

Lacking Research Skills, Students Struggle. School Librarians Can Help Solve the College Readiness Gap.

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If Hollywood made horror movies specifically for librarians, a typical opening scene might be this: A despondent freshman slumps in his dorm room, struggling to complete his first major research project. The camera pans out to a wide shot, showing the library building next door. Students don't know how to make proper use of its vast research options—and they aren't asking university librarians for help.

This scenario is familiar in universities across the country. According to *SLJ*'s 2019 information literacy and college readiness survey, responding high school librarians estimate that 69 percent of their 12th graders are college bound, but only one in four reported that their high school libraries have set goals for preparing students for college research. In a separate 2017 study of academic librarians, *Library Journal* found that fewer than one of every three first-year students are prepared to successfully complete a college-level research project.

College librarians say a progressive plan to make sure most students are ready for college research could help close the current gap.



Illustration by Thomas Pitilli

Many K–12 librarians feel it is part of their job to prepare students for post-secondary work and are eager to address the readiness gap. A major aspect of college preparedness is teaching students how to conduct quality research, whether for an English 101 paper or part of a STEM project. As school districts continue to cut back on certified librarians, this work becomes even harder. But college librarians, from state schools to very selective private ones, are ready to help. They're pinpointing what challenges new students are having on campus and are open to working with K–12 librarians to help narrow the gaps students face.

"It's a nationwide problem. Students are coming not prepared, through no fault of their own," says Juan Carlos Rodríguez, dean of the University Library at the California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA). "Students should be getting these skills early, but a lot of

high school students don't have librarians as a result of budget cuts."

College students' research challenges can be defined in four major areas, according to the *LJ* report. That survey of more than 500 college librarians showed that students have trouble picking a research topic and creating objectives. They also rely heavily on Google searches; are overconfident about their research abilities; have trouble vetting sources for reliability; and can't properly cite sources.

High school librarians can use strategies to help address these shortcomings. *SLJ*'s survey showed that the vast majority of middle and high school librarians—90 percent—understand the importance of information literacy. Still, many of them cite time constraints, unsupportive school leaders, and stressed teachers as impediments to regular instruction with students.

The first thing most new college students need to do for a research assignment is to pick a topic. For some, this might be the biggest hurdle they face, says Stephanie Gamble, Johns Hopkins University academic liaison librarian. "These students have always been raised in a world in which there's more information than any one person can exhaustively consider," Gamble says. Trying to narrow down that information can paralyze them.

Many students working with the humanities department at Hopkins have “very strong ideas” about what to research, she says. In an earlier job as a librarian at a Midwestern public university, she says she observed that students “had a harder time recognizing that anything is researchable, as long as you ask the right questions.”

In the past, she adds, the questions students came up with would drive them to a library to find experts. Today’s students can search so much information online, it can be hard to get them into the library.

Rodríguez says the students on his commuter campus come to the library but rarely seek out a librarian’s help. His 24,000-student school is addressing that by offering students many options for assistance, from writing centers to tutoring help, all under the same roof. He’s starting to see benefits.

“If we make it difficult for students to get help, they’ll be reluctant to ask for it,” he says. Rodríguez also has to counter a growing trend that he’s seen in the greater Los Angeles area: Most students aren’t used to asking librarians questions because they didn’t have a librarian in high school. The university now has its librarians visit more classes to introduce themselves to students and let students know they have subject area expertise.

While CSULA has seen its library staff shrink from 15 to seven in the past several years, Rodríguez hopes to hire an outreach librarian to partner with area school districts.

Because Hopkins doesn’t have a student center, the library is the campus’s de facto student hub, Gamble says. Even with that visibility, librarians are becoming “invisible” to students, she says, as the number of students interacting with staff continues to decrease.



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—Stephanie Gamble, academic liaison librarian, Johns Hopkins University

The overconfidence issue

Students’ “easy access” to information actually makes it more challenging for them, says Rodríguez. “They have a sense of confidence, when they are lacking these skills.”

While using Google, or even Google Scholar, they often aren't aware that proprietary databases (which their school may well have access to) can provide more information and context on a subject. Many students don't know that some information isn't online at all, but could be discovered in library archives, says Gamble. "They're good at finding things, just not all the right things."

