Bridging the Skill Gap: Helping Non-Traditional Students Develop Research Skills When They Need It Most

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Abstract

Many of the research skills needed to succeed in higher education are never explicitly taught. Most students learn through experience and exposure. However, working-class students don't always grow up in academic environments that provide the same exposure to these skills. This paper will explore ways to help working-class and non-traditional students develop fundamental research skills while respecting their busy schedules. The University of Central Florida Library's "Research Tips Tuesdays" webinar series will be used as a model to help instructors identify skill gaps, design scaffolded skill building programs, and brainstorm potential campus partners.

Keywords: *Information literacy, hidden curriculum, library instruction, scaffolded instruction*

Background

There is a growing population of non-traditional and working-class students participating in higher education. Research has shown that these students often have very different learning styles and needs than traditional students. While there is a lack of consensus in the literature on how to define non-traditional students, most research defines them by age. Other studies define them in terms of their adult life responsibilities. Regardless of how non-traditional is defined, it is clear from the research that many students coming back to college feel they do not know as much as their traditional counterparts, and they may not be aware of library resources and services offered. Further, these students often have increased anxiety about working with new technology.

Academic libraries are well placed to help non-traditional students develop the skills and confidence they need to successfully engage in the scholarly community. As researchers have noted, "There is an extremely compatible, yet often overlooked, relationship between the disciplines of adult education and librarianship. If libraries and adult educators can learn more about one another and forge closer and more frequent relationships and collaborations, the adult learner will be better served and truly empowered to succeed in their academic endeavors" (Cooke, 2010, p. 208). However, these students frequently suffer from "library anxiety" and are unlikely to seek out help at the library.

Andrea Tieman and Megan Black (2017) stated, "There are arguments that instruction is the gateway to curbing library anxiety and ultimately the tool to get nontraditional students into the library and to ask for help" (p. 200). The question remains: How can libraries help students overcome their library anxiety, while recognizing that coming to the library for instruction is a significant hurdle for these students? The library at the University of Central Florida (UCF) identified a gap in instruction programming focused on helping working-class students develop the research skills they need to be successful. This paper describes the development and marketing of a series of online workshops designed to meet the perceived needs of students, while integrating foundational research skills and providing a low-stakes introduction to library services for students who may be hesitant to come to the library.

Transfer Students at the University of Central Florida

The number of transfer students at UCF continues to grow each year. "As of fall 2015, there are 14,023 first-generation undergraduate students enrolled at UCF and 61% of those students are transfer students" (UCF Race and Gender Demographics 2016 Report). Spring 2019 enrollment at UCF was 65,467. As shown in Figure 1, the undergraduate population consisted of 56,074 students; 29,941 were transfer students. In the latest report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, it was found that transfer students were more likely to be over age 24 and slightly less likely to have enrolled fulltime (Shapiro et al., 2017).
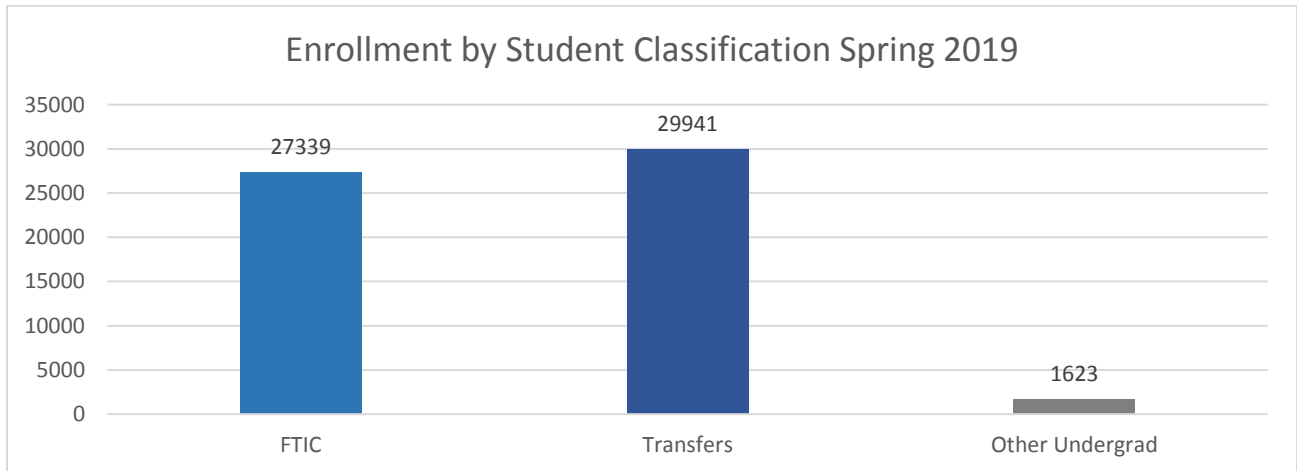

