Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Exploring Faculty Engagement With and Perceptions of the Library When Teaching University Students About Fake News

A Review of:

Reviewed by:

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Abstract

Objective – The authors sought to examine how faculty engage with and feel about the library and librarians when teaching university students about fake news. This follow-up article focuses on survey questions not reported on in the previous article by Weiss et al. (2020).

Design – Cross-sectional mixed methods survey.

Setting – California State University, Northridge (CSUN) in Los Angeles, California.

Subjects – CSUN faculty members, including tenured, tenure-track, and term-contract faculty (e.g. lecturers and adjuncts).

Methods – The authors identified survey participants using purposeful-random sampling. The CSUN Office of Institutional Research provided the authors with a randomized subsample of 400 faculty

(18.88% of all CSUN faculty). The subsample included an equal number of tenure-track faculty and term contract faculty drawn from across all nine CSUN colleges.

The full survey consisted of 28 questions and was divided into four sections entitled: "Demographics," "Personal Views," "In the Classroom," and "Role of the Library." In this article, the authors focus on the "Demographics" and "Role of the Library" sections, exploring the association between select demographic variables (age range, gender identity, college, and academic rank) and questions 23-27 using cross-tabulation and Spearman correlation.

Main Results – The authors received 69 survey responses. The cross-tabulation identified a significant association between respondent's college and response to question 23 ("Do you use the Oviatt Library's resources/services to teach or inform your students about fake news?"). Faculty from two of the nine CSUN colleges and half of the faculty from the remaining colleges reported never using library resources or services. The correlation analysis revealed a moderate correlation between academic rank (Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, and Lecturer) and response to question 26 ("Do you feel librarians offer sufficient support related to fake news?"). Lecturers were more likely to agree with question 26, while respondents in higher academic ranks were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree.

The correlation analysis identified three pairs of questions with significant correlations. Questions 23 and 24 ("Do you collaborate with librarians to teach or inform your students about fake news?") were significantly correlated. When respondents selected "Never" in response to question 23, they were more likely to select "Never" in response to question 24. Questions 26 and 27 ("Do you feel the Oviatt Library offers sufficient support related to fake news?") were also significantly correlated. When respondents selected "Agree" or "Neutral" in response to question 26, they were more likely to select "Agree" or "Neutral" in response to question 27. Finally, questions 25 ("Do you feel the Oviatt Library has reputable trustworthy sources?") and 27 had a weak correlation. The more strongly respondents agreed with question 25, the more likely they were to select "Strongly Agree", "Agree", or "Neutral" in response to question 27.

Conclusion – The results of the study suggest that faculty at CSUN have divergent views about how the library and librarians can help them teach students about fake news. Lecturers agree more often than faculty in higher academic ranks that the librarians at CSUN offer sufficient support related to fake news. Library outreach and awareness programs may be helpful in changing how faculty view the library and librarians.

Commentary

In their study, Alwan et al. (2021) investigated how CSUN faculty use and feel about the library and librarians when teaching students about fake news. This commentary evaluates the study methods and reporting using the Burns and Kho (2015) survey assessment guide.

There are several study strengths. The authors clearly defined the target population and articulated their rationale for targeting CSUN faculty, stating that higher education teachers help students develop critical thinking skills and are thus well positioned to address the issue of fake news. Additional study strengths include reporting the survey response rate (69 responses from a sample size of 400) and appending the full survey instrument in the publication.

Burns and Kho (2015) prompt readers to assess whether the study sample was representative of the population. The authors provided some information about the distribution of academic rank in the overall CSUN faculty pool. There were approximately 840 tenured or tenure-track faculty and 2,023 faculty in total. That suggests that approximately 1,183 faculty (58.48% of the overall faculty pool) fell

into the contract or Lecturer category. The authors also reported a breakdown of survey respondent demographics in their previous publication (Weiss et al., 2020), and while they did not report the exact number of respondents that were tenure, tenure-track, and contract, they used a bar graph to show that approximately 50% of respondents identified as a Lecturer. Since the distribution of academic rank in the sample does not perfectly match the distribution of academic rank in the population, the generalizability of the study results is affected. This is noteworthy because one of the authors' main findings was that Lecturers are more likely to find librarians helpful when teaching about fake news. It is difficult to determine more about the sample's representativeness without additional demographic characteristics of the population (e.g. the distribution of faculty across all nine colleges).

According to Burns and Kho (2015), "readers should discern whether a systematic approach was used to develop the questionnaire and understand the potential consequences of not using a methodical approach" (pp. 1–2). The authors did not report their survey development approach, but the phrasing and clarity of several questions could have been improved. For example, in question 23, the authors use the terms "resources" and "services" interchangeably. Without definitions, respondents may have had varied understandings of the two terms. Question 24 could also be perceived as redundant to question 23 if respondents considered librarian collaboration to be a type of library service. This lack of distinction between the two questions could potentially explain their significant correlation. While the authors acknowledged many of the question terminology issues, using a systematic development approach with pretesting and formal testing could have helped further refine the questions.

Despite the shortcomings of the study, the authors demonstrated how academic librarians can survey faculty colleagues regarding engagement with and perceptions of the library and librarians at their institution. Academic librarians wanting to strengthen and promote services related to a specific topic (e.g. misinformation or disinformation) may find it useful to gather information from their faculty colleagues using a similar survey. Academic librarians that offer instruction on fake news and related topics could also reflect on the applicability of the authors' findings within their own context. Specifically, the finding that Lecturers feel more positively about librarian support could inform the development of targeted outreach activities and serve as a reminder to connect with faculty across all academic ranks.

References

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