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Building Connections

Between First-Year Students and the Academic Library

*Keynote Address 50th
Annual Conference of the
Association of Christian
Librarians, July 13, 2006*
Betsy Barefoot, EdD

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It is an honor to be with you here on this lovely campus. This is not my first trip to Indiana Wesleyan. I have many friends here and recently worked closely with Indiana Wesleyan's faculty and staff in a major year-long self-study and improvement planning process for the first year. I very much appreciate the invitation extended to me by Sheila Carlblom to reflect with you about your important role in Christian college settings and how what you do – helping students become knowledgeable and ethical seekers and consumers of information – is so important. In my remarks this morning, I want to reflect with you about the first year, the nature of today's beginning students, and about the challenges we face in making information literacy a more central component of the first year. I also have questions about what it means to be a Christian librarian – honest questions that I want to explore with you in the context of the first year. Finally I want to facilitate a conversation between all of us about ways that you are currently integrating your work into the first year. But let me begin by practicing what I preach to faculty who teach first-year students by telling you a bit more about myself and how I more or less fell into a career focused on the first year.

It was August of 1988, and I had moved with my family to Columbia, SC – a hot, humid, very Southern metropolis. The move was one of those you make for someone else's career. Not my idea, as I was trying to complete a doctorate up in Williamsburg, VA. But determined to make the best of it, I enrolled in a graduate course at the University of South Carolina (USC) and sought some graduate-student-type employment to pay my tuition. Through a roundabout process, I ended up at the National Resource Center for The “Freshman” Year Experience – a place I'd never heard of. I had lots of questions and some downright suspicions, but hey, a job's a job!

From that tentative beginning, I slowly but surely pieced together a career, but more importantly, I began to change my attitude. My experiences at USC and on many other college campuses led me to recognize that the first year is really unique and important and that it merits a special focus from all of us – especially in a Christian college or university, where we are called upon to serve “the least of these.” Remember that first-year students have the least knowledge, the least experience, and the least self-assurance (that is self-assurance based in reality). Let's make sure that these students also don't receive the “least” attention, caring, and support. If we live our faith, there should be no other educational settings in which first-year students are more loved and cared for than in Christian colleges.

If you can, conjure up your own first year of college – what are your memories? Are they pleasant, are they painful? Did you have more than one first year? My own first year was utterly average. I had worked hard to get to Duke University from a small Southern high school, but once I arrived, I found myself lost in a sea of extremely brilliant people, or at least that was my impression. And in 1962, neither Duke, nor any other campus, was known for reaching out to students who were lost. But what about you? Is there a person or event that stands out in your memory of the first year as especially significant? Were you one of legions of students who heard “look to your left, look to your right” – was that motivational or were you discouraged? What about the library – as a first-year student, how and by whom were you taught to access, evaluate, and use information? Who, if anyone, took the responsibility to help you learn how to feel comfortable and knowledgeable in your college library? When did you make the decision to become a college librarian? Did that, by any chance, happen in your first year? Did you go to a Christian college? If so, did it

meet your expectations – were you treated with caring and respect, or were you ignored, dismissed, or treated with disdain? Did anyone care about you as a whole person – your hopes and dreams, concerns and fears, or were they just interested in your academic performance or obedience to the rules?

Throughout the history of higher education, the first year has occupied a unique place for both students and institutions. But a unique place is not necessarily a place of value. For students, the first year represents one of life's most significant transitions – and is filled with anticipation, delight, fear, as well as sadness – the best of times, the worst of times. But for institutions, the first year has sometimes been seen as a necessary evil – the “castor oil” portion of the undergraduate experience. A period characterized by low-level bargain that goes something like this: “Don’t expect too much of us (the institution), and we won’t expect too much of you (the students).” From the campus perspective, the first year has been redeemed primarily by its useful function as a weed-out mechanism and as a cash cow that at many campuses is milked over and over to fund the rest of the undergraduate and the graduate curriculum. And to practice some self-disclosure, for parents (including me) the first year has been, if nothing else, a holding tank for adolescent students who are not quite ready to take on the real world, but who definitely need to leave home.

