

# A PILOT STUDY OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EMBEDDED LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

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## **Abstract**

Research in the field of education strongly supports that collaboration among professionals in the field will enhance students' educational experiences. While this is true at all levels of education it is particularly true in higher education where professionals from various areas of expertise work together to ensure their shared students receive instructional supports that will allow the students to reach their fullest potential. The reality is that many instructors become primarily focused on their own courses as opposed to reaching out to colleagues whose knowledge and skills might act as a complement to their own. The result of which means that college students are left to seek out the individuals who are best able to help them to be successful when meeting assignment

requirements. While there is a value to this approach the benefits of college professionals working together closely can offer invaluable support to the students not only as they meet the objectives established in their courses, but as they develop their networking and collaborative skills – skills they will take with them beyond their college experiences. One of the key collaborators essential to any teachers' success as they head out into field is librarians. Introducing them to academic librarians throughout their college experiences is the first step in fostering this lifelong practice.

**Keywords:** library instruction, , instructional support, experiential learning, collaborative skills.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Research in the field of education strongly supports that collaboration among professionals in the field will enhance students' educational experiences. While this is true at all levels of education it is particularly true in higher education where professionals from various areas of expertise work together to ensure their shared students receive instructional supports that will allow the students to reach their fullest potential. The reality is that many instructors become primarily focused on their own courses as opposed to reaching out to colleagues whose knowledge and skills might act as a complement to their own. The result of which means that college students are left to seek out the individuals who are best able to help them to be successful when meeting assignment requirements. While there is a value to this approach the benefits of college professionals working together closely can offer invaluable support to the students not only as they meet the objectives established in their courses, but as they develop their networking and collaborative skills – skills they will take with them beyond their college experiences. One of the key collaborators essential to any teachers' success as they head out into filed

is librarians. Introducing them to academic librarians throughout their college experiences is the first step in fostering this lifelong practice.

Librarians are essential to student success, and their skills and knowhow have the potential to enhance teaching and learning experiences for both teachers in the field as well as their students. Traditionally however, the role of the librarian has been perceived as passive “guardians of the books.” This Puritanical stereotype leads people to view librarians as simply individuals who maintain the library’s resources and who sit behind desks waiting for people to ask reference questions where their obscure knowledge can be brought to light (Fagan, 2003). This outdated perception of the roles and expertise of 21<sup>st</sup> century librarians results in missed potential for meeting one’s own personal and professional goals – much less enabling students’ to do the same.

The collaborative nature of the course instructor and librarian in this study has developed gradually over time – from a more traditional “library day” meant to introduce students to the physical resources found in the library to the point of co-creating and co-teaching key course assignments. While there is a value to providing students with exposure to the physical resources in the library as well as an introduction to how to locate and cite resources, limiting the students to such general experiences with librarians results in missed opportunities for truly understanding the myriad benefits working with librarians may have. Additionally, if college professors maintain such a limited view of the librarians they work with the same results will be actualized. Much of the library-related research on this topic gave mention to the importance of integrating information literacy into the curriculum (Cunningham & Lanning, 2002; Doskatsch, 2003; Figa, Bone, & Macpherson, 2009; Kesselman & Watstein, 2009). This integration can come in various formats, such as one-shot instruction sessions or embedded librarianship. An essential component to any integration of information literacy into the curriculum requires faculty buy-in, mutual respect, and trust (Doskatsch, 2003; Figa et al., 2009; Kesselman & Watstein, 2009).

Librarians are responsible for student learning outcomes that are infused into the curriculum. They integrate information literacy into the professors' areas of study/courses/programs, and stay up-to-date with learning technologies in support of teaching and research. Further, they foster connections between campus resources, and build relationships with students in order to inspire lifelong learning.

The purpose of this study was to explore how, if at all, students felt having an embedded librarian in one of their courses impacted their abilities to successfully meet course requirements. While the course instructor and librarian had felt positive results from the students based on past experiences it was decided that the true measure of whether or not the close collaboration was having an impact on student perceptions and performance could only be determined through surveying the students themselves.

