Leveraging High School Research Experience

By Dr. Rick Stoddart

Growth is moving from one stage to the next. These transitions offer new opportunities, but they can also be times of uncertainty and change. Moving from the academic expectations of high school to those of college includes both growth opportunities and anxiety for students.

Teachers can help students make the leap to college by immersing students in research experiences that mimic what they’ll encounter in college. For example, incorporating LiLI databases like Academic Search Premier into course assignments is a great step toward bridging the transition to college-level resources. Most college freshman in my library instruction classes haven’t heard of LiLI or EBSCO/Academic Search Premier. Leveraging LiLI content and building database search skills in high school gives students a head start with college research.

Exposing students to a variety of information formats also builds skills necessary to hit the ground running with college research. The gold standard for research at the academic level is the peer-reviewed journal. While high school students might not be ready for peer-reviewed journals, teaching students the basics about the features of different information formats can lay the groundwork for success at the university library. For example, learning the differences between an article, a book, and journal; or the parts of an article such as an abstract or bibliography; or the difference between a popular journal versus an academic journal are all worthwhile skills. Even basic library vocabulary such as periodicals, serials, or what a bound journal is can reduce confusion for students.

Introducing students to the importance of proper citation is another good way to help students avoid freshman mistakes that might lead to more serious academic consequences such as plagiarism. Holding high school students accountable to the ethics and expectations associated with properly attributing, incorporating, and synthesizing the ideas of others into their writing will pay long-term dividends not only in college, but also in the workplace.

Taking time for reflection on how these research skills and experiences might translate into their college experience is an important metacognition activity for students. In class, try to incorporate a short piece of reflective writing that asks students to imagine how they might use citation or database searching in college; it helps students make connections from their high school research experiences to what they might encounter in college.

Finally, the best piece of advice for high school students entering college is to go introduce themselves to their library’s reference librarian. A reference librarian is the guide that helps students navigate the college experience -- because if they don’t know the answer, they can find someone who does.
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