

Vermont Librarians' Statement on Information Literacy Across the Lifespan

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The Vermont Consortium of Academic Libraries, Vermont School Library Association, and Vermont Library Association believe that information literacy is crucial to Vermonters' success from K-20, into the workplace and continuing throughout the lifespan. While librarians and libraries provide the foundation for teaching information literacy skills, offering quality information sources and collaborative spaces for all Vermonters, we do not work alone in valuing and building these skills. We work with other stakeholders like teachers, faculty, administrators, trustees, and employers who also have a stake in the information literacy skills of Vermonters. There is an urgent need for dialog among key stakeholders to raise awareness of the importance of information literacy as a lifelong skill, strengthen channels of communication to help students transition their skills from one setting to another, and to help Vermont's students become information literate adults and citizens.

Background

Information Literacy is defined by the Association for College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* as "...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" (2015). These critical skills are not only for K-12 students and the college bound; they are essential for lifelong learning and career success. Studies have found that freshmen struggle with college-level research, while employers find new college graduates lack critical thinking skills (Head, 2013; Head, 2016).

Employers in the 21st century knowledge economy want their workers to engage in collaborative problem-solving that entails solid source evaluation and analysis, using a wide variety of resources (Raish & Rimland, 2016). They have found that new hires fresh from college frequently lack these and other "intangible" critical-thinking skills (Monge & Frisicaro-Pawlowski, 2014). The Net Generation may appear to be technically savvy, but the critical research skills that are missing may lead them to approach information from a very narrow perspective, accepting the first few results of a Google search as sufficient, when these may instead represent biased, shallow, or inaccurate thinking on a subject.

Project Information Literacy, which conducts studies of young adults and their use of information skills in their personal and professional lives, has recommended that schools begin teaching information competencies early, and that this instruction continue throughout students' formal education. They also recommend that stakeholders begin building bridges for teaching these information literacy competencies throughout the K-20 curriculum. The Vermont Agency of Education's *Education Quality Standards* which officially went into effect on April 5, 2014 (2016) and *Sample Graduation Proficiencies & Performance Indicators for Global Citizenship* (2016, August) clearly articulate Vermont's commitment to information literacy.

Librarians, teachers, faculty and administrators need to come together to talk about how to better prepare students to succeed from one level to the next, and how to ultimately create lifelong, information-literate learners (Head, 2016).

The Role of School Librarians

Teacher librarians play an integral role in student learning and success. In addition to being teachers, school librarians are school-wide curriculum leaders who develop and deliver library services; support every learner; create a culture of independent reading; and partner with staff and parents to support student learning, achievement and personal growth. A Washington State School Library Impact study found that students who attend schools with certified teacher librarians and quality facilities are more likely to graduate, and that this impact was particularly notable in high-poverty schools (Coker, 2015). At elementary schools, librarians lay the important foundation for print literacy and information literacy skills. According to an Ontario study, “The presence of a teacher-librarian was the single strongest predictor of reading enjoyment for both grade 3 and grade 6 students” (Klinger, 2009).

As with all learning, future and sustained growth is dependent upon ongoing, scaffolded opportunities to practice, learn, and share. In K-12 schools that value and support information literacy, teacher librarians regularly collaborate with classroom teachers, incorporating technology that empowers students to be effective users and creators of products and information, an integral component of the Vermont Agency of Education’s *Sample Graduation Proficiencies & Performance Indicators for Global Citizenship* (2016, August). Students are introduced to databases in order to access information within an organized system, just as they will in college, the workplace, and their personal lives when searching out quality information on topics ranging from healthcare to car repair. In today’s digital learning environments, students continually practice the information retrieval and evaluation skills that create critical and creative thinkers, i.e. the digital citizenship skills necessary to ethically use and share information (International Society for Technology in Education, 2016), and collaborate and leverage technology to solve real-world problems, doing work similar to what they will encounter in their future careers (Future Ready Schools, 2016).

Studies have shown that without robust library programs and information literacy skills integrated into the curriculum, students are often unprepared for the rigors of academic research facing them in college (Head, 2013; Varlejs, Stec & Kwan, 2014; New York City DOE/CUNY Library Collaborative, 2014). This can be compounded by the misperception that technology-savvy students should have no problem accessing the information they need. Without the careful preparation provided by school library programs, information literacy gaps will persist in college.

