Library As Place in Urban High Schools: Connecting College Readiness to Librarian Intervention and Community Partnerships

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This mixed-methods study was based on the evident need for communication of information literacy skill expectations between the K–12 school systems and higher education. Both incoming university freshmen and high school seniors were assessed with the use of TRAILS (Tool for Real-Time Assessment of Information Literacy Skills). Qualitative analysis of individual interviews with school and academic librarians as well as focus groups was coded for themes related to communication, curriculum planning, and administrative support

Introduction and Context

Currently, there is limited research (but hearty discussion) on how libraries and librarians are disappearing from the elementary and secondary school landscape and the long-lasting effects of these actions from across the country. Librarians at all types of libraries are desperate to make connections and provide professional support to each other as well as the teachers and faculty that they work to support their students in college readiness and success. One way we were able to start to bridge this gap was through the grant funded *College Ready, College Bound* project, which spanned almost two years of gathering interviews and data in central Indiana high schools with the cooperation of school and academic librarians taking part in our study.

How are libraries and librarians connected to college-readiness, preparing students to take on the challenges of higher education? David T. Conely defined college readiness as "the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program".[1] Lance, Rodney, & Russell found that students tended to perform better on state tests at all grade levels where principals "valued teacher-library media specialist collaboration, supported flexible library scheduling, met regularly with the library media specialist, and had the library media specialist serve on key school committees" (p. 14),[2] and high schools had better results when the delivery of instruction and design included a skilled library professional. Todd and Kuhlthau (with Oelma) in 2004 also found that nearly 100% of 13,000 students sur-

veyed indicated that the school library, its services, and library media specialists have helped them with their learning process (p. 24).[3] According to the AASL report[4] "97% of Americans (224.5 million) agree that school library programs are an essential part of the education experience because they provide resources to students and teachers" and "96% of Americans agree (222 million) that school libraries are important because they give every child the opportunity to read and learn" (p. 4).[5] The American Library Association (ALA) estimated that school librarians help more than 30 million students each week navigate a vast landscape of digital content, because the majority of students still lack the ability to analyze information found online.[6] More than 60 studies indicated that students who had access to a well-staffed, adequately funded library scored significantly higher at both the elementary (18%) and secondary (10%) levels[7] and produced clear evidence that school library media programs staffed by a qualified school librarian have strong and positive impacts on student achievement.[8]

Across the country, school libraries and librarians have faced budget and staffing cuts in public schools, and in an emerging trend, charter and magnet schools may not have a library at all, nor does state policy require that a school have a library space or librarian on staff. The *College Ready, College Bound* project, conducted at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis, in addition to public, private, and charter high schools in Marion County, Indiana, and with the support of the Central Indiana Community Foundation, began as conversations about connections, relationships, and future partnerships between high school and academic librarians, and how those urban schools who did not have a librarian or library space might be impacted in preparing their students for higher education. This project also looked at several methods of assessing the preparedness not only of the students in their senior year of high school, but the readiness of librarians and teachers to be involved in the assessment of information literacy and curriculum in their schools.

Literature Review

One essential element of college readiness is the ability to think critically and evaluate and incorporate information to offer a reasoned argument, solution, or discussion. These are the hallmarks for information literacy, currently defined by ACRL as "a set of abilities requiring individuals to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information."[9] However, recent changes in the skills-based definition to a more conversational, information disseminating framework was not considered as part of this research, as there is not currently an easy to implement a measurable and aligned mode of assessment that would be feasible in this context.

A recent survey of college and university librarians revealed that 88% felt that fewer than 40% of their students were prepared for research, and additional panel discussion with both high school students and first year college freshmen indicated that they could not distinguish between a journal and a book when given a citation, identify keywords in a thesis, or distinguish between a popular magazine and scholarly journal.[10]

Students who have been exposed to what a library can provide recognize the value of library services, and communities, schools, parents, teachers, and students can begin to see real impact through resources and support in their own school library. Unfortunately, many (2002), school principals have archaic perceptions of the role of school librarians informed by their experiences as students in the mid-20th century,[11] as well as difficulties stemming from the school library profession itself. The effects of this void in the students' educational experience as well as lack of clarity and understanding of what library spaces and librarians can provide have been realized, and not just in tangible results like grades or standardized test scores, but deficits in socialization and technology skills.

