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Navigating the Information Highway:

A Multilayered Approach for First-Year Graduate Students



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ABSTRACT

Taylor University's Zondervan Library developed a multifaceted approach of engagement with graduate students of the Master of Higher Education and Student Development program, utilizing a variety of venues and courses relating to advanced research and writing. Regular assessments provided feedback for improvement within the embedded program structure. A second component of this model involved an archival project, which facilitated student research with primary documents in the university archives. Overall, graduate student understanding and ownership of the research process increased, and teaching faculty noticed improvement in the quality of research-based assignments as well as the program's thesis project.

Introduction

In an effort to provide in-depth and intensive research assistance to Taylor University's most advanced residential students, those enrolled in the Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development program (MAHE), university librarians partnered with MAHE department faculty to integrate research techniques with the existing curriculum across the program's entire first year. The partnership has seen several iterations since librarians entered the MAHE classroom in 2008 in a one-shot instruction session format. Each semester's methods and implementation evolved based on faculty and librarian perceptions, as well as more formal student assessment in the past two years. Librarians created a strategy of multiple touchpoints across several courses, including classroom instruction, advanced group workshops, and individual research consultations to enhance student research and writing skills, as well as to impact student understanding of professional literature within their discipline.

The MAHE program utilizes the cohort model with all students simultaneously enrolled in the same set of courses for the entirety of the two-year program. Enrollment for each cohort falls within the range of 15–19 students. From their first semester, students engage the thesis process, beginning with the development of a research idea and initial stages of research and writing in *Introduction to Higher Education Research* (HED 690) and moving toward a completed thesis proposal by the conclusion of second semester's *Inquiry in Higher Education* (HED 580). With such an early focus on research and learning about the literature in their field, librarians found clear entry points into the curriculum. In addition, many MAHE courses require research for various smaller papers and assignments, including *History and Foundations of Higher Education* (HED 550). This course requires a project featuring primary source research conducted in the university archives. The model of library-student interaction described in this paper offers insight into developing and assessing a similar program with like-minded students and faculty.

HED 550 & The Archival Project

Archival Project Premise

The purpose of the archival project in HED 550 is to facilitate engagement between graduate students and primary source documents through the experience of research in an archival environment. Through this research, students also learn more about the history and heritage of Taylor University, or another academic institution of their choosing, through comparison to other institutions or the higher education industry as a whole. Along with the research paper component of the project is a presentation to the class, further informing the cohort on a variety of topics from Taylor's history. The project begins with an orientation to the university archives through a class visit in which students meet the staff, tour the facility, and receive an introduction to conducting research using primary documents. The students are informed about the policies and procedures of an archival environment and how it differs from a library.

Initial Efforts (2007–2010)

During the first few years the project scope was limited to researching iconic people associated with the university, largely individuals with buildings named in their honor or memory. Students came to the archives; browsed through yearbooks, newspapers, and specific collections pertaining to their subject; flagged items of interest for copying; and then worked from photocopies on their own. This pattern resulted in limited interaction with primary documents as well as the completion of a majority of the project away from the archives. Another unintentional result developed after a few cohorts had completed the project; the professor grew weary of continuously evaluating papers focused on the same fifteen prominent individuals in the university's history.

Project Revisions: Document Engagement (2011–2012)

In Fall 2011, a conversation between the university archivist and the HED 550 professor resulted in clarified expectations of the project, its purpose, and expected outcomes. Both parties agreed that students would benefit from conducting a majority of their research in the archives, thus eliminating the need for excessive copying and scanning and enabling the students to interact more with primary documents in an archival environment. Archives staff encouraged students to make appointments rather than simply dropping by, so that staff could prepare for their visits and better assist them in their research. These changes resulted in an increased usage of the archives for in-person research, as well as an enhanced relationship between the archives staff and the cohort. Many students expressed enjoyment of the project and the different approach to conducting research. During this time the university archives digitized and made searchable all of Taylor's yearbooks, alumni magazines, and online catalogs, increasing discoverability and accessibility, as well as streamlining students' research.

More Revisions: Project Expansion (2013)

Two years later (2013), the project was reevaluated and, due to the recent processing of a large amount of materials related to the university's administration and operations, the project's potential topic list expanded beyond iconic individuals related to the university, incorporating topics related to the administrative nature of the university (e.g., presidential transitions, faculty governance, responses to various events and crises). The majority of students chose new topics over the previously offered individuals. Also new with this project revision was an expected, though not required, in-person conversation between the student and the university archivist to discuss his or her topic, the types of resources available, and how to get started. By this point, the university archives had digitized and made searchable all issues of the student newspaper, further expanding searchable resources for MAHE students during their visit to the archives. As a result of these improvements, students expressed noticeable interest and excitement during their research, as well as an increased commitment to spending time conducting research in an archival environment. The professor found satisfaction with the project's expansion, as this provided fresh insight into some lesser-known areas of the university's history.

At the same time that the archival project developed into a more robust primary source research interaction, librarians engaged the same MAHE students in the traditional literature review process for their program thesis. Librarians and archives staff found that students benefited from frequent interaction, specific direction, and individualized guidance through intentional and varied exposure to library resources.

