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Academic and Intellectual Freedom Climate on Campus

ACRL Intellectual Freedom Committee Panel, ALA 2009

Academic libraries are all about free information - free as in beer and free as in speech. The benefit of the first is obvious to students. They feel quite differently about the library than they do about the campus bookstore, for example. What they may understand less clearly is the "free as in speech" aspect of the library. And to some extent that's because of the way we teach students about libraries and research.

There's a basic paradox embedded in information literacy. Though our ultimate goal is that students will learn to think for themselves, most students approach the library with pragmatic goals and a set of instructions in hand: Here is the kind of question you should investigate. Here are the kinds of sources you should consult. This is the kind of language you should speak in; not your language, but ours. For much of an undergraduate's education, he or she is learning the ropes of academic inquiry, and that means unlearning her own language and learning how to mimic the questions other people ask. And libraries are complicit in that unlearning. We want to prepare students for lifelong learning, but the first order of business is to prepare them to be successful students. And in the early years success means being able to manipulate tools correctly and follow rules. The ultimate aim, of course, is for students to learn how arguments are built, how to think critically, how to articulate and answer their own questions . . . and possibly even to gain the courage to break rules when necessary - but there's an apprenticeship to serve first, and that tends to absorb most of our time and effort.

We are also working against the implicit symbolism of libraries. We think of libraries as testaments to freedom, but in so many ways, the library is likely to be seen as a bastion of traditional culture, of someone else's idea of order. Students don't always appreciate the truly anarchic nature of libraries - their openness to multiple conflicting answers; their tolerance of diverse perspectives - in fact, one of our faculty dubbed the library the "Palace of Ambiguity. But it doesn't look all that open to After all, just look at the symbolism of the orderly shelves, the relatively studious and hushed atmosphere, the ways in which traditional library architecture reinforces the dominance of high culture and the Western tradition. Not everyone feels instantly at home or empowered in an academic library. It's generally not until they've

become comfortable with an academic identity that they can feel on equal footing with the sources on the shelves – that they, too, have a role to play in making knowledge, that it's negotiable and fluid.

For those of you who aren't directly involved in information literacy efforts at your library, in a nutshell they are designed to foster students' ability to find, evaluate, and use information. The [information literacy standards](#) for higher education frame those abilities with two other competencies: the ability to recognize when information is needed and an understanding of the economic, legal, and social implications of information. These framing capabilities tend to get relatively short shrift from librarians in their instruction.

To recognize when information is needed. In college, that's easy. I need information because I have a paper due in two weeks. Someone else decides when information is needed, and why. I think we - and I mean "we" to embrace faculty as a whole - need to think more creatively about how information is needed beyond college. I've just heard something on the news that makes me curious; I want to learn more. I want to bring an issue to the city council, but I need persuasive evidence to make my case. Why do so many kids in my neighborhood have asthma? Is there something we can do about it? We hope that the critical thinking students do when we ask them to read a Toni Morrison novel or a classic essay by Clifford Geertz will lead them to ask questions later in life, but I'm afraid too many of our students leave college unaware that the skills they learn while finding sources for academic assignments can be applied to "real world" questions after college. And that's partly because we focus on academic task for which we make them dependent on proprietary resources; we provide them for their college years, but they may not have those library resources available later. More to the point, they may see no need for scholarly information once the assignments stop coming. I think we need to consider how to make scholarly knowledge meaningful beyond college.

To understand the economic, legal, and ethical issues surrounding information and to use information ethically and legally: boy, do we drop the ball on this one. The number one way academic libraries check that one off the list is to tell students not to plagiarize. How often do we have an opportunity to discuss the information controversies that are so important for our society: the cost of government secrecy, the micro payments of personal information that we make when we use common web resources, how commercial interests have hijacked publicly-funded scientific and medical research, how the fourth estate is crumbling before our eyes, and why it matters. How often do we point out that legal and ethical uses of information may not be the same thing?

Ironically, it's exactly these issues that make the whole ecosystem of information meaningful and that animate students' interest. How sad that we so rarely find time to get around to discussing them. If we could take half the time we spend demonstrating how to coax information out of poorly-designed and expensive databases or how to document sources to avoid a plagiarism rap and spent it on the exciting stuff, students might stay awake and leave with something to think about, not just hints on how to survive the next assignment. They might learn how to be a good citizen, not just a good student.

Course-related instruction is the mainstay of most information literacy programs, and very often this instruction is tied to first year courses that introduce students to academic expectations. Certainly, it's not possible to sprint through every aspect of skills and dispositions

that take years to develop, but even within those constraints we can introduce some critical issues. For example, first year students can examine and compare three sources on a topic related to their course and explore the differences between advocacy and more even-handed journalism. They might examine a first-draft-of-history news account of some controversial issue and compare it to a scholarly treatment of the same topic. When introducing students in a biology course required for majors to the nuts and bolts of interlibrary loan, I mention the cost of permissions and say a few words about the reasons why scientific information has such a high price. It doesn't take long, but it at least introduces the idea that all sources require engagement, require critical thinking, that information isn't an inert substance mined in a library and delivered to a professor's desk.

As Jacob Bronowski said, "There is no way of exchanging information that does not involve an act of judgment." Those acts of judgment are essential skills for becoming free human beings and for sustaining a free society.

