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Exercising Research Skills: An Information Literacy Boot Camp for Religious Studies Graduate Assistants

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Abstract

Instructional librarians at the University of Dayton collaborated with a religious studies graduate program to offer a three-day information literacy workshop, or "boot camp," to the program's graduate research assistants. The graduate program had found that the assistants' research skills did not meet the expectations of their faculty mentors, and the workshop sought to address these deficiencies. With input from the religious studies faculty, the workshop focused on catalog and database searching, Boolean logic, primary sources, and the Chicago citation style. The librarians incorporated active learning exercises into each workshop session. Assessment of the workshop suggested that the assistants gained confidence in these information literacy skills. Feedback from faculty also indicated that the assistants' research skills had improved.

Introductory Footnote

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Graduate Assistants

Stephanie Shreffler and Heidi Gauder

Introduction

Graduate research assistants in religious studies need advanced research and

information literacy skills in order to effectively help their faculty mentors. Graduate

assistants, however, often enter their graduate programs without sufficient knowledge of

how to conduct library research. Requiring faculty members to teach these skills to their

assistants individually can slow down the training and research process, and results in

students possessing varying skill levels. In recognition of the need for a more unified

program, the religious studies graduate program at the University of Dayton, a private,

Catholic university, sought to collaborate with the library to create an information literacy

workshop for its graduate assistants. The workshop, which came to be known as the

"Religious Studies Boot Camp," taught information literacy skills such as catalog and

database searching, Boolean logic, finding primary sources, and citations. The

assistants' self-evaluations indicated that they felt more confident in their library

research skills after the workshop, and religious studies faculty reported a marked

improvement in their assistants' abilities.

Boot Camp Beginnings

The University of Dayton, founded in 1850 by the Society of Mary, is a private,

Catholic university in Dayton, Ohio. The full-time undergraduate population includes

more than 7,800 students, while the graduate student population numbers 2,400. The

Department of Religious Studies offers two graduate programs for a Master of Arts degree, along with a doctoral program. The M.A. in theological studies, according to the department website, seeks to "provide students an opportunity to broaden their knowledge and deepen their understanding of Christianity through the academic study of Scripture, historical theology, church history, and contemporary and moral theologies." The other Master of Arts degree is in pastoral ministry. The doctoral program maintains a distinctive focus, with research on "the practices/praxis of Catholicism as it is inculturated in multiple ways in the United States context." There are roughly 30 students in the M.A. programs and another 30 students in the doctoral program each year. The Religious Studies department provides four graduate assistantships to doctoral students and a set of two-year assistantships to seven M.A. students. Additional assistantship support comes from Campus Ministry and the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives.

Prior to our collaboration, the religious studies department offered a one-credit research methods course.   This course was ultimately deleted from the MA program of study, however, and the department found that the graduate assistants lacked the advanced knowledge necessary for research work. Since this course had been recently canceled, the librarians endeavored make the students aware of library services. The religious studies boot camp, as it is currently designed, developed over the course of a couple years. Beginning with an email to the religious studies graduate program supervisor in 2012, librarians offered to meet with graduate students to discuss library resources, citation management, and library spaces. This offer coalesced into two brown-bag sessions during the fall 2012 semester during which one librarian shared

information about the library and a second one discussed the services and holdings of a special collection dedicated to religious materials. A second round of brown-bag talks took place during the spring 2013 semester, including a request to review Turabian citations.

The following year, the coordinator for library instruction and the coordinator of graduate studies met and brainstormed a new approach: a set of workshops at the library just prior to the start of the fall 2014 semester. The previous sessions had been open to all graduate students in religious studies, but this workshop series would be required for graduate students who had research assistantships. The coordinators articulated the following workshop goals: "The sessions will cover skills that students need in order to effectively locate and evaluate primary and secondary sources. It will also address skills needed to record and produce appropriately annotated bibliographies that use Turabian citation style." They identified three librarians to help deliver the workshops: two special collections librarians for subject knowledge, along with a librarian from the instruction team. In August 2014, the first religious studies workshop was held; following student feedback, it was recast as the "Religious Studies Boot Camp."

