

Assessing Information Literacy for Transfer Student Success

By: [Karen Stanley Grigg](#)

Grigg, K. (2017) Assessing Information Literacy for Transfer Student Success. In Kara Malenfant (ed) Shaping the Campus Conversation on Student Learning and Experience: Activating the Results of Assessment in Action. Chicago: ACRL/American Library Association

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Abstract:

While University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) Libraries has an extensive first-year library instruction program, our significant population of transfer students have not taken part in this initiative. Librarians often teach 300- and 400-level courses to students who have a diverse range of educational experiences, and it became clear that this meant students came to UNCG with just as diverse a variety of information literacy skills. We were unable to identify how much information literacy instruction transfer students have had or how skilled they are with library research when they arrive on campus. A literature search on transfer students and information literacy skills yielded scant results at that time that we could use as a basis for our understanding of this population. Since we wanted to serve this population in a more focused manner, three librarians in the Research, Outreach, and Instruction department formed a research team and surveyed all incoming transfer students in the fall of 2014. The goal of the research study was to identify the information literacy skills and needs of our incoming transfer students to find opportunities to provide needed outreach and instruction to help these students succeed. We asked basic demographic questions, gave several “test” questions related to information literacy, and asked the students what skills they believed they needed help obtaining.

Keywords: Academic libraries | Information literacy | Transfer students | Library instruction

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CHAPTER 14

Assessing Information Literacy for Transfer Student Success

Karen Stanley Grigg, Science Liaison Librarian, University of North Carolina at Greensboro Libraries

While University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) Libraries has an extensive first-year library instruction program, our significant population of transfer students have not taken part in this initiative. Librarians often teach 300- and 400-level courses to students who have a diverse range of educational experiences, and it became clear that this meant students came to UNCG with just as diverse a variety of information literacy skills. We were unable to identify how much information literacy instruction transfer students have had or how skilled they are with library research when they arrive on campus. A literature search on transfer students and information literacy skills yielded scant results at that time that we could use as a basis for our understanding of this population. Since we wanted to serve this population in a more focused manner, three librarians in the Research, Outreach, and Instruction department formed a research team and surveyed all incoming transfer students in the fall of 2014. The goal of the research study was to identify the information literacy skills and needs of our incoming transfer students to find opportunities to provide needed outreach and instruction to help these students succeed. We asked basic demographic questions, gave several “test” questions related to information literacy, and asked the students what skills they believed they needed help obtaining.

Results showed that the transfer students over age twenty-nine and transfer students from community colleges scored the least knowledgeable on basic information literacy skills and that students who reported having previous information literacy instruction scored the most knowledgeable. The team planned to engage in further studies and saw the Assessment in Action (AiA) program as an excellent opportunity to learn more about assessment and to connect with other campus entities that work with transfer students. UNCG has made adult learners a priority, and, as research tends to support that library engagement correlates with student retention and success, this project aligned with the goals of the university. ³⁸

Collaboration across Campus

One early goal of our AiA project was to discover natural allies on campus outside of the library. Some of the external relationships I formed were crucial to the ongoing research in which I am engaged with transfer students and adult learners; I realized that prior to AiA, I had been operating in a silo, unaware of how many entities on our campus were also providing

³⁸ Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud, “Library Use and Undergraduate Student Outcomes: New Evidence for Students’ Retention and Academic Success.”

services and resources to our transfer students. Most notably, I made connections with our New Student Transitions and First Year Experience Director, and the main coordinator for transfer student orientations and programming, and also with the Associate Director for Programs, Campus Activities and Programs in the Campus Activities & Programs office, who is also heavily involved with assessment. We also connected with the director of the Office of Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Services (OAERS), who provided us with graduate student statisticians to help us with analyzing our data. The library eventually employed one of the student statisticians post-AiA to help us with all of our statistical needs. Without AiA, I doubt we would have made all of these connections, and now we are continuing to partner with those with whom we worked on the project, both on transfer student issues and on other library issues.

In our initial team meetings, I became keenly aware that collaborating with campus entities outside the library provided information and opportunities we would not have had otherwise. The team member heavily involved with transfer students made us aware of several opportunities for the library to be involved with outreach, such as involvement in the Transfer Student Expo, the Transfer Student Orientation, and meetings with staff in the Transfer Student Center on campus. Another team member made some creative suggestions for designing our survey study that expanded my perspective. One such suggestion was that, rather than always generating new data, we might want to leverage data that already exists, such as pulling student information from the registrar for classes that have had library instruction and comparing the GPA of these students to the general student population. Another suggestion was that, rather than asking students to answer demographic questions, we use their unique ID number and pull this information directly from the registrar. Ultimately, all agreed these techniques required more time and staff hours than available in this context, but these are approaches I will try in future studies, and I might not have realized that we had the ability to access this data without our partners' knowledge base. I realized how often librarians design research studies in a vacuum and how important it is to connect with other campus stakeholders.