The responsibilities and collaboration of curriculum directors, teachers, and librarians can have considerable impact on the preparation of students wanting to transition to higher education, but without the

right space, funding, collections, and staffing, student may be left to their own devices, or suffer the consequences, through low test scores (ACT and SAT), or face a steep learning curve when transitioning to college courses. A study by Worthy, Moorman, and Turner[12] showed the connections between achievement, attitude, and income levels; all had significant effects on the students' reading preferences, where they get their reading materials, and limits to availability: "not all students can afford to buy materials of interest, and thus, they may not choose to read in their spare time or in school."[13] Libraries and librarians have very little stake in test scores, and without that leverage, can be seen as dispensable or discretionary pieces of the school budget. Results mean dollars, even though it may be difficult to imagine a school or community without a library, this is the case in many urban schools across the country.

Unfortunately, the students are the last ones to be consulted on their overall educational path. There is a body of literature that discusses the readiness of high school graduates for college level work—the 'gap' is more pronounced in children from rural or underserved populations. In Marion County, Indiana (Indianapolis and surrounding townships), more than 49% of high school students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and in one school, 89% of the students qualify.[14]

College Ready, College Bound

In addition, academic librarians often express concern that many college freshmen are not prepared to conduct college-level research. A recent survey of college and university librarians revealed that 88% of the responders felt that fewer than 40% of their students were prepared, and many major studies have identified the important role of research skills in the future success of high school students.[15] As further discussed in Schein et al,[16] their study and panel discussion with both high school students and first year college freshmen indicated that they could not distinguish between a journal and a book when given a citation, identify keywords in a thesis, or distinguish between

a popular magazine and scholarly journal. "Finding and using information is exponentially more complex than it was a generation ago as the information landscape has shifted from one of scarcity of resources to abundance and overload."[17]

Throughout the research project, we were exposed to wide variety of experiences—public, private, small, large, magnet, and charter schools; no library, small library, brand new library, virtually empty library--hoping to find a common thread in that would allow us to gather enough information for insight into the role of the librarian in the school, the functions that took place in the library, and what benefit (if any) the students had from their experiences in being a part of the "library as place" and whether information literacy skills could play a role in their college readiness.

Methodology

Initially, a pilot phase was begun in 2011, with three school media specialists participating in both implementation of the TRAILS assessment in selected classes of freshmen and senior level students, and pre- and post-interviews about their results and implementation of the assessment. In 2012 and 2013, data and interviews were collected through in-person and phone at nine schools in the Marion County, Indiana area; five academic library faculty were also utilizing the TRAILS assessment at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis. This encompassed more than 1,200 12th grade students, and over 400 first-year (freshmen) university students from several different majors or subject areas.

We decided to use the TRAILS assessment not to focus solely on measuring skills, but to understand the usefulness of an instrument to engage librarians in the assessment process of instruction, as well as a connection to college-readiness skills within their own context (in the library or part of library instruction) where little pre-existing connections were in place at most high schools we encountered.

Started in 2002, TRAILS is a freely accessible online assessment tool through Kent State Uni-

versity. Initial support for TRAILS was provided through the University Libraries' grant partnership with the Institute for Library and Information Literacy Education (ILILE), which was a federally funded initiative of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the U.S. Department of Education. ILILE was established to provide local, regional, and national leadership in fostering successful collaboration among K-12 teachers and school librarians who are concerned with advancing library and information literacy in the K-12 school curriculum[18]

TABLE 1 TRAILS (Tool for Real Time Assessment of Information Literacy Skills) Sample Category and Question, 12th Grade Level	
Category	**Sample Question**
Develop a Topic Develop focus. Recognize the hierarchical relationships of broader and narrower topics. Identify individuals to help you focus a topic. Identify manageable topics based on the parameters of an assignment.	You have been asked to research and present an argument about global warming in a five-page paper. Which of the following research questions would be narrow enough to argue in your paper?

