# Faculty and Librarian Cooperation in Designing Course Projects for At-Risk Freshmen

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*The relevant literature reveals a concerted effort by academics to adjust their thinking regarding teaching methodologies, the need for students to acquire critical thinking skills, and the desire to nurture undergraduate success. Interdisciplinary or team teaching is often cited as a progressive model, as are learning communities and the integration of higher level thinking skills into classes and curricula. However, librarians are rarely asked to participate in designing assignments, classes or general education goals. As information literacy becomes an increasingly important component of campus objectives, librarians should be called upon more often to contribute to their institution's priorities. This paper addresses one successful method of infusing the needs of the instructor, the student, and the campus by integrating the expertise of the "teaching" librarian.*

Colleges and universities invest academic capital in the "at-risk" student community every semester, and educators try to foster growth within this population using a variety of methods, e.g., contracts, mentoring sessions, workshops, and intensive classes. Sometimes two or more of these strategies are employed together with the hope that at least one will help students get on track. However, it is not just the students who need to get on-track. Despite good intentions, educators tend to work with the same tools, or "pieces of the puzzle," sometimes only rearranging the "pieces" instead of developing desperately-needed new ideas; academia must find more creative ways to reach at-risk students. The authors propose that faculty need to use innovative resources in order to help students move towards real change. This article will focus on how two instructors, a reading specialist and the library's instruction coordinator, combined their unique skills to create a course project wherein academically at-risk students researched, reflected, wrote, and presented on how their chosen career field matched – or did not match – their current attitudes, behaviors, and expectations of success regarding that career.

Frostburg State University (FSU), unlike most educational institutions, dismisses first-year students for abysmal academic performance at the end of the fall semester. Students may be given "a second chance" based on several criteria: a superior letter of appeal, a recommendation from the student's advisor and an affirmative review by the Academic Appeals Board. The goal of the spring ORIE101: Introduction to Higher Education (ORIE Boot Camp) course at FSU is to offer intensive guidance for these successful appellants during their second semester. The college environment is challenging for this group, and they require additional assistance on how to develop strategies for academic success and personal adjustment. The class activities are designed to promote critical thinking skills and introspection, with the goal of infusing problem solving abilities and promoting self correction of destructive behaviors. Each learning activity is designed for personal success and includes oral and written reflection activities. This course was the vehicle for the authors' pilot project of librarian collaboration in the development of course assignments fashioned for at-risk students.

## Review of Literature

In a landmark text that focuses on the study of freshmen behaviors, Erikson and Strommer (1991) overview the differences in freshmen, noting that recent generations of students do not seek out challenging coursework and often dedicate less time to homework than previous generations. They often become more engaged in outside activities like television, other media or part-time employment (p. 5). Overall, they may have completed high school successfully, but that does not mean that they have the skills—either academic or emotional—to tackle university life. Light's (2001) book spotlights students' reactions to their college experiences, arguing that making the transition from high school to college—complete with self-management and higher expectations—was more difficult than they had anticipated. Interviews noted that time management was a crucial difference in the responses from successful and unsuccessful students. Sophomores who had experienced a successful first year valued what they had learned about how they spent their time, but unsuccessful sophomores "hardly ever mentioned the word [time], even when prompted" (p. 24). Successful students also mentioned the value of a mentoring experience, wherein they learned positive behaviors and felt supported to do their best (p. 94).

Designing a course for unsuccessful first-year students would then involve skill development in time management and effective learning strategies, hopefully within a mentoring setting. Yet skill development and outside reinforcement are not enough. This paradigm also needs to address students'

emotional reactions and belief systems, including self-efficacy and motivation. In Cole and Denzine's (2004) study, they examined students who were dissatisfied with their performance in a particular class. They concluded that the students' self-efficacy, optimism or pessimism, and self-esteem were connected to their success in class. The authors suggest that continual self-assessment should be a component within a first-year experience (p. 41), helping students better understand how their skills and their own perceptions of their skills—affect success in college.

In conjunction with reflection and self-awareness, students may understand the areas they need to improve for academic success. However, wanting to change behavior, or knowing how to take specific steps to change behavior is important to recognize (Dembo & Seli, 2004). Students need to assess both their "skill and will" and if instructors or programs focus on only one of these aspects—such as study strategies or motivation—then students are not as likely to be successful at altering behavior (p. 10).

As a result, Leamnson (1999) argues that educators need to involve students in learning in order to "initiate behavioral changes in students" (p. 49). Students cannot simply take notes or be asked to regurgitate information on exams. Productive learning and changes in behavior happen when students are motivated; students must be prompted with reflective activities that will help them become engaged with the material and learning (p. 60). Reflection often begins when students are asked to apply critical thinking to a particular task or assignment. Critical thinking is a high-order thought process essential to molding college students' problem solving skills and evolving analytical abilities (Bensley, 1998, 2002). Information literacy (defined as finding, analyzing and disseminating information in an ethical, coherent manner) has at its core the fundamental charge of infusing students with critical thinking skills (Middle States, 2003). Thus, drawing on the idea that educators must find "new pieces of the puzzle" to fully reach students, collaboration between an information literacy expert and a reading specialist seemed a reasonable avenue to pursue for the authors. Connections between academic and library faculty is a positive approach for working with students, as argued by researchers like Harmony and Young (1999), Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk (2003) and Emmons and Martin (2002).