The Role of Academic Librarians

Academic librarians teach information literacy in varied settings on campuses and online, visiting the classroom to teach information literacy concepts or provide subject specific research guidance. Online, academic librarians work in creative ways with faculty by embedding in course learning management systems, providing

contextual help as the student moves through the curriculum. Academic librarians are frequently technology innovators, leveraging new media and tech tools to respond to the learning needs of all students, advancing user-friendly design, and fostering a spirit of innovation and collaboration on their campuses.

With the flood of information available digitally, evaluation of relevant information is an essential piece of information literacy. Academic librarians focus on this piece to prepare students for the complex reality of finding, evaluating and synthesizing information once they graduate and enter the workforce. They also prepare students for the workplace by teaching how to research and keep current in their field by introducing them to the professional literature and information structures in their profession, and how to find, evaluate and use information outside of the education system's subscription resources. As students progress toward producing their own intellectual output, librarians play a crucial role in helping them navigate the legal and ethical issues around content publishing.

College and university librarians help students learn to ask the right questions as they grapple with new intellectual concepts. Whatever the students' academic and career pathways, they need to be prepared to conduct meaningful research that can lead to learning through inquiry and discovery and provide lifelong, critical-thinking skills.

The Role of Public Librarians

Public libraries play a critical role in their communities. In addition to supporting children's literacy and providing a safe space for kids after school, public libraries typically provide an informal learning space which also accommodates adult learners. This fits in with the public library's mission as place for "lifelong learning." Public Librarians can provide invaluable assistance to all learners, supporting literacy across the lifespan. They help community members of all ages learn to navigate the increasingly complex world of online information which is now essential to everyday tasks, from finding health information, to conducting job searches, to applying for benefits, or engaging in cultural pursuits that improve quality of life. Public libraries are challenged to meet the needs of an extremely diverse client base. Library users have a wide range of educational and technological experience and require a wide array of information sources and types of assistance. Public library staff help support the information literacy skill requirements of a well-informed populace. A focus on building the partnerships between public, school and academic libraries will strengthen the information literacy skills of our citizenry.

For children and teens, public librarians complement the work of school librarians, helping students identify quality resources for school assignments and supplementary learning. In addition, public libraries now serve as learning environments for school students choosing alternative educational opportunities, as part of Vermont Act 77 of 2013, Flexible Pathways Initiative (Vermont Agency of Education, 2016, Flexible Pathways). Including information literacy in these endeavors would not only make the projects and the learning more robust but also prepare these students for real-world research situations.

Strengthening the Information Literacy skills of All Vermonters

Information literacy skills are transferrable, critical thinking skills. Librarians help individuals learn to select, evaluate, and ethically use sources in academic, professional, and personal contexts. These skills can carry over into the arena of citizenship. There is a critical need to develop citizens who can interpret and evaluate political and social policy information and recognize their own and others' biases when seeking balanced viewpoints and evidence for action. We live in a dramatically polarized society, in which we have become accustomed to seeking information sources that conform to our previously held beliefs. If we are to heal this extreme divide, we need to integrate information literacy concepts across all levels of education, workplace training, and public discourse (Lenker, 2016).

Information fluency is an important part of the Common Core standards as reflected in the emphasis on the independent quest for information, the value of evidence, and the strategic use of technology. These are the skills that Vermonters need to attain to become college and career ready. The McClure Foundation has identified the top 67 high-pay, high-growth jobs projected for Vermont in the near future. The majority of these careers require highly-developed critical thinking and information literacy skills (McClure, 2016). Vermont's current high school completion rates (87.8%) and low college attendance rates (52%) further reveal the need for strong information literacy skill development across the K-12 curriculum, both for workplace readiness and for college success and completion (New England Secondary School Consortium, 2015).

In order to remain competitive in an innovation-driven economy, it is critical that Vermont make a commitment to promote the information literacy awareness of its citizens. Conversations around educational policy and resource allocation should include the voices of professional librarians in collaboration with educators and administrators at all levels in order to ensure this commitment is realized.

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