

**Report for Improvement of Library Instruction
At Laredo Community College**

**Amigos Fellowship Final Report
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Submitted by

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Final Report

To the AMIGOS FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

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Introduction

The bulk of this project involved visiting five college and university libraries to study their library instruction programs. We were seeking a sample distributed among similarly sized institutions, private, public, college, and university, each within three to four hours driving time from Laredo. Prior to the site visits, we investigated other library web pages for information about library instruction programs elsewhere in the state, library staff information, materials, and online access. These included institutions in San Angelo, Alpine, Kingsville, Brownsville, McAllen, Harlingen, and Austin, among others. Several sites initially looked suitable, but after contacting the staff it turned out that a visit did not work out due to a variety of factors. In a few instances, sites that at first seemed of secondary interest actually turned out to be the most rewarding in terms of information shared. In the end we focused our attention on the institutions below and visited each of them.

Austin Community College (Austin, TX)

Wisner and Church visited this site, accompanied by Sarah Church (LCC Acquisitions Librarian) and Thomas LaFleur (LCC Library Director)

University of Texas – Pan American (Edinburg, TX)

Church and Vasquez visited this site

St Mary’s University (San Antonio, TX)

Church and Wisner visited this site

San Antonio College – Alamo Community College District (San Antonio, TX)

Church and Wisner visited this site

Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi (Corpus Christi, TX)

Wisner and Bustos visited this site

The site visits occurred in the fall and spring semesters of 2002-03. In-depth observation and comprehensive discussions were held with librarians at each one. Travel and visitation required the use of one full working day for each visit. Two LCC staff members went on each visit, except to Austin Community College.

Austin Community College

Public, 2-year institution.
Associate's Degree.
Enrollment: 29,322.
Multi-campus. Semester.
Regional Accreditation: Yes.

In the various orientations given by this institution—one of the most respected community colleges in the state—students must produce a two to three-page report on a particular topic in response to a specific research question or to real-life problems. The learning experience, which is grounded in a thorough initial lecture and demonstration of databases in one of several computer labs around the various campus locations, is thus research-based, and occupies students for two to three hours. The faculty actively support such efforts. For example, in one class, Chemistry 1411, there are about six hundred students per year who produce a paper. There is also a web-based component for library instruction which is permitted in lieu of classroom attendance, and there is a large and varied web page devoted to library instruction in order to guide students. Well-crafted paper handouts on topics like finding periodical articles and books, and a summary of online sources, are available. Finally, Austin Community College has sign-up sessions, so that students who simply wish to gain knowledge of library search

techniques without being in a certain class may sign up to learn more about how to do systematic research.

Writing on a research topic can be quite an undertaking, for new college students especially, and their success often turns precisely on their command of the library and how to use it. It is one thing to be armed with a topic—quite another to coerce a large and complicated entity like a library to yield its information in comprehensible form. Austin Community College was the only school of the ones surveyed that has chosen to make the writing of an actual paper (even if a short one) the central component of their instruction. It is also the only site we visited that takes students (in a well-supported and assisted manner) from the beginning to the end of a research project. It speaks well of the faculty, also, that they support such efforts, recognizing how useful they can be in quelling student uncertainties and fears.

University of Texas—Pan American

Public, 4-year institution.
Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Doctorate.
Enrollment: 13,640.
Semester.
Regional Accreditation: Yes.
National Accreditation: Yes.

This institution has one main library on campus. The university website includes a library component which is easy to understand. It has links for the catalog, databases, library request forms, online reference materials, and other university websites. Of particular interest is the Library Instruction page, where instructors can reserve classes for library instruction by use of a request form, along with contact emails and phone numbers.

Library Instruction at this university consists of weeklong sessions, either on Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday or Tuesday-Thursday. Each session lasts fifty to seventy-five minutes and includes a student feedback form for each session which is due at the end. Scheduling for instructional sessions is flexible, mediated by course needs. Two labs accommodate twenty-five to thirty students. The material covered in a week's sessions is tailored to fit the course-- undergrad or graduate--and can be either a regular content class or an ad-hoc group made up of interested, self-assigned students. Faculty are encouraged to join their students to assure the time is spent on tasks and that there is good follow-up. New faculty are given orientation sessions each semester to get them interested in what library services are available for their students' needs. First-year undergraduates attend mandatory library instruction sessions each summer semester.

Teaching labs are spacious, with good lighting and an instructor's PC and overhead projector. Student desks have the PC's mounted underneath, with the monitor seen through a tinted glass top. Each PC has "floppy disc" access, so students are able to save their work. Instructional sessions are in-depth and slow-paced for maximum coverage of a large variety of online resources. Each database is analyzed carefully, and includes explanations of Boolean searching, field delimiters, and typing in proper syntaxes.

The Library Instruction department has established a Strategic Action Plan, aiming for high quality instruction. Surveys are used to ensure that instruction conforms to the needs of faculty and students. Instruction is goal-driven, using instructional design principles. A student skills evaluation is also conducted. It is graded and returned to the faculty member.