## Development

Well before the spring term began, the reading specialist for ORIE101 Boot Camp approached the library's instruction coordinator to join the course and co-develop student assignments. After several brainstorming sessions, a

number of assignments were conceived, one of which was the final student project and is the basis for this paper. The final project focused on the concepts of job assumptions, personal skills and future goals/life planning. It was believed that career interests would motivate students, and if a link could be drawn from the end result (the desired career) to the preparation necessary to reach the end result (college), the class's curiosity would remain piqued. With this paradigm in mind, the authors created a three day assignment integrating active learning, self-assessment, reflection, information literacy, and communication competency. The first day involved students listing a preferred career and three personal attributes and three learned skills they thought would be necessary to achieve success in the selected field. Students were then instructed on the reliability of information on the Web, provided with training in advanced Web searching and told to research their career and compare the findings to their preconceptions. On day two the students received coaching on searching for jobs online, resume and cover letter writing and application procedures. Using a Web-based career service, each student found a position in their field of interest and composed a fictitious resume and cover letter to be turned in before their presentations. The final day consisted of making a five to seven minute presentation regarding the selected career, preliminary assumptions, attributes associated with successful people in that career, and whether or not the reality met or differed from their expectations or assumptions. Visual aids such as posters and PowerPoint were encouraged. Students' connection to the project was gauged three ways: the presentation, the cover letter with resume and a short-answer question on the final exam.

## Results

All students indicated in their presentations that their initial assumptions were poorly informed or simply erroneous. Two discoveries stood out for all thirteen students in the class: the number of hours worked per week and the specific tasks performed. One student, Ann*, who had wanted to pursue medicine, indicated that her interest in becoming a physician may not be compatible with her dream job: "I realize now that most doctors spend more time doing other work, like paperwork, than seeing patients. I don't know about that." When the student audience asked questions of a presenter, the most common query was, "do you still want to do it [this job]?" Nine of the thirteen participants said yes, but four said no. Three students said they were now reconsidering their chosen career due to rigid job requirements and/or low salary. One student found that the job wasn't anything like she thought it would be; "It seemed interesting, that's all."

*Pseudonym is used

The first drafts of the resumes yielded skimpy results, with many students not knowing what to write. One student, Ben*, commented, "I haven't completed college, I haven't done an internship, and I don't know what skills I have that I could write down." Ben's written feedback revealed a clear insight into the steps he had yet to take to realistically pursue his dream job as a computer programmer. In response, the authors tried to help Ben see—in addition to experience he will need to acquire—the qualities, like personal characteristics, that he already possessed. Ben was creative enough to write down skills from his summer job that might transfer: interpersonal ability, a facility for communication and teamwork. The second drafts were far superior. Students showed forethought and problem-solving skills in addressing the need for resume-building experience.

The final exam for ORIE Boot Camp included a short-answer question addressing the career project. When asked to describe what they learned from researching, writing, and reflecting on a possible career path, almost all students "got" the point. Many commented on steps necessary in the future, such as specific course work, internships or far more rigorous dedication to academics. One student wrote, "I learned that I need to get started if I want to really be a doctor!" Students averaged 3.7 out of four points for this question, which was graded on the basis of their demonstrating concrete reflection and critical analysis.

## Conclusions

Interdisciplinary collaboration in the classroom or in learning communities is not uncommon in higher education, but drawing on the knowledge and abilities of a teaching librarian to enhance the learning experiences of students is still a relatively nascent, untapped resource. The traditional model for librarian participation in discipline-specific or First Year Experience style courses is as a guest lecturer or tangential reference source. However, as "teaching" librarians continue to gain insight into educational theories and critical thinking concepts, they offer their campuses a unique opportunity to improve the model for working with the at-risk population; their perspectives could offer a "new" piece to the puzzle. The authors believe their teamwork offered this group of ORIE Boot Camp students a unique and enlightening experience: the advanced Web searching skills and the critical evaluative training (taught primarily by the librarian) will transfer to other classes and promote life-long learning. The nexus between a chosen career, academic coursework and behaviors to obtain the career through academic planning and research—or to redirect energy onto another path—will also benefit the students. However, the data needs to be more definitive. A longitudinal study

using a well-crafted assessment tool—or perhaps collection of tools—could yield more tangible qualitative results. Moreover, a similar study measuring the impact of a librarian-instructor partnership within a discipline rather than one course or project would also be useful.

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