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The Research Advisory Program (RAP): Fostering Information Literacy Skills through Individualized Research Consultations
Kelly Rhodes and John Boyd

INTRODUCTION

Librarians at Appalachian State University have developed a program offering individualized research consultations by appointment. The Research Advisory Program (RAP) was developed to provide students with the opportunity to meet individually with a librarian to acquire strategies and tools for identifying resources for a research topic. Through the use of RAP sessions librarians are able to equip students with the skills that not only allow them to find the information they need, but also to understand the importance and use of the information they find.

OUR SETTING

Appalachian State University is a public comprehensive university located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina. Enrolling 14,653 students, the university is one of

sixteen constituent institutions in the University of North Carolina system. Appalachian offers degrees at the baccalaureate, master's, specialists and doctoral level.

Appalachian has two libraries on its campus: the Music Library and the new Belk Library & Information Commons which serves as the main library for the campus. The Reference and Instruction Team of Belk library consists of eight full-time librarians, one Web librarian, two adjunct librarians and two staff. The Reference and Instruction team offers a number of services to the university community including assistance in the design of library assignments, bibliographic instruction, thesis research assistance, and online services such as email and live chat.

INFORMATION LITERACY

Belk library does not have a formalized information literacy program however we have established information literacy goals that are in line with the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. We are currently meeting these goals by conducting bibliographic instruction (on & off campus), designing library assignments, offering for-credit courses/modules, and providing WebCT online instruction. The Research Advisory Program offers an additional opportunity to promote information literacy by assisting students in: 1) understanding the research process; 2) applying methods of inquiry; and 3) accessing, critically evaluating and selecting information.

BACKGROUND

Librarians working the reference desk would encounter students' who had research needs that could not be efficiently met at the reference desk. Often students were researching a topic

that required more in-depth help that a librarian was able to give at that moment. As a consequence librarians often found themselves making appointments “on the fly.” We were interested in researching formalized programs that offered individualized consultations in an uninterrupted setting. These consultations would supplement quick exchange at the reference desk, bibliographic classroom instruction, and other reference services currently offered.

Librarians felt that offering individualized consultation sessions would give students time to learn about resources for a particular topic, while also allowing them to actively participate in the research process.

In the spring of 1998 Glenn Ellen Starr Stilling and Kelly Rhodes were asked by the reference team to present a proposal outlining the feasibility of implementing this type of service in our library. We conducted extensive background research on the topic of one-on-one library instruction. The literature search revealed that a number of articles had been written on term paper clinics as they were commonly called. Many of the articles focused on the research strategy model of finding information which was of particular interest to our team. Our proposal focused on the primary advantages to offering this type of program:

- Accommodations for students with different learning styles
- More hands-on and personalized help than our bibliographic instruction sessions offer
- A way to reach students at a teachable moment
- A way to reach students who had not received library instruction
- An opportunity to introduce users to the research strategy model and to concepts such as controlled vocabulary and boolean logic.

The Reference and Instruction Team discussed a number of issues, included the naming of the service, when to offer the service, the time/personnel commitment involved, scheduling, publicity, and the anticipated demand for the service.

IMPLEMENTATION

After considering all of these factors we decided to implement our own service which we dubbed the Research Advisory Program or RAP for short. Our first order of business was to define specifically what the service was and what it was designed to do. We came up with the following definition: “The Research Advisory Program (RAP) is a consultation service offered to students, staff, faculty, and community researchers. RAP offers in-depth, one-on-one appointments with a librarian for assistance with a particular research topic.” The program debuted October 1998 and offered 14 hours fall (1998) and 17 hours spring (1999). This compares to 27 hours offered fall (2004) and 25 hours offered spring (2005). The total number of sessions has increased from 75 sessions in the 1998/99 academic year compared to 356 sessions for the recent 2004/2005 academic year.

It was important to the librarians that we define the service in a way that differentiated it from the other services we offered. In addition, librarians were somewhat concerned about adding another service to our already full plates. It was of particular concern that we set parameters on the service from the beginning. One way we facilitated this was to require a 48 hour advance sign up for anyone using the service. Since we were touting RAP sessions as offering “in-depth” assistance we felt that librarians would need adequate time to prepare for their individual sessions.