The participants utilized the "Develop a Topic" category for virtually all of the high school and IUPUI students; however, there was one incidence of a participant utilizing all of the TRAILS category assessments for the 12th grade level. These scores were not considered in the analysis of the data, and only the "Develop a Topic" scores were included. Developing a topic can be a building block for further research projects or assignments that students would be encountering in future classroom setting, which looks at the ability to determine criteria to narrow or broaden a topic for an assignment. Once the TRAILS assessment was conducted in the library or classroom, post-assessment interviews took place. Interview questions focused on whether TRAILS was an effective way to gauge college readiness skills, as well as their own in-

sights into teaching and assessment and reflection on their relationships with teachers and administrators in creating college-ready curriculum through the library resource (Appendix A).

Pre-interviews consisted of a tour of the facility, explanation of the study, and preparing participants (typically the full-time librarian or support staff) on procedures for coding students, implementation during a class or tour, and whether they perceived any difficulty in negotiating participation with the teachers or administration in assessing students (and, revealing the results). Additional background questions about education, experience with assessment, and other procedural questions were asked, and a timeframe given on when they should implement TRAILS with the students.

TRAILS Results

Student scores in the TRAILS assessment are returned as either raw scores (e.g. 6.3) or as percentages, as well as a graphical representation on class reports. Students are coded with random 4 digit numbers, and each school and class were also given randomized codes so that an aggregate of the scores could be calculated. Students in the university freshmen courses were also given the same 12th grade level assessment, and codes were generated for them as well. As we only had IRB to cover the content of the interviews and not the scores of the students, we can only reveal that the average score in all of the high school testing was 4.6 (out of 10), or 46% correct out of 100. Scores were considerably higher in those high schools that had a full-time librarian on staff, with a 1.2 point difference than those students who were not supported through a library or librarian. It is important to note that the schools that did not have a librarian agreed to have teachers on staff conduct the assessment, but they were invited to participate in the focus group discussions and interviews when applicable.

As stated earlier, we held pre-and post-assessment interviews as well as focus groups, concentrating on the process of implementing the TRAILS assessment. TRAILS categories are meant to build upon the re-

search experience for a student, and scoring of these assessments was not intended for a high-stakes grade or test, but to generate conversation about information literacy and research skills amongst students, librarians, and teachers. In addition to considering how we could use TRAILS as a jumping off point for looking at information literacy in the high school settings, we also considered those schools who may not have a library space or place in their building, whether by design (lack of space, mobile, portable, or temporary setting), overcrowding, or if the space had been reallocated for other purposes when the school chose to eliminate the librarian role or position from their staffing, and if this might have an impact in their achievement on an information literacy assessment, but long-term effects for college readiness and success.

Participants and Interviews

Most school librarians that participated in our study do not take part or feel that they currently have a role in the preparation for ISTEP, SAT, ACT, or other standardized testing measures that are typically given to upper level high school students; however, many of the skills measured on these assessments are directly related in information literacy, technology, or critical thinking skills, all of which can be connected with library research. Librarians felt that participating in this study gave them a better understanding about pedagogy, assessment, and developing a stronger case for connecting time spent with students in library instruction sessions and student realization that information literacy skills (search strategies, critical thinking, evaluation, and research sources) were part of the proficiencies in college.

Some common themes emerged, over 40 hours of interviews and 2 focus group sessions:

- Time: Although the TRAILS assessment was a very short (10 question) assessment, the initial interviews revealed that the participants often had very little interaction or time with classes; Spending time with students in the library or utilizing resources, participating in library instruction, and focusing on informa-

tion literacy skills (search strategies, critical thinking, evaluation, and sources of information) were part of their preparation to the transition to college

Quotes: "It's the first time that I get to assess what they know or what I have taught and to prepare them for admission to college."

- Timing: It was crucial for us to work with the participants very early in the semester (or even before school began in the fall) in order for them to not only prepare themselves for the assessment, but to get approval from administration if necessary, and plan working with teachers and faculty on how best to incorporate the assessment into the curriculum at key times during the semester or throughout the year

Quote: "I would like to start earlier, closer to the beginning of the year; once the teachers get into their groove…we were lucky that three teachers let us in. They don't deviate from their instructional calendar."

- Support: Participants felt that being a part of a study like CRCB gave them a better understanding about pedagogy, assessment, and developing a stronger case for connecting curriculum with student success.