Of course, I don’t think I have to tell you that the first year has roles that are far more important than being a sorting mechanism, money maker, or holding tank. Speaking not only for myself but also for all of us at the Policy Center on the First Year of College, we believe that the first year occupies a critical place in the undergraduate curriculum – not the only important place to be sure, but one that gives us as educators, including college and university librarians, unique opportunities to influence what and how students learn. Our interactions with first-year students also provide a unique opportunity for us to live our Christian values.

Why is the first year so important? First, we know that the first year is the time when

students confirm or adapt their expectations for what college is all about. Many students enter higher education with a highly unrealistic notion of what’s required in order to do well, with the belief that all academic work takes place in the four walls of the classroom, that knowledge will be poured into them by the experts, and that out-of-class study or discovery simply isn’t necessary. And then on the other side, there are students who expect the first year to be far more challenging than it is in reality and become bored and disengaged.

The first year is the period in which students develop long-lasting patterns of behavior, attitudes, and make momentous decisions about majors and careers as well as friendships and social alliances.

Generally, students in the first year are more compliant, more open to suggestion and influence than more seasoned, or perhaps we should say, more cynical upperclass students. So this time period provides us an opportunity to help students chart successful pathways through college – pathways that include acquisition of the knowledge and skills of information literacy.

Before we think about how all of us can more effectively link the work of librarians to positive goals for the first year, let’s pause for a moment and focus on the students. What can we say about today’s first-year students? Well that depends on your particular campus and the students who attend. Your institution may enroll and admit traditional-aged students from middle or upper socioeconomic backgrounds that we could accurately characterize as millennials. My friend, Jerry Pattengale, here at Indiana Wesleyan has looked in depth at the characteristics of this new breed of student. Jerry and other scholars who study millennial students (those born after 1981) maintain that generally speaking, these students are extremely persistent (for things they want), very close to their parents, highly scheduled, confident if not overconfident, conventional, pressured, optimistic, competitive, and sheltered by what are termed helicopter parents. Now while these adjectives describe some first-year students, they don’t do a very good job of describing others – first-generation learners,

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adult learners, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds – especially those students who have little or no family involvement in their education and sometimes strong family opposition. Generally, these students feel marginal – they are far less self-confident, optimistic, and competitive and may be downright scared of college and especially the library. I remember not so long ago having to accompany a very frightened adult female first-year student on her first visit to the university library.

How do today's first-year students view information and the role it plays in their college experience? In a nutshell, if you're not living under a rock in the year 2006, you are bombarded with information. And students who have grown up in the world of ATM machines, cell phones, and instant messaging have come to expect that information is immediate, presented on demand 24/7, and in a "USA-Today" type format – that is short and sweet – nothing that you really have to search for. Why even leave the comfort of your residence hall room when everything you've ever wanted to know is available at your fingertips? Or so goes the first-year-student logic. Most any Google search results in thousands, often millions of references in a nano-second. But do first-year students know how to evaluate information and how to use it? Over 20 years ago, the futurist John Naisbitt said it all in his statement, "We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge." And we might add "starved for a clear sense of values."

At the risk of over-generalization, many, if not most, new college students have not learned how to discriminate truth from fiction especially when it's in print – there is something so authoritative about the printed word – have never been exposed to primary source materials, journal articles, and the like, and have only a vague understanding of plagiarism. Speaking of plagiarism, one of my former first-year students – age 18 – presented a paper to me in which she wrote – "in my 13 years of research on this topic ..." She truly didn't understand that lifting material for personal use was not only comical in this case, but unacceptable. By

the way, librarians at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee are intentionally addressing plagiarism in their work with first-year students and have a Web site that you might want to check out – http://library.apsu.edu/guides/1_6.htm.

So if we can agree that one of the predictable characteristics of new students is that they need help in the basic concepts and mechanics of information literacy, my question to you is who among us is most directly responsible for providing that help? Should we hold the students themselves responsible for their own information literacy? Should we assume that they should learn to love the library and library research all by themselves? I don't know how your students feel about the library as a physical setting – My guess is that their feelings, for better or worse, relate to their earliest memories of the public library in their hometown and their school library.

For me the public library was a wonderful place where I went from my earliest years to listen to stories and then to check out seven books a week – that was the maximum. I can still bring back the musty, reassuring smell of that old public library. When I was in my first year at Duke University, the East Campus library was the place where almost everyone went to study or occasionally to check out potential dating opportunities.

