

IMLS Sparks! Ignition Grant:  
IL Framework Cooperative Project for At-Risk Student Success in Smaller Colleges

**Statement of Need**

We propose to develop best practices for ensuring that information literacy education programs in smaller college libraries support the success and persistence of at-risk<sup>1</sup> students in their critical first-year. We will study how best to accomplish this using the newly adopted Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Framework) and develop new assessment methodologies and engaging educational experiences for students in their first semester. Since 2000, colleges have worked to create greater focus on instruction and assessment of information literacy using the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Standards). However, in 2015, ACRL released the Framework representing a departure from the hierarchical and procedural character of the Standards. The new Framework is a significant change from the rigidity of the older Standards. The Framework approaches information literacy as a holistic set of knowledge practices within six broad areas of information literacy (i.e. frames) with proficiency in the frames evidenced by behavioral dispositions relevant to the knowledge practices of a given frame. The development of information literacy within the Framework's model is more referential and asymmetrical, an aspect that requires much deeper understanding than the prior highly structured and linear Standards. For instance, understanding a frame such as *Authority is Constructed and Contextual* may facilitate and increase understanding of the frame *Information has Value*; however an increase in either or both does not necessarily entail enhanced proficiency with other frames, such as *Scholarship as Conversation*. Given this substantial divergence in the conceptualization of information literacy, the educational practices and assessment of information literacy must be revised and updated.

This significant need to revise our information literacy practices comes at the same time when academic libraries are increasingly expected to justify the value of their activities and initiatives to their institutions, and also when institutions are scrutinizing student retention and analyzing student attainment of various academic competencies. Although many librarians are working towards this end, few have developed a tried and true method, especially one that is focused on the new Framework, which can be efficiently used by others. It is particularly essential that smaller college libraries develop a clear means of assessing and ensuring the effectiveness of their educational missions. Smaller college libraries are especially subject to the budgetary concerns of their parent institutions as cuts or even level budgets curtail their ability to be innovative. The smaller staff size often means there is less in-house expertise to accomplish new initiatives, especially those that require developing new complex skills. The limited resources of the institution can also make it difficult to move projects forward. For example, many colleges have only one institutional research employee to provide necessary data for informed decision making, so many libraries are still learning how institutional data can be used to gain deeper understanding of the issues we are continually working to solve. Therefore, we must develop methods that address the need for detailed and precise data analysis with limited

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<sup>1</sup> See SupportingDoc1.pdf for more details on our rationale for focusing on "at-risk" students

resources, so we can better determine which approaches best meet the needs of at-risk students, especially related to college readiness to support the outcomes of the entire institution's mission.

The conceptual differences between the Standards and the Framework mean that the multitude of assessment initiatives gauging the efficacy of information literacy in the context of the Standards no longer offers sufficient analysis to inform our practices. Smaller colleges face the challenge of limited resources to develop new skills and methodologies quickly to react effectively to these changes. Not only do smaller colleges have a limited development budget but they also have significantly fewer professional staff to experiment with new methods while dealing with their existing workload. This puts smaller colleges at a disadvantage in comparison to larger institutions that are able to more quickly adapt due to the number of professionals who can contribute to new endeavors and share knowledge. With this project we will learn and determine how best to use the new Framework at smaller institutions with limited resources to create positive impact for students who need it the most.

This collaborative project involves the libraries at five small liberal arts colleges in Maryland and Pennsylvania: Goucher College, McDaniel College, Ursinus College, Washington College and Washington & Jefferson College.<sup>2</sup> Accomplishing this project collaboratively with five distinctive colleges will allow us to develop a model that can be utilized by others. Our ultimate goal is to directly affect the success of at-risk students by helping them develop essential college research abilities as efficiently and effectively as possible. In order to do this, each institution must first determine the skill level of each of our incoming students, determine which indicators may correlate to students struggling with college-level academic work, develop learning activities that help students bridge the gap, and develop persistence abilities and attitudes towards their longitudinal success in college and in life. This grant will allow the project collaborators to develop skills to design an effective information literacy program centered around the Framework's dispositions and knowledge practices for first semester students including: a pre-test to determine baseline abilities of incoming students; module based learning activities to help target areas of the greatest need; a post-test assessment methodology to determine to what degree students' abilities improve as a result of our new Framework focused teaching practices; focus groups to determine if attitudes of learners have improved in terms of their information literacy related abilities and how it may affect their college persistence. The findings and products will be shared broadly for the benefit of others, especially those at other small colleges that have limited resources to create robust methods on their own.

