



Building Success beyond High School with Career- and College-Ready Literacies

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School librarians make it a priority to create an environment in which students feel safe, welcome, and supported. We can help students take that feeling of safety and security with them as they move into adult spaces, including university and public libraries. Many of our students' future interactions with libraries will take place primarily through digital tools, which school librarians are well positioned to teach students to use. Helping students gain basic knowledge about what is available to them at libraries beyond high school, develop skills with using the library itself (including self-efficacy), and learn about building a professional presence online for job hunting and career work are all ways in which school librarians can effectively support students in transition to their post-secondary lives.

When we speak of literacies our students need, how do college-ready and life-ready literacies fit into that puzzle? Too often high schools send graduates into the world without practical tools that will help them to be successful. With the college freshman retention rate

at only 64 percent on average (for public universities) and much lower for students of color or low-income students (ACT 2015), how can school librarians provide interventions that help the other third of our students make their transitions more successful? The Partnership for 21st Century Learning's P21 Framework identifies two areas for student outcomes that relate to our work in school libraries: Information Media/Technology Skills and Life and Career Skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning n.d.).

Students need help specifically in:

1. Understanding post-secondary digital resources and tools
2. Engaging in self-efficacy when needing help
3. Creating academic digital archives or portfolios
4. Creating appropriate digital social self-representation

In their research on library anxiety, a concept first identified by University of North Carolina's Constance Mellon (1986), researchers Qun G. Jiao and

Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie identify areas that are stressful for students and for which students are most at risk. Issues that Jiao and Onwuegbuzie particularly identified are:

- (1) barriers with staff (the perception that librarians and other library staff are intimidating and unapproachable);
- (2) affective barriers (feelings of inadequacy about using the library);
- (3) comfort with the library (how safe, welcoming, and non-threatening students perceive the library to be);
- (4) knowledge of the library (how familiar with the library students feel they are); and
- (5) mechanical barriers (feelings which emerge as a result of reliance on mechanical library equipment). (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie 1995)

Their research makes it clear that library anxiety impedes college students' research tasks because it interferes with the more-mechanical tasks of using the library or research tools effectively. Furthermore, they found that this anxiety impacts a large percentage of students, particularly non-native English speakers, males, and high-achieving students.

Literacy specialist and author Renee Hobbs (2010) has identified “access” as a key competency for literacy; high school librarians can help ease this anxiety with a variety of strategies. One way to do this is to offer students practice with university or public library websites. During the last week of school, for example, I typically work with senior English classes to provide a tour of college library websites. University and public libraries offer a variety of services that students aren’t accustomed to accessing in high school, including texting and live chats with a librarian, webinars, subject-area librarians, subject-area guides, study room reservations, and more. We practice locating helpful resources on college sites, chat live with a librarian to show how easy it is, locate links to subject-area librarians, and learn how they can help. We look at databases and how to use subject guides to determine which databases are appropriate for their majors. We explore the look and feel of LibGuides. Universal search is another feature they might not be familiar with, so we explore how that works as well. Finally, we look at tools university libraries have provided on their site for independent learning, like webinars, pathfinders, etc.

At Madison College in Madison, Wisconsin, which is for many students a stepping stone to University of Wisconsin schools,

information literacy coordinator Matthew Coan notes: “We librarians at Madison College spend countless hours creating online research guides for students. We also have many online tutorials. (My job is to maintain and update them.) Quite often, however, students don’t seek these out unless we first ask them or require them to do so” (2015).

In discussions with our Professional Learning Community groups for twelfth-grade instructors, I’ve discovered that English teachers at the high school level are mostly unfamiliar with the offerings and navigation of current university library sites. So this year, to expand student support, we are planning (at the time of this writing) more-routine spring semester opportunities for students to engage with university-level pathfinders. For example, for their study of *Hamlet* we might use Rice University’s Shakespeare pathfinder. We have identified areas where students need help so we can weave strategies into their spring semester assignments, such as how to use synonyms in searching, how to use universal search, and helping students engage in self-efficacy by using “chat with a librarian” services.

Similarly, seniors who don’t plan to go to college immediately after high school can benefit from guided practice in using public library websites, specifically sections that are dedicated to

career support. This practice would help students build confidence and familiarity with public libraries and their resources.

