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Kristin M. Woodward

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Students at the center in emerging academic models: embedded information literacy and distance services in the University of Wisconsin System Flex degree

Kristin M. Woodward

The University of Wisconsin (UW) System Flexible Option is the competency-based education model launched by the University System in November 2013. "Flex" is self-paced and student centered. Students are awarded credit for mastery of concepts regardless of where learning takes place, making it an ideal path to degrees for adult learners with some college credit. Information literacy and distance library services are embedded in the Flex program. As a new, developing academic model, Flex presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for embedding student-centered library services and information literacy. The evolving Flex curriculum, the needs of an unknown student body and the role of new student support staff were all challenges initially. However, they were closely tied with opportunities that once examined formed the basis of our embedded library model for competency-based education.

While the Flex option is the UW System brand of competency-based education (CBE), in 2013, a *New York Times* article stated that CBE itself is expected to grow throughout higher education to meet the needs of the "37 million Americans with some college and no degree" (Kamanetz, 2013). At the same time, the article explains President Obama's college affordability initiative is making financial aid available for innovative programs like CBE, which is typically not term- or semester-based. This is essential because CBE has the potential to remove the time-based barriers adult students often face and to transform education to be more focused on learning outcomes (Kamanetz, 2013). The role of information literacy and access to specialized research sources in a CBE program like Flex is fundamental because students are expected to incorporate evidence-based reasoning in their written assessments. It is important to explore models for embedding the library in CBE at this moment, because The Lumina Foundation is currently studying Flex and other CBE programs to create a blueprint of best practices for quality that new CBE programs will follow (Lumina Foundation, 2015).

To appreciate the unique elements of Flex as a model of competency-based education, it is useful to understand Flex vocabulary. At the core of this model are competencies and assessments. Competencies are the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors students are expected to master and the assessment is a paper, exam, clinical observation or other activity that allows students to show mastery of a competency. The Flex option allows students to work at-their-own-pace and is not aligned with the traditional 15-week semester. Students can enroll for one or more competencies during a three-month subscription period. Subscriptions begin on the first day of the month so students can enroll and plan their course work to fit their work and family schedules. Course work consists of learning from the curated course content or drawing on existing knowledge to prepare for assessments. Faculty design a recommended learning path and academic success coaches serve as learning support and academic advisors.

The Flex Option is a shared UW System degree program. The University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (UWM) and the UW Colleges were first to offer Flex degrees. UWM offers three bachelor's degrees: Nursing BSN, Diagnostic Imaging and Information Studies. In addition, UWM offers a certificate in Business and Technical Communication. The UW colleges offer an Associate degree and the general education courses in that program can also be used to fill in gaps and prerequisites in other programs.

As UW System degrees, all of the programs adhere to the UW System shared learning goals for information literacy. Therefore, information literacy was a consideration in the design of all competency sets and the rubrics that are used to measure student achievement outline information literacy objectives appropriate to each competency. Librarians from UW Milwaukee were engaged early in the design of the competency sets to advise on information literacy pedagogy in a self-paced, online environment and to embed distance services in the program. While not all competency sets were developed at the time of launch, information literacy themes, especially the use of resources as support for professional and clinical decision-making, emerged in each of the degree programs. LibGuides for each program were developed and embedded in the D2L learning management system for each competency set.

The prospect of embedding information literacy and library services

during the development phase of a new academic model is an ideal scenario for aligning the library with academic programs. However, it is worth noting the challenges we encountered. While we were well-positioned to address these on the UWM campus, the same challenges may present themselves at other institutions developing online library instruction programs or preparing for new academic models, especially those that do not have established distance services or an online library instruction program.

Planning an embedded model for an evolving curriculum

As our early interactions with the program are tied to developing an embedded information literacy model, our first challenge was designing that model for an evolving curriculum. In our needs assessment, we sought to understand how students would learn, what they would be asked to produce in terms of writing or other projects that required the use of research sources and how their work would be assessed. Early in the development stages, faculty were learning this model themselves by engaging in the process of writing the competency sets. When we talked with our faculty about the learning activities in their competencies, it became clear that students would be required to integrate resources in written assessments and that faculty wanted to provide some form of online library instruction similar to the embedded model we use in fully online courses (Figure 1).