Librarians at each of the institutions will gain knowledge and the ability to develop new assessment methods and instruction models. Faculty at each institution will be partners in the project and will gain new insights into the value of incorporating information literacy into their courses. Administrators and other campus partners such as those in academic support services will learn the benefit of studying information literacy as an essential academic competency and how it supports the needs of at-risk students. Other small college libraries will benefit from our experience and be encouraged to use what we develop because it will be replicable for use at other institutions especially those with limited resources. The library profession as a whole will

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<sup>2</sup> From 2008 to 2012 these five institutions worked together on a collaborative project funded by the Teagle Foundation to study diversity concerns at the institutional level. This library project builds on that successful relationship and explores a new approach with focus on specific learning outcomes.

benefit from our findings related to developing programs for diverse populations. Ultimately the students are the greatest beneficiary of this project as we develop new methods to increase their success in college and important information-seeking life skills.

The following research questions will be answered in the course of this project:

- RQ1: Which demographic factors indicate correlation to lower information literacy test scores of incoming students and how do these vary by institution?
- RQ2: To what degree does Framework focused information literacy instruction make a significant positive impact on bridging a student's college readiness gap?  
Framework specific research questions related to above:
  - RQ2.A: To what degree does first semester information literacy instruction affect a student's ability to locate a variety of sources relevant to a given topic?
  - RQ2.B: To what degree does first semester information literacy instruction affect a student's ability to articulate the basis of a source's relevance and authority?
  - RQ2.C: To what degree does first semester information literacy instruction affect a student's ability to critically assess information and synthesize information from a variety of sources?
- RQ3: To what degree does information literacy instruction affect a student's attitudes towards research and how it supports their success in college?
- RQ4: How effective was our new Framework focused model for information literacy instruction at increasing the abilities of students within demographics that needed the most development?
- RQ5: How effective were the assessment instruments and methods used at measuring our intended outcomes?

The intended results of our project will ensure that students from all demographic backgrounds, especially those that may indicate difficulty with college-level work in their first year, are more successful with using research for their learning activities. We will bring to light the necessity of colleges to develop new information literacy instruction methods to support their increasingly diverse students with the goal of significantly improving student success and persistence.

All academic institutions are at the beginning stage of learning how to incorporate the new Framework into their long established practices. It is important that smaller colleges are not left behind in this advancement of the core education service we provide to our institutions. We believe that we can help other colleges innovate by doing the detailed work necessary to develop models they can easily incorporate into the complexities of their current situations. By developing this as a collaborative project we will be able to take into consideration the issues presented by each institution's unique context and find solutions that can be applied to meet various needs. We will also develop this as an efficient model to be used by institutions with fewer resources to dedicate to these efforts. This project has the potential for far-reaching impact because it focuses on the needs of diverse at-risk populations and targets essential college readiness skills. We will provide a high impact solution to a difficult problem and the question everyone is trying to answer: how do we prove to our institutions that information literacy is an essential academic competency and do so in a way that provides compelling results, especially for those students with the greatest need? Our plans are to do a concentrated study of the issue to

serve the library community as a whole. This is not possible for any one institution on their own. We will test various methods of teaching and integrating Framework focused information literacy into the curriculum and develop a toolkit of resources that makes a difference in building greater understanding and support for library services within our communities.

