Subversive Infusions: Strategies for the Integration of Information Literacy Across the Curriculum

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Available online 9 November 2012

Beginning in 2004, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) requires institutions seeking accreditation to develop a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) to improve student learning. QEP topics may be focused on a single educational initiative or may combine several efforts in order to enhance and assess student learning. While some plans have focused on information literacy specifically, a considerable number of the QEP proposals submitted to SACS between 2007 and 2011 have integrated information literacy learning outcomes as part of another topic. An analysis of the topics and outcomes proposed at 58 institutions offers librarians and information professionals an alternative perspective on the integration of information literacy across the curriculum.

Keywords: Information literacy; Quality Enhancement Plan; Curriculum design; Learning outcomes; Strategic planning; Assessment

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) revised their accreditation standards to require colleges and university to develop a plan that would enhance student learning across the institution’s curriculum. The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is a locally developed proposal that “(1) includes a process identifying key issues emerging from institutional assessment, (2) focuses on learning outcomes and/or the environment supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution, (3) demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP, (4) includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP, and (5) identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement.” Institutions would be expected to select a topic and develop a proposal during the year prior to its review and acceptance by external SACs reviewers.

At the same time, librarians at colleges and universities across the country were ramping up the assessment of their library instruction and information literacy programs, thanks in no small part to the publication of the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education in 2000. While library and information literacy instruction was not new to many campuses, an organized program of planning, teaching, and assessment was less common. The ACRL Standards encouraged local institutions to expand instruction programs and to collect information about students’ pre-instructional abilities and post-instructional information literacy development.

As a consequence of timing, librarians at numerous institutions were able to provide their universities with adequate grounds—both statistically in assessment data and intellectually via a growing body of literature on information literacy development—to consider information literacy for local QEP topics. From 2004 to 2011, eighteen universities developed QEP proposals for enhancing student learning at their institutions by focusing specifically on this topic. Beyond plans that featured information literacy as a focus, more than 100 universities and colleges included information literacy learning outcomes as part of more broad learning objectives. In some cases, the development of information literacy was a direct component of the plan, while others included information literacy in a very limited manner.

While librarians and others have reported on the process involved in proposing, selecting, and implementing QEP proposals focused on information literacy development across an institution’s curriculum,
the impact of information literacy in plans that blend information literacy with other curricular goals has received little attention. In the course of completing research on the presence of information literacy as a topic in Quality Enhancement Plans developed for SACS accreditation, the researcher analyzed proposals published at the SACS QEP website between 2003 and 2010 and organized these documents based on the concentration given to information literacy objectives, learning outcomes, and assessment measures. Rather than analyzing QEP proposals that focus solely on information literacy, this analysis focused on plans that integrate information literacy outcomes with other learning goals in a substantive manner. The results of this work will suggest directions for those librarians and institutions involved in integrating information literacy goals within similar curricular development situations.

**Literature Review**

The use of accreditation reaffirmation criteria and planning to facilitate information literacy integration across higher education curricula has been a popular option for institutions seeking to expand or develop local information literacy programming. Ilene F. Rockman introduces *Integrating Information Literacy into the Higher Education Curriculum* with a chapter detailing the need to integrate information literacy development and learning outcomes across disciplines and cites the influence of requirements set by accrediting bodies as one of the motivating factors behind this trend. Aside from SACS, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), and the North West Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) have all included accreditation suggestions or requirements related to the value and necessity of information literacy development in higher education settings. For a comprehensive review of the relationship between libraries, information literacy instruction, and accreditation standards before 2002, see Thompson’s “Information Literacy Accreditation Mandates: What They Mean for Faculty and Librarians.”

The inclusion of information literacy and library instruction in requirements for accreditation reaffirmation does not mean that all organizations have treated the subject in a similar fashion. In 2007, Saunders offered a cogent analysis of the different ways that information literacy has been appropriated in these standards. In her comparative analysis, Saunders found that information literacy and related teaching and learning outcomes were distributed across accreditation reaffirmation guidelines and were not isolated to sections related to library instruction. This distribution suggests both a challenge and an opportunity for librarians to become more involved in curriculum development and assessment at their local institutions. Less common is the application of accreditation standards to information literacy goals for specific academic disciplines. Ruediger and Jung analyzed the relationship between accreditation and information literacy standards and suggested a process for weaving these expectations and outcomes within subject-specific situations (in this case, the curriculum for an advertising program).