The University of Dayton is a Catholic university; as such, religious themes and topics are an important facet of collection development at the University Libraries. The Marian Library holds the world's largest collections of materials on the Blessed Virgin Mary. Founded by the Marianist order in 1943, the Marian Library seeks to uphold the mission of making the Blessed Virgin Mary better known, loved, and served. To fulfill

this charge, the Library collects books, periodicals, rare books and incunabula, artwork, and archival material that document Marian studies and devotion throughout the world.

The U.S. Catholic Special Collection collects and preserves materials that document American Catholic history and culture. It supports the PhD program in American Catholic Studies offered by the Department of Religious Studies. Its collections include books, archival material, periodicals, artwork, and objects and artifacts.

Design of the Boot Camp

When designing the boot camp, the instructional librarians consulted with the religious studies department. Religious studies faculty completed a survey that asked them to identify the skills they thought essential for their graduate assistants. Consistently, the faculty identified finding books, finding journal articles, and finding primary sources as the skills most needed by their graduate assistants. In response, the instructional librarians developed a three-day workshop, with one day devoted to each of the three topics. In addition, the librarians introduced the *Chicago Manual of Style* citation guidelines appropriate for each day's session. The workshop took place during the graduate assistants' general orientation to their new responsibilities and their graduate program.

The first day of the workshop began with a tour of the library, focusing on the areas the graduate students would most likely use during their studies. Stops included the library's research and writing center and two special collections. The tour familiarized students with the library and allowed them to visualize areas of the library that were mentioned during the workshop. After the tour, the librarians introduced the

library's basic online resources and taught the students how to find books. They reviewed the LibGuide they had created for the attendees of the workshop, then demonstrated how to use the online catalog with special attention to Library of Congress Subject Headings. The librarians also explained interlibrary loan and demonstrated how to request books and other resources from the consortium OhioLINK. Citation work that day focused on teaching the basics of the Chicago style for citing research in books. Interactive activities on the first day included a "Name That LCSH!" game, created by Christina Sheldon, and group work to practice writing citations for books (Sheldon 34-36). At the conclusion of the workshop, students were asked to complete a short quiz that tested their new abilities to search the catalog, write book citations, and use subject headings.

On the second day of the workshop the focus switched to finding journal articles. The day began with strategies for brainstorming keywords and an introduction to Boolean logic. The librarians demonstrated keyword searching and introduced the students to databases dedicated to religious studies and theology. They also reminded the students that the keyword brainstorming and Boolean logic skills should be used when searching for books in the library catalog. Citation work began with questions on citations included in the previous day's quiz (citations proved to be the most challenging part of the workshop). The students then learned how to cite journal articles in the Chicago style. Interactive activities from the second day included group work practicing keyword brainstorming, creating proper search strings using Boolean logic, and writing journal article citations. Students again completed a short quiz that tested their skills on these topics at the end of the day.

The third day of the workshop focused on finding primary sources and other sources unique to religious studies. The day began with discussion of what to expect when conducting research in archives. Next, students explored the content and structure of finding aids by brainstorming, as a group, what information they would like to know about an archival collection they were using for research. The librarian then displayed an actual finding aid and showed how the finding aid included that content, and explained the finding aid's structure. The librarians also introduced the students to primary source databases, WorldCat, and the library's own digital archival collections. Citation work on this day introduced students to the basics of citing primary sources. It also focused on writing citations for sources particular to religious studies, such as the Bible, papal encyclicals, and conciliar documents. At the end of the day, students completed a survey in which they evaluated the change in their own information literacy skills.

Second-year graduate assistants are required to take the workshop again. These students often have valuable advice for their first-year counterparts. We have also found that an annual refresher of these information literacy skills serves these students well.

