



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

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The Faculty Forum is your opportunity to express your considered opinions on issues related to teaching. Our goal is to spark a lively, constructive dialogue on college teaching. All viewpoints are welcome. As we begin our third year of publication, we invite all readers to submit an opinion piece or a teaching tip. We want to share your insights with the entire university community.

Overcoming Library Illiteracy: A Joint Responsibility

From my seat at the reference desk, I see evidence daily that the teaching faculty assume that students understand academic libraries--that they know what is in an academic library and that they can find what is there. Teaching faculty probably assume these things because years in academe have made library terminology and research methods a part of their workaday world.

I ask you to consider just how new this world is to the freshman--and how still unfamiliar it may be to the sophomore or junior. According to David Allen (1982), a librarian at The State University of New York at Stony Brook,

many students are library illiterates. . . .A surprising number do not know how to look up a book in the card catalogue and have no idea what a call number is or how to use it to find a book. It is rare indeed to encounter a student who understands the mysteries of locating an article through a periodicals index and then tracking it down using the library's serials catalogue. Even beginning graduate students are generally unfamiliar with the basic indexes and bibliographies in their fields.*

At the reference desk every day and night during the regular weeks of the semester and during the term paper rush, we field questions the students ask. We see the head scratching, the false starts, the bewilderment, the quiet desperation. Certainly, many students do know how to look up a book in TOP CAT, but there are indeed "a surprising number" who do not. As we consider the more complex skills mentioned by David Allen, the level of difficulty goes up and the percentage of competent students goes down.

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Faculty may choose to ignore the students' ignorance and "let them figure it out the way we did." Or they may simplify assignments and water courses down so that library use is cursory or even unnecessary. But neither of these choices seems academically healthy. The first merely perpetuates the students' ignorance and, I suspect, results in a lot of student papers based on either too few or inappropriate sources. The second choice is a surrender to mediocrity and undermines the integrity of a university education.

My preference would be for faculty to recognize their students' library illiteracy and keep it in mind when designing courses and assigning coursework. Faculty can help students before assigning a 20-page term paper by spending more time on basic research skills such as differentiating scholarly and popular literature or using (that's using, not making) a bibliography. At a faculty governance level, The Faculty Senate Council responsible for the General Education Program might identify a hierarchy of research skills to be taught in a succession of General Education courses.

Overcoming library illiteracy requires a joint effort of teaching faculty and librarians. WCU librarians are glad to visit classes, upon invitation, and provide instruction related to research assignments. We can work with faculty to compile library resource guides for a particular assignment or subject area. And we are always willing to spotcheck library assignments for obvious troublespots, based on the questions we frequently field at the reference desk.

If we prepare students sufficiently for their work in the library, they are more likely to succeed, more likely to enjoy their work, and more likely to invest those long and tedious hours necessary for quality academic research.

Becky Kornegay, Library

*David Y. Allen, "Students Need Help in Learning How to Use the Library," The Chronicle of Higher Education, June 9, 1982, p. 56.