It's possible to delve a lot deeper if you can have more time with students and really engage them in the issues through readings and discussion. We've tried this in a couple of ways at our library, through an [interdisciplinary course](#) aimed at students going on to graduate school who want a firmer grasp of how libraries work and through an experimental but very promising lab section attached to a political science methods course. In these cases students have time to reflect on issue – privacy, government information policies, how peer review works and why it doesn't always work, how evidence is defined differently by different disciplines, how journalists use anecdotes and emotional appeals to shape people's response to stories, how statistics are often misused. These are engaging issues for students who often draw insightful analogies and bring in issues they've encountered elsewhere while getting practice using research tools. It's one way to make sure they gain some sense of the ethical, legal, and social issues beyond "don't plagiarize."

Faculty development is another avenue to pursue. We can have a real impact by helping other teachers incorporate the library more effectively into their courses. But we can also help them see the role libraries play in freedom of information. They may have a good grasp of which journals are the best ones in their field, but little sense of how books are published or why the news industry is in free fall. I did a [three-day workshop](#) last January on "How Information Works" that gave us a chance to talk about the Google Books settlement, the importance of university presses for covering topics that aren't commercially viable for trade publishers, the state of the news media, and the effect that copyright law is having not just on scholarly communication but on culture in general. The faculty brought a lot of their own knowledge to the table but enjoyed having a chance to put the big picture together while learning some new things about the library and the Internet that they can use in their scholarship and teaching.

Outside of the classroom, academic libraries have some terrific potential to educate their communities about intellectual freedom issues – and much learning in college is done outside the classroom. First, there are many ways that libraries can support campus initiatives. Programs devoted to globalizing the curriculum or "one book, one college" reading programs are ripe for library involvement. Diversity programs are a perfect match since diversity of experience and of opinion is what libraries are really all about. Service learning and experiential learning can be another site of collaboration, making the library's presence and potential meaningful beyond traditional library assignments. Is someone on your campus trying to

promote civic engagement? Be part of that. Or what about student organizations? Can they use the library as a space for events or displays?

The library can also take leadership in ways small and large. There are several annual events that lend themselves to library outreach. For example:

[The September Project](#). To quote their website, "Since 2004, libraries across the world have organized events about freedom and issues that matter to their communities during the month of September. This grassroots project favors free over fee, public over private, and voices over silence." Libraries of all types in countries around the world have participated. In our most ambitious year of participation, we hosted Jane Kirtley, Professor of Media Ethics and law to speak about government secrecy, had a panel of faculty speak about the PATRIOT Act from historical, political, and anthropological perspectives, and helped launch a teach-in on the impact of Katrina, inviting faculty from all across campus to shed some light on the disaster from their disciplinary perspectives. Most years we've been less ambitious, but we always try to do something. From time to time, faculty ask us to host events such as a simulcast teach-in on Guantanamo Bay, which suggests to me we are becoming identified as a place for hosting these kinds of conversations.

[Banned Books Week](#) is another natural opportunity to discuss intellectual freedom issues. It's always good to complicate people's understanding by highlighting ways that challenges come from both the left and the right.

[Constitution Day](#), September 17th, is a great opportunity to talk about intellectual freedom, and schools are now required to host some kind of event marking it. Why not score some points with the administration by offering to take the responsibility on? This coming fall we're combining our Constitution Day event with a year-long focus on Mexico, part of a Global Insight program, by having a professor who teaches constitutional law (who is popular enough to have her own Facebook fan club) speak in the library about immigration law post 9/11.

We've also made a point of celebrating [Darwin's birthday](#) on February 12th, which has been gratefully received by our science faculty. This past year, we had a cake, toy dinosaurs, and a fascinating talk by a geology professor who also collects rare books related to evolution and allowed us to display them in the library. When we announced the event on our blog, we got an e-mail from a student who was concerned that we "represent both sides" and "support academic freedom" by making sure anti-evolution views were represented. He linked to an "academic freedom day" website sponsored by the anti-evolution Discovery Institute. I replied by inviting him to the event, and that while I disagreed that this was an academic freedom issue in a biology classroom, where evolution is fundamental to the understanding of biological sciences, but libraries were exactly the kinds of places where issues were always open for discussion. He didn't show up, but I did link to the website in a round-up of sites about Darwin for our library blog – in a section about how Darwin remains a controversial figure.

[Sunshine Week](#), "a national initiative to open a dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information" is held annually in March – again a natural opportunity to become the local face of a national effort to promote values we hold dear.

And in general, through our blog and other campus communications, we make an effort to

highlight issues of information policy and its social context to make sure that our community is aware and to develop our identity as an institutional resource for these issues, whether it's privacy, access to information, censorship, or fair use. We [recently updated](#) our mission statement and composed a vision statement to capture this role.

Our original mission statement is pretty bare-bones and positions the library in a support role: "The library advances the teaching mission and intellectual life of the College by selecting and facilitating access to information and by instructing in its use, interpretation, and evaluation."

The new vision statement embraces a more activist role: "The library will play an essential role in engaging students in critical inquiry and developing the skills and dispositions of life-long learners, prepared for lives of leadership and service in a diverse and fast-changing world. To do this, the library will support the curriculum with materials and opportunities for course-related and independent learning; will provide leadership in fostering information literacy across the curriculum; will inform the community of emerging issues in information policy and trends; and will support the intellectual and cultural life of the college by developing programs, collections, and an engaging physical and virtual space for exploration."

I think for information literacy to be meaningful, our students need an activist library. It's important that we help them be good students, but it's just as important that we help them think about what that means for their future and to understand how free information – free as in speech – is essential for a healthy and free society.



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