Stakeholder Summary

No Simple Solution for Improving Students' Research and Critical Evaluation Skills

The ability to locate, evaluate and accurately utilize complex information, often referred to as information literacy, is a critical skill for success in school, work and life. A new study by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) recommends colleges and universities implement institutional information literacy strategies to help students develop these skills. While the study examined several different models for teaching information literacy, on their own none proved significantly advantageous, and the authors suggest multiple approaches may be required.

Project Description

The study examined more than 500 students at Georgian College in the diploma, applied degree, collaborative degree and university undergraduate programs. Using four online surveys over the course of two years, students were asked about their perceptions and attitudes towards information literacy as well as tested for their research and critical analysis skills. The project examined four different models for teaching core skills, including providing specific information literacy courses, embedding information literacy into existing curriculum, online tutorials and non-mandatory tutorials. In addition, faculty were surveyed twice on their perceptions of student information literacy and its importance.

Findings

The study calls for institutions to adopt information literacy strategies that focus on teaching styles, delivery models, human resource requirements, outcome measurements and defining the benefits to student, institution and employer. Many faculty suggested more time be allotted to skill development as well as additional resources including online tutorials.

As may be expected, students' comfort, accuracy and ability to utilize information literacy skills increased over their two years of study. While the overall results showed no single method of delivery to be particularly advantageous, the students who had information literacy training embedded in their course curriculum did show significantly higher ability to accurately cite source material.

Students have become increasingly reliant on web-based tools to collect information, with nearly 97% saying they use online sources to find current information. As the use of online research increases, most faculty members said students express confusion over copyright, intellectual property and plagiarism.

Plagiarism, often unintentional, was a repeated concern with several surveyed faculty expressing apprehension over students' inability to differentiate between it and appropriate behaviour such as paraphrasing. While the vast majority of surveyed students were able to identify examples of plagiarism, there appeared to be confusion on certain "grey areas." For example, between 40 and 50% misidentified as plagiarism the acceptable practice of placing appropriately credited text in quotation marks. The

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survey results also revealed citation identification, research process and copyright as areas in need of improvement.

Information Literacy Competency Standards for Students: A Measure of the Effectiveness of Information Literacy Initiatives in Higher Education was prepared by Amanda Duncan and Jennifer Varcoe from Georgian College.