HED 690/580 & Thesis Research

Establishing the Connection (2008)

Though a loose connection existed between the MAHE students and the Zondervan Library early in the program, by Spring 2008 the professor of HED 580 requested a one-shot session to provide an overview of local research tools, as well as to introduce two of the librarians available for research assistance. Anecdotal and classroom feedback indicated the one-shot method insufficient to meet students' research needs for a thesis project. While librarians contemplated potential changes, programmatic changes in the MAHE department set this early cooperative effort aside for a few years. When the conversation began anew, both teaching faculty and librarians desired a partnership dedicated to enhancing student outcomes as excellent researchers who understand the literature of their field and are prepared to write, publish, and present professionally by the time they graduate.

Redesigning Library Interactions (2011)

It was not until Fall 2011 that the professor of HED 690 sat down with librarians to establish a more formal alliance with multiple touchpoints in one semester. Methods of interaction that semester laid the foundation of the multilayered approach, featuring one introductory classroom session by two librarians, several small group sessions for more focused practice with the research tools and citation management systems, and a suggested (not required) 30-minute individual consultation with a librarian. To reinforce strategies presented to the students, librarians designed and graded a research log assignment which recorded the tools, search terms, and strategies students used while progressing through the course objectives of thesis topic selection, initial research, and the creation of a substantial bibliography on their thesis topic.

Despite the momentum and positive changes that developed that semester, the librarians continued to sense disconnect from the MAHE students. Those students who participated in individual consultations with librarians appreciated the opportunity, and librarians found that a single student would return two or three times during a semester for addition assistance. However, as consultations were not required for the course, only a handful of students followed this path, leaving the majority without individualized, in-depth guidance. It was not until the subsequent academic year that both the professor and librarians discovered a solution addressing many of the students' different information needs at critical times of the semester in a way that introduced and later reinforced the tools, strategies, and library support for MAHE student theses.

Redefining the Model (2012)

The 2012-13 school year became the first for librarians to inaugurate a more holistic approach for the entire first year of the MAHE program through seamless participation in one fall and one spring research-based course. The teaching faculty provided the desired student outcomes and assignments, asking input from librarians regarding where and when to accompany the students in the learning process. With this broader view, all parties agreed to continue with a similar model from the previous year for the first semester, one-hour course (HED 690), which required a rough draft of the literature review as the final course deliverable. Librarians interacted with students through an in-class introduction and overview; a required small group session; an annotated bibliography assignment that was introduced and created by librarians but graded by the professor; and an individual consultation that was strongly suggested, but not required. Librarians distributed a formalized electronic survey to this group of students at the end of the semester, gathering feedback and enabling the librarians and professor of the spring course (HED 580) to modify tactics and strategies immediately for engaging the same students in their next thesis research course. The survey results are discussed below in the assessment section.

Significant modification of librarian involvement developed in the second semester course, during which the students became oriented toward the mindset of a scholar and worked toward a thesis proposal by the close of their first year. As librarians had not participated in this course for five years, the level of involvement moved from very little to a nearly embedded model: two 45-minute, in-class sessions discussing the iterative nature of the research process along with thesis research and writing tips and including an in-class assignment on citations; one 50-minute small group session for more focused help in using research tools for the students' individual topics; a required three-hour shift at the library's research desk for the purpose of reinforcing research skills as graduate students assisted undergraduates seeking research assistance which provided an opportunity for a one-on-one conversation about their topic with a librarian; and several questions incorporated into the course final exam relating to the content presented by librarians (e.g., citations, research process, specific tools, search strategies). As a whole, the new strategy allowed students to grow comfortable approaching and requesting help from several librarians beginning with their first moments of engaging the thesis process. Multiple touchpoints throughout both semesters enabled librarians to connect with students at key junctures in their research and writing process to fine-tune their strategies and remind them of specific tools. Student feedback, outlined below, indicated that the redesigned model of interaction met their information needs and reduced research anxiety.

Assessing the Multilayered, Multicourse Approach (2012-2013)

Assessment of library interaction with MAHE students was not utilized prior to the 2012-2013 course modification. Following the Fall 2012 semester, librarians

distributed an anonymous electronic survey as an assessment tool to the cohort of 17 students, of which 11 responded, providing a response rate of nearly 65%. The 10-question survey focused on the perceived value of specific sessions, presentation of the material, and understanding and use of the tools and resources presented. Several open-ended questions solicited anecdotal responses about the most and least helpful aspects of the library component of the course as well as suggestions for improvement.

The results from the survey were largely positive. Students valued the class session more highly than the small group session, and a majority of respondents (81%) did not schedule a one-on-one session with a librarian, as it was not a requirement. A majority of respondents understood the various resources and tools that were presented, and results regarding the use of specific tools and resources aligned with librarian expectations. Respondents commented that the most beneficial part of the library component in HED 690 was developing a relationship with the librarians. Criticisms of the component centered on the immense volume of information presented in the class session; some felt it was too much, too early in the semester. Many respondents requested a more thorough explanation of the citation management tool, due to positive promotion by the minority who utilized it.