The team weighed two different projects and opted to implement both. The first study was pretest-intervention-posttest information literacy sessions in a class specifically for incoming transfer students, FFL 250 (Enhancing the Transfer and Adult Student Experience). The second study was a follow-up survey to our initial incoming transfer student cohort to see if their information literacy skills had improved, and if so, if those students who had interacted with librarians had greater improvement. The addition of the pretest-intervention-posttest study arose when we were asked to provide library instruction for this group of incoming transfer students, and since we often use pretest and posttest assessment, it seemed logical to capture and use this data in addition to our original study.

Once we gathered our data, we connected with the director of the Office of Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Services (OAERS), a division of the Department of Educational Research Methodology (ERM), who provided us with graduate student statisticians to help us with analyzing our data using SPSS statistical software. This office allows ERM graduate students to gain valuable experience designing and analyzing assessments, both internal, to

UNCG, and external, to the community. Prior to AiA, I was not aware that we had an entire department that would provide these services to faculty researchers. One graduate student was assigned to each project, and these students analyzed our data, met with us several times, and presented final reports, results, and graphs and tables we could use for publications and presentations. Their excellent work during this project led to one of the student statisticians becoming employed part-time for the library, as library administration had many assessment projects ongoing and had employed statisticians in the past. She spent twenty hours a week here analyzing data for other research projects and advising any of us who wanted help designing assessment projects. After AiA, this graduate student met with me to assist in planning future focus groups and shared her expertise on qualitative research. My one regret is that we did not know this service was available prior to designing our assessment instruments. Though this student has graduated and is now working full-time elsewhere, I plan to meet with OAERS again in the fall semester of 2017 and ask if we can partner with one or two ERM students to help plan, implement, and assess our focus groups.

The process of learning to use the AiA Assessment Cycle has been very useful for me as a researcher. I had conducted previous research projects, but did not have an effective method for planning outcomes and criteria, nor did I consider collaborating with entities outside the library. Most MLS programs offer at most one research methods class, though many do not require it, and many academic libraries expect incoming hires to already have well-honed research skills. The AiA structure of regular Moodle interactions provided an opportunity to seek and give guidance to other AiA cohort members, and the periodic streaming sessions on the research process and types of research helped to supplement the concepts we learned during our in-person meetings at ALA conferences. While I participated in a focus group at ALA for AiA participants, I have not stayed in touch with my cohort members. I am considering capitalizing on those relationships to see who might have been involved in qualitative research to talk to them about focus groups and ask about their experiences with their projects.

I encountered some challenges during the AiA process. While the webinars and information provided by facilitators and the cohort structure of support through the offering and receiving of guidance were supposed to provide a community of practice, some of the cohort members seemed to disappear over the year, and some groups were more active than others. My sense was that some participants either left their supporting organizations, or changes in strategic directions or job duties made it difficult to complete the project. Another struggle I had was that the initial timeline I identified was overly optimistic, and we were constrained near the end of the year to complete our data analysis in time. OAERS did, in fact, provide two excellent student statisticians, but it took more time than we expected for our project to pass through the pipeline on our end. Additionally, several of my AiA team members whom I invited to the project had high-level positions with many obligations, and multiple in-person meetings were impractical. However, we are a Google institution, so we did much of our work by email and Google Docs and managed to collaborate with minimal in-person meetings. Both of these challenges, while stressful for me as a team leader, helped me develop strategies for managing project

expectations, building contingency plans, and creating timelines that allow for unexpected delays, especially when working with external entities. One of AiA's objectives was to build participants' skills in finding natural collaborators across the campus. One reason we often work in silos is because collaborating outside our usual circle requires comfort with some level of uncertainty and ambiguity. The alliances and relationships we build across campus are well worth working outside of our comfort and control zone, but in order to ensure the success of our projects, we must be flexible with how we collaborate and with our timeline, as well as developing contingency plans.

Findings

I was disappointed that the data in both studies did not reflect what I hoped to find, most likely due to the challenges we faced. Our pretest was not sent out before the class as we were expecting, so we had to reallocate instruction time, and, for a variety of reasons, one session's data had to be removed, making our sample size small. There were not statistically significant improvements in skills in the posttest, but we did find a significant increase in student comfort doing basic library tasks. Both tests were useful in recording which tasks incoming students found the most challenging. The survey also suffered from a smaller sample size. Almost half of our survey emails bounced back, speaking to retention issues!

[[FIGURE Grigg 1 HERE]]

Figure 14.1

<caption>Figure 14.1 compares student comfort with finding journal articles on a topic prior to library instruction session with comfort post-instruction.

[[FIGURE Grigg 2 HERE]]

Figure 14.2

<caption>Figure 14.2 compares student comfort with finding books on a topic prior to library instruction session with comfort post-instruction.

[[FIGURE Grigg 3 HERE]]

Figure 14.3

<caption>Figure 14.3 compares the research skill considered most challenging prior to library instruction session with that identified post-instruction.

We did not find the statistically significant variations in populations that we found in our initial study, but this fact could be a result of the students having completed a year of instruction. The most significant finding from this study was that students who reported having library instruction the previous year were four times as likely to have sought out a consultation from their liaison. This again suggests that library instruction increases comfort with library research and librarians.