Mary Keeling, president of the American Association of School Librarians, agrees. "They're satisfied with a Google search, when that's only the tip of the iceberg," she says. "They seek an easy out."

Part of this problem lies with classroom teachers, according to K–12 librarians. The only subject that regularly includes information literacy work is English, most respondents to SLJ's survey said, and even then, some teachers just don't grasp the value a librarian can add.

"Teachers assume students have the skills necessary to conduct academic research and writing, but they don't come to the physical library and miss out on lessons that had previously been collaborative," wrote *SLJ* survey respondent Dana Carmichael, a librarian at Whitefish (MT) Middle School.

Vetting information

The bigger issue, in Gamble's view, is students' weakness in properly evaluating information. "They have to evaluate information clinically and determine if it's usable and appropriate," she says. "Those pieces are becoming increasingly important because of the wide range of information available. That's something students come in with a fairly uneven ability to do."

Thanks to greater awareness of fake and doctored news, students have a better handle on the idea that some information can be biased, Gamble says. But many students don't apply the same skepticism to their textbooks. Gamble says she frequently tells students that while textbooks have facts and information, they were written by people, so they still contain someone's point of view.

"That's very hard for incoming students," she says, "They really aren't taught that."

In other cases, this awareness of point of view in historical documents swings too far, Gamble says, using the example of history students studying primary sources. Once students realize that a letter, say from Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, likely contains the treasury secretary's biases, they are apt to dismiss the document in full. "Sure they have a bias, but they were there," Gamble adds. Students "have to make sense of information in light of that, rather than throwing it out."

When the question is formed, the research completed, and the paper written, some students still fail at the last step: citations.

“We have to teach kids to use various citation styles,” says Keeling, because each field of study has its own rules to follow. Rodríguez adds that the different ways to cite various materials can trip up nearly every student.

Amid these challenges, there is good news. More students are contacting librarians online, according to Keeling and Gamble. “We’re seeing a rising number of questions via chat or email,” Gamble says. “With distance education, students can be anywhere.”

“Libraries can reach beyond the walls of the library,” Keeling says. “We want students to have access beyond the school day.”

Still, Gamble notes that in-person help can be much more fruitful for librarian and student. “You can talk faster than you can type,” she says. Plus, “a lot can happen visually.” The student can show her the assignment they are working on, and she can quickly ascertain the professor and the student’s year.

In the end, Gamble says, students need to wade into each project and be prepared to engage with the information they find. “Information is incredibly messy. Most students aren’t introduced to information in that way.”

Partnering for improvement

One way to close the information literacy gap is for more librarians to partner with peers at higher education institutions. “I would like to collaborate more with the local college on the information/research skills especially now that our juniors and seniors are taking college classes there,” wrote one survey respondent.

As CSULA adds more librarians, Rodríguez is looking to begin an outreach program to community colleges and high schools in the area. “We know where 80 percent of our students come from,” he says. That makes it easy to work more closely with high schools and let staff know “what skills we expect students to come with. We need to prepare a new group of educators to understand how important these skills are to student success.”

Keeling suggests that more high school librarians become familiar with the Association of College and Research Libraries framework for information literacy. According to the SLJ survey, more than half of school librarians have introduced the six concepts included in the ACRL framework.

Despite the decline in requests to librarians at Johns Hopkins, Gamble knows the value of the staff hasn’t diminished. She is hopeful that a building renovation will make student-staff interaction easier. Even now, when a few students come to the information desk to ask a question, it’s not long before a line will form as other students realize that a staffer might be able to speed them to the right resource or help reframe a problem.

Just reaching the students where they are, whether through midnight coffee breaks or letting them know the staff understands the stress of finals week, can build a better bond, she adds. "They should know the library cares about them, and then they might seek out other help."



[Download full infographic for *SLJ* Information Literacy/College Readiness survey.](#)

SLJ's Information Literacy/College Readiness Survey Report



Wayne D'Orio is a freelance journalist and a regular Hechinger Report contributor who writes frequently about education and equity.

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