Discussion and Assessment

One of the primary goals of the boot camp was to ensure that the graduate students were prepared to do the work associated with their research assistantships. In a survey distributed during the first three years, the supervisors selected the skills they wanted their research assistants to master. Eight supervisors completed the survey the first year; eleven completed it the second year; and ten completed it the third year. Many supervisors checked off nearly every option listed in the survey, but over time, it

was clear that they highly valued mastery of locating books and journal articles, selecting appropriate keywords, and using discipline-specific databases. Although the faculty did not mention the value of Turabian citation skills, the students themselves saw value in practicing this skill.

Chart 1: Graduate student supervisor survey, 2014-2016. Research skills needed by religious studies research assistants.

In addition to seeking faculty input, the librarians also reached out to the graduate assistants prior to the boot camp. The librarians were interested in learning whether students felt their skills were adequate for the work ahead or if they were aware of specific trouble spots. Secondly, the librarians planned to ask students similar questions after the boot camp in order to understand how much the students thought they learned from the session. Students were asked to rate the change in their ability in four areas: searching for books, using article databases, finding primary sources, and creating accurate Turabian-style citations.

The pre- and post-boot camp surveys have been distributed to every boot camp cohort (year three, however, had an insufficient response rate and the data is not included in this discussion). In the first year, five students took both the pre-workshop survey and the post-workshop survey, and seven students completed both surveys in year two. In year four, eight students took the pre-workshop and post-workshop surveys. In total, twenty students filled out both pre-workshop and post-workshop surveys; this number includes fourteen new students from years one, two and four; and

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six returning students from years two and four. These sets provide the basis for analysis.

The survey used a rating scale of 1-4, with 1 as an indicator of least confidence and 4 being the greatest rating. Although a fairly small sample size, the results show some interesting patterns for new graduate students and returning graduate students. Consistently, the returning students indicated on the post-workshop survey that they learned less than first-year students, with the exception of using book catalogs.

First-year students indicated that their information literacy skills improved after the workshop. Interestingly, these surveys may have also helped them realize how much they actually did not know about library research. One student, in a post-workshop email to the instructors, wrote, "When I answered the poll today, I backpedaled on some of the numbers from the pre-survey, not because your training was lacking, but because it alerted me to a lot of things I didn't know. Having learned them, I won't feel proficient until I use them."

Since these assessments were based on self-evaluations by the graduate assistants, they may not accurately reflect the growth in skill. Although these surveys did not test the assistants' actual skills, they did demonstrate that students felt more confident after the workshop. This confidence was supported by feedback provided by religious studies faculty (described later in this article).

Chart 2: Mean scores, graduate student rating of ability to search book catalogs, before and after boot camp experience (2014-2017)

In this sample, first-year graduate students were more confident in skills in BEFORE queries, while it is likely the repeat students gave a more realistic assessment of skills. Repeat students in AFTER queries indicated that they learned more, while new student scores rated themselves the same as prior to the boot camp.

The ability to find and locate books ranked first for faculty, so this part of the boot camp was designed to ensure that students could meet faculty expectations. Given the primacy of books in this discipline, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that new students rated their ability to use book catalogs the highest of all four categories prior to the boot camp. Both new and returning students did indicate new proficiency in this category, but the difference appeared to be small, particularly for new students. In the future, it might be worth ascertaining exactly what catalog search skills students have prior to the boot camp and tailoring the session to address specific gaps.

Chart 3: Mean scores, graduate student rating of ability to search article databases, before and after boot camp experience. 2014-2017

In this sample, new students were less confident in skills in BEFORE queries, while repeat students had gained confidence. Repeat students in AFTER queries indicated a smaller change in the search abilities, but new students indicated that they learned more.

It was interesting to note the confidence level for database searching in returning students in the survey given prior to the boot camp. One might surmise that with at least a year of graduate courses and faculty support responsibilities, they have been putting

the skills and concepts into practice during that time. They have likely grown comfortable with the database interfaces and search mechanics, to say nothing of their ability to locate and evaluate relevant articles.