## **Impact**

Throughout our work on this project, librarians at small colleges will gain new opportunities to participate in the dialog designed for the new Framework and practice innovative methods for teaching with increased effectiveness. Due to the flexible nature of the Framework we intend to leave room for creativity within a set of clear practices and outcomes. The opportunities presented by multiple institutions collaborating on this project will allow experimentation with instruction methods such as flipped classroom techniques, online teaching environments and creating engaging classroom activities. This approach will allow us to test a variety of options designed to make the largest impact with student learning differences and determine those that are most effective.

To assess our performance goals, each student will be evaluated prior to exposure to any library instructional activities to establish the baseline of their abilities. We will develop a set of learning activities focused on Framework learning outcomes (as outlined in RQ2.A – C above) which will be delivered in a set of environments (e.g. online and/or in-person) using carefully planned methods. We will then assess if there are statistically significant improvements in the information literacy abilities of the students, which methods proved the most effective, and if they made a difference with students in multiple demographic categories. We will discuss the learning experiences with students in focus groups to determine how it shaped their attitudes about research practices and their persistence to attain a college education. The intended impact is for students to improve their abilities significantly enough to be more successful in their college research work and information discovery process. We will also develop new working relationships with faculty to focus on intentional goals for courses designed to increase information literacy development.

Upon the completion of our project goals and assessment methodology, we will write a white paper summarizing our successes, challenges and results. In addition, we will share and publicize what we learned and developed through conference presentations, articles, and a toolkit of resources posted for others to use. Librarians in small colleges are hungry for clear and easy to use models they can start using immediately to demonstrate their impact on student learning. This grant will allow us the opportunity to partner across multiple institutions while gaining greater insights from experts in the field to develop new methods and practices no one institution would be able to produce on their own. Our institutions offer enough variety in form and function that the successes we produce should be easily adaptable and useful for others. It is our intended goal to share what we learn for the benefit of all, including the refined assessment methods, tools and learning activities. We will ensure that our resulting products are prepared and presented in an easy-to-follow road map for success. We will also provide insights for developing successful partnerships with faculty and other campus partners, such as institutional research, to complete a similar project. As professionals in smaller institutions, we see the necessity for producing results that can be broadly used by institutions with fewer resources. We find that all too often this research is dominated by larger institutions offering little hope of

reproduction in a smaller environment. Our results, focused in smaller institutions, will also offer the flexibility to be scaled up for larger institutions with greater resources for customization.

## **Project Design**

We will conduct at least four collaborative meetings of the partners from each of the five institutions. Two of these meetings will be training and planning events with experts in the field to assist in developing local expertise in assessment methods and creating Framework learning activities. At least two additional collaborative meetings will be held to further develop and refine teaching and assessment methods with the involvement of faculty from each institution. Incoming students will be assessed to determine their baseline for comparison. Results will identify various demographic groups whose scores are weaker in comparison to their peers. Students will receive information literacy instruction utilizing new Framework focused methods. Afterwards, an assessment will be administered to determine if there were improvements in student abilities, which instruction methods were most effective and if they made a difference with students in various demographic categories. The research will conclude with focus groups comprised of student participants to determine how the instruction activities shaped their attitudes towards research practices and influenced their persistence to attain a college education. This will allow us to review our results using both quantitative and qualitative research methods which are necessary to determine attainment of outcomes related to the Framework's disposition concepts. We will use the results to refine our methods to the most effective model and share it with the wider professional community.

Jessame Ferguson, Director of Hoover Library at McDaniel College will be the project lead. She will meet with partners at each institution to ensure the project is well established and meets milestones throughout the year of collaborative work.<sup>3</sup> She will also ensure the project is successfully completed and methodology is followed correctly. Each of the library directors at the participating colleges will provide leadership and oversight for their institution to maintain consistency and ensure the goals are fulfilled. At least one librarian and one faculty member from each college will be immersed in the training, planning and implementation of the project. Additional campus partners at each college may be involved, such as staff from institutional research to assist in data collection as necessary. The administrative and financial obligations of the grant will be administered by the appropriate staff at McDaniel College.

