overestimated the time, we could adjust the menu. Setting time limits was also simplified by our new goal of teaching consistency. We had begun to use methods like sharing scripts and team teaching so that different librarians would approach the same resource or topic in similar ways.

Publicizing the menu

When the menu content was settled, print and Web versions were created. The print version was designed to look like a restaurant menu. Each dish was given a price in minutes and a short, informal description. We used a fancy font and marbled paper to further the restaurant allusion; laminating the menu was discussed but proved too expensive at the time. This handout was distributed at new faculty orientations, at campus departmen-tal meetings, and at brown bag discussion groups led by librarians.

The Web menu[2] was more utilitarian to allow for quick downloading and to follow the library Web site's template. Dishes were listed with prices, but to minimize scrolling, descriptions of each dish were accessible via links rather than included on the menu. A link to our online instruction request form was more prominent than it was in the print menu. The URL to the Web menu was included on the instruction request form and e-mailed early in the semester to all teaching faculty members, inviting them to arrange library in-struction sessions for their classes. It was also sent to individual faculty who asked for more information about library instruction.

At first, use of the instruction menu in the fall of 2004 was low. Most professors who arranged for library instruction early in the academic year were repeat custom-ers and already knew what they wanted in a session. Some were quite surprised when we contacted them and explained that we now had a system for calculating how many topics could be covered in a 50-minute ses-sion and that they had requested too much. We sent them a link to the instruction menu and asked them to prioritize their topics to fit the time limit.

After these early requests came the on-slaught of professors responding to the mass e-mail advertising our services. In this wave, many professors were copying and pasting from the instruction menu into the online request form. Apparently putting the menu link into the mass e-mail and on the form was enough to get them to use it. Between

personal reminders in the fall and the mass e-mails, professors quickly learned to refer to the menu when requesting library instruction. By the spring semester, almost all of the approximately 200 instruction requests that came in quoted the instruction menu.

Effects of the menu (expected and surprising)

We had hoped that the menu would communicate to the professors the limitations of a single 50-minute session, but we found that the menu also served as a vehicle for sharing possibilities. One topic, "Search Strategy Techniques," was described as "Strongly Recommended." At the time we created the menu we could not remember anyone ever specifically requesting we teach search strategy techniques, even though it was something we almost always included in a session. Since its inclusion on the menu, many professors using the menu request we cover search strategy techniques, and give us time to do so.

The menu is also an excellent way to promote under-utilized resources and topics professors did not realize we offered. We have to be selective with our menu so that the list does not become too long, but we try to draw attention to key topics. One professor mentioned she hadn't realized we could teach her students how to evaluate Web sites, and, in fact, hadn't even realized they might need such a session until she read about it on the menu.

Although we cannot refer professors who spontaneously ask us to cover new items at the start of an instruction session to the menu, we have found it to be an invaluable tool during the initial conversations with faculty. When a professor begins asking for too much in one session, we can explain that the cost of the items adds up to more than his or her class time and we can blame the menu. "I'm sorry, but the menu says it would take three hours to cover all that you want."

While faculty had sometimes tried to get librarians to change their minds about how much could be taught in 50 minutes, they tend not to argue with the menu. Somehow the menu has become an authoritative source. Because we now regularly discuss time limitations before the library session, far fewer faculty ask us to add items to the session at the last minute.

The instruction a la carte menu cannot replace personal conversations with professors, but it can be a great conversation starter. For those faculty who don't know how to articulate exactly what they want from a library session, or for those who wonder what we offer, the menu provides some basic information. When we talk to professors who have read the menu, we find that we understand each other better because the menu makes clear what we will and will not be doing when we teach a particular topic. In personal conversations we can also stress that the menu is just a partial listing of our topics, and that we create new menu items to tailor our sessions to the professor's assignment and the students' interests.

The menu has become a powerful marketing tool. After being shown the array of choices for library instruction available, professors are now much more likely to request a second library session for their classes. About a third of our classes in spring 2005 were returning groups. Some professors were intrigued by topics they hadn't known we could teach; others learned their requested topics added up to more than one class period. We were pleased that either way, the professors realized that they wanted more information covered than 50 minutes allowed, and made room in their class schedules to bring the students back.

Conclusion

We decided to share our instruction a la carte menu story because it was a project that was remarkably easy to put together, yet had a strong positive impact on our instruction program. Putting the menu together took no more than a couple of hours; the most difficult part was agreeing on the cost of each item. Once we began looking at the menu as

and practitioners are welcome. The journal is entirely open access and published by the Department of Peace Studies at Bradford University in England. *Access:* http://www.jha.ac/.

