

A Hartford Consortium of Higher Education Grant Proposal to Create a Shared Online Test to Assess the Information Literacy of Incoming Freshmen

Narrative:

Academic libraries are evolving to support new pedagogies, new technologies, and the heightened expectations of students and faculty. New information technologies offer many research opportunities, but they also require new research skills to retrieve and identify appropriate resources. Some students come to college with multiple skill deficits. Libraries, through information literacy programs, introduce students to the research they will need to master for a successful experience in higher education. Helping students with these skills is now the great challenge of reference and instructional librarians.

In 2000 the Association of College and Research Libraries published recommended competency standards for information literacy, including performance indicators and outcomes. Assessing freshmen is the first step toward meeting these expectations. Once their strengths and weaknesses are identified, library instruction can then be tailored to address the outcome, keeping the instruction fresh for each new class. Librarians increasingly look to online testing for this preliminary assessment. Online testing is an efficient way to assess which skills students bring with them and which they lack. Campuses often use online testing to assess freshmen basic informational technology skills such as email and word processing as well. Adding an online information technology assessment is an efficient start toward educating students on the broader research skills required for college success.

Most freshmen come to college thinking they know how to use a search engine such as Google or Yahoo. Far too many believe this is the beginning and end of the research process. Academic subscription databases need to be introduced and explained. Search engine results need to be tempered by some analysis of the reliability of the websites found. Navigating complex online products like the United States Census requires problem-solving skills and an understanding of specialized vocabulary. Knowledge gained in sociology and political science classes is also relevant in working with the census. Few freshmen will enter with these skills, but seniors should have them upon graduation. Once the concepts are mastered, the students will become confident and critical life-long learners. They will be prepared for graduate work, for work in the knowledge economy, and for daily life in the age of the internet. We need to assess where our incoming students are, so that we can make sure they all graduate with these essential information skills.

Fully meeting the ACRL standards is a daunting challenge for librarians. Yet addressing information literacy is critical for libraries facing accreditation from regional accreditation groups, including NEASC. Testing at the beginning and end of a course can offer evidence for the outcome assessment these organizations expect. An online product is attractive as it can be easily administered and analyzed. It also allows institutions to test distance learners. The ACRL guidelines for distance learners expect the "delivery of

equivalent services". Libraries may also reap some beneficial publicity as testing introduces students to our services.

If we assume information literacy is important and that online testing is the most efficient way to assess freshmen, another question remains. Why a custom product? We believe sharing online services through the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (CDTLC) provides an unusual opportunity for inexpensive and non-generic information literacy testing. Most of the cost is upfront to design the product and the reports. Once created the local test will be inexpensive to maintain and will quickly pay for itself. It will be adaptable and can be made available to other consortium member libraries. It could be a model for related products. An information literacy test for graduate students is one possibility. While commercial products are becoming available, they are more elaborate than we believe we require. More importantly, longer tests are more than we expect our campus partners will support. To encourage faculty cooperation, we are keeping our requests modest as we built consensus on the need to include information literacy throughout the curriculum.

Project

During the 2006-2007 academic year Diane J. Goldsmith, Dean of Planning, Research, and Assessment, and her team at the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (CTDLC) will be contracted to design an online information literacy test. The plan is to begin the testing with three partner libraries, Capital Community College, Saint Joseph College, and the University of Hartford. They also share the online platform of the CTDLC. Other members will be free to join the project at any time.

The information literacy questions will be provided by the Reference/Instructional Librarians of the participating institutions. Multiple choice questions have already been administered through paper testing of the 2005 English 104 freshmen classes at Saint Joseph College. The results bring some local test experience to the project. The online test will be created with reporting mechanisms for each institution to pull out the data it needs. The test will be created during the 2006-2007 academic year for use in the fall of 2007. Later versions might include simulations, but this project will be kept simple to keep costs low.

Budget

A grant of \$2,500 is being requested.

The \$2,500 represents the cost for the first forty hours for CTDLC to construct a basic test and minimal reporting mechanisms. Expansion of the basic test and more elaborate reports will be the responsibility of the participating consortium library or libraries who request them. Annual \$500 hosting fee would be split among the libraries participating in the testing, and will need to be supported by local library budgets.

The \$2,500 is based on Diane Goldsmith's estimated quote of March 10, 2005. Her quote is to design a longer test requiring 40 hours to build the product. Beginning with a shorter test the extra hours can be re-directed to building a basic report for local library

analysis. In the future, it will be realistic to expect some modest additional costs may become the responsibility of the participating libraries. Future revisions will be charged at \$65/hour for CTDLC members.

The library directors understand there may be some matching funds the institutional libraries will need to contribute to this modest project budget. With the eGreater Hartford Consortium grant to launch the project, they are confident the other costs will be manageable. The value and importance of this project is too great not receive high priority status from individual libraries.

Once the test is up and running, future costs are a modest annual fee of \$500, billed through the Consortium. Libraries will have the option of doing data analysis locally or paying for the CTDLC to do it at \$65/hr. This offers the participating libraries valuable flexibility to manage costs through either dollars or staff time.

Investing in a custom online information literacy test for the academic partner libraries will greatly improve their ability to assess freshmen research outcomes, critical for NEASC accreditation. The product offers the potential of serving other members of the Consortium in the future. Most critically, it supports the fundamental mission our institutions share of teaching our students to be successful life-long learners. The first step of testing freshmen is a firm step on the road to achieving this mandate.