Chart 4: Mean scores, graduate student rating of ability to search for primary sources, before and after boot camp experience. 2014-2017

New students and repeat students reported similar confidence levels in BEFORE queries. Repeat students in AFTER indicated that they learned less, but new students indicated that they learned more.

This part of boot camp sought to expose students to possible primary source resources as well as provide an introduction to archives. Repeat students showed less confidence in their primary source research skills prior to the workshop than they did in other categories of research, perhaps because they have less immediate application of this topic, and therefore fewer chances to practice these skills. Nonetheless, faculty did see this as a valuable skill, and it presented the librarians with an opportunity to introduce students to a wider diversity of sources.

Chart 5: Mean scores, graduate student rating of ability to generate accurate citations in Turabian format, before and after boot camp experience (2014-2017)

New students were less confident in skills in BEFORE queries, while repeat students were more confident in skills. Repeat students in AFTER indicated a smaller change in their learning growth, while new students indicated that they learned more.

Clearly, new students were the least confident in this area among all the skills they were asked to evaluate. The discussion and practice of creating citations were obviously valuable boot camp components for new students, as this category showed the largest difference in ratings before and after the experience. The results indicate that the graduate students benefited from discussing and generating citations; indeed, for the latest boot camp we included additional citation work based on faculty feedback. On the faculty survey, this research aspect ranked far lower in importance than finding books and articles, but a couple faculty mentioned citation skills as a very important component to the training, as it is an area of "consistent difficulty" among the graduate students.

The surveys provide us with a general benchmark of confidence in research skills before the boot camp as well as a general sense of how much students thought they learned during the boot camp. Even though these surveys provide general impressions, they do raise questions that could help us prepare for future workshops. For example, it might be worthwhile to talk with second-year students before a second round of boot camps to identify specific research skills they were called upon to use during their first year as graduate assistants. We might also want to query the second year students about the contexts that required them to search for books and primary sources. Given the religious focus of this library and university, we want to highlight relevant collections of primary sources, but we might need to do so in a more purposeful approach. Second-

year graduate students could also help us understand whether the scope and pace of the boot camp were appropriate.

Benefits and Challenges of the Boot Camp

The boot camp offers many benefits to students, religious studies faculty, and librarians, but presents several challenges for these groups, as well. One obvious benefit is that students learn the advanced research skills needed for their jobs as graduate assistants. One graduate student noted that the experience proved especially beneficial since he completed his undergraduate studies at a college outside the state; and secondly, his undergraduate degree was in a social sciences discipline (with a religious studies minor). As a result, he felt had very little experience with the research skills needed for this program.

Students benefit from the boot camp in ways beyond building familiarity with library resources. The camp offers a natural mediuim for each year's attendees to develop camaraderie as a cohort. The presence of second-year graduate assistants also greatly benefits the first-year assistants. The second-year GAs can offer direct, relevant advice that the librarians, faculty, and graduate assistant coordinator may not think to offer. Hearing the second year GAs talk about their experiences and the challenges they overcame during their first year shows the new assistants that they too can succeed in this role. Even though the second-year students indicate that they learned less their second time in boot camp, their role as experienced peers cannot be overlooked.

The religious studies faculty benefit from the boot camp because they receive better research assistance from their GAs. One faculty member reported, "There has

been a noticeable and positive difference" in the GAs' research skills, adding that she no longer has to spend time teaching them basic skills like database searching and writing correct citations. She noted that the students who have attended the boot camp have "done especially well finding full-text resources, tracking down complete citations for some of my trickier sources, and creating an initial bibliography." Another faculty member sees a noticeable difference in the skills and confidence levels of GAs and other graduate students. The GAs are less anxious about projects she assigns to them, better able to focus on the end product, and more excited about the creative elements of the project.

