What We Wish They Knew When They Got Here:

An Academic Librarian's Perspective

by *Cindy Levine*

Editor's Note: Many academic librarians in North Carolina participate in programs sponsored by the North Carolina Bibliographic Instruction Group, an interest group within the College and University Section of the North Carolina Library Association. The group has sponsored workshops across the state designed to help academic librarians improve their teaching skills and explore topics of current interest such as active learning and innovative instructional design. Their most recent efforts have centered around the use of Internet resources in bibliographic instruction (BI) and the extent to which BI is incorporated into the library school curriculum. These librarians have an intrinsic interest in understanding the extent to which students graduating from high school have a background that enables them to learn to use college libraries with success. This article focuses on just what this background should involve.

All of us who work at busy academic reference desks know that we regularly encounter new students with widely ranging backgrounds and abilities. We can tell a great deal about a student's sophistication with information sources from the first ten seconds of a reference interview. With some new students, we can see that look of disbelief and confusion grow more intense with each additional sentence we utter. Other students, equally new to the library and faced with the same explanation, will say something like, "Oh, is that how you do that here? Okay, that makes sense." One student seems overwhelmed, fearful, and panicky; the other seems, if not relaxed, at least basically in control of the situation.

What accounts for these differences? It's probably not genetic. No one is born with a basic framework for operating comfortably or effectively in libraries. In part, the differences we see probably can be ascribed to different levels of preparation and experience that the students receive before they reach college. So what do we

wish they knew when they got here?

It is impossible to dictate what students "should" know. Libraries are changing so fast that specific skills become outdated almost as rapidly as they are learned. The best we can do is to try to articulate certain elements which, if they are in place, put students in a position to learn about academic libraries quickly once they get to college. Perhaps surprisingly, the most important elements are not library skills, but rather a set of attitudes and expectations about libraries that some students bring with them when they come to college.

Therefore, if I could be granted only one request, it would be that,

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when students get to college, they do not already hate libraries. Instead, they should view libraries as places that can give them power and help them to satisfy their curiosity. I decided to become a librarian, in part because I was under the impression that it was a very glamorous occupation. Therefore, it came as a surprise to me when I discovered that not everyone viewed libraries as exciting places that give power to individuals. Many see the library as a place that teachers force them to go, usually to find information that the teacher wants them to find. But students can also use libraries to meet their own needs. They can use the library, for example, if they find themselves in a course with a professor who does not explain things very well.

Unfortunately, this is not a rare occurrence for first-year students who often take introductory college courses with hundreds of other students, and for professors who are not gifted when it comes to teaching undergraduates. Students often believe that they are doomed because they do not understand their notes or do not like the

textbook. Frequently what they do not realize is that the explanations they receive in class are often not the only existing explanations of that subject. If they go to the library, they may find other explanations that are clearer or that provide better illustrations.

I have noticed that when new students arrive at the university, the library usually is not their first destination. I wish students knew that libraries are useful places to go for areas of non-academic interest, simply in order to satisfy their curiosity. Students can find out more about places they may be planning to visit, for instance, or about items they may be planning to purchase. And if they ever begin to feel that there is something that everyone except them seems to know all about, and they don't want to advertise their ignorance, libraries can provide another way to find out. In other words, libraries allow students to be more independent, and certainly more in control of their lives.

Another subjective element that negatively affects students initial response to libraries is library anxiety. In the March 1986 issue of *College and Research Libraries*, Constance Mellon published a study on library anxiety that was based on her work at a southern university. Students kept journals over a two-year period in which they recorded their changing feelings about the library. The journals revealed that students initially felt overwhelmed by the large size of the library. They did not understand where things were located and did not know how to get started. They revealed that they felt that inadequacy is shameful and should be hidden, and that that inadequacy would be revealed by asking questions.[1]

High school librarians are in an excellent position to help students who plan to go to college to develop the kinds of attitudes and skills that will help them take full advantage of college libraries. As Mignon Adams pointed out in an article in *Catholic Library World*, school librarians have some distinct advantages over college librarians when it comes to teaching basic library skills. When library skills are officially integrated into the public school curriculum, the librarian can work with secondary school teachers on a routine basis without the need to "sell" the concept to the faculty each semester.[2] High school librarians have, in a sense, a captive audience. What can they do to help students enter college with a more positive attitude towards libraries? What skills will help students the most when they enter college?

As an academic librarian, I would like students to come to college with a few basic mental models onto which academic librarians can hook the concepts that we need to teach. In this way, when introducing a new tool, we would be able to explain it by referring to concepts that they already understand. It enables us to draw analogies between things we are trying to teach and concepts with which they are already comfortable.