In our embedded model for online instruction, we deliver a set of learning objects, learning activities and resources that match the learning outcomes for the

Figure 1. *Information literacy as a key component in the Flex curriculum*

course. We recommend the use of low-stakes assignments to measure student learning of information literacy concepts that will be assessed more formally in student writing. In Flex, the concept of scaffolding assignments is absent because students interact with the course content in their own way at their own pace. As a solution to this challenge, we determined that information literacy would be integrated in the assessment rubric and the learning path for the competency. To give students a structure for mastering the content, the faculty provides a learning path that outlines the key elements of the competency and highlights what will be required to be successful. The criteria for the final assessment are outlined in rubrics so students must work toward those expectations for mastery, including information literacy elements. In the end, working through the discussion of how to embed information literacy in Flex brought us back to our embedded online instruction model. Similar to our embedded model for online classes, we still deliver tailored instruction that matches the information needs of the competency and assessment of student learning is embedded in the competency. By collaborating with faculty during the design phase, we found the opportunity to align our embedded model with Flex by building information literacy concepts into the assessment rubrics. In turn, the rubric essentially provides a roadmap for the embedded library content and a measurement of information-based learning (Figure 2).

Unknown student populations/ affiliations in a shared degree program

As a new program designed around a completely new academic model, we sought clarity on how Flex students would be affiliated with the university and how they would be identified. Understanding how students enter the University has implications for how students are enrolled in the student information system which in turn interacts with our learning management system. As a shared UW System degree, Flex students could potentially enroll in competency sets on multiple campuses at the same time. As Flex grows, there is the potential that

students will be identified as UW System students, but for the short term, they are identified with the home campus that offers the degree the student is working toward.

The benefit of affiliating students with an existing campus is that students have access to the library collections, librarian subject experts and an information literacy curriculum that has already been developed on that campus. In addition, Flex students at UWM have the same privileges as our existing distance student population. Online and distance learning students have access to our full electronic collection but can also register for electronic delivery of digital content and home delivery of materials from the physical collection, including books from throughout the UW System's shared catalog.

As Flex offers a rolling monthly enrollment, we did not offer a student online orientation to the library. Instead, we opted to embed our distance services in the LibGuide for each competency set. We revised our distance services guide to address all online programs, streamlining the content of the guide to highlight first and foremost the process of registering for services. This content was also embedded in the LibGuides for each competency set.

New roles to facilitate student success

While embedding information literacy in the course, design was our primary concern for supporting general education outcomes in Flex; we also prioritized direct student support. We noted the value of building a relationship between the Library and the academic success coaches (ASC). The ASC is a new academic role that is specific to Flex, a sort of hybrid professional between a traditional academic advisor and a student success coach. The ASC's purpose is to support students as they move through the individualized learning path. We wanted to ensure that ASCs could refer students to the library when faced with research needs and reinforce the role of information and library services in the Flex curriculum.

While students encounter the requirements to use research resources in

Figure 2. *Embedded information literacy support is designed to match the requirements of the competency set*

their work, they come to the program with vast differences in their past research writing experiences. Some have technical training and are experiencing liberal arts writing conventions for the first time. Many have significant professional experience and may be familiar with specialized reference and data sources within their specialty, but need assistance with basic library functions and academic conventions like citing resources. For this reason, we wanted the ASCs to be in a position to refer students to the library's modular information literacy tutorials and the 24/7 Ask a Librarian service in addition to the embedded LibGuides.

By reaching out to the ASCs, we hoped to build awareness of the Libraries' collections, online reference services and protocols for getting materials delivered to the student homes. Most importantly, we wanted to convey the connection between the competencies and library research. And as students are working through the competencies at-their-own-pace and bring their own prior learning to the table, we wanted ASCs to be aware of opportunities to fill in basic information literacy gaps. Because this is an evolving role, all of the ASCs were not hired during the development phase so at the time of the Flex launch, we

created a LibGuide specifically for the ASCs. Once the competency sets had been rolled out and the ASC team had been established, we followed up with two training sessions.