The project will begin on January 2, 2017. We will convene two collaborative meetings in January to begin the education and planning process with the assistance of experts. Project teams will be formed and monthly milestones will be identified leading to the completion of work to develop the assessment methods and learning activities. Jessame Ferguson will visit each institution during the spring term to ensure that questions are addressed and each college develops the necessary groundwork for the project's success. A third collaborative meeting will be held in April to share progress and refine our plans. Details will be finalized in July at the fourth collaborative meeting well in advance of the beginning of the Fall semester. Incoming first-year students will take the baseline assessment during their orientation or first few days on campus, at the end of August or beginning of September, depending on the college's academic

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<sup>3</sup> Based on the results presented in the 2012 final report for Teagle Foundation diversity project the visits to individual campuses were crucial to the success of the collaborative.

calendar. The information literacy learning activities will take place throughout the fall semester, with the final assessment and focus groups taking place during November and December. Analysis and discussion of results will take place during December. As this is a collaborative project the library directors are accountable to each other for the success of the project and will help keep each other on track for the benefit of all involved and our professional community. McDaniel College, as the lead institution on the project, will work to ensure that all milestones and deadlines are met.

Funds are needed to support four training and planning events for approximately ten people, including participant travel costs, possible site costs, food and trainer costs. Trainers will be experts in the field guiding the development of skills and knowledge of librarians and faculty and will consult on the efficacy of project details. Their expenses include fees for services and travel costs to attend the meetings. Funds are also needed to support the development of the first version of the assessment instrument and to conduct a norming and beta testing process. Funds are needed for test taker incentives and consultant costs to ensure the methodology and data analysis is sound. We are also requesting funding for release time for the project lead to manage and organize the work of the collaborative partners, conduct research, develop and update documentation and make site visits. Also travel funds are needed for the project lead for four site visits (once at each institution) to ensure the project's success at each partner location.

Each institution will contribute librarian time to developing and implementing the project, student participation, faculty knowledge and involvement, institutional research expertise, access to existing computer labs to support automated testing and teaching facilities either online, physical, or both. Details about the library structure and resources of each participating institution can be found in the supplemental material.

As outlined, we will use a pre and post-test and focus group assessment methodology to ensure we gain both quantitative and qualitative measurements through direct and indirect methods. We will determine which learning activities were most effective at increasing the abilities of students from diverse groups and how effective our assessment tools were at measuring it. The project will conclude if learning differences, context from cultural or prior experiences or other demographic factors relate to lower information literacy scores and whether or not improved engagement with information literacy education supports college success of at-risk students. We will determine if there are differences in results at each institution, what makes an impact, what doesn't and why.

The project team will share the results broadly with our institutions to ensure more faculty and administrative support is gained for expanding and continuing to support successful information literacy outcomes for students. The findings and products will be publicized at local and national professional organizations through professional conference presentations, articles, and a toolkit of resources posted for others to use. Furthermore, we will share the findings with regional organizations, such as the Maryland Library Consortium, the Maryland State Department of Education's Instructional Technology & School Libraries section and the Pennsylvania Library Association College and Research Libraries Division that are exploring issues of high school readiness for college. We will also share the results with future funders as we hope to continue the project by following a cohort of students throughout their undergraduate years, developing best methods for increasing their information literacy abilities leading to graduation, and entering the workforce as information adept citizens.