Students should understand that academic libraries are essentially like the smaller libraries to which they are more accustomed. The main difference is one of scale. If students feel confident about using school libraries, they are less likely to be thrown by the sight of a larger library. Students should be given, in advance, information about college libraries before they arrive at college. They can be forewarned about the size and reassured that the basic organization is analogous to that of their school library. Depending on the location of the school, it may be possible to introduce high school students directly to academic libraries. I have seen successful assignments in which teachers or school librarians bring a high school class, as a group, to an academic library for an orientation, and continue to work directly with the students as they progress through their research. This kind of experience helps prepare students for the larger academic library while reinforcing similarities with their school library. It also goes a long way towards confronting the library anxiety problem, which is itself a barrier to students' belief that libraries can be useful to them.

Students should be told that the library will have a reference desk where they have a right to ask questions and seek guidance. As Mellon found in her study, many students feel that their skills are less adequate than those of other students but are reluctant to ask questions. I would suggest telling students that the staff at the reference desk will not do the whole project for them, but that it is reasonable for them to seek help by asking questions. For students accustomed to a smaller (or different) library, the questions may take the form of asking how a specific type of information is found in this particular library. It is also helpful for students to practice visualizing the type of information they are seeking and then articulating their information needs.

What are some other mental constructs we as academic librarians would like students to have when we talk to them about finding information in libraries? First of all, a basic familiarity with a variety of different types of publications helps students understand why they should be excited about the prospect of access to a large academic library. Students should have the opportunity to read books including fiction, biographies, and non-fiction in areas of interest to them. They should read popular magazines and newspapers. They should look at some scholarly journals and see how they differ from more popular publications. They should see films and listen to music. If possible, they should explore some interesting Internet sites. In short, they should be exposed to the variety of information sources that can be found in an academic library. High school is the time to become excited about the vast array of types of materials and to learn that, once they get to college, they will have easier access to a larger collection of materials.

Secondly, students should be introduced to some kind of classification system. It does not need to be the Library of Congress system, which is used in almost all academic libraries; the Dewey Decimal system will do very well to introduce students to this basic concept. Students should understand that any classification system organizes materials into a logical pattern, clustering together materials on the same subject. They should learn how to start an information search with a catalog, which offers a variety of access points, to identify a promising record, and to be led by a call number to a place in the library where that item, along with others on the same topic, may be found.

Thirdly, students should learn to make the distinction between a library catalog and an index that is used to identify things that exist somewhere in the world but are not necessarily to be found in their own library collections. In academic libraries, it is very common for the same computer workstation to provide access to the library's OPAC as well as to numerous other databases. Many students have the misconception that anything listed in any computer database may be found in the building which houses the computer workstation through

which the database was accessed.

And lastly, students should learn math. I would be especially delighted if they came to college understanding concepts such as sets, subsets, and intersections between sets. When students have a firm grasp of those concepts, it gives academic librarians something onto which the concept of Boolean searching can be hooked.

Once students enter college, the next step is for academic librarians to work with students who have vastly differing levels of knowledge and sophistication about libraries. How can this be done effectively? One way is to create a first-year program in college that attempts to establish a common base of knowledge about libraries. If this is successful, subsequent instruction can rest on a known basic structure of knowledge. At North Carolina State University, we have used a library research workbook to teach basic library skills since 1987. Students read about basic concepts and answer simple multiple-choice questions using important reference tools. Recently, we have begun to shift the primary emphasis of this program away from specific reference tools and toward the essential critical thinking

skills that students need when they encounter any information source, regardless of format. This shift has been motivated by the increase in the number of available information sources and the proliferation of interfaces that students encounter. The Internet exposes students to even more information sources that may be evaluated for possible use. What becomes important is not the knowledge of specific information sources, but rather, whether students know how to ask questions, evaluate, and make judgments about these sources.

I would like to teach students to understand what to look for in databases. What does it mean if they do a search and get zero results? What conclusions are valid to draw? How should they then proceed with their search? This endeavor is more likely to be successful if students enter college with curiosity about the world and enthusiasm about the prospect of finding information about the world in libraries.

When asked what college-bound students should learn about libraries while in high school, Harold Ettelt, head librarian at Columbia Green Community College, replied that it was really more important to focus atten-

tion on students who would not go to college. He asserted that "the use of libraries is not about getting through college, it is about getting through life." Students who go to college will have another opportunity to learn the value of libraries and how to use them effectively, but for non-college-bound students, high school library instruction provides their last chance. He then provided a short list of common sense suggestions about what teachers can do to provide the groundwork for effective library use. His suggestions, which include teaching students to read well, to use books, to ask questions, and to glimpse the world of knowledge that is open to them through libraries,[3] are appropriate for all high school students, whether or not they ever attend college.

References

[1] Constance Mellon, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development," *College and Research Libraries* 47 (March 1986): 160-5.

[2] Mignon Strickland Adams, "Bridging the Gap: What Do They Need to Know?" *Catholic Library World* 60 (March/April 1989): 220-1.

[3] Harold Ettelt, "Teaching High Schoolers About Libraries: A Message to Teachers," *The Reference Librarian* 38 (1992): 89-91.