This requirement facilitated the creation of a sign-up sheet that we call the *RAP Session Request* form (Appendix I). The student is required to provide basic information (i.e. name, email, class level) and to give a detailed description of their topic or assignment including what research they have conducted so far. The form allows us to conduct a reference interview with the student and make sure the form is filled out sufficiently. This form is then passed on to the librarian who uses the information to prepare for the session.

To assist librarians in preparing for the RAP session we have created a *Sources to Consult* form (Appendix II). This form is used when meeting with the student. It allows the librarian to walk the student through the research process and includes reference materials, searching the online catalog (subject/keyword), online databases (controlled vocabulary, boolean logic), and internet resources. At the conclusion of the RAP session the student is able to take this form to use as a reference during their research.

SELLING THE PROGRAM

During the implementation phase of the program librarians focused on selling the Research Advisory Program. Since this was a new endeavor we realized that we needed to get the word out around campus about this new service. We partnered with various faculties on campus who were instrumental in getting the word out by mentioning RAP sessions in their classrooms and encouraging students to make use of the service. In addition, the reference team designed flyers which were placed throughout the library advertising the service. We supplemented this publicity with articles in the campus newspaper, emails to faculty, and a prominent advertisement on the library's web site. The most successful publicity however has

been word- of- mouth. After seven years the Research Advisory Program has become an established library service and although we still publicize it on the library web site most students now ask for it by name.

MANAGING THE SERVICE

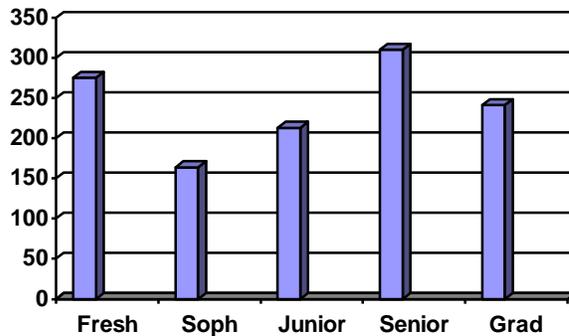
Participation in RAP is open to library support staff and faculty. Although we have participation from other areas the service is primarily staffed by reference librarians. Belk library offers RAP sessions year round and currently uses an academic calendar for scheduling. Librarians and support staff who participate in the program sign up for the hours which work with their individual schedule. Although we have explored online calendar options we have found that the paper calendar works best for us. During the 2005 spring semester we offered 20-27 hours per week and for the most part we were able to accommodate student appointments with the hours offered. However, there are cases when a student needs an appointment for an unscheduled time. In these instances we find a librarian who is available to take the research request.

Statistics gathered during the past six years reveal that the librarians' preparation time for a session averages 1.5 hours and the average instruction time spent with the student is 50 minutes. RAP continues to compete with other library responsibilities however, given the 48 hours advance notice and the importance of the service, librarians have enthusiastically embraced the service.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