Figure 1. UCF Student Enrollment Headcount by Student Classification: Spring 2019 (From UCF Institutional Knowledge Management Interactive Facts 2018-2019)
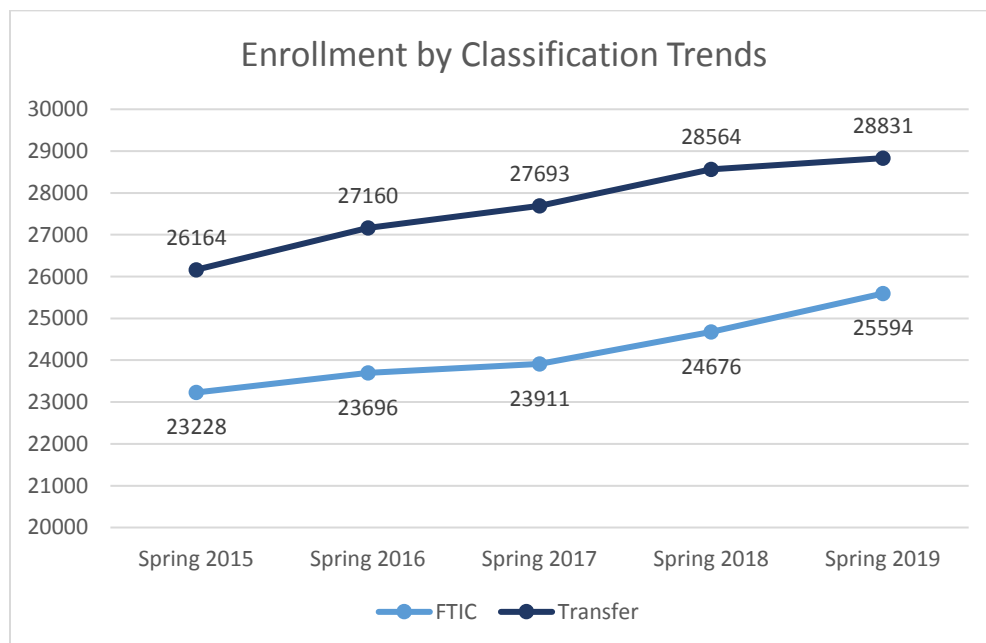

Figure 2. UCF Student Enrollment Trends by Student Classification: Spring 2019 (From UCF Institutional Knowledge Management: Interactive Facts 2018-2019)

Therefore, transfer students are more likely to be defined as non-tradition students than typical first time in college students (FTIC). Over the last five years, there has been a steady upward trend of the number of transfer students attending UCF (see Figure 2). As this population continues to grow, the UCF Libraries have continued to develop new instructional and engagement programing designed to help students learn the academic skills that often become part of the hidden curriculum in postsecondary educational settings.

What is the Hidden Curriculum?

The hidden curriculum is defined by Sambell and McDowell (1998) as "what is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction" (pp. 391-392). In other words, it is the skills and experiences that are never explicitly taught yet greatly influence student success in traditional higher education settings. There are many aspects to the hidden curriculum in higher education that, when missing, can negatively impact working class students, particularly first-generation and transfer students. One of the most prominent intersections between libraries and the hidden curriculum is information literacy. These skills are necessary to actively participate in the scholarly community, yet by the time students reach college it is often assumed that they have already developed these skills so it is presumed no longer necessary to explicitly teach them.

Library research has demonstrated this to be untrue for most students entering college, not just working class or non-traditional students (Gross & Latham, 2012). In a recent survey conducted by Library Journal, librarians estimated that "less than a third of first-year students (28%) are prepared for college-level research" (Dixson, 2017, para. 3). Further, researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago found that first-generation freshman often lacked fundamental skills such as how to locate library books on the shelf, evaluate information, and they viewed research as a single-step event (Pickard & Logan, 2013). Without these skills, students struggle to find the information they need, spend more time searching for resources and often choose poor resources for their needs.

Student Struggles

Observation and assessment data from library instruction sessions reveal that the students at UCF conform to the results found in library research. They often struggle with fundamental information literacy skills. However, they don't always recognize that they are lacking these skills. Library research has long shown a gap between student perception of skills and their actual skills (Gross & Latham, 2007; Mahmood, 2016). This, coupled with libraries providing informal learning opportunities in formal learning environments, makes it difficult to attract student participation in library workshops. In the summer of 2018, students at UCF (n=211) were surveyed to identify what academic skills they perceived to struggle with the most. Respondents felt that stress and time management were their biggest struggles. They often didn't know how to start research projects and were confused when searching for sources. This made it difficult to keep up with readings, complete homework on time, and study for exams. Further, they felt they lacked the skills to effectively deliver class presentations.