Reference or other departmental librarians teach the various sections, spending twenty to twenty-five hours per week on instruction. The head of Library Instruction does not supervise instructional staff per se but coordinates the curriculum. Faculty can reserve the lab after an instructional session for further content-type course use. Such well-thought out procedural considerations definitely enhance the quality of instruction at Pan Am. The lab has a number of handouts available—study guides for the databases and other materials that serve to refresh the student’s memory on instructional and searching resources after the session is over.

The clean, crisp atmosphere of the labs impressed us. The equipment was new and well maintained, having been recently installed with grant monies. The staff all seemed collaborative and collegial, and offices were well equipped.

St. Mary’s University

Private institution, 4 year or above.
Bachelor’s Degrees, Master’s Degrees Doctorate.
Enrollment: 4317.
Semester.
Regional accreditation: Yes.
State accreditation: Yes.

At this institution, four instructors participate in the library instruction program and each gives about six lectures per semester in a well equipped, fully wired classroom. Each student has his or her own computer and is first given a fifteen to twenty-minute PowerPoint lecture, followed by instruction in independent searching to solidify what has just been taught. Students in a particular English class, ND101, must take library instruction, and there are about twenty-five sections of these. English classes account for most requests. Teachers here can schedule on very short notice (classroom instructors just fill out a form)—only a day or two might be required to get a spot. Librarians

distribute a detailed and substantive evaluation form at the end of class which is used to evaluate the program, though it is not used to evaluate particular instructors. Instructors also frequently go outside of the library to give lectures in remote classrooms, since the entire campus is wired. Students who are given instruction within the library, however, meet only in the lab designated for instruction. Because the library is on three floors, it is inefficient to try to tour a class around. Emphasis at St. Mary's is thus on search strategies and important library-service information rather than on spotting actual service points.

In addition to searching on the computer following the PowerPoint demonstration, students usually receive an exercise, three pages in length and fairly detailed, testing their knowledge of the book and periodical databases. Also, the instructor who gave the lecture grades the exercises and then returns them to the appropriate classroom teacher. The staff at St. Mary's, when asked, were "not sure" how many exercises are actually distributed in a given year. During the lectures, the classroom professors *must* be with the class, though some admittedly do not really like to follow this stipulation. In the immediate future, the library wishes to implement an online tour of the library. The librarians are also considering an online exercise.

The library instruction program at St. Mary's gave every appearance of being professional, well run and well equipped. The librarians involved frame themselves as full, tenure-track faculty members who do not have a "punch-the-clock" mentality, but who nevertheless take seriously the work they do. The program at St. Mary's demonstrated both organization and accountability and seemed flexible to faculty needs. The use of a PowerPoint demonstration, however, as opposed to a guided online

demonstration, did seem to diminish the liveliness of the overall lecture. Students had to rely on the follow-up practice part of the class without having been actually guided through a live search, at least so far as we could tell. Also, this instructional program does not seem to emphasize public relations within the university to any large extent. While it is currently contemplating a library newsletter, its attempts thus far on this score were marginal. Thus, there was not a great deal of faculty outreach to increase the size of the library instructional program. This is in distinct contrast to San Antonio College, the next institution we surveyed.

San Antonio College

Public, 2 –year institution.
Associate’s Degree.
Enrollment: 20,064. Multi-campus.
Continuous calendar.
Regional Accreditation: Yes.

Some background is useful in showcasing this particular institution. It prides itself fiercely on its library instruction program, perhaps because it has had to fight in order to justify, enhance and promote itself. The library is now, however, one of the most formidable institutions on campus, and its faculty-librarian-educators play leading roles in faculty governance, the Faculty Senate, and the student newspaper. In 1992, the library instruction program came under fire from the Administration, so the librarians went on the offensive, consciously forging ties with the faculty, and built up a persuasive counter-movement which eventually overcame all bureaucratic obstacles. Today the library instruction program proudly tours nearly 14,000 students a year in some 650 individual sessions. It is staffed with some of the state’s most enthusiastic and conscientious librarians--many of them young, ambitious and seeking tenure--and

involves fourteen or fifteen librarians full-time. They utilize two state-of-the-art labs on the main campus library, allowing twenty-five minutes of demonstration and twenty-five minutes of practice time per orientation. Also, the librarians never forget that public relations and close faculty ties go hand in hand, not only with the building of an instructional program, but because they are strong sources of support in threatening or negative environments. Such continuing PR efforts include a place in the student newspaper when it comes out, active web photos of visiting persons or groups, and even a library logo contest, so that the instruction program can always have an identifiable trademark on all of its handouts. The faculty, for their part, actively supports and respects the library instructional program. They always accompany their classes. Five working days are required for scheduling a tour at SAC, perhaps under the theory that if you just accommodate everyone immediately they do not respect you (a persuasive argument, as we ourselves have discovered).