But in my experience in teaching contemporary first-year students, I find that their attitudes about the library as a place are both different from mine and troubling. Some see it as a sort of museum, a place that belongs to the past, not the present. Although some students use the library for serious study, others have told me – "the library is too quiet to study in," or "the library gives me the headache." And in a conversation that I had with a local sixth grader a few weeks ago, I was told that the library is "for nerds and old people." So I doubt that we can really depend upon most students to somehow pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and learn to see the library in a new light.

Should faculty who teach courses enrolling first-year students be responsible for ensuring that students learn the basics of information

literacy? Sounds logical, but before we breathe a collective sigh of relief, let's take a closer look at some of those courses and the faculty who teach them.

While English composition classes are typically small across all institutions, first-year class sizes of 75, 100, or even more students in subjects such as first-year history, biology, psychology, sociology, religion, and the like, are not uncommon in American higher education. Now there's a cash cow – a huge class taught in many cases by an adjunct who may or may not have the “big picture” of learning goals for the first year. What's the chance that the instructor of such a large class is going to focus on information literacy, or care one way or the other about how this mass of students views the library? Instructors of large classes have all they can do to stay afloat and to give the requisite number of multiple choice examinations. Keeping up with attendance goes out the window; promoting interaction is extremely difficult. And the library – you've got to be kidding! Let's face it, many first-year classes are far from an ideal atmosphere for learning in general, much less learning the habits of information literacy!

Many campuses center library instruction in what I've come to call the collegiate “home-room,” the first-year seminar. Do you remember homeroom when you were in junior high and high school? It was the place where you got all the important information that didn't quite fit in the regular curriculum. As you might imagine, the quality of library instruction in first-year seminars varies from poor to outstanding, and the amount of time devoted to this topic varies as well. But even if students are getting a substantive introduction to the library in a first-year seminar or a special library course, many, if not most of us, are lacking evidence that our students actually transfer that knowledge to “regular” classes across the disciplines.

So while it would be ideal if we could rely on all faculty teaching first-year students to provide the knowledge and skills and appreciation necessary for information literacy, with the exception of some English courses, some first-

year seminars, and a few special first-year library courses, it rarely happens, at least in the first year. So that leaves you and me, and to tell you the truth, I'm really very busy!

Is it time to throw up our hands? Well not yet. The solution to this problem is being discovered by some of you through collaboration – collaboration between librarians as information specialists, classroom faculty, and students – yes students. One of most powerful means of molding first-year-student attitudes is through linking them with upper-level students who can serve as role models and mentors. And the long-term and more effective answer to the problem is moving library instruction beyond a special library course or first-year seminar to a tighter and more direct integration in courses across the curriculum.

On that theme, let me share with you an observation from a University of South Carolina friend and Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the School of Library and Information Sciences, Dr. Charles Curran. In a recent e-mail message, Dr. Curran stated the following:

“I think it is especially great that we are pursuing the relationship between librarians and the first-year experience. If the students can understand the tremendous gains they can enjoy by partnering with librarians from the beginning, they and the librarians will benefit. But I think the key, really is librarians partnering with faculty. I have always been a big fan of assignment-directed library instruction and a big foe of out-of-context library instruction delivered because it is September.”

I would agree with Professor Curran that although a library orientation, a special library course, or first-year seminar that includes a library unit may be a good beginning, talking about the library only in September, or only in the first term of the first year, simply isn't sufficient. In spite of the laudable efforts of many who teach these special courses that fall outside the regular curriculum, the danger is that students sometimes view them as not quite “real courses.” And in order for content and activities to be taken seriously, they must be imbedded in what students see as “real.”

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Think of a way to help define and measure the characteristics of an “information literate campus,” or more accurately a campus committed to information literacy, especially for first-year students.

Am I arguing that we give up on the special library course or first-year seminar? Absolutely not. These courses are effective places to begin helping students learn the concepts of information literacy. But in order for library instruction to make a significant difference in the way students approach academic work, it must continue across the curriculum in the first year and beyond.