With information literacy as the focus of a variety of campus QEP proposals, a number of articles describing the library’s role during QEP development and implementation have been published. Millet, Donald, and Wilson write about the experience of successfully proposing a QEP for Trinity University that focuses specifically on information literacy learning outcomes. In “Information Literacy Across the Curriculum: Expanding Horizons,” the authors detail the QEP approval process, strategies for infusing information literacy across the curriculum, and the five-year plan to achieve QEP objectives. The authors contend that one of the most valuable results of this process was the involvement of librarians in the development of new courses and the revision of many standing courses, an involvement that has an across-the-board impact on the curriculum. In a subsequent article, Millet argues that the key to the acceptance and success of a QEP proposal with an information literacy focus is to (a) develop strong communication between librarians and faculty members, (b) offer professional development opportunities designed to improve the teaching abilities of librarians, and (c) never underestimate the power of assessment data to provide evidence that students need and will benefit from increased information literacy development.

Penny M. Beile’s “Assessing an Institution-Wide Information Fluency Program: Commitment, Plan, and Purpose” describes the University of Central Florida Libraries efforts to partner with faculty and administration to implement and assess information fluency development across the curriculum. Beile highlights the challenges involved in proposing and implementing a curricular initiative of the size and scope of a campus QEP program, and cites the difficulties related to differing conceptualizations of information fluency between librarians, faculty, and administrators. In addition, the organization of campus partners and the assignment of responsibilities, as well as the need for librarians to maintain a visible role in a campus QEP with an information fluency focus is considered.

In “The Impact of Accreditation and Distance Education on Information Literacy,” Johanna Tunon describes the efforts of Nova Southeastern University to meet SACS accreditation standards related to the provision of library-related learning outcomes. Tunon contends that it is the very presence of such accreditation standards that have spurred libraries to focus efforts to assess library and information literacy instruction effectiveness. Along with a variety of other library-faculty collaborations, Alexandra Simons describes the University of Houston’s involvement in the campus Learning by Discovery QEP. Simons believes that the library’s involvement in the QEP process helped librarians to “align library resources more closely to the needs of the university.”

Loughman, Hickson, Sheeks, and Hortman detail Columbus State University’s QEP development process and its focus on the enhancement of students’ writing abilities. The authors explain the ways that information literacy instruction was integrated into the proposal and the assessment methods that were selected to gauge success and suggest improvement of the library’s involvement with the QEP. David Salinero and Cynthia Beardsley have written on the library’s role in the development and application of Delta State University’s QEP focusing on student and faculty engagement. The authors give focus to the library’s efforts to revise activities and programs that were in place prior to the development of the QEP along with the creation of new resources and services to facilitate DSU’s proposal. While these examples describe various levels of library involvement in the development of QEP programs to meet the accreditation standards set by SACS, the relationship between accreditation standards and information literacy goals requires further exploration in practice and in the scholarly and professional communications of information literacy advocates. In “Perspectives on Accreditation and Information Literacy as Reflected in the Literature of Library and Information Science,” Laura Saunders contends that published and informal discussions on the potential benefits of associating the requirements of accrediting bodies with the goals of information literacy programs continue to receive slim treatment. As institutions and libraries come to the end of five- and ten-year assessment programs related to QEP accreditation requirements, it is expected that more reporting will be offered on the process related to the proposing, implementing, and completing these campus-wide assessment programs.

**Methodology**

The SACS Quality Enhancement Plan website includes listings of QEP proposals submitted and accepted between 2004 and 2011. Due to considerations related to the launch of the QEP program by SACS and limited information for many proposals published during the first
year of the process, study samples were limited to reports submitted during the five-year period between 2007 and 2011. During the sample period, 391 institutions submitted QEP proposals for review. Undergraduate (192) and graduate institutions (199) were represented in an equal manner in this sample. Executive summaries and information available at institutional websites for each QEP proposal were analyzed to locate topics, specific language, or learning outcomes focused on information literacy development. In addition, executive summaries were considered that did not specifically mention information literacy but that included program goals or learning outcomes that are often associated with IL such as the evaluation of information or the ethical use of sources. From the total of 391 proposals, 127 proposals were identified for use in the study (Table 1).

In most cases, the complete QEP proposals created by each institution (commonly published in PDF form and between 50 and 80 pages in length) were located and analyzed. In situations where proposals were considered confidential to institutional personnel or were otherwise unavailable, information from the institution's website was used to collect additional information. Then, plans were organized into three categories designed for this project. Categories were based on the level of focus given to information literacy goals, outcomes, and assessment:

1. IL-Focused Proposals: information literacy development is the stated goal of the proposal. While the document may use terminology other than "information literacy," the objectives of the proposal, the literature review, learning outcomes, program development process, and assessment measures focus on information literacy development.