## **PRIOR LITERATURE**

### **Student Perceptions of Librarians**

When searching for literature to support student perceptions of librarians, very little work appears to have been done. Fagan (2003) worked to update results from a 1977 article by Hernon and Pastine, but found no empirical data concerning students perceptions of librarians between 1977 and the time she wrote her article. Fagan surveyed 48 undergraduate students at various stages in their academic pursuits. Most of her findings, however, are related to student perceptions of librarians in general, apart from classroom instruction. Along this aim, Fagan found that "students know librarians are there to help them but often consider librarians' knowledge as limited to the familiarity with the physical library" (p. 139). Also of importance is her summation that "Swope and Katzer found 65% of students with a specific need would not ask for assistance from the librarian" in part because "they were dissatisfied with the previous performance of the librarian" (Fagan, 2003, p. 132). Both of these assertions

give a clear picture of the current expectancies students may have of academic librarians.

Some work has been completed since Fagan's 2003 article. Edwards, Kumarn & Ochoa (2010) surveyed graduate students in an online course about the value of librarians and found that in their study (N=5) "all five responses contained positive remarks about the embedded librarian project and included examples of how students' searching changed" (p. 283). This work echoes the previous findings of Dugan (2008) and Hall (2008). More recently, Meredith and Mussell (2014) surveyed students after embedding their instruction in an online course. They, too, had a low participation rate (12%), but did find that the majority of students agreed that an embedded librarian did help them complete their course assignments.

### **Embedded Librarianship**

One area of research that provides insight into collaboration between teaching faculty and librarians occurs within the context of embedded librarianship. Embedded librarianship is best defined for the purpose of this study as "participating in a group, community, or organizational unit primarily made up of non-librarians, providing knowledge and information services as part of the group" (Shumaker & Tyler, 2007, p. 31). Kessleman and Watstein (2009) expanded this definition to include that an important ability is "knowledge and understanding of the research needs of customers" (p. 394). Shumaker and Tyler found that providing instruction was one of the most important contributions of an embedded librarian. Several research projects show benefits of embedded librarianship in specific contexts, including the increased use of a librarians, an increase in the quality of student work, and an increase in the number of quality sources used to complete assignments (Becknell, Moeller, & Pope, 2016; Heathcock, 2013; Jacobs, 2009; Kumar & Edwards, 2013).

In order to provide an example of faculty buy-in and mutual trust, one must look at the work of Hearn (2005). The director of his/her the college's

writing program approached Hearn to help with an introductory writing course. Hearn elaborated on how mutual agreement was reached so that the students would receive eight sessions of library instruction during the writing intensive course. The professor introduced Hearn to her class as a co-instructor, and trusted Hearn to provide feedback to students as well as grade the research portion of selected assignments. Hearn found that students who received in-depth library instruction actually did rely on more acceptable sources for their research-based writing assignments.

Through their study, Figa, Bone, and Macpherson (2009) supported a few useful arguments about embedded librarianship that translated to the face-to-face world. The researchers found that students think that having a librarian in the classroom is helpful. They ground this finding on the earlier work of Markgraf who found that “students preferred to direct their library questions to a specific person” (2004, p. 8, as cited in Figa, et. al, 2009, p. 77). The researchers also discussed the benefits of a long-term academic relationship with a librarian in an online course. This study lends credibility to conclusions derived from Avdic and Eklund (2010) that a lasting relationship with a librarian can result from receiving meaningful and relevant help from that librarian.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To measure student perceptions of embedded library instruction, a qualitative approach was used to analyze open-ended course surveys that were already part of scheduled course instruction. Participants for this study were 22 students enrolled in a secondary social studies methods course that included both undergraduate and graduate students. No distinction was made between class standing when completing the surveys. The first survey asked students to reflect on the following prompts:

1. Reflect on your interactions with librarians who have taught during previous courses, and how, if at all, you feel it impacted your experience completing assignments.
2. With regard to the first Content Knowledge Portfolio, please reflect on the ways, if any, having a librarian connected with the course impacted your experience completing the assignment.

The second survey asked students to reflect on the following prompt:

1. Please reflect on the ways, if any, having a librarian connected with the course impacted your experience completing course requirements.

Informed consent was delivered and collected by the librarian concurrently with course evaluations and was kept under lock and key until final grades were submitted by the instructor of record. The data was analyzed collaboratively by the librarian and the instructor using a grounded theory approach. Student responses were printed off and simultaneously coded using notes in the margin, while being discussed in order to ensure inter-rater reliability. After an initial round, axial codes were developed to determine themes and trends. Since this is an pilot study, the researchers concluded that no further data analysis was warranted at this time.

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### **CITATION INFORMATION**

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