I don't have to tell you that this kind of integration across academic courses is easier to accomplish in small private colleges than in large universities. It's far easier if first-year classes are of manageable size, are taught by experienced faculty who have a strong commitment to the institutional mission, and if there are clearly defined learning objectives for the first year or a defined core or general education curriculum.

Let me give you some specific examples of institutions that are focusing intentionally on information literacy in the first year. Let me suggest that you learn more about what's going on at Wartburg College, a Lutheran College in Iowa; the College of Wooster, an institution born in the Presbyterian tradition in Ohio; several public institutions – Ulster County Community College in New York, Austin Peay State University in Tennessee, the University of Arizona, and Bowling Green State University, and Kent State University in Ohio. At all these institutions, ongoing work is connecting the first year to the library and to the broader concepts of information literacy, and that work is yielding demonstrable results. At the conclusion of my address, I'll want to hear more about what many of you are doing on behalf of first-year students.

Although, as I told you earlier, the first year has been the focus of my work for almost 20 years, I am currently part of a small team that provides leadership for an organization called the Policy Center on the First Year of College. The Policy Center is funded in part by grants from philanthropic foundations (including the Lumina Foundation here in Indiana), and we work directly with campuses that want to attempt a systematic improvement of the first year – that is the whole first year – all the policies, practices, and programs designed for

or affecting first-year students. We have designed a set of broad principles for the first year that guide this self study, and I want to share five of those principles with you that I believe are especially relevant to your work.

The first principle is the importance of a collective sense of purpose for the first year on any campus and the acknowledgement of everyone's role in meeting that purpose. While on the one hand, this sounds like a simple concept, it has been our finding that at many colleges and universities, the only articulated purpose for the beginning college experience is “retention,” and while retention may be necessary, it hardly deserves to be considered a purpose of this period in the undergraduate experience. So beyond retention, is there a shared and positive vision for the first year on your campus, a shared sense of desired outcomes, and do those outcomes include elements of information literacy? Is this purpose recorded anywhere or is it implicit? If an outsider were to visit your campus, could that person deduce your first-year purpose by looking around, or is there a disconnect between what you say, perhaps even what you believe, and what you do? Let me add that this host campus has a clear mission for the undergraduate experience and the first year – and that is to produce “world changers.” Courses and activities are aligned in such a way as to keep that purpose front and center for students, faculty, and staff.

The second principle is the need for logical and effective organization for the first year. A few campuses have undertaken an extensive reorganization of their libraries to better serve undergraduates, especially first-year students. Bowling Green University even has a “first-year librarian.” And at IUPUI, the instructional team for each learning community includes a university librarian. Who if anyone is specifically in charge of how your library addresses the particular needs of first-year students and who interfaces with faculty who teach first-year courses? If your answer is no one, could you consider a reorganization to make someone on your staff directly responsible for a meaningful interface between the library and the first year?

Many of the campuses we have worked with have designed informal but influential organizational structures – campuswide task forces or working groups that meet periodically to monitor all aspects of the first year and recommend change. I hope that if your campus has such a working group, you are at the table.

The third principle of first-year excellence relates to the alignment of teaching and learning. Has your campus determined desired learning outcomes for first-year students and were you part of that discussion? If your college or university is one of the forward-thinking institutions that have determined learning outcomes for the first year, do those outcomes align with what's happening in and out of the classroom? For instance, many campuses hold critical thinking as a goal for the first year, and as you know, information literacy is a central, essential component of critical thinking. But how can large classes, reliance on multiple choice examinations, and the absence of any significant research activity that would require using library resources actually yield the ability to think critically? I believe that many of our institutions have a serious misalignment between what we say and what we do in terms of our goals for student learning, especially in the first year.

The next principle speaks to the importance of helping students make a successful transition to college, and one of the essential components of transition is confirming and/or challenging student expectations for college life. What expectations do your students have for campus life in general and specifically about their need to use the library? Is the library a part of the “admissions tour,” and if so, is it just a “pass-by-and-point” experience, or do prospective students actually have the opportunity to meet you and learn about the library as a friendly source for information during the admissions process?

What role should your library play in a full roster of transition programs and activities? Is a “library tour” sufficient; do “scavenger hunts” work, or are you designing more substantive ways of helping students change their attitudes about library use and actually learn to enjoy the process of finding and using information?

