

**Centenary College Information Fluency
2001-2002 Project Report**
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Introduction and summary

In spring 2001, a group of Centenary College faculty and staff won an Information Fluency (IF) Associated Colleges of the South (ACS) grant for the upcoming academic year. The implementation team included one professor, a librarian, and a student, who collaborated with representatives from a first-year seminar program (FYE) and the college library/information technology (IT) division at large. A series of products and operations were conducted in 2001-2002, including the creation of an interactive, materials-rich IF Web site; regular offering of workshops on multiple themes, both in and out of classes; a convocation; interaction with the larger ACS IF project.

By spring 2002, the project was generally successful, winning the approval of the ACS IF community. Its functions had developed, and new features emerged in contact with campus life. In April the Centenary team, expanded, won a follow up grant from the ACS for the forthcoming academic year.

Project narrative

Our collective strategy was to achieve broad IF coverage through multiple sectors of campus life. In particular, a strong focus on first-year students should result in a sophomore class with IF competency the next academic year, along with practices and materials for IF instructor of the next incoming first-year class. Within three following years, the entire student body at Centenary would have received initial IF training.

We began in the late spring and early summer of 2001, in order to lay the groundwork for fall operations. Before classes began, the grant proposal required the assembly of many pieces for the IF strategy.

First, we assembled the IF team. This included the grant writers, along with a student (Lisa Game) and a librarian (Judith Grunes).

Second, we formulated a practical Web strategy. The grant proposal called for us to create a content-rich, truly interactive, multipurpose, Web-based resource. We therefore decided to build a clearly-organized, easily accessible site (<http://www.centenary.edu/~balexand/if/>), minimizing special effects and bandwidth-costly features¹. .pdf documents, static and printable versions of dynamic site content, were to be included, in order to provide useful materials offline.

Third, we researched the field of IF more closely, assembling print and digital materials to further refine our upcoming work.

In order to fully mobilize IF assets on campus, we build relationships with several key players.

- Magale Library was an initially eager collaborator, seeing our project as a way to broaden student and faculty awareness of the library. Unfortunately, our key contact person fell badly ill early in the fall 2001 semester, and was essentially out of operations until late spring 2002. Resource limitations prevented her effective replacement. Partly as a result, we worked in a supplementary role, sometimes introducing students to basic library skills. We also singled out the inter-library loan (ILL) office for collaboration, as that office found itself in need of greater awareness among students performing research projects.
- First-Year Experience (FYE) was entering a new form in 2001-2002, shifting from a supplementary event sequence to a campus-wide, multi-section enterprise, including

¹ Cf design statement at <http://www.centenary.edu/~balexand/if/design.html>.

innovative curriculum, registration, and composition strategies. As with the library, FYE found IF a useful collaborator in accomplishing its goals, especially in teaching research techniques. In turn, we were able to use FYE's wide reach and high visibility to expand campus awareness of our project. Before classes began, we held several meetings with FYE faculty, garnering feedback on their particular needs and interests.

Additionally, as the fall semester drew nearer, it was discovered that the college lacked a copyright policy. Centenary's provost suggested that IF research and draft one, then present it to the entire college faculty in the context of an intellectual property (IP) discussion during a pre-semester workshop.

Once the fall 2001 semester began, IF operations commenced on multiple fronts.

Workshops – that is, presentations or small classes with a mixture of delivered material and interactive discussions and individual work - were a major mechanism for IF pedagogy.

- Workshops open to the community. We held workshops on a variety of topics in information research, evaluation, and presentation. These were offered at different levels, from introductory (how to use the library, what a Web page is) to advanced (interactive web design). These were advertised to faculty and students that appeared likely to benefit from them, using means from fliers to in-class announcements.
- Class-specific workshops. Based on requests from and collaborations with Centenary faculty, we ran workshops within classes targeted to specific aims. For example, an introductory-level history class requested a presentation of finding and evaluated primary and secondary documents on the Web (Elaine Thompson, fall 2001). George Newtown requested a lesson on finding and presenting images, within the context of a writing class (English 101, two sections, fall 2001). Several FYE classes requested workshops on research methods (Mark Schlatter, Eric McIntyre, spring 2002).

Along these lines, we also provided feedback for class research assignments, such as Lisa Nicoletti's Holocaust critical materials assessment paper (English 101, fall 2001) and Jennifer Stranger's research topics assignment (FYE, spring 2002).

- Workshops tailored to a specific audience, not bound to a class, and often on demand. Centenary's Honor Court requested instruction in detecting plagiarism through the Web, following a series of incidents they lacked confidence and background to pursue. We also fielded numerous questions on copyright.

