LIBRARY JOURNAL.com
Visit *LJ* on the web!
www.libraryjournal.com



BY CAROL TENOPIR

# Are Online Librarians Teachers?

In my column "The Age of Online Instruction (*LJ* 9/1/02, p. 36,38), I made the bold assertion that "in this age of online libraries, librarians in all types of libraries are online educators." I should know better than to make an assumption without facts. John Ferguson, instructional services and systems librarian at Richland College Library in the Dallas County Community College District, immediately challenged the statement. Ferguson, who has survey results to support his assumptions, found that not quite half of academic libraries in the United States are currently "teaching libraries" and far fewer are "teaching proactively, rather than just reactively."

## People turn to the web

First, why did I make those statements? The online era means a shift in emphasis in reference librarians' roles. Studies show that both adults and children most often turn to the web as their first source for information.

I recently conducted focus groups of first- and second-year undergraduates in a study for the National Science Digital Library. These university students consider themselves expert searchers, although most are unaware of online databases or the difference between online scholarly journals and trade magazines. They are "experts" at web search engines yet most have never used advanced search features.

In focus groups, professors acknowledged that because their students turn first to the web, they try to recommend high-quality web sites. The professors are concerned that they don't have the time to teach students to find and recognize the best sources, whether they are on the web, an online database, or in print (for a complete report on the focus groups see web.utk.edu/~tenopir/nsf).



Carol Tenopir
(ctenopir@utk.edu)
is Professor at the School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

## Teaching is necessary

In many libraries, walk-in reference traffic is down, while virtual traffic to the library's online resources is up. Librarians can't see the puzzled faces of students who are doing their research from home.

These trends make an aggressive teaching program necessary in all types of libraries but particularly in academic libraries. Working with college and university teaching faculty, librarians need to provide both online and in-person instruction in search techniques, web evaluation, and the best resources for specific subjects. Web-based teaching modules and interactive tutorials better match today's students' study habits.

> "These trends make an aggressive teaching program necessary in all types of libraries but particularly in academic libraries"

Many libraries are doing this, as the programs I described in my earlier column attest. Eastern Michigan University's LOEX (Library Orientation Exchange) Library Instruction Clearinghouse shares instructional materials from hundreds of libraries (www.emich.edu/public/loex/loex.html). LOEX includes over 650 member libraries worldwide, and the web site provides links to many online instructional materials. The mistake I made was to assume that *many* means *all* or *almost all*.

## Ferguson's findings

In 2001, Ferguson visited 2,188 college and university web sites to look for evidence of information literacy training. He found that approximately 45 percent provide "reactive" information literacy training, while only 15 percent provide "proactive" training.

Reactive training programs invite faculty to contact the library to make arrangements for a lecture or hands-on presentation. Proactive information literacy programs, on the other hand, are where the "librarians take the initiative to develop—and aggressively promote—what they believe is essential for all students…to know in order to be information literate." Proactive programs could be for course credit, required tutorials, or noncredit courses that are recognized by the faculty of for-credit courses.

It is no secret that Ferguson is an advocate of proactive information literacy programs. Richland College has had a proactive, class-integrated information literacy program since the mid-1970s. They have found that students who earn their "Certificate of Information Literacy" (incorporated into at least five classes) do better in school. The literacy program has resulted in "a higher course completion rate, a higher student retention rate, and higher student grades." Most students who complete the certificate were required to do so, so they are not a self-selected group (see www.rlc.dcccd.edu/lrc/pdfs/takingthelead.pdf).

## What it takes

Why do so few academic libraries currently have proactive information literacy training programs? Ferguson explains that "a proactive program requires both a library that is—and librarians who are—tool literate, resource literate, research literate, publishing literate, emerging-technology literate, and critically literate." Ferguson believes that only a small percentage of academic libraries measure up to these criteria (see "Information Literacy in Six Dimensions," www.rlc.dcccd.edu/lrc/pdfs/Dimensions.pdf).

While I won't compound my mistake and make the assumption that this belief is true, I remain convinced that proactive online teaching must be a major role of academic libraries. As Richland College discovered, information literacy programs that are integrated into the curriculum can improve students' academic achievement.