In addition, the instruction program studies and incorporates the ACRL Standards for Bibliographic Instruction as much as it is able, and its program is closely tied into the curriculum. The library instruction program sees these last two points—standards and curriculum-relevance—as the bedrock of everything it does. All the program’s efforts accord with the premises set out there. You can have good library instruction without the Standards, SAC feels, but you can’t have great instruction. It follows that this library instruction program has a mission statement, written goals, an awareness of shared philosophy which new hires must learn, and a high sense of professional dedication and calling.

This institution became the benchmark college in our study. The enthusiasm, organization and pride of its librarians for what they are doing are noteworthy and commendable. Its championing of what could loosely be called “public relations” (this is really too small a term—perhaps “collegiality” comes closer), as well as its recognition of the ACRL standards and their integration into the curriculum, sets SAC apart.

Texas A&M—Corpus Christi

Public, 4-year or above.
Bachelor’s Degree, Master’s Degree, Doctoral Degree.
Enrollment: 7,369.
Semester.
Regional Accreditation: Yes.
National Accreditation: Yes.

Although the program here is somewhat less vital than at other schools, it is noteworthy that faculty commitment to library involvement remains strong. Significantly, a librarian sits as a member of the Core Curriculum Committee—a crucial role to play in the development of the goals of both the institution and the library. The library actively supports the university’s commitment to writing across disciplines and a good deal of library-faculty planning goes into this effort. The staff here gives about 150 library instruction sessions per year to classes ranging in size from ten to twenty-five students each. They employ a back-up PowerPoint presentation as a substitute if the online version fails. Most tours are requested by phone or in person, and tours are accepted with four or five days notice. Students receive demonstrations of database searching, but do not do any searching of their own until after the presentation is over and the instructor has left. A typical tour—covering the basics of library research from databases to domain names—takes about forty-five minutes. Various paper-based resources and handouts are also distributed in each instructional session. The program

seems well-organized and well thought out, but there is a curious lack of vitality (or so it seems) in the morale of this program. Our guide was very enthusiastic, but one did not get the sense that he was supported by his colleagues in a way that might help him realize his goals. It may be the fact that the librarians at this school do not have faculty status, a fact he himself cited. Such professionals are always “between two worlds”—and it shows. Nevertheless, some good library instruction is occurring here, and there is little reason to doubt that if a student went through a lecture and paid attention, he or she would be much enriched by the experience.

Conclusion

The results of surveying the five schools confirmed the present utility of how we deliver library instruction at Laredo Community College, rather than cause us to radically revamp what we are doing now in our new lab. Perhaps the chief virtue of the fellowship was to reveal a convergence of pedagogical practices among the target schools and ourselves. This is somewhat startling, given the diversity of the schools and the types of populations they serve—but separate and similar solutions have evolved. Details varied, of course (the use of handouts, for example, or the level and importance assigned to record-keeping), but, by and large, the strategy of “demonstrate-guide-practice” was ubiquitous. This encourages us to believe that our own efforts with the new lab are on target, and that we have responded to the needs of our patrons with common sense and a reasonable degree of awareness of student and faculty needs. This is not something we could have confirmed without the fellowship, or without actually visiting the various schools as we did. This is to say, then, that procedures and practices gleaned from each

of the visits will help us to improve our own library instruction program: for example, distributing a set of coordinated handouts on web sites in the various disciplines would be efficacious to our own program. An online exercise would also be useful as an alternative to our current Scantron-based exercise, as would an online library tour. Perhaps the three most critical areas of improvement for us to make are the following: (1) writing a mission statement and establishing yearly goals for library instruction; (2) embedding library instruction more deeply into Laredo Community College's curriculum; and (3) utilizing the ACRL standards more fully, and exploiting the still-underused potential of public relations to make our library instruction program an outstanding one, rather than a very good one. This underscores our principal commitment to hands-on, not remote, instruction, as befits a community of students who very much need close and active guidance in the research process. We are concerned that the library instruction program, improved by technology, not lose the human touch, and that the other "helping" functions of the library (such as the Reference Desk, periodicals assistance and Interlibrary Loan) be re-enforced.

An important side benefit of these visits was the informal way that we were able to relate to the other librarians we met. We were on their "turf," and, for the most part, we were impressed with the way they were willing to talk about the good things they were able to accomplish as well as the less pleasant aspects of their jobs. This included the ways they interacted among themselves, and the ways they were able to be self-directed or encouraged to collaborate with others or to solve problems for increased student access to information. In one library in particular we spent a rewarding day with over ten librarians in a very organized session. On their own, they had organized a full

day of demonstrations for us. We ate lunch with them and we discussed a wide variety of issues—all on a very professional and collaborative basis. One cannot duplicate such close interactions even at a bustling statewide or national conference or teleconference. We learned things about their library directly and came away with numerous ideas, as well as validation for much of what it is we do. We observed that each of us encounter the same kinds of problems and successes, despite the range of students or facilities available.