Quotes: "I really would like to know what are[sic] college professors wanting and what I can do to support that, how to mimic what it looks like at [the]college level and more vertical and more collaboration and conversation." "I think we do need assessments like TRAILS that show data and what is happening. I think we need administrator support and teacher buy-in. Some of that becomes…the teachers themselves don't understand what is expected in terms of research and skills, the expectations that they put on students don't match up…it's a losing battle if there isn't a team approach."

Findings and Further Discussion

College Ready, College Bound focused on the role of the librarian in preparing students for higher edu-

cation, as well as the support systems, partnerships, and communication that is necessary to fully support students in their educational success. School and academic librarians, teachers, administrators, and college faculty were brought together to better understand roles, responsibilities, and how to move forward in creating relationships and best practices. Although participants did not give a "glowing" review of the TRAILS assessment—it is not a perfect instrument, and there might not be a "perfect" setting, the majority were pleased with how easy it was to set up, implement, and results were available immediately. We also felt that it could be extremely superficial, in that it could be given in a class but there would be no follow up or application, and it would be best if students were given an authentic learning experience. To some students, it might just be seen as another standardized test—one more hoop for them to jump through. It is definitely considered "low-stakes" in most cases, but for the most part, we were pleased with how the participants utilized TRAILS, and we established great relationships with them, and hope to continue to explore how academic librarians and institutions can connect with K–12 to aid in the preparation and transition from secondary to higher ed. Using a method of assessment like TRAILS opened the door between many librarians in the high schools and their teachers or administrators, as well as establishing new partnerships with academic librarians and the community. Additional studies and literature indicate that librarians can have a positive effect on student success, and further our determination to continue exploring options for professional development, new pedagogical models such as project-based learning, and working with all K–12 schools that do not currently have a librarian (or media specialist) on staff. If we continue to allow these roles to disappear from the K–12 landscape, what academic librarians and faculty will be compensating for or remediating will impede the engagement, retention, and success of those college ready, college bound students.

Appendix A. Focus Group Questions

FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION

Icebreaker
If you had limitless time, what would your ideal library instruction session look like?

Focus Group Questions
1. What type of training or experience do you have in assessment?
2. What types of grading or assessment do you participate in?
3. Do you assist or have a role in developing curriculum in your school?
4. What do you think is the toughest part of assessing information literacy?
5. How can librarians or teachers use an assessment instrument like TRAILS?
6. What do you think is the role of the media specialist or librarian in preparing students for college?
7. How can K–12 and academic librarians collaborate to assist in the transition between high school and higher education?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to share about teaching and assessing information literacy, or about the TRAILS assessment tool?

Appendix B. Post-TRAILS Assessment Questions

1. How did you approach students or teachers about taking the TRAILS assessment?
2. What type of direction or information did you give them about the assessment?
3. How long did it take for them to complete the assessment (approximate)?
4. Did you have any technical problems with the assessment?
5. Do you use any assessments similar to TRAILS? No but has used TRAILS before
6. Did you thoroughly review the TRAILS assessment questions? If so, what is your opinion about the questions? Are they relevant to the curriculum? Grade level?
7. Were there any questions that surprised you (content) or you thought weren't relevant? What would you change about the questions? Would you change the format (from multiple choice to open-ended)?
8. Are any of these questions similar to ones on other assessments that students participate in?
9. When you were approached about being part of this study, did you hesitate? Why?
10. What was the reaction of your staff, supervisors, or teachers?
11. Did the assessment change any relationships or open lines of communication with others in the building?
12. What was the reaction of students to taking the assessment?
13. When you reviewed the TRAILS scores, were you surprised in any way?
14. Have you agreed to share the scores/data with others? What will this be used for in your school?
15. Would you give the TRAILS assessment again? Why or why not?
16. Is there anything you would change about this process (time of year, preparation for students, etc.)?
17. What do you think is the most challenging (in term of assessment) for librarians?
18. What types of resources, materials, or supports do you think librarians need to show student learning, engagement, or persistence?
19. Do you think an assessment like TRAILS could be helpful? Why or why not?
20. How should we move forward in this study?
21. What can we do to support you?
22. Is there anything else about the assessment, students, or study that you would like to share?

Notes

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