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Necessary Skills

Librarians preparing students for college success

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Graduation night is a kaleidoscope of images: balloons, tears, Pomp & Circumstance, proud parents, and equally proud teachers. Central to the festivities are those fresh faced, optimistic graduates ready to throw themselves at life, many of them poised and ready for college.

How can school districts position their students for academic success? This is a growing concern as only half of incoming university freshmen graduate within six years and less than one-third of all community college freshmen graduate within three years.

Fortunately, researchers have identified the 21st century tools necessary for collegiate success. And most districts are already prepared with the necessary educator and a research-based curriculum to provide the required learning: the high school librarian.

Teaching information literacy

High school librarians teach information literacy skills that provide the foundation for the advanced skills taught by academic librarians at the community college and university level. Unlike traditional "library skills," information literacy skills combine evaluation, self-assessment, and decision-making.

Information literacy is the ability to recognize when there is an information need, identify the necessary information, efficiently locate the needed information, then effectively evaluate, organize and use the information. This skill set helps students navigate the information-rich world of the 21st century.

In 1998, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology introduced "Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning." The nine standards are:

1. A student who is information literate accesses information efficiently and effectively.
2. A student who is information literate evaluates information critically and competently.
3. A student who is information literate uses information accurately and creatively.
4. The student who is an independent learner is information literate and pursues information related to personal interests.
5. The student who is an independent learner is information literate and appreciates literature and other creative expressions of information.
6. The student who is an independent learner is information literate and strives for excellence in information seeking and knowledge generation.
7. The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.
8. The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.
9. The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

Since the standards' publication, researchers have chronicled the positive impact that information literacy instruction has had on student learning, achievement, and standardized test scores. In 2000, the Pennsylvania Department of Education supported a state-wide study that confirmed the link between a strong school library media center and student achievement. The size of the library collection, budget, and staff correlated with student test scores throughout Pennsylvania.

Standards for college librarians

Also in 2000, the Association of College and Research Librarians (ACRL) released its own list of standards for students enrolled in colleges or universities. The standards, and their associated performance indicators, build directly on those established by AASL and articulate skills demonstrating critical assessment, evaluation and ethical use.

According to the ACRL, the information literate student:

- Determines the nature and extent of the information need.
- Accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.
- Evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.
- Uses information effectively, individually or as a member of a group, to accomplish a specific purpose.
- Understands many of the ethical, legal and socio-economic issues surrounding information and information technology.

University-level researchers have documented the critical need for information literacy learning at the high school level. One reason is that the Middle States Commission on Higher Education now includes information literacy skills instruction as a key factor necessary for university accreditation. Universities also are authorizing research into many factors that could improve those rates.

Transitioning from high school to a college or university is challenging, and clearly we want our students to succeed at the next level. Educators and administrators at the district level should heed the research findings and furnish their students with a professional school librarian.

Furthermore, students need a well funded and well equipped library media center where they can learn and practice Information Literacy skills. These are skills that have been proven necessary for the information rich world of the 21st Century and we need to position our students for continued success in that world.

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