The librarians at UCF decided to frame information literacy instruction as time-saving and stress-reducing skills to draw student attention. Workshops were also framed to help students gain a broader understanding of how these skills could positively impact their own well-being in

addition to improving their research skills. This resulted in a webinar series titled *Research Tips Tuesdays*. Each webinar was designed with discrete information literacy skill-based learning objectives that could be delivered in 40 minutes or less, followed by an open question and answer session lasting approximately 20 minutes.

Information Literacy Framework

The learning objectives for the *Research Tips Tuesdays* webinar series were guided by the Association for College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016). This framework is divided into six frames: authority is constructed and contextual; information creation as a process; information has value; research as inquiry; scholarship as conversation; searching as strategic exploration. Each frame represents an essential concept to academic research and identifies learner knowledge practices and dispositions. Knowing these characteristics can help develop scalable learning opportunities that are designed to allow learners to deepen their understanding of fundamental concepts.

Constructing Scaffolded Skill-Building Paths

Using the student survey results, librarians developed a series of topics that would address student concerns, while also addressing known information literacy skill gaps. For the initial series of webinars, seven topics were identified that fell into three broad categories:

- Effectively engaging with scholarly writing
    - Reading academic articles as evidence
    - Note taking
- Research skills
    - Developing effective search strategies
- Becoming part of the scholarly conversation
    - Presentation skills
    - Planning writing projects
    - Citing sources as evidence

For each topic, discrete learning objectives were identified and aligned with the frames of the ACRL Information Literacy Framework. This allowed the program designers to focus on specific learning outcomes, while maintaining realistic expectations on how much content could be provided in a 40-minute session. The program designers scheduled topics so that the skills learned in each session would reinforce and build upon those learned in previous sessions, as well as align with the flow of academic work across a semester.

One of the central challenges was to design scaffolded skills throughout the sessions yet allow each session to stand alone. Working-class students are often pressed for time and might not be able to commit to a series of synchronous workshops. The webinars were recorded and made publicly available on the library's website (https://guides.ucf.edu/rtt/archive) so that students who were not able to attend during the live session could access the content when it was most convenient. Any student who registered for the webinar was sent a notice as soon as the recording was available online. Further, to make the webinars as accessible as possible each

session was designed so that even if participants hadn't watched or attended the previous webinars, they could still understand and engage with the content, though perhaps not as deeply as those who had attended multiple sessions.

Even when students recognize gaps in their knowledge—and accommodation have been made to make the sessions openly available—it can be difficult to find time to incorporate informal learning opportunities into their already demanding schedules. The Teaching & Engagement librarians at UCF have had the most success increasing participation when students are encouraged to attend by faculty or other academic mentors. This led the program designers to develop strategic campus and community partnerships to increase participation.

Engaging Campus and Community Partnerships

A key aspect to the success of any new program is promotion and buy-in. Utilizing campus and community partnerships helped promote the online sessions and make them accessible to more students. UCF has a partnership with six local state colleges through the DirectConnect program. This program guarantees students admission to UCF once they have completed an Associate degree from one of the partner colleges (DirectConnect to UCF). UCF Connect Librarians located at these partner colleges helped promote our "Research Tips Tuesdays" to UCF students as well as potential transfer students currently attending partner colleges by live streaming our sessions in their libraries. This gave the program designers an opportunity to provide an early introduction to the types of resources and services that transfer students could expect at UCF.

The library also collaborated with the First Year Experience LINK (Learning and Interacting with New Knights) Program, " an education and involvement-based program to help students new to UCF get involved on campus" (LINK Program, n.d.). LINK helped promote our workshops by including them in the list of available programs that students can attend to earn LINK points. At the end of each year, students can redeem their LINK points for prizes. Finding campus and community partners can significantly increase campus awareness of library programs and show students direct connections between the library and academic coursework.

Conclusion

Adult learners are a special demographic of students that continues to expand and warrants special attention (Cooke, 2010, p. 209). The *Research Tips Tuesdays* webinar series provides non-traditional students an opportunity to improve their research skills by participating in short sessions, framed to address student perceptions of their own needs, with a focus on making their research and study time more efficient and effective. By identifying the pathways working-class students use to attend UCF, the program designers were able to cultivate partnerships to increase awareness and participation of programming.

In the future, the UCF Libraries plan to engage more faculty to support attendance and use of the webinar archive by integrating them into their online course spaces through the learning management system. Further, the program designers hope to make the webinars accessible to a wider audience by developing more campus partners such as Housing & Residence Life who can live-stream the webinars to students living on campus and in UCF Living Learning Communities. By developing programming that is accessible, focused and scaffolded, libraries

can provide working-class students the opportunity to develop skills that are traditionally part of the hidden curriculum, while also easing library anxiety. Through campus partnerships and targeted promotion, academic libraries are well placed to provide the ongoing support many non-traditional students need to succeed.

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