At the conclusion of HED 580 in Spring 2013, the professor solicited student feedback on his own course evaluation relating to student interactions with library personnel and resources. While students indicated little change in their perceived *ability* to research, they described an increase in confidence, comfort, and competency for successfully completing a research task as a result of their interactions. They specifically noted utilizing the library resources and spending time and developing relationships with librarians as impacting their confidence levels. Students also noted time dedicated to learning about and using library resources as significant in equipping them for the research process. Clearly, the students identified time spent with librarians and dedicated time devoted to actively doing research as the most impacting aspects of their interactions with the Zondervan Library.

Building on the Foundation: Navigating Course Adjustments (2013–2014)

As with any fairly new academic program, MAHE courses adjust and readjust as new cohorts come through and program outcomes shift. The two courses with which the library had been involved began to align the course objectives more clearly surrounding the thesis project. A librarian met with both teaching faculty members prior to the start of the Fall 2013 semester in order to determine what changes to the library instruction model would benefit the students most. One significant change came in a fall term shortened by two weeks. The conclusion of courses before Thanksgiving break provided availability during the two subsequent weeks for advanced-level, 40-minute workshops to reinforce tools and strategies necessary

to complete the newly-designed course deliverable: a 50-item bibliography with 20 annotations. Prior to these workshops, librarians interacted with students throughout the semester in: a 50-minute introduction and overview class session; a required, mid-semester, individual consultation with a librarian; and a 20-minute guest appearance by a librarian during the week classes ended to promote the required workshops after the holiday break. The end-of-semester workshop topics included: Advanced WorldCat Searching; Advanced Zotero Use and APA Formatting; and Strategizing the Research Process, which involved determining search terms, discerning the best articles, understanding where to look for citations and how many to read, as well as considering how to exhaust the literature on a topic.

Because librarians had the opportunity to interact more frequently and on a deeper level with the MAHE students during the first semester, the MAHE professors and librarian felt that the second semester course interactions would necessarily change as students had a greater understanding of the research tools and strategies at their disposal. The professor of HED 580 insisted that the exercise with MAHE students working alongside the librarians at the research desk continue, as all students the previous year had lauded this as an instrumental part of their educational experience. The one modification needed for this exercise was a reduction in the amount of time spent at the desk to accommodate schedules more easily. The timing enabled all sixteen students to have one-on-one time with a librarian to discuss gaps in their literature review or other questions related to their individual topic prior to the due date of their final draft. Because of the increased opportunities for interaction with librarians in the fall semester, MAHE students frequently requested meetings and consultations with librarians throughout the second semester, despite the fact that the formalized, classroom interactions were reduced from the previous year. The new model succeeded in equipping students earlier in the thesis process, allowing them to become comfortable with the librarians, and thus improving overall interactions between both groups. Students struggled most with finding a rhythm in their research during the first semester, so front-loading librarian interactions during that time benefited them more than spacing out the opportunities over the entire school year.

Reassessing for Improvements (2013)

Librarians distributed a slightly revised online survey at the end of the fall semester. Feedback indicated that students felt they understood the tools available in the library better than they had the year before at the same point in their studies. From a cohort of 16 students, 12 responded, which provided a response rate of 75%. Many questions remained the same, with slightly altered questions to match the tweaks made to the library component structure. An increased number of open-ended questions specifically asked how the various interactions with librarians impacted the students' research experiences.

The results, again, were largely positive. All respondents valued the in-class and required one-on-one sessions, and a majority of respondents felt that they understood the resources presented to them. Respondents viewed the one-on-one session as the most helpful aspect of the library interactions. Several respondents commented that the component reinforced researching techniques and expanded their basic knowledge of the tools and resources. Criticisms of the component focused on the timing of various touchpoints during the semester and a desire for increased relationship building with and communication from the librarians. All respondents felt that their expectations of the component were met. In the survey results, it became clear that MAHE students increasingly viewed librarians as partners in the thesis research and writing process.

Conclusion

Understanding student needs and faculty expectations for the graduate students took time, beginning with building relationships with the faculty members outside of the classroom and gathering momentum through both formal and informal student feedback. For the librarians, it took trial and error over the course of several years. What is presently established is certain to change, yet a model for both the archival project and the thesis interaction is in place where librarians and teaching faculty work together on course modifications to ensure students' understanding of the research process in both environments and success with their projects. The takeaways from the various kinds of engagement the librarians have had with MAHE faculty and students demonstrate that it is vital for librarians to establish a connection with students early on, continuing the relationship through required individual consultations. The more opportunities that exist for students to interact with librarians throughout the scope of course projects, the more students appreciate and make use of librarian assistance, reinforcing lifelong learning skills. Assessment provided vital direction for modifications to meet student needs and expectations as well as course objectives. Looking at it comprehensively, the multilayered approach of instruction with graduate students at Taylor University has produced more confident information seekers who are better equipped and empowered to navigate the information highway now, as well as in the future. †

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