School librarians serving K–12 students need to be sure their own websites are stepping stones to using the sorts of information and resources offered on university and public library websites. Even in high school, library websites are often not on students’ radar, so finding opportunities and methods for engaging students with them is important. When building pathfinders or LibGuides for students, for example, why not include links to the local university’s or local public library’s pertinent resources? Consider having students build pathfinders themselves so they internalize the value of these resources. When the school library doesn’t have a book, refer the student to a nearby public library or university, and use the other institution’s website to look up what is available so that students see libraries as connected entities.

Another way to combat library anxiety is to empower students to ask for assistance, building the P2I skills of initiative and self-direction. Jiao and Onwuegbuzie’s research found

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Photo: Walker Harris

that high-performing students and non-native speakers both assume that other students know what to do better than they do and feel embarrassed asking for help (1995).

And, as librarian Coan points out, “Even if they want to ask for help during an info lit session, there are logistical hurdles. Only one of me and, perhaps, twenty-two or more of them...most of the time they’ll probably have to come back and see us at the reference desk, which is also intimidating.” For students from lower-income backgrounds or for non-native speakers, particularly, any activities that empower students to ask for help, that build resiliency in seeking information, and teach them that librarians are trusted professionals are beneficial.

Students need help with other digital career- and college-readiness skills as well—what British technology nonprofit Jisc calls “career and identity management” literacies (2015). As Austin

Community College teaching adjunct William Martin told me, we assume students who are online have digital skills, but they are not necessarily practical or professional ones (2015).

There are simple tasks that school librarians can teach students, like setting up appropriately named e-mail accounts for job hunting. The informal or slang e-mail account names that students might have found entertaining to use with their friends might not be appropriate for their college application or job hunting process. Helping students establish a professional digital presence, whether via a resume site, a LinkedIn profile, or an About.me page is another way to prepare students for job hunting and a more academic presence online. At our campus at Westlake High School, ed tech Lisa Johnson works with every senior class to transition their work into online portfolios they can access after high school. She shows students how to migrate

documents or set up portfolio sites of their own to store their work, using sites like Bulb <bulbapp.com> or Google Sites and Google Docs.

This intentional transitioning for students provides them guidance in a structured way, rather than leaving the transition to chance; this assistance is especially important for students who don't have family support after high school. School librarians can play a similar role, helping students migrate important projects that represent their academic work onto portfolio sites, blogs, etc. We can help curate portfolio options for students and team with teachers or counselors and ed tech staff to systematically help students with transitioning their work to an online profile.

In accordance with digital citizenship training, school librarians can talk to students about appropriate use of social media accounts as they move into college or careers or show them how to create alternate accounts for professional



work. In fact, students are already unconsciously sorting their online identities. In her book *It's Complicated*, danah boyd documents the fact that students adjust their "identities" to match the social media tool they are using, reserving some tools for interacting with family, while using others for school friends.

When secondary librarians teach students these digital life literacies, they help students perceive that librarians can provide support for real-life problems. Since Jiao's research identified "affective" tone of librarians as a barrier, the more we work with students, create inviting library environments, and have positive engagements with students, the more we change their perceptions of librarians in general. School librarians play a significant role in creating life-long library users and supporters, and our role as a vital link in the career-ready/college-ready chain is a significant but often overlooked one. Working with high school teachers to create a plan for transitioning students will help alleviate barriers to their success for years to come (Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, and Daley 1997).



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AASL and a member of AASL's 2015–2016 AASL Presidential Think Tank. Carolyn is the incoming president of Texas Computer Education Association's Library Special Interest Group. She was awarded the White House Champion of Change for Connected Learning in 2014 and was a four-time finalist for TCEA's Librarian of the Year. Her recent articles include "Far Beyond Makerspaces" in the November 2015 issue of *Internet @ Schools*, "Wear to Learn? Wearable Technologies—Promises and Problems" in the June 2015 issue of *Internet @ Schools*, and "The Librarian–Principal Relationship" in the April 2015 issue of *Teacher Librarian*. She is also an advisory board member for both the ALA Center for the Future of Libraries and the Granite State College School Library Program. Her blog, *Not So Distant Future*, is available at <http://futura.edublogs.org>.

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