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# STUDENT AND LIBRARIAN PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMATION LITERACY: FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN DIVERGENCE (Paper)

**Abstract:**

This paper reports the results of a study focused on the implementation of the ACRL Framework in community college libraries. The study explores information literacy instruction practices in this context, comparing librarians' and students' perspectives. Librarians with instructional responsibilities were surveyed, and students are being interviewed, to explore divergence in their perspectives, as has been reported elsewhere, and to identify opportunities to improve instructional practice.

## 1. Introduction and Goal of the Study

Understanding information literacy (IL) instructional practices in community college libraries,as well as the perceptions of the librarians and students about student IL needs, is critical in the U.S. context because more than half postsecondary institutions are community colleges and these colleges educate close to half of post-secondary students, particularly in rural areas of the country (Eddy 2013). The introduction of the new Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2016) has placed academic librarians in both Canada and the U.S. at a juncture where they are being asked to embrace a paradigmatic change in the conception of IL that rejects a skills-based approach in favor of a set of threshold concepts, knowledge practices, and dispositions. The new ARCL definition of information literacy is: "Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning" (ACRL 2016, 3). This definition is further expressed through six core threshold concepts: (1) Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, (2) Information Creation as a Process, (3) Information has Value, (4) Research as Inquiry, (5) Scholarship as Conversation, and (6) Searching as Strategic Exploration. These concepts are further elaborated through an articulated set of knowledge practices and dispositions. Librarians are being asked to adapt their instructional practices to this conceptual approach, and to infuse IL instruction throughout programs of study in collaboration with other campus stakeholders, such as faculty and administration.

This paradigmatic change comes at a time in which we have a limited understanding of the perceptions of IL that are held by librarians and students and how the need for IL instruction may vary based on student goals and the types of instruction students have experienced. This study is therefore timely as it investigates the instructional practices of librarians as they transition to the Framework and seeks to understand student perceptions of their IL instructional needs within the context of their educational goals and ability to be lifelong learners. This understanding is of particular importance for community colleges because they face unique challenges due to their mission (education for all), the students they serve (from a wide variety of backgrounds), and the faculty they employ (often large numbers of adjuncts). In addition, students who attend community colleges have a variety of post-graduation goals. Many can only study part-time, may need to take breaks in their education, and many will leave without attaining a degree or credential (Dougherty, Lahr, & Morest 2017). It is not unusual for community college students to be older, currently employed, responsible for children, have limited economic resources, and need remedial education (Dougherty, Lahr, & Morest 2017; Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Rosenbaum 2016). While the literature on IL instruction in academic libraries is quite expansive, less is known about IL instruction specifically in community college libraries and the extent to which librarians have access to all students in the course of their studies (Reed 2015). In addition, there is evidence of a gap between perceptions of librarians and of students in other contexts, which may have serious consequences for instructional success (Detlor, Julien, Serenko, Wilson, & Lavallee 2011). Thus, this study is motivated by a key change in the IL instruction landscape, as well as previous work in this area.

## 2. Methods

The goal of the study is to examine community college librarians' and community college students' perceptions of students' information literacy needs. These are the research questions to be addressed in this conference presentation::

1. What are the perceptions of community college librarians about student IL needs?
2. What are the self-perceptions of students concerning their IL needs?
3. Do student self-perceptions of their IL needs vary based on their educational and career goals (transfer to university, enter the general job force, practice a trade, or join a profession)?
4. Do student self-perceptions of their IL needs vary based on the type of instruction they receive (skill-based vs. threshold concepts)?
5. How do librarian perceptions and student perceptions of student IL needs compare?

In fall 2019, we conducted an online survey of instructional librarians in community colleges in Florida and New York (N=760), focusing on IL instructional practices and soliciting librarians' opinions about students' IL needs. The survey was based on a national survey of IL practices in academic libraries generally (Julien, Gross, & Latham, 2019). Survey results have been analyzed; selected results are summarized below. In-depth online interviews with 60 students (30 in Florida and 30 in New York) are currently underway, and are being digitally recorded and transcribed. These interviews and preliminary data analysis, using a grounded theory approach, will be completed by the time of the conference, to answer the research questions listed above. The ACRL Framework will inform interview data interpretation, and categories and themes from

the data will be compared to the frames, knowledge practices, and dispositions. The study received IRB approval from Florida State University, and an advisory board of college librarians from New York and Florida is overseeing the project, and helping to recruit interview participants.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The survey of librarians with instructional responsibilities received a response rate of 21.4% (n=163), 94% of which offer IL classes and 99.3% of which offer information IL instruction (ILI). Respondents ranked "teaching students to find information in various sources" as their most important objective, which they also view as their students' most important objective. However, respondents would prefer to prioritize teaching students how to critically evaluate information, which they view as the most important skill for their students. Respondents rank students' awareness of technological innovations as their greatest strength, and critical evaluation of information skills as their greatest weakness. One respondent stated, "We find that most of the students do not know how to find academic materials and resources that support their academic needs." Another wrote, "In my experience, students vastly overestimate their research abilities. They think that because they have experience using Google, they know how to research." "Many students come from public schools that no longer provide library services, and if there is a library, there is no media specialist or librarian on staff," reported one respondent. Others noted that there are differences in students' strengths and needs, depending on their program of study. One said, "Many workforce programs require students to participate in specialized technologies or environments and are given coursework that requires a certain level of IL skills. Those in basic level programs many times are not aware of or exposed to complex IL concepts." "Searching as strategic exploration" was ranked as the most relevant frame from the Framework for students' success (ACRL 2016). However, most respondents (56%) indicated that the Framework has had only a minor influence on their IL instruction. Among respondents who report an influence, this has mostly been to use the frames to conceptually underpin their instruction (46.1%), and to motivate a shift to more active, hands-on learning approaches (38.5%). These survey results will be compared with the results from the student interviews currently underway, to identify divergence in perceptions about students' information literacy needs.

## 4. Implications

Community colleges are the most inclusive institutions of higher learning, available to many people who are not ready for or cannot afford other forms of higher education (Community College Research Center 2018). The American Association of Community Colleges recognizes that IL is critical to the success of community college students (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2018). However, community college students remain understudied, even though they are a very diverse population whose IL needs are likely to be very different from the needs of students in university contexts. Findings from this study will provide a much needed, holistic understanding of how community college students, and the community college librarians teaching IL, perceive students' attainment of IL.

Findings from this study address gaps in the research by revealing the key IL needs of community college students from the point of view of both students and librarians. The study provides a snapshot of current instructional practices, the extent to which the Framework is being implemented, and the challenges community college librarians face in serving their academic communities. It also contributes to the literature on student perceptions of IL, the relationship between student goals and instructional experiences, and their view of IL. The results of this research can aid the design of instruction that responds to students' perceived needs, inform collaborative relationships between librarians and other stakeholders such as teachers and administrators, and assist LIS educators in teaching programs at the master's level in how to develop, implement, and evaluate replicable programs that are responsive to student needs. Thus, there is broad potential for multiple outcomes, including influencing future research on best practices in information literacy instruction in the community college environment.

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