2. IL-Integrated Proposals: information literacy is one of several primary goals of the objectives and/or outcomes identified in the proposal. Faculty and student are slated to receive information literacy instruction to aid in the completion of the plan and assessment measures related to information literacy learning are included in the plan. The term "information literacy" may or may not be used, but learning outcomes associated with information literacy are included in the plan.

3. IL-Optional Proposals: information literacy is not listed as a stated goal of the plan, although outcomes or IL instruction and program development are included as optional or incidental components of the QEP.

After the QEP proposals were organized, each plan received a second analysis based on the category in which it had been initially organized. As a result, some reports were moved from one category to another, until the plans in each category aligned with the definitions provided above. A total of 21 proposals were removed from the collected data due to a lack of substantive information literacy content, resulting in a final sample of 106 QEP proposals. Descriptive data about each plan was recorded in a Microsoft Excel document and statistical data was collected for each of the three proposal categories. Based on these results, plans in the IL integrated category received a second review to collect the specific language used to describe learning outcomes. Learning outcomes were then associated into five categories based on the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. Additional information was collected about the assessment measures that would be used to gauge the enhancement of student learning due to QEP-related activities (Table 2).

### Findings

Of the 106 proposals selected for categorization and analysis, 18 focused on information literacy as an institution's QEP topic. 58 QEP proposals integrated information literacy in an equal manner with other learning objectives, and an additional 30 plans incorporated information literacy learning outcomes as an optional component of the plan's goals or objectives. While IL-Focused Proposals are clearly of interest to librarians and other information literacy advocates, the IL-integrated category requires greater scrutiny. Clearly, the number of Integrated Proposals that included information literacy outcomes saw an increase during each year of the sample period. Further, as evidenced in Table 3, both undergraduate and graduate institutions show increased interest in including IL learning outcomes in their proposals over time. Of these, the majority (37.9%) focused on critical thinking as the primary topic. Improving student writing (17.2%) was also popular, as was the creation of undergraduate research experiences for students that allowed them to be mentored by faculty (12.1%). Other proposal topics included programs to prepare students for college-level work and participation (12.1%).

A number of terms were used in these proposals to identify information literacy learning outcomes, with "information literacy" being the most common (29.3%). A number of schools (24.1%) used the term "critical thinking" to describe outcomes that librarians and information professionals would commonly associate with information literacy skills. Other examples include "research skills" or "research methods" (13.8%) and "inquiry" (10.3%). A considerable number of proposals (22.4%) did not use a specific term to describe instruction, assignments, or learning outcomes related to the location, evaluation, selection, or use of information sources (Table 4). After categorizing each learning outcome associated with information literacy development by their association with one of the five ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, most plans (37) included one or more learning outcomes related to activities involved in the evaluation of sources. All QEP proposals focused on critical thinking instruction and learning included an outcome that almost replicates the language in the Standards. Standard 4 related to the use of information to accomplish a purpose is also a popular outcome (28) and was most prevalent in QEP proposals designed to enhance students' writing abilities. A total of 21 outcomes focused on the effective and efficient location and gathering of sources. Of the five categories, those that have received little attention across these proposals relate to students developing an understanding of the nature and extent of information needed (6) and the ethical use of sources (3). Finally, nine of the proposals included outcomes that were more aligned with the broad definition

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### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of QEP proposals submitted to SACS, 2007–2011</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2007</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of proposals</td>
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<td>Number of undergrad inst.</td>
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### Table 2

<table>
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<th>Total number of proposals organized by category, 2007–2011</th>
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<td>IL-Focused Proposals</td>
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<td>IL-Integrated Proposals</td>
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<td>IL-Optional Proposals</td>
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Table 3
"Integrated" proposal topics by year and type of institution (A = undergraduate institutions, B = graduate institutions)

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of information literacy without focusing on one or more of the five standards.

**DISCUSSION**

After reviewing and analyzing the 58 IL-integrated QEP proposals, it was evident that the topics of these proposals exhibited a number of trends. The QEP proposal topic that seems most conducive to the integration of information literacy in a conscientious manner focused on enhancing student learning in the area of critical thinking. The connection between critical thinking and information literacy should be no surprise to information literacy advocates. Information literacy requires critical thinking abilities that may have been learned prior to information literacy instruction and that may reinforce continued learning in future situations. The ability to locate and navigate online interfaces and make selections regarding keywords and phrases, the ability to evaluate sources for authority, reliability, timeliness, accuracy, and relevance, and the ability to use sources in an effective and ethical manner are all signs of a critical thinker's behavior. The fact that these activities and behaviors can be graded or quantified makes them well-suited to an assessment-based proposal to enhance student learning.