An opportunity that arose from connecting to the ASCs is that we received feedback on how students are using the library within the program. While we are accustomed to working from our collected knowledge of how students interact with assignments when we encounter them at the reference desk, to date we have received only a handful of chat reference questions in which students either self-identified with the Flex option or the students' Flex status became apparent during the chat. While our goal in online reference transactions is parity of service among Flex, online and face-to-face students, the lack of self-identification makes it difficult to identify service gaps specific to Flex. A benefit of working with ASCs is that they look at student support from a holistic program level. For example, we learned that some students have presented a need for basic information literacy support in a competency set that does not yet point to the LibGuide or our basic information literacy tutorial. This helped us identify a curricular gap we need to address and reinforced the value of ongoing dialogs

with the ASCs to better understand student needs.

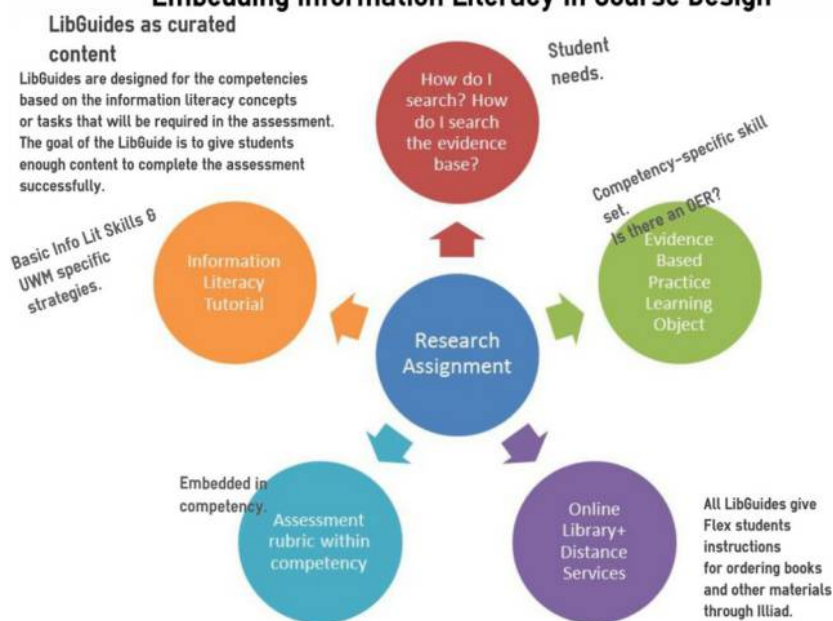## Expanding the model and articulating the library's role

Embedding the library in a new degree program and a new educational model is the representative challenge and opportunity binary for this project. The challenges associated with early involvement in the program were well-worth exploring because they were associated with the opportunity to expand our embedded library program. We adapted our new model for Flex and the additional content that we developed is used in multiple courses in all modalities of instruction – Flex, online, blended and face-to-face.

Initially, we worked with a small group of faculty at UWM responsible for the first competency sets to be rolled out at launch. This is where our initial efforts to connect information literacy content with course rubrics took place. As new competency sets were rolled out and new faculty began teaching in the program, we identified new information literacy needs in the areas of cultural competency, evidence-based practice and avoiding plagiarism.

When our Health Sciences faculty contacted us about cultural competency, they were familiar with our model and requested that we develop a LibGuide for the online course and the Flex option simultaneously. This was also an opportunity to build collaborations between our instructional design staff and our library subject specialists around Flex. The operational benefit of designing new materials for Flex was clear when the materials could be reused so efficiently in multiple modalities to support embedded information literacy. In effect, by expanding our model, we grew the quantity of specialized learning objects in our cache, extending the reach of our subject specialists.

By responding to the challenges and finding the opportunities of embedding information literacy and library services in the Flex Option, we were able to build information literacy and library services into the design of a new degree program. Flex's self-paced, student-driven model allowed us to view our approach to online information literacy from a new angle and develop new

strategies for measuring student learning that are even more closely connected to the curriculum. Greater focus on student-centered learning outcomes independent of a semester-based curriculum also shapes our classroom-based and online instructional design for information literacy. Engaging with the Flex curriculum, anticipating the needs of a new student cohort with new support needs early in the program development phase was a first step in understanding the particular needs of students in competency-based education.

Perhaps more importantly, it provided us a framework for articulating our embedded model and advocating for the role of information literacy in emerging academic models.

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Kristin M. Woodward (*kristinw@uwm.edu*) is Online Programs/Instructional Design Coordinator at University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA.

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