

## **Information Fluency: Where Are We and Where Should We Go? A Proposal to the Associated Colleges of the South**

**From Millsaps College**

### **Rationale**

In recognition of the present and increasingly important role of information technologies, ACS with significant support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, has embarked on a bold effort to infuse the concepts of information fluency throughout our consortium in teaching, access to information, and technology support. But, how an institution addresses information fluency is a complex issue and not one which can use a template approach. Each institution must determine for itself what information fluency means and what role information fluency should play in the institution.

We believe Millsaps College must achieve an appropriate balance between the traditional role and values of the residential liberal arts college and the evolving role of technology. In particular, we want to discuss the issue of technology which, though a powerful tool, can foster isolation and diminish socialization and face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, we believe that there is an increased dependency on electronic resources, especially journals, and that we do not adequately understand the limitations of electronic sources, and the neglect of other, sometimes more reliable, sources. And, naturally we are concerned about student information-seeking behavior and the tendency to take the path of least resistance. This extends to students' ability to adequately evaluate and interpret sources of information, a major issue in information fluency.

This is not to say that the traditional problem-solving methods from library science, the social sciences, the humanities, mathematics, and the physical sciences should be abandoned. Rather, these methods must be expanded so that we are adequately preparing our students for solving problems by means of current and emerging computational processes and technologies. Further, we believe that both faculty and students must be integrally involved in defining, refining, and disseminating these new problem-solving methods and techniques. Unfortunately, faculty (and consequently students) do not seem to have embraced the information fluency concept enthusiastically as of yet. We believe this is largely a result of faculty failing to understand what information fluency means, the importance of the concept, and what it represents as a teaching opportunity and challenge.

### **Background**

The widespread deployment of the personal computer over the last fifteen years, coupled with the increasing power and storage capability of this device and the availability of interconnection via intranets and the Internet has led to a revolution in the way we learn, work, and live. If we use the past as a predictive lens for the future, we can only expect the continuing increase in the power of computing and the availability of information along with the growing availability of software solutions to accelerate the impact on our lives.

The National Research Council (NRC) in 1997 undertook a study to answer the question, "What should every citizen know about computing?" The report, *Being Fluent with Information Technology* (<http://books.nap.edu/books/030906399X/html/index.html>), documents the Council's conclusions. A significant contribution of the NRC's report is the attempt to move beyond the overused term "computer literacy" and all its accompanying myriad interpretations and baggage.

Out of this effort came the term "information fluency" to refer to a person's facility and proficiency with the concepts, principles, and problem-solving methods of computing. An emphasis has been placed on the need for the information fluent person to understand and use basic computing concepts that transcend skill sets in the use of current hardware and software systems. But to go beyond this, faculty at ACS and elsewhere believe that information fluency should focus on

understanding basic computing concepts at a level that enables our students to formulate new problem-solving paradigms based on that understanding.

### Strategy

Millsaps College has had faculty and staff involved in the ACS information fluency initiative from the very beginning. But, the College has not attempted to get broad-based faculty involvement. This has been influenced for the past two years by the direction of institutional energy: the many activities surrounding installing a new president and doing the preparation work for a reaffirmation of accreditation visit by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The SACS visit is now completed and the president is preparing to launch a new strategic plan after much preparation work. Thus, the recent third call for proposals from ACS members for collaborative projects in information fluency comes at an ideal time for Millsaps to give attention to this important concept.

We believe that our most effective approach for initiating a broad-based dialogue about information fluency on our campus is to hold a faculty conference early in the fall semester. Our plan is to identify an outside person with faculty recognition who understands information fluency and can articulate this to our faculty in a way that will help them to understand the reason for the importance and desirability of infusing this into our curriculum/culture. The goal of the conference is for participants to understand “what is information fluency”, “should this be important at Millsaps”, “how might we approach information fluency”, and “how do we help students achieve information fluency”.

Our initial plan is to hold the conference in late September 2002, using a Friday afternoon, Saturday morning format. A part of the conference will be discussion groups which will have a theme topic to consider. Topics might include:

- Creating optimal learning environments with technology
- A modular approach to curriculum innovation
- Technology issues
- Access to information
- What information can you trust?
- Privacy issues
- Intellectual property and copyright
- Digital preservation and changing content
- Everything's not on the web
- Role of academic support units: Library, Academic Computing, Writing Center

### A tentative schedule is:

<b>Friday</b>	<b>Leggett Center</b>
Noon	Group lunch
1:00	Opening Session with invited speaker
2:30	Break
3:00	Discussion Groups (multi-topics with leaders/conveners)
4:00	Reports of Groups/Discussion
5:15	Reception at Weems House
<b>Saturday</b>	<b>Leggett Center</b>
8:00	Continental Breakfast
8:30	Technology Update

10:00	Faculty response/discussion
10:30	Break
11:00	Review and assessment of current IF status on campus
11:30	Wrap-up - determine goals for the future
12:30	Group lunch

We will invite faculty participation, with an expectation that 25 to 30 will attend. Through personal invitation by faculty leaders, we believe that we can obtain the target group of faculty. In addition, we will consider involving students who would be selected by a faculty team.

Since there has not been a concentrated effort to consider information fluency at Millsaps, we believe that early next fall is an ideal time for this discussion. With the support of ACS we can have a signal event which will allow the faculty to focus on information fluency and determine if this is a matter that we can embrace.

At the conclusion of the symposium, an evaluation will be done to assess its effectiveness. Information from the symposium will be posted on the Millsaps Web site and will thus be available to all members of ACS. A team of faculty will be selected from symposium participants to continue the discussion of information fluency based on the outcomes in order to determine follow-up work. ACS will benefit by having a thorough consideration of information fluency at a key ACS institution. It is expected that some faculty will have strong continuing interest in this effort and will work outside the College with the consortium.

**Symposium Leaders:** Richard Smith, Vice President and Dean of the College  
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**Invited Speaker:** to be determined