As the team leader, I gave a report to all the liaisons about our findings and made our data

available to all so that each liaison could use our findings when developing information literacy instruction. Survey data broke down results by department, so liaisons were able to see how well their students performed on the information literacy tasks and what skills the students indicated they needed most. Our transfer students have specific student orientation days in the summer, and, as the team leader for this project, I now lead these tours so that I can provide targeted information about the libraries' services and collections likely to interest transfer students. For example, transfer students are likely to be commuters and more likely to have to balance their coursework with work, family duties, or both. I address remote access and extended library hours in depth with our transfer students, and I also discuss liaison consultations, since the students who made a connection with their liaisons were far more likely to seek out these consultations. We are teaching the same course this fall and will be adjusting our approach to instruction and topics based on the feedback we received from students in our AiA study. Additionally, we are meeting this summer with some of our community college feeder school cohorts to discuss potential handoff instruction and other ways we can collaborate.

[[FIGURE Grigg 4 HERE]]

Figure 14.4

<caption>Figure 14.4 shows the positive correlation between receiving library instruction and seeking help from a subject librarian.

Through this project and participation in AiA, we have set the stage for other campus entities to see us as a partner in research and in student success. Librarians at UNCG are all tenured and tenure-track, but not all UNCG faculty realize that we also engage in original research. When we coordinate with other units on campus, especially in research, we gain visibility and credibility. Institutional acknowledgement also comes with our continuing focus on transfer students, which connects with the university initiative on adult students. Though our AiA project was primarily quantitative, the exposure to qualitative research throughout this project has given me the confidence and basic skills to plan several focus groups as we plan to repeat the project in the upcoming fall semester. The student statistician hired by the library had worked closely with us to begin planning for our fall focus groups. Her departure introduces some ambiguity, in that we will need to contact OEARS again directly and work with new students, but I am confident that the groundwork we laid with this department will allow us to continue partnering with this useful service. In addition, our former dean retired, and both she and the acting dean strongly supported our participation in AiA and assessment in general. In fact, the acting dean was an AiA team member. She is still the Associate Dean of Public Services, but our newly hired dean has not arrived, so it is yet unknown whether library outreach to transfer students will be a priority in the future. However, we expect that the relationships we have built and the skills we have obtained will help with future projects of any type.

One challenge will be nurturing these new relationships. In a large, bureaucratic organization, it is not always reflexive to reach outside of one's own unit to scan for natural partnerships across the university. AiA required us to make those important connections, but it

will take time and practice to sustain them; I hope repeating this project will help us in that effort. I plan to lead larger conversations within the library about how we can build in an exercise of identifying natural partners outside the library when we take on new assessment projects. I find that I am asked to be involved with assessment efforts more often now that I have completed AiA, and I am asked for my feedback by other librarians. I would like to offer a workshop to any interested librarians about the AiA program and the cycle of assessment.

I have also presented and published about my experiences with AiA and my research projects. I made a presentation at the Library Assessment Conference, and, in November 2016, was invited to join a panel of speakers on the topic of transfer students and the library at the 2016 National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students Conference, making contacts with librarians and other university staff across the country who work closely with transfer students. This is evidence that AiA provided the tools I needed to continue expanding my community of practice.

Conclusion

Over the past two years, I have continued focusing my research and outreach activities with transfer students. Though one campus team member has moved on to another position, and another has not been active in participating with the library efforts, I found a champion in the Transfer Student Office who has been actively recruiting the library's involvement with transfer student relations. The library had already given optional tours during all orientations for incoming students, but I now am staffing a table at the Spartan Expo fair for potential and enrolled transfer students, presenting at the incoming transfer student orientation, and planning further outreach opportunities at the Transfer Student Center. I have collaborated with several of our largest feeder community college librarians, and am working on co-delivering library instruction both on the community college campuses and virtually. Based on our AiA assessment measures, I have adjusted instruction sessions to address those skills most needed by our incoming transfer students. And I am going to be presenting for the second year running at the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students (NISTS) conference in Atlanta, where I am making national contacts with people across the campus who work with transfer students. We will be conducting focus groups in Spring of 2018 to examine some of the broader issues and challenges faced by transfer students, rather than focusing solely on library skills and needs. Additionally, we will be working on additional quantitative research focusing on existing data, perhaps analyzing student attendance at library instruction sessions and identifying through enrollment how many transfer students have attended, and then tracking and comparing their overall GPA to those transfer students who have not attended library instruction sessions. Additionally, I am continuing to share our research results and knowledge of transfer students to other librarians who work with these students.

References

Soria, Krista M., Jan Fransen, and Shane Nackerud. "Library Use and Undergraduate Student Outcomes: New Evidence for Students' Retention and Academic Success." *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 13, no. 2 (2013): 147–64.

Biography

Karen Stanley Grigg has been the Science Liaison Librarian at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) Libraries and Archives since 2013. Prior to taking this position, she was the Collection Development Services Librarian at Duke University Medical Center Library for eight years, and began her career in academic librarianship in 1999 as the Agricultural and Life Sciences Librarian, and later the Textiles and Engineering Services Librarian, at North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries. She received her master of library science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1998, and has a BA in English literature and some additional undergraduate studies in wildlife biology and mathematics. Her hobbies include backpacking, bicycling, and geocaching.