Librarians benefit from the boot camp because it provides them with opportunities for extended contact with the graduate students, and they are able to dive more deeply into information literacy content than with typical one-shot sessions. It is quite clear that the librarians have the support of the religious studies department and that their work is valued; the graduate student advisor in particular plays a key role in facilitating the communications between librarians and faculty, as well as ensuring graduate student attendance at the annual boot camp. The boot camp also provides, to some degree, outreach and collaboration opportunities, as librarians have used faculty feedback to shape and improve the boot camp itself. Activities such as "spot the error in the bibliography" help strengthen student citation skills and likely simulates what they encounter in providing research support to faculty. Because faculty mention specific resources that they expect students to use, the librarians can provide relevant instruction using those resources as examples. Finally, the students become more

familiar with the librarians teaching the boot camp and are more likely to reach out to them for assistance.

Although the benefits of such a boot camp are clear and meaningful to students, faculty, and librarians, the format of this approach does present challenges. For the librarians, such work is labor-intensive, especially if the program is team-taught. The teaching team needs to coordinate lesson content, teaching times, and assessment approaches. This boot camp is offered right before the start of the fall semester, so there is additional competition for resources, since public services and teaching librarians are called upon to participate in orientations and presentations during this time. Likewise, the library's teaching classroom is in heavy use, so scheduling a space can be difficult. As with many other research sessions, librarians are challenged to find the right balance of teaching content and hands-on application while making sure that students are not overwhelmed by information.

Students and faculty face their own difficulties with this boot camp as well. They too may be facing start-of-year logistical issues. Both first- and second-year graduate assistants may question the utility of the boot camp, especially if they believe their research skills are fairly good already; other students may be overwhelmed by the amount of information that the boot camp covers.

The boot camp has proven successful in part because of support from the religious studies department and because the library has had the resources -- personnel, space, and time -- to facilitate the program. It has benefited also from the fact that teaching faculty expect their graduate assistants to effectively conduct research, so the graduate students are highly likely to employ the skills and concepts

covered in the boot camp. However, scaling up this boot camp to include graduate students from other programs would require significant changes to this approach.

Conclusion

When the religious studies program at the University of Dayton terminated its methodology course, the library was able to step in and provide the training that the graduate research assistants would need for their work. Taking an unconventional approach -- a three-day "boot camp" before the start of the school year -- allowed the librarians extended contact with the students to develop the necessary skills right away. Along the way, the librarians refined the sessions to become more learner-centered, but the content has remained essentially the same, with consistent emphasis on catalog and database searching, Boolean logic, finding primary sources, and citation skills.

Feedback from faculty and students indicates an appreciation for the sessions, and after the training, graduate assistants are able meet faculty research expectations. In particular, first-year graduate students noted that the boot camps helped them with their skills, most notably in their ability to format citations in Turabian style and search for primary sources. Faculty expect that students will leave the boot camp with the ability to locate books and articles through library resources. Although students indicate proficiency in their book and article skills, the librarians will continue to reinforce catalog and database searching, based on faculty feedback and the centrality of these skills and resources to religious studies research. In the future, a more detailed survey prior to the boot camp may identify exact skill gaps in these categories.

Librarians are eager to collaborate with faculty in ways that work with departmental or individual teaching constraints. By offering multiple sessions prior to the

start of school, these librarians overcame the difficulty of teaching in-depth and complex research skills. For readers who want to improve graduate student research skills, however, there are other ways to design and teach research skills to new graduate students. Librarians have worked with faculty to provide research sessions during course times, offered evening or daytime workshops and brown bag sessions, and met with students for one-on-one teaching. Librarians can easily serve as a bridge between graduate students and faculty; as experienced researchers, faculty may take such skills for granted and assume that graduate assistants already have proficiency with disciplinary research; likewise, librarians also understand/acknowledge the disconnect of what faculty mean by research skills and what students understand/comprehend as research skills. Librarians can help students meet faculty expectations with some extra training sessions and department support.

Faculty do not need to think they are solely responsible for teaching students how to conduct research. Through collaboration with the library, faculty can continue to use their class time to focus on subject-related content while still ensuring that their students gain crucial information literacy skills. This boot camp approach can be easily replicated, especially with input and collaboration from librarians.

Works Cited

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