• ***Forced Migration Review (FMR).*** FMR is published by the Refugee Studies Center at Oxford University, in association with the Norwegian Refugee Council. It appears three times a year in English, Spanish, and Arabic and provides a forum for the regular exchange of practical experience, information, and ideas between researchers, refugees, and internally displaced people and those who work with them. *Access:* http://www.fmreview.org/. ℵ

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a work in progress and not set in stone, consensus was much easier to attain. We make an effort to distribute print copies of the menu at every opportunity, but we believe that including the menu's URL in e-mail sent to faculty has been most effective. Professors click on the link and then can learn about the variety of instruction choices. From the menu, they can click on a link that brings them directly to an online request form. We try to make it as easy as possible—and it works.
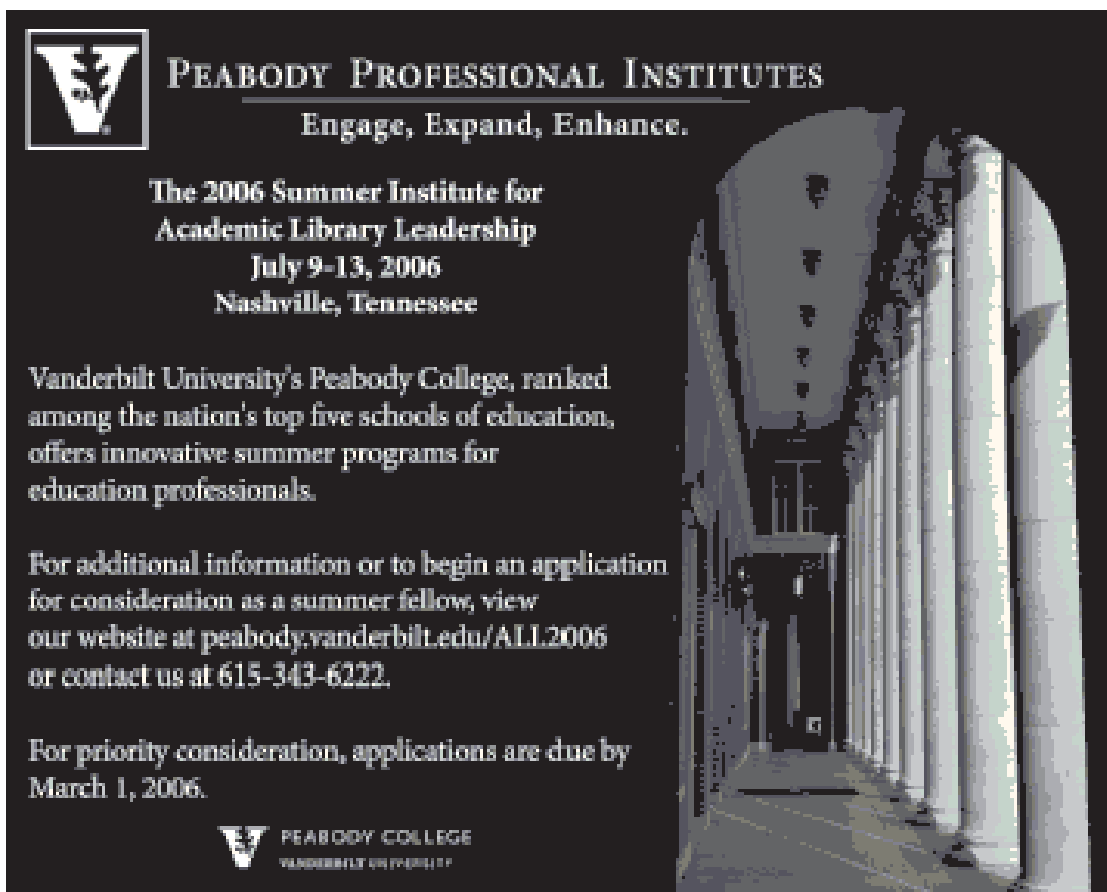
A future goal is to incorporate the menu directly into the online request form. In our vision, there would be a checkbox next to each item, and as a professor checked each box, a running total of minutes needed would appear. Integrating the menu in this fashion seems like the next logical step in making instruction requests as simple as possible.

Notes

1. This paper is based on a poster presentation given at the 2005 ACRL National Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

2. The Web menu can be viewed at lib.radford.edu/Instruction/menu.asp. ℵ