

Information fluency at Washington and Lee University

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Description

The information fluency program at Washington and Lee University uses a team approach to support faculty members and their students in courses that require independent research and the use of software tools to find, analyze and present information. Representatives from Leyburn Library and University Computing work together with a professor to assess the information fluency skills that students will require in order to successfully complete the work for a particular course. This may include the use of the Web and library databases to find and download data, conduct literature reviews and perform other research; the use of survey tools to collect data; the use of quantitative and statistical tools to analyze data; and the use of word-processors and presentation tools to effectively present information, incorporating graphics, tables, charts and other visual elements as appropriate. The professor in consultation with team members incorporates course work that will help students demonstrate mastery of these skills.

The heart of the program is a group of peer mentors which provides coaching and hands-on assistance to students in the course. The peer mentors are students who have completed the target course with distinction and are trained by the professor, librarian, technologist and each other to be proficient in the information fluency skills required for the course. These students are paid to provide various kinds of assistance:

- they hold weekly office hours when they are available to help students with research and software skills and to coach them on assignments
- they conduct hands-on workshops to train students in software skills
- they make themselves available by e-mail and phone to provide assistance to students

The specific areas of assistance provided by the peer mentors depend on the information fluency skills required for the course.

The information fluency program provides other resources for students, including a comprehensive and ever-growing Website (<http://info.wlu.edu>) with information and tutorials to help students attain specific information fluency skills; and Element K, an online tool that provides self-paced software tutorials.

Benefits

As of winter 2004, the program has served more than 350 students in 14 sections of courses taught by four professors. The program yielded unplanned benefits in 2002, 2003 and 2004, when, upon request, the student mentors assisted students in Economics 399, the discipline's capstone course, in addition to Economics 203, the course targeted by the program. Here are some of the specific ways the program benefits different constituencies:

For faculty members: Students in certain courses must master skills in research and the use of software tools to find, analyze and present information. Faculty members are faced with the challenge of teaching those skills themselves, or asking students to learn them on their own. This program provides peer mentors and other resources to equip students with information fluency skills, freeing the faculty member to focus on core issues in the course.

For students: The program provides many kinds of help for students in attaining information fluency skills necessary for a course. Peer mentors are available during evening office hours and by appointment, providing a considerable convenience to students. In addition, our research and informal observations show that students tend to prefer to learn software skills from other students.

For librarians and technologists: Helping faculty members by training their students in research and software skills is satisfying, but time-consuming work. Indeed, there is a practical limit to what technologists and librarians can accomplish in group and one-on-one training of students. By training a core group of students -- peer mentors -- who in turn train scores of other students, librarians and technologists leverage their time and achieve a far greater impact than they could have had individually.

For the University: The program helps meet a need that spans all disciplines, and directly addresses one of the nine initiatives mentioned in the University's current strategic plan: "Develop a comprehensive 'technology and information' program for faculty, students and staff that will teach our community how to access information efficiently and to process and evaluate it meaningfully in accordance with our educational mission."

History

The program was started in the winter 2002 semester as a result of a \$4,000 Associated Colleges of the South grant won by Phil Cline, Professor of Economics, Jeff Overholtzer, Director of Technology Education, and John Tombarge, Head of Public Services and Reference Librarian at Leyburn Library. The team hired and trained a group of four peer mentors, who worked with three sections of Cline's Management/Economics 203 (Quantitative Models) course, taught during the winter 2002 semester. Students gave high ratings to the program, and Cline credited the program with improved outcomes in the course. Overholtzer and Tombarge subsequently described the program in an article published in *Educause Quarterly*, and were joined by two of the peer mentors in making a presentation on the program at the national Educause conference in fall 2002.

The program has continued to focus on Management/Economics 203, which is a required course for all economics, management and accounting students at Washington and Lee University. After the winter 2002 semester, Larry Peppers, Dean of the Williams School of Commerce, Economics and Politics at W&L, has generously provided financial support for the program. Tombarge, Overholtzer and Professor of Economics Michael Anderson are currently seeking grant funding that would help expand the program to additional disciplines and courses at W&L.