In addition, critical thinking skills (including abilities associated with information-literate behavior) are commonly assessed on an institution-wide level, providing those institutions with ready-data to justify or explain the choice of critical thinking as a QEP topic. The most popular tool for the assessment of critical thinking abilities (35%) in students was the Tennessee Technical University's Critical Thinking Assessment Test (CAT). This test interprets students' responses to gauge their ability to evaluate information, think creatively, learn and solve problems, and communicate effectively. Each of these skill categories includes information literacy related outcomes, such as separating factual information from inferred information, the identification of new information that might have an impact on an issue or problem, and separating relevant information from superficial data. The ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) test was another popular option (25%). The CAAP test includes five possible assessment modules, out of which three modules include the assessment of the student's ability to evaluate and make decisions related to information. The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)20 and the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST)21 were also considered or adopted for assessment purposes by 25% of those schools with a critical thinking QEP focus, and both include measures to gauge critical thinking and problem-solving abilities related to the evaluation and use of information.

While arguable, it is likely that institutions that chose critical thinking for their QEP topic included information literacy learning outcomes as part of their proposal because of the strong connection between critical thinking and information literacy. This connection is strengthened when

Table 4
Terms used in Integrated Proposal to describe information literacy-related learning outcomes, activities, etc. organized by year and type of institution (A = undergraduate institutions, B = graduate institutions)

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assessment measures designed to justify the QEP (and in some cases, to also evaluate its impact during the ten-year life of the plan) also confirm
the need for information literacy development. Ultimately, the use of
these sources and the development of campus-wide learning outcomes
based on these assessment tools should be of interest to individuals
seeking to integrate information literacy across the curriculum. If
librarians and campus partners are aware of the assessment measures
that are used to guide the development of QEP-style proposals, strategic
planning guidelines, etc., they will be better able to find an opportunity
to focus on components of those measures that relate to information
literacy development and assessment.

Aside from proposals that focused on critical thinking, improving
student writing by improving instruction and programming was a
popular QEP topic. This was even more evident in proposals classified in
the IL-Optional category. The connection between improving students’
ability to write and present reasoned, informed arguments and
information literacy development should be clear. Of interest in these
cases is the fact that the term “information literacy” was less common in
favor of such identifiers as “research skills,” “research methods,” or
“inquiry.” One of the reasons for this may be the very specific manner in
which English Departments and writing programs view the use of the
term “literacy” and its application in this particular situation. In-
stitutions implementing QEP programs focused on student writing
tended to depend upon examples of students’ written assignments and
electronic portfolios and standardized rubrics were provided or
proposed to help quantify assessment data that is more commonly
presented in a qualitative manner.

Other topics selected by institutions that seemed to have a strong
connection with information literacy learning outcomes were focused
on creating opportunities for undergraduates to participate in research
projects with faculty mentors, the development of students’ global
competence and sensitivity and understanding related to different
countries and cultures, and the preparation of students to either prepare
them for their introduction to university education or for their entry into
the job market. All of these proposals offer opportunities for librarians
and others to integrate information literacy learning outcomes into
across-the-curricular programs. Again, while it is ideal to develop
information literacy programs that become integrated throughout the
curriculum and within the disciplines in a very direct and conscious
manner, the ability and opportunity to integrate information literacy in
any way possible is one that should not be overlooked.

**FURTHER RESEARCH**

While this study focuses on collecting and comparing the intended
information literacy learning outcomes in Quality Enhancement Plan
proposals, further research on the assessment methods use to justify
the selection of a QEP topic and the assessment methods selected to
determine the impact of the program would be valuable. First, the
institutions included in this study were required to show a need for
enhancement in teaching and learning related to their QEP proposals.
Institutions used assessment data collected prior to the QEP
development process to help determine the topics that would be
considered for the QEP. This data was also used to justify the final
selection of QEP topic. While it would be ideal that all institutions
conducted campus-wide surveys or studies to determine the status of
information literacy education across the student body, it may be that
they are collecting information-literacy assessment as part of other
assessments (e.g., critical thinking assessments and general education
assessments). Therefore, researchers should consider both the tools
that are intended to regularly assess local student bodies, and the
selection process by which these tools are chosen. The answers to
both “what?” and “how?” may give local professionals greater insight
into the data that is regularly being collected in relation to their
concerns and efforts, as well as the process involved in selecting these
tools so that professionals may become more involved in this process.