One public presentation occurred during the spring 2002 semester. The FYE program invited an IF speaker for its January convocation. This event included all first-year students, along with the FYE faculty. It offered a fine opportunity to explain the project to this audience, to instruct them in some searching and assessment strategies, and to further enhance visibility of the Web site.

Communication proceeded during the academic year. Primary IF staff met regularly, and communicated frequently by email and instant message. IF staff communicated less frequently, but steadily, with other stakeholders: library and IT staff, FYE faculty, the college provost.

We continued to research IF during the fall and spring semesters. Questions of technology, copyright, library policy, and research methods developed, were investigated, and worked into our site and workshops. We studied other IF and IF-related projects and tools.

An additional venue for Centenary IF operations, research and publication, emerged over the year. Following development of a draft copyright statement², I followed up on digital copyright as an academic interest. This led to one publication³, and invitations to speak and write further. Lisa Game, the IF student worker, presented on her work in the project at Centenary's Undergraduate Research Forum in April 2002. She also turned her information studies skills to a fine paper on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "Theater of Memory: in the Round", analyzing Prospero's use of his island as a mnemonic tool.

By the end of the spring 2002 term, we conducted a series of assessments in order to understand how far the project had come.

Assessments

As per our grant plans, we assessed the Centenary IF project from several angles, in order to build up as comprehensive a picture as possible.

We ran several focus groups during April 2002. Participants were drawn from FYE classes, selected as representative (rather than superlative) by instructors. We asked a series of questions, then worked with results, following student comments. The results:

- Students found the site very useful, but rarely used it.
- The most important skillset they obtained was Web material assessment.
- None attended the voluntary workshop.

We followed this by applying the same set of questions to two FYE classes, with discussion facilitated by instructors (Barbara and George Newtown) and IF staff (late April 2002). This occurred in a computer classroom, so we were able to bring up and display the site to support and stimulate discussion.

- Few used the Web site, but most found it applicable in theory.
- None (!) used print materials in the library; none had received instruction in how to use Magale's facilities.
- Most thought their Web skills were (as of April) sufficient. Their major concern was in library and print materials.

In collaboration with the IF group, Centenary's Resource Center, led by Kim van Hoosier-Carey, created and administered an IF assessment as part of the FYE program's year-end general evaluation. According to this data:

- One quarter of respondents (20/83) liked the IF site and/or found the site useful. One quarter (23/83) felt the opposite. One-half (40/83) offered no opinion.
- The January IF convocation scored in the middle of all (10) FYE events. Van Hoosier-Carey thinks the opinion was actually higher, but scored lower to due unrelated, concurrent events and curricula which were intensely disliked.
- IF concepts and skills made headway. According to the report, "most students in 3 different groups were able to recall 1 or 2 useful ideas [or] techniques that they learned

² <http://www.centenary.edu/~balexand/if/copyright.html> . This is still only a public draft, and not official policy of the college.

³ "The Digital Millennium Copyright Act: Licensing the Commons". [Mindjack](http://www.mindjack.com/feature/dmca.html), 10/29/2001 (<http://www.mindjack.com/feature/dmca.html>). Noted by [this page](http://boingboing.net/2001_10_01_archive.html#6717439) (http://boingboing.net/2001_10_01_archive.html#6717439)

during the IF convocation and were able to articulate how they used these techniques or ideas.”

We had planned to chart usage of the Web site via server logs. Centenary was unable to make server logs available, unfortunately. General comments were favorable. The only complaint we received was about the frames structure of the site.

We did receive comments and assessments from users away from Centenary. One former Centenary staffer, Robin Steed (Instructor, Occupational Therapy, LSU), praised the site’s research skills sections. ACS audiences have been very favorable, including, for example, Donna Cohen (Rollins), and general comments at the ACS IF summit in February 2002. Susan Perry, a Mellon Foundation senior advisor, praised the site. And Middlebury College’s library/IT staff decided to make use of the tutorials.

Lastly, anecdotal evidence, drawn from conversations between the IF group and the public, indicated a general interest and appreciation for the project’s work. From August 2001 onwards, we found (literally, at times!) users for IF resources, from workshops to presentations to the site. Few found every aspect of IF applicable, but nearly all detected some useful component(s).

Conclusions

Generally, we were very pleased by the results. We introduced the concept of information fluency to a campus lacking anything like it; we trained a population of students in IF skills; we established a site which can be easily used by audiences separated in time or space.