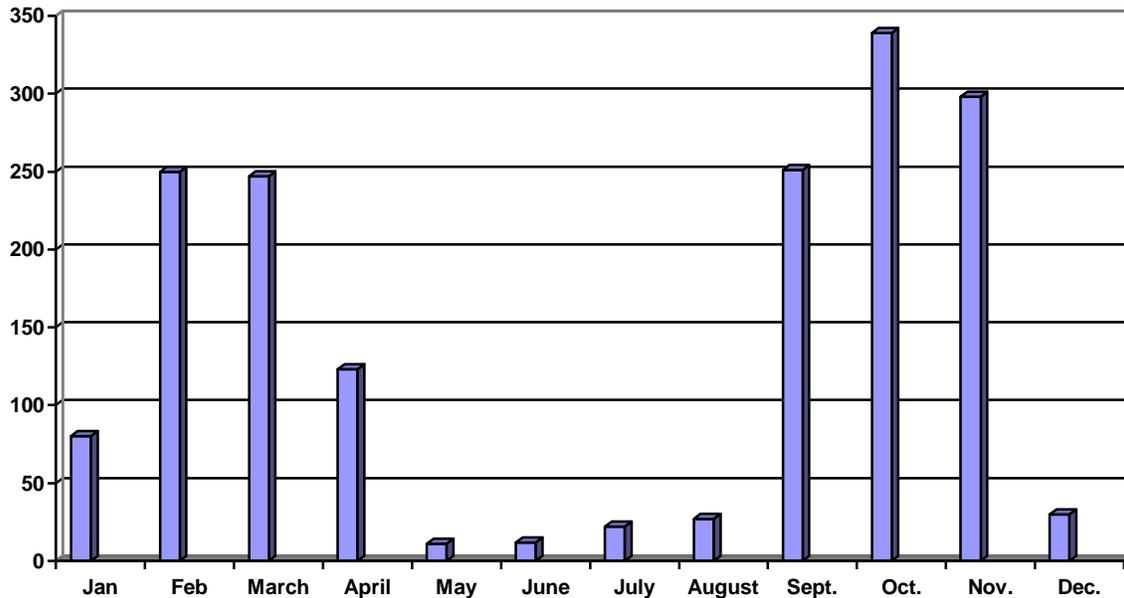
Although we have not conducted a formal assessment of the Research Advisory Program we have gathered and analyzed statistics from August 2001 – April 2005. The service is used most often by seniors followed closely by freshman (Figure 1).

Figure 1



A large number of academic departments make use of the service with History, Interdisciplinary Studies, English, and Music being the top four. Our service is offered year round, and as expected, our peak times reflect our fall and spring semesters (Figure 2).

Figure 2



The Reference and Instruction Team does have plans to conduct formal assessments of all instructional programs, RAP included. In the meantime we plan to continue reviewing the program and look for way to improve the service as demand increases.

CONCLUSION

Individualized research consultations are not unique and the literature reveals that many academic libraries offer this type of service. Since its inception seven years ago the Research Advisory Program at Belk Library continues to be one of the most successful services that we offer due in large part to the continual participation and support of the Reference and Instruction Team. We believe RAP sessions function as a way to bridge the gap between the classroom, traditional library instruction, and the reference desk and serves as a very prominent opportunity to promote what librarians do.

SUGGESTED READING

American Library Association, "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education." <<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm>> (16 April 2005).

Cardwell, Catherine, Katherine Furlong, and Julie O'Keefe. "My Librarian: Personalized Research Clinics and the Academic Library." *Research Strategies* 18(2) 2001: 97-111.

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Library Reference and Instruction Team, "Information Literacy Goals for Appalachian State University Students," <http://www.library.appstate.edu/new/admin/info_lit_goals.html> (2 February 2005).

Shobert, Tim. "Term-Paper Counseling: Individualized Bibliographic Instruction." *RQ* (22) 1982: 146-151.

Yi, Hua. "Individual Research Consultation Service: An Important Part of an Information Literacy Program." *Reference Services Review* 31(4) 2003: 342-350.

Appendix I

Appalachian State University

RAP (Research Advisory Program) Session Request Form
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Name: _____ Mailing Address: _____
Phone: _____ Email: _____
Today's Date: _____
You are: (Circle One) Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate Faculty Staff

Course title and number: _____ Professor: _____
Date the paper/project is due: _____ Length of paper/project: _____

What is your topic or assignment?

- Give us as much information as you can.
- Do you need to have a certain number or type of sources (books, journal articles, newspaper articles, primary sources)?
- If you have a description of the assignment that your professor handed out, attach a copy.

What research have you done so far? – Where have you looked? What have you found? What are you disappointed that you <u>haven't</u> found?
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(Library will fill out this part)

Librarian: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

Request taken by: _____

Appendix II

Appalachian State University
Belk Library & Information Commons
<http://www.library.appstate.edu>

RAP Session: Sources to Consult

Student:

Date/Time:

Topic:

Reference Materials:

WNCLN Online Catalog:

For books beyond WNCLN:

For Articles in periodicals (magazines, journals, newspapers):

Internet Resources: