Integrating Government Documents into Information Literacy Instruction, Part II

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The following article continues the article in DttP 32, no. 2, "The Current Information Literacy Instruction Environment for Government Documents." The previous article discussed the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education Standards and commonly-perceived barriers to faculty, student, and reference staff using documents in research. This article examines the barriers to including documents' use in instruction and proposes solutions, some of which can be easily integrated into daily work and others that will call for more collaborative effort among librarians, meaning those who teach in the classroom, those who do not, and those who wear many hats, including that of government documents specialist. Breaking down these barriers is part of increasing information literacy skills for all concerned.

Barriers to Inclusion and Some Solutions

Government documents specialists need to use their skills and tools to publicize the usefulness of their resources and teach these tools to others. Encouraging instruction librarians to learn about and include government documents in their instruction may meet with resistance as it means more work for them in an already over-loaded teaching plan. But students are not the only ones constantly learning and adopting new strategies, as a good librarian continues to learn new resources and technologies in order to enhance their instruction. Even if a librarian has taught for years, most are checking sources and literature in the field to include new developments as standard instruction preparation. Adding government documents, if only a title or URL at a time, can be part of this continual development of instruction.

The following is a list of common barriers and possible solutions. This list is certainly not complete, as many more examples of both problems and solutions can be found in any institution and with some creative thinking.

Barrier: The students' perception that everything needed for research is on the Internet prompts the instructor to forbid research on the Internet. This restricts access to valuable resources and does not encourage critical thinking and evaluation skills. This restriction also confounds students when useful, government-provided information may only be available through the Internet.

Solution: Work with instruction librarians and faculty to help them instruct students in developing critical assessment skills. Government sites make good examples for validity comparisons for bias, timeliness, and other ratings with other domains. In presenting evaluation examples, one aspect of the discussion could be assessing the political slant and mission of the agency producing the information.

Barrier: The number of formats and packaging is overwhelming and is compounded by the CD-ROMs and Internet sites using a variety of software and search methods.

Solution: Emphasize to non-documents librarians that they already work with a number of different sources and formats on a daily basis; journals; monographs; indexes; databases; and a wide variety of search mechanisms, in paper, electronic, microform, and video. Government documents do not use any unique formats. Any instruction librarian provides instruction on how information will be found in a number of formats. As librarians have proven themselves adaptable to various sources, search strategies, and formats, the familiarization can be based on what they already know. Key to this familiarization is to learn the key resources and finding aids. Acknowledge it will take time and effort, but they are not expected to learn the entire documents universe at one effort. Instead, they should familiarize themselves one resource at a time with knowledgeable help.
Barrier: The SuDoc classification system is based on publishing agency, rather than subject classification as found in Library of Congress, Dewey, or other classification systems, scattering useful material through the collection.

Solution: Many disciplines are already multidisciplinary, and a good researcher learns that useful information will be found in more than the main subject area. A researcher working on slavery could move from the call numbers for U.S. Civil War to gender issues to economics for different aspects of their research. Each of these areas is found in a different subject area of the library. The parallel is that each agency publishing on a topic is doing so from the viewpoint that is important to the conduct of business for that agency. Proper use of finding tools is necessary regardless of whether it is the library's catalog, the Internet, or a print index due to the wide variety of information and its classification.

Barrier: As demonstrated by the recent creation of the Department of Homeland Security, agencies producing various types of reports, monographs, and studies can be moved from one department or agency to another, with new SuDoc numbers created. The resulting trails can be difficult to follow, especially with documents that may not have links or pointers to newer materials or older electronic documents that simply disappear.

Solution: This is when well-written finding aids, print and electronic, come into use. Pathfinders or helpful cross-directories kept at the help desk will ease the transition. At California State University San Marcos (CSUSM), aids such as the SIC/NAICS correspondence table from the Census site are used. It takes time to create or locate good aids, but the help is needed by those who do not work with this material on a daily basis, and there are many shared tools created by helpful colleagues available through various venues.

Barrier: Lack of cataloging, or access to government document collections through a separate print index, prevents access through the general library online catalog. This is most common with older documents, and, as Sleeman points out, with money being a limited resource, retrospective conversion for older materials is unlikely in the near future. With students' preference for ease of access, they are less likely to use print monthly or yearly indexes to access historical documents.

Solution: Identify online indexes or digitization projects for historical documents, such as the Avalon Project at Yale Law School, and include in either bibliographies, instruction handouts or as possible entries in your institution's online catalog. Find a place on the library's Web site to install pathfinders for increased visibility and access.

Barrier: Document resources can be lost among monograph, periodical, and Internet sources in catalog, database, and Internet searches.

Solution: A variety of finding aids created in-house or using such aids as FirstGov.gov, GPO Access, or Google.com/unclesam are means to overcome access difficulties. There are numbers of finding aids, pathfinders, guides, and resources available in print and on the Internet. GODORT has handouts available on a variety of titles at the GODORT Handout Exchange. Provide instruction librarians with a set of either agency-produced or locally produced aids appropriate for use in their disciplines for handout or on the library Web site. Encourage instruction on use of advanced searches using limiters. The CSUSM catalog provides a limiter for "U.S. Government Docs," but unless the purpose of what limiters do is understood, they will go unused.

More Actions to Take

Government document librarians are just like their colleagues, eager to share their wealth of knowledge and the resources of their collections. Work with both librarian colleagues and teaching faculty to introduce students to government resources.

Emphasize the similarities of documents to other reference and information resources. Drawing on existing knowledge and identifying the parallels provides a comfortable place to begin learning a new resource and is a commonly used instruction technique.

Examine the instruction program to find opportunities for the documents specialist through assignment-directed teaching or within a discipline team. There might be assignments given by faculty that use document resources that open the opportunity for classroom instruction or instruction to the reference staff.
Participate in program reviews for the opportunity to become involved in the resource reviews used to support any programmatic changes. There may be customized or general finding aids available that can be included in instruction.

Encourage the instruction librarians to make good use of limited instruction time by adding Web sites or titles to key literature in their instruction handouts and Web pages. This can be inserted when the material is checked and updated for the next instruction session. Focus on a particular resource and promote it to discipline-focused librarians and faculty as discussed in Ragains’ article on promoting Census data. Even though this 1995 article addresses instruction using CD-ROM technology rather than the more recent Internet access, the descriptions of problems, publicity, target audiences, and instruction are still applicable. Of special note is the section discussing the impact on librarians for provision of reference and technology-related services due to increased awareness of and access to these documents. Ragains argues that all librarians and staff need training, rather than leaving such knowledge solely to the documents librarians, in order to provide competent reference service. Think outside the box for opportunities to exchange information. CSUSM has introduced informal library brown bag lunches focusing on different topics such as an issue addressed at a conference or innovative instructional techniques. Different area specialists take turns to present on their expertise or interests, providing the documents librarian opportunities to demonstrate selected resources.

Ask your librarian colleagues if they would like materials concerning their subject interests be routed to them, at least copies of the cover and contents page. Set up a file for similar copies in a notebook at the reference desk for browsing (divided by subject and marked with the SuDoc number.) Have copies of handouts at the reference desk(s) for referral when students come into the library, especially if there is an assignment that could use documents and keep in a notebook.

Many institutions have merged the reference services points for documents and general reference. This places librarians and staff in a position to become more familiar with documents. This familiarization is supported by use and, as many reference librarians also provide library instruction, this is a step toward including government documents in instruction. In situations with separate service points for reference and documents, encourage the reference desk staff to familiarize themselves with the government documents collection and offer cross-training or cross-reference duties. Do not neglect the paraprofessional staff in this familiarization process, especially if they are a first contact. No one at the reference desk likes appearing uninformed about resources mentioned in an instruction session.

Simple guides to citations styles are very popular at CSUSM. Students come in and ask for them all the time, either having heard about them in class or from another student. A handout specifically for citing government or legal resources in a variety of styles or by including examples in the general style guide is useful.

Internet-based tutorials are an increasingly popular tool for both addressing the problems of too few instruction librarians for too many instruction requests, for reinforcement of instruction, and for helping distance students who need instruction in research and information literacy. Consider adding a module discussing government documents to an existing tutorial, or collaborate with other librarians to build a tutorial. Creating a tutorial is a great deal of work, but several tutorials have made their source code available to eliminate some of the work required (for example, TILT). The California State University Information Competency systemwide tutorial included a government documents librarian on the development team and includes coverage of government documents in the resulting tutorial. Faculty, even though experts in their discipline, are hard-pressed to keep up with the literature and sources in their field. Send announcements of changes and updates in documents (whether federal, state, or local) or mention new finds in a newsletter or e-mail to faculty. Offer to collaborate with faculty on assignments and Web pages for courses or disciplines, and investigate the possibility of team teaching. Both Tims and Fescemyer, as well as other authors, provide examples that demonstrate cooperation and outreach between librarian and faculty member using government documents in instruction.
Assessing the Efforts

With these efforts to increase documents usage, do not forget to gather data to determine the extent of successful outreach. Establish usage statistics by analysis of citation lists from papers, reshelving statistics, or weblogs. Put counters on Web pages and ask the reference staff to record their use of government document resources before and after training. Contact faculty at the end of the semester for analysis or anecdotal evidence of increased use. All the efforts made to increase documents usage will be meaningless if positive results cannot be demonstrated. Assessment is to not only show the positive, but areas needing redesign or new strategies; if results are not showing increased use this is useful feedback.

Conclusion

Government documents are a rich resource to add to any instruction librarian's repertoire, even if it is necessary to add them in small increments. Creativity and collaboration between individuals and teams are key tools to removing barriers to information access and government documents literacy. Working towards an increase of exposure to government documents through instruction is a win-win situation, providing the information-literate researcher more tools for their research while providing the librarian with more tools to locate information during instruction and reference activities. A corollary to familiarity breeds contempt is that a lack of familiarity breeds disuse. Despite the often unique obstacles documents present to the uninstructed, instruction librarians work against greater obstacles than these to provide instruction on library resources, information access, and evaluation of resources, and should not let their unfamiliarity with government documents deter them, but they would probably welcome help from those who know government publications best. Working with librarian and faculty colleagues for document-inclusive instruction can broaden the scope of research and better prepare students to work with a broad range of materials, develop analytical skills, and become information-literate information consumers.

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References and Notes

5. ALA Government Documents Round Table Education Committee, GODORT Handout Exchange. Available at: www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/godort.html.