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Teaching Matters: The State of Information Literacy Assessment and the Way Forward

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THE STATE OF INFORMATION LITERACY ASSESSMENT AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Librarians' commitment to user education gives rise to their concern for assessment—that is, *teaching matters*. Collectively, the papers in this theme issue convey much about current practice in information literacy assessment, and they point out challenges we must address in order to understand what learners know and the ways we can continuously improve our services to them. With so many excellent articles, this column is a bit shorter than usual. Below, we reflect on some issues raised.

First, it is clear that information literacy assessment has matured in the last decade or more. Debra Gilchrist's map of our assessment history ("A Twenty Year Path") highlights seminal steps such as the development of the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education*. These standards have become an essential framework for our teaching, providing

benchmarks for what students should learn and guidelines for learner-centered practice. Ten years ago, effective summative assessment of IL competencies was mostly ephemeral; although we have not yet found the Holy Grail, we have made steps toward validating IL tests, as discussed in two articles, by Snow and Katz ("Using Cognitive Interviews to Validate an Interpretive Argument for the ETS iSkills™ Assessment") and Mulherrin ("The Evolution of a Testing Tool for Measuring Undergraduate Information Literacy Skills in the Online Environment").

It is also clear that both front-line instruction librarians and library administrators need to implement assessment methods that are appropriate for their instructional programs and their institutional environment, meshing their efforts with local assessment practices and expectations. Practitioners and administrators

need to recognize that assessment requires careful planning for specific purposes, and that assessment options and choices must be clearly understood. Formative assessment, for instance, may be sufficient for relatively new or small programs (indeed, formative assessment is always beneficial, since it promotes reflection and continuous improvement). However, after IL efforts have achieved significant buy-in and a robust presence in academic programs, summative assessment is more appropriate. Megan Oakleaf's article, "Writing information literacy assessment plans: a guide to best practice," clearly describes the planning and resources necessary for such undertakings.

Looking forward as we continue to explore and implement sound assessment methods in our IL practice, it will be critical to:

- continue building an information literacy presence at our institutions, in alliance with teaching faculty, curriculum planners, student service providers, and a wide array of academic groups.
- identify baseline skills, in part so IL services can be targeted to those who fall below this level.
- determine students' growth in IL competency over a student's undergraduate career, both with and without ILI.
- study how IL programs have changed as a result of assessment.
- conduct more validity testing on summative IL tests. For instance, we should learn why some students' post-test scores fall below scores attained on pretests. Are we sure we

have measured the same intellectual skills, or do such discrepancies indicate shortcomings in the assessment instrument?

- investigate student learning based on factors other than direct teaching and assignments, such as Web site design. Do students gain transferable skills after using better-designed sites?
- continue to clarify the larger intent of assessment for both program and individual, and when assessment data is used in individual performance appraisals, strive for fairness. Assure that cohorts with different responsibilities are evaluated equitably and assessment data is weighted fairly with other evidence.

The articles that follow not only illustrate the current state of IL assessment; they offer the reader/practitioner a kaleidoscope of options for addressing some of the profession's on-going concerns in this area. The authors share their own successes, shortcomings, and ideas so that we might all make progress in this complex and often puzzling keystone to our practice. We hope that in reading the articles in this issue you will see their potential to impact our larger agenda as we seek ever more direct paths toward improvement of services to students, faculty, and other key constituents.

This column focuses on the conceptual and practical aspects of teaching information literacy. Column co-editors Patrick Ragains and Janelle Zauha write about trends and issues that have come to our attention, but also solicit contributions to this space. Readers with ideas for Teaching Matters may contact Patrick Ragains at ragains@unr.edu, or the editors of Communications in Information Literacy at editors@comminfolit.org.