The last principle that I want to highlight this morning is the importance of serving every student whom you admit. What do you know about whether or how your student population is changing? Do you have more “developmental students,” more students whose first language is not English? Do those students make use of your services, and if not, how might you more effectively reach out to them? If you serve students from other cultures, who is helping them understand the rules of information use that might be different in their country of origin? I think you could have an important role to play in helping students and faculty understand the definition of plagiarism and how that varies among cultures.

I invite you to access our Web site (www.fyfoundations.org) to see all nine principles (which we call Foundational Dimensions) and read more about this project. And I hope some of these ideas will perhaps serve as a catalyst for you to think more broadly about how this organization might help campuses become more intentional and accountable in the area of information literacy.

In my interactions with ALA and more specifically the Association of College Research Libraries (ACRL), I have been impressed by the serious work that has been done to delineate the characteristics of the information literate student and to define characteristics of information literacy programs. I don't know whether you have attempted a parallel process in your organization. If you have or if you plan to do so in the future, I also encourage you to think of a way to help define and measure the characteristics of an “information literate campus,” or more accurately a campus committed to information literacy, especially for first-year students. Why do I say “especially for first-year students”? Because remember, the first year is the time when you can have the greatest influence in molding and directing patterns of behavior that lead to academic success, patterns that once learned and practiced, will likely persist throughout the collegiate experience.

What would a campus look like that was truly committed to the centrality of information

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literacy; how would resources be allocated, learning outcomes articulated, and first-year classes be taught? What would be the quality of communication between the library and other academic units? I believe that campuses need your help in responding to these questions and many others to create a vision of excellence rather than a minimal or an acceptable level of achievement. The best library with the most committed professional staff will never reach its potential without the broader and deeper commitment of the campus. It's time to reverse the bargain of low expectations and to say to students – “expect nothing less than excellence from us, and we'll expect the same from you.”

When I accepted the invitation to speak to this group, I had honest questions about what distinguishes a library in a Christian college or university from any other library. Is it simply a matter of the books you choose to have or not have in your inventory? Or is there something about the atmosphere that says to students, “Come all ye who labor and are heavy laden.” There is help here, there is caring here. We won't ignore you, we won't shush you – we'll listen with respect, we'll be your friends, your surrogate parents, your guides. I hope that your first-year students find your library a warm and friendly place – not because of the books or the furniture, but because of you!

As I conclude, let me leave you with a few final thoughts and suggestions. I wish I could assure you that your campus would always extend to you and your colleagues an invitation to be part of campus dialogue about the first year. It's apparent that some of them are, and it is clear to me that this interaction is yielding exciting new examples of collaboration. But I find that sometimes the library and librarians are so familiar, so obvious, that you are actually forgotten. The response is “well, of course, the library is important to the first year.” But acknowledging your importance doesn't always extend into an invitation to be part of campuswide plans and decisions. Folks, don't hide your collective light under a bushel, don't wait for an invitation to join conversations about the first year. You may have an inside view of students that no one

else has. So don't hesitate to remind your fellow faculty and administrators that you play a central role in whatever learning goals the institution has for its students – learning goals such as clarification of Christian values, improved writing and communication skills, civic engagement, numeracy skills, appreciation of diversity. I recently heard a wonderful address by Alan Guskin, former president of Antioch University and now senior scholar at the Project on the Future of Higher Education, in which he raved about the willingness and ability of college librarians to innovate in ways that could serve as a model for all of higher education. He used many cases in point to describe how librarians are helping us think in new ways about student learning. Your campuses need you in discussions about the first year.

To the degree that your budgets allow, I encourage you to attend other relevant gatherings of faculty and student affairs professionals to keep front and center the importance of your work and your many successes. It's unlikely that any significant number of educators outside your profession will come to your gatherings; therefore, I hope you'll find it possible to go to theirs.

Finally I urge you to maintain your momentum in your work on the first year. I'm delighted to announce that later this year the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience at the University of South Carolina and ACRL will release a major monograph on linking the library and the first college year. When that publication becomes available, I hope you will obtain a copy for your own library and read and share its contents with others on your campus. I wish you well as you continue your good work on behalf of all students – especially those in the first year of higher education. ✚