You *Shall* Pass: Bridging the First-Year Research Skills Gap

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Background

Concern over first-year (FY) students’ lack of research skills is long established, including their inability to support claims, go beyond Google, and understand the need for citations. The research instruction (RI) librarians at SUNY Geneseo’s Milne Library have collaborated with other colleges/universities, high schools, and school support units to build a bridge over the research skills abyss, including opportunities for high schools to bring students to Milne for a research skills class and embedded instruction in FY writing seminars. Students, teachers, and faculty uniformly provide positive feedback, with a demonstrated increase in students’ research skills and readiness for college-level work.

INTD105: First-Year Writing Seminar

Two of the course requirements are that one paper be a research paper, and an RI librarian provide a research skills instruction session at least once during the semester (many instructors have an RI librarian visit twice).

RI librarians are embedded with each section of INTD105; i.e., each section of INTD105 is supported by an RI librarian, who contacts the instructor to learn about the needs of the class.

Because each INTD105 instructor uses their own theme for their class(es), each research instruction librarian develops individualized research skills instruction lesson plans to support the theme of the class and the requirements of the research paper.

Goals of Research Skills Instruction for INTD105

- **Locate**: Locate and utilize a broad spectrum of library resources.
- **Evaluate**: Evaluate sources for use in a variety of contexts.
- **Integrate**: Integrate sources into arguments.

INTD105 Research Skills Instruction Assessment

In 2017–2018, the RI librarians worked with the HEDS Consortium to conduct a baseline assessment of first years’ and seniors’ research and information literacy skills.
The assessment was offered at the beginning of the fall semester and at the end of the spring semester.

The point was to identify the research practices that students improve upon over the course of the year (or continue to struggle with). *Note: Not every student who took the assessment in the fall also completed it in the spring.*

The most difficult components noted by students:

- Narrowing/broadening a topic
- Using evidence to support their arguments, developing their main argument, thesis statement, or hypothesis
- Expressing ideas clearly
- Obtaining full-texts of sources

Students showed an increase in confidence in these categories (among others):

- Using a database
- Determining whether a source is credible
- Knowing how to cite a source in text and in a bibliography

The gains indicate that the instruction emphasis on the goals of Locate, Evaluate, Integrate is having a positive effect.

RI librarians are currently discussing how to implement information on obtaining full-texts of articles and evaluating information for relevancy, as well as investigating a rubric-based approach to assessment that would allow them to look at the students’ research papers to see if there is consistency between students’ implementation of their research skills and their opinions from HEDS.

**High School Outreach Program**

Every high school library media specialist (or a teacher or administrator, if the school district has no librarian) within a 45-minute bus ride of SUNY Geneseo is contacted near the beginning of the school year to let them know/remind them about Milne Library’s outreach program and resources, and encourage them to consider bringing their students in for a day in a college library.

Because each class is working on a different research project, each class has an individualized research skills instruction lesson plan to support the requirements of the research project and the needs of the students.

Classes visiting Milne range from 8th and 9th graders participating in the National History Day project to seniors writing about British and/or classic authors, poetry and music, or using a seed text (e.g., *Moneyball* and the use of statistics in writing; *The Things They Carried*, which is used to spark research on any topic).
High School Outreach Program Qualitative Assessment/Feedback

- For many years now, Ms. Larson-Rhodes has been welcoming Avon High School’s seniors to Milne Library at SUNY Geneseo to gather college-level information for their senior research projects. Sherry instructs the students how to effectively navigate Milne’s catalog, databases, and the library itself and then provides them with the opportunity to work on their own in the library in any way they see fit. Through this experience, our students not only gain access to many additional resources for their projects, but they also get a chance to explore what it feels like to utilize a college library first-hand. A testament to the impact of Sherry’s program is the fact that I have students email me during their first year of college to say how comfortable they are using the library at their new institution. I can’t thank Sherry enough for the role she plays in this!
  —Suzanne Freeman, School Library Media Specialist, Avon HS

- For the past few years, we have brought high school seniors to Milne Library for a tour and work session. Experiencing the college library and resources has helped students create authentic research projects and papers as well as open their eyes to a whole new realm of sources. These visits have proven to be a valuable tool in preparing students for college writing.
  —Karen Bugman, ELA Teacher, Keshequa HS

- We have been bringing our seniors to Milne for research for many years. They are able to use resources that we, as a public high school, do not offer. The students also see what a college library is like which helps prepare them for their upcoming year as college freshmen. Sherry always does a great job introducing our students to all the resources that are available at a college library from databases to print materials. We love our annual trip to Milne!
  —Joan Ellison, School Library Media Specialist, Keshequa HS

- Our high school students gain invaluable insight during their visit to Milne Library in preparation for their research paper and the next step in their educational journey. Sampling college life and delving into its rigors has been a rewarding experience!
  —Christine Meyers, AP Language Teacher, Geneseo HS

- Visiting Milne library for the day is the first sample our students have had of what it’s like to dedicate an entire day to a scholarly research project. Most return to school excited for the day when they will be college students and have access to the level of resources and help that the college has to offer. Our dedicated librarian for the day, Sherry Larson-Rhodes, makes the process of research accessible to all with her detailed instruction and friendly support throughout the day.
  —Heather Greene, School Library Media Specialist, Geneseo HS

- Our high school students grow both academically and socially from working with Ms. Larson-Rhodes during their visits to Milne. We bring over both freshmen
working on National History Day projects and seniors in AP Literature classes. Being a part of a college experience—researching in a college library, using the expanded database collection, locating books using LOC in the stacks—provides them a taste of where they could be in the future. We love bringing our classes to Milne!
—Deb Donohue, School Library Media Specialist, Livonia HS

Perry requires ALL 12th grade ELA students to visit a college library as part of their senior thesis project. Our goal is to ensure that all students are able to access information which they deem credible, reliable, and appropriate, regardless of their future plans. All students are asked to provide feedback on the thesis process. Of 62 students polled, 39 cited their time at Milne as the most important part of the thesis process. Specifically, the use of larger subject-specific databases, instruction on searching and utilizing key words, and the quality of the resources were most often given as reasons why Milne was an integral part of the thesis process.
—Saragrace Perry, School Library Media Specialist, Perry HS