Additionally, researchers may consider the connection between
proposed methods of assessing a program and the program’s intended
learning outcomes. Obviously, the learning outcomes of an education
program—as determined by faculty, administrators, and other
stakeholders—should be assessable by using the tools designed or
selected to accomplish this task. But, what if the tools selected to
assess a program also determine the learning outcomes of that
program? Consider the influence and power involved when a
program or institution selects learning outcomes based on outcomes
that are easily assessed by the most common or most respected tool.
Fortunately, in addition to campus-wide assessment, each of the QEP
proposals included in this study depended on authentic and direct
assessment of students’ products (often in addition to context-free,
campus-wide surveys). Of the assessment methods proposed, rubrics
(27%), surveys (27%), and writing portfolios (18%) were the most
popular forms. Still, due to continued concerns that our teaching and
learning goals should reflect the needs of our students and our local
communities, rather than depending upon pre-determined assess-
ment instruments that might encourage a “teaching to the test” mentality,
understanding procedures for selecting and assessing local
learning outcomes is warranted.

The rhetorical character of the SACS QEP process is also worthy
further investigation. These documents are curricular and social
designs intended to improve student learning, and still, the fact that
these proposals are required by an accrediting body that will then
determine the worth and value of the plan as part of an approval-
granting process makes for striking and often sophisticated use of
persuasive strategies. While curriculum designs—and redesigns, in
particular—must consider the morale and “buy-in” of the local
community, the QEP proposal must also convince a group of objective
reviewers that the plan is feasible and still substantive in its impact.
Librarians, information professionals, and others would be well served by
continuing to develop our understanding of the ways that local cultures,
professional trends and concerns, and assessment-as-persuasion can
impact targeted curricular (re)design.

On a more semantic level, the differences—whether they are
obvious or only nuanced variations—in the language used to describe
information literacy learning will offer avenues to understanding the
way that language is used and can be used to communicate library and
information literacy program goals. For example, what is the
difference between a learning outcome that says “students will be
able to evaluate sources for relevance” and one that says “students
will be able to identify relevant versus irrelevant information?” What
is the difference between saying that “students will learn to use
sources ethically” and “students will learn about problems associated
with plagiarism?” Looking to the specific example of the Tennessee
State University QEP focused on improving student writing, what is
the purpose in developing outcomes related to students’ abilities as
they “manage and coordinate information from multiple sources”?2/2
Librarians and others involved in curricular or learning assessment
(re)design projects will attest to the perceived importance and possible
contentiousness of questions such as these. By improving our
understanding of the ways that the use of specific language can help
or hinder our efforts can only benefit us as we have and will continue
to become more involved in campus-wide projects that intend to
chart our institutions’ educational objectives.

Curricular plans and designs that create connections between
quantitative literacy and information literacy continue to be rare, and
we are only recently taking advantage of the obvious connections
between information literacy and visual literacy as we make efforts to
show that instruction on the location, evaluation, selection, and use of
information—activities that are often involved in the creation of new
informational products—is necessary across all disciplines. In addition,
QEP proposals or similar curricular planning developed at religious
or seminary institutions may provide a conscious and conscientious

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example of the interplay between information literacy and personal or spiritual values. While not specific to institutions that are religious in derivation or by design, these locations seem to make a more conscious effort to include this interplay into learning outcomes, broadly, and as they relate to information literacy specifically. Our professional understanding about values and learning as part of information literacy instruction continues to be a fertile area for continued work.

CONCLUSION

The requirements established by organizations involved in the reaffirmation of accreditation for universities and colleges should continue to be investigated as sites for information literacy program development that extend across the curriculum and beyond one-off-one collaborations between librarians and teachers. Taking opportunities when available and creating them where none exist will continue to be necessary strategies for librarians as they integrate information literacy into their local curricula, culture, and institution. Librarians and others should encourage the use of assessment measures that integrate IL assessment with other university/college assessment initiatives. Not only do these subversive strategies ensure that IL competencies are being evaluated at local institutions, but they also reinforce the fact that information literacy development is crucial—in and of itself, and within the realm of other learning objectives.

Looking forward, the vitality of information literacy instruction and programming will depend in large part on its adaptability. Indeed, the principles and theories that support information literacy offer a wide expanse of opportunity for distribution across disciplines, subject matters, and professions. As we consider ways to maintain momentum for information literacy teaching and learning, one of our tasks will continue to be the location of connections with disciplinary concerns and institutional initiatives. Understanding the ways that information literacy has been and continues to be integrated in campus-wide planning, while also responding to the needs of different audiences in different locations, benefits both established and developing programs.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

An annotated list of the QEP proposals selected for this study is available at http://libguides.trinity.edu.qep. Links to full proposals are included when available or have been replaced by institutional websites and QEP executive summaries when necessary.

REFERENCES

7. ibid., p. 325.