However, dissemination was not as widespread as we had hoped. Problems and mixed results occurred:

- Publicity enjoyed mixed results. We fought constantly to keep IF in the public eye. The student paper, *The Conglomerate*, ran a positive feature story⁴. We created, revised, and posted flyers en masse, both for workshops⁵ and for the site. Announcements in classes concerning workshops happened frequently, either in person or by request. The college provost steadily reminded audiences of the IF project. The Website never went down. Workshops occurred frequently. Yet student awareness, at least as revealed by the FYE assessments and low turnout to workshops, remained imperfect. We suspect that this is due to several factors. First, the project was a pilot, and made progress; the follow up iteration should be able to build on that establishing phase. Second, the library was not engaging in sustained outreach strategies during this year; to the extent IF was identified with Magale, it would not benefit in public awareness. Third, the FYE program was also piloted during this year, and much first-year attention was taken up by that (sometimes controversial) experiment; IF played only one role out of many in FYE.

Off-campus publicity was, ironically, more successful. My DMCA paper created some contacts. Our ACS presentation (February 2002) won users from other campuses. And our success led to our involvement in another project, the creation of an IF journal (in progress, as of this writing). We consider it a success to garner off-site usage, but wish it would translate to campus utility as well.

⁴ http://www.centenary.edu/students/congo/2001_2002/issue04/info04.html

⁵ See http://www.centenary.edu/~balexand/if/flyer_march5.html for an example.

- Our stated goal of collaborating with the writing lab did not develop as hoped. The fall lab was driven by students in an English senior seminar; scheduling conflicts between that seminar and my own classes caused a disconnect. Furthermore, no students in that seminar expressed an interest in IF. This might have been due to the pilot nature of the program – how could they have been interested in something they knew nothing about?
- Collaboration with FYE was less frequent than the grant implies. Although each semester began with large IF-FYE events, regular group interaction did not occur. Instead, there were many conversations between IF and FYE staff and faculty members, both in person and via email. This was due partly to the tremendous energy and time the FYE pilot required, on top of all the normal workload of all involved. However, no ill effects have been detected. IF was appraised of FYE activities, and vice versa. Some FYE faculty suggestions failed to develop (a Web unit on statistical information, and possibly one on map skills), which seems to have been a workload casualty. Such suggestions may be acted on during the next iteration of IF-FYE.
- Open workshop attendance was disappointingly low. Although we advertised heavily, and tried numerous combinations of date, time, location, and topic, we rarely generated more than three students per meeting. Only two, “The Future of IF” and a campus visit by a Swedish new media scholar, generated greater numbers; these were probably driven by students in the information technology studies (ITS) minor.
 - One solution is to abandon the open workshop idea altogether. Given workload demands, it seems a waste of time.
 - Another approach is to build workshops aimed at academic units and professional programs.
- Site development was less thorough than we had planned. By the start of the spring 2002 semester, several key features remained in draft, or even unfinished, state. This is most likely to do inaccurate workload assessments beginning the project. All involved had more than full time occupations, and IF did not reduce any of them. One solution to this is to expand the IF team.
- Library collaboration was less involved than we’d hoped. While IF was able to help in some library tasks (introducing research skills, explaining changes in the library building), IF and Magale staff held few meetings, and email contact was fitful. This is partly due to the primary IF librarian’s unanticipated debilitation through sickness, during the fall term, with effects (exhaustion and catching up work) lingering through the spring. Fortunately, the ACS provided excellent consultation assistance. This communication shortfall was also due, in part, to Magale’s customary outreach issues, driven in part by its resource problems.
- We were surprised by a series of needs that we characterize as *emergent*. That is, certain demands and problems arose that we had not (and often could not have) anticipated, yet developed within the constellation of IF fields. For example, copyright policy expanded as a subject for public discourse, partly through the instability and changes in policy and enforcement during this very period. As a result, we expended resources studying and explaining copyright policy. In another example, Centenary’s Honor Court requested instruction in detecting plagiarism through the Web (as noted above). Elsewhere, research and publications occurred (see above), which drew time and resources, for all of their excellent benefits. At the same time, Magale Library developed a search tool,

SuperSurf⁶, and needed IF help in promulgating it. Furthermore, we found ourselves responding to transformations in the information world, during the time of the grant. As technologies appeared or vanished, IF staff had to keep informed, while conveying important highlights to our audiences through a variety of mechanisms. One response was our creation and maintaining of an “IF News” item on the site, containing information for both Centenary campus and world events⁷. These are all legitimate needs, which we met productively. We recommend that IF programs should consider and foreground emergent demands as an essential component. The Digital Technologies and Cultures (DTC) program⁸ is a good place to look for collaboration.

We hope these comments accurately and usefully describe the 2001-2002 IF project. Additionally, we hope they prove useful to the next iteration in 2002-03.

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⁶ http://www.centenary.edu/lib_tech/reference/newsurf/

⁷ See the main site, and its archive (<http://www.centenary.edu/~balexand/if/archive.html>).

⁸ <http://www.colleges.org/~dte/>