Schedule of Completion

January 2, 2017 – December 31, 2017

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Begin project; conduct first group training and planning meeting – first half of January	█											
Conduct second group training and planning meeting – second half of January												
Project lead visits each institution during the spring term to address any questions and ensure that each college develops the necessary groundwork for the project’s success		█	█	█								
Conduct third group meeting to share progress and refine plans			█	█								
Conduct fourth group meeting to finalize details of assessment and instruction methods before the start of fall semester							█					
Monthly milestones due for the baseline assessment project team		█	█	█	█	█	█	█				
Share progress and discuss details at April group meeting			█	█								
Complete test-ready version of baseline assessment						█	█					
Conduct baseline assessment norming and beta-testing process and analyze the results; share progress and discuss details at July group meeting						█	█					
Revise and finalize baseline assessment and share by mid-August							█	█				
Analysis of results compared to demographic data; share findings								█	█	█		
All institutions conduct baseline assessment of incoming FY students								█	█	█		
Monthly milestones due for the learning activities team		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█			
Share progress and discuss details at April group meeting			█	█								
Complete draft learning modules covering each of the three Framework areas outlined in RQ2A-C; share progress and discuss details at July group meeting							█					
Revise and finalize learning activity details and share by mid-August								█	█			
Monthly milestones due for the post-test assessment team					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Discuss post-test methodology based on design of baseline assessment and learning activity plans at July group meeting						█	█					
Deliver draft for feedback, conduct beta-testing if needed, gather and review feedback								█	█	█		
Revise and finalize post-test assessment methodology and share by end of October									█	█		
Analysis of results compared to baseline assessment scores and demographic data; share findings										█	█	█
All institutions conduct post-test assessment of FY students										█	█	█
Monthly milestones due for the focus group planning team					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Discuss focus group questions and methodology plans at July group meeting						█	█					
Deliver draft questions and methodology; gather and review feedback								█	█	█		
Revise and finalize focus group questions and methodology and share by end of October									█	█		
Analysis of focus group results; share findings										█	█	█
All institutions conduct focus group with FY students										█	█	█

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Supporting Document 1

Details on our rationale for focusing on at-risk students:

At-risk student populations can vary from institution to institution and there have been very few studies that tie information literacy development directly to the diversity of student demographics that can identify if we are effective at meeting the needs of populations that require the most help. We face changing demographics of incoming college students<sup>1</sup> with very little research on how to address the widening college readiness gap. There are a number of studies that discuss the difference between the information literacy skills students develop in high school and the expectations they face when arriving at college.<sup>2</sup> However, aside from outlining the issues to increase awareness, there is a surprising lack of clear and concrete solutions that prove to make a significant difference.<sup>3</sup> It falls on college librarians to address these issues. Furthermore, as outlined in AAC&U's 2015 publication, [America's Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education](#), it is critical to examine this issue tied to many aspects of diversity and how differences in background, race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomics, etc. affect a student's ability to succeed in college. We must address the problem of at-risk students' ability to effectively navigate the information available to them to approach a greater understanding of the world and their particular situations within it, which presents a significant gap in their college readiness skills. This has not yet been deeply studied by colleges because getting access to demographic information and conducting a comprehensive study that increases our understanding of these related factors can be a challenge for most institutions. This grant will allow us to develop best practices to traverse various situations at different institutions to gain access to student demographic details to compare against findings that lead to new insights for identifying and supporting at-risk students.

The question of which students are at-risk is worth investigation because there are a wide variety of opinions on the topic. One perspective by Buffy Smith, in *Mentoring At-Risk Students through the Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education*,<sup>4</sup> focuses on students who are at a disadvantage because they lack what the author refers to as "cultural capital" to navigate a "hidden curriculum." Smith writes: "Students labeled 'at-risk' are typically considered by some scholars to have two or more of the following characteristics: raised in a single family household, low-income, first-generation, demonstrate poor academic performance. . . . Other scholars argue that students are placed 'at-risk' because of institutional cultural barriers embedded within the higher education system." She emphasizes that the label of "at-risk" for her purposes means that these students "have the potential to succeed or fail depending on the types of institutional support they receive" (p3). She then goes on to define the hidden curriculum as "the manifestation of the biased institutionalized cultural capital of higher education" (p59). It is in essence a second, non-academic "curriculum" that doesn't need to be taught to students who grow up in a particular (privileged) environment, but that does need to be explicitly taught for many people who come from different (usually less

privileged) backgrounds. Smith concludes that mentoring can help these at-risk students become academically successful.

It seems possible that a new Framework learning model focused on reflection, discourse and practice could provide new ways to address these issues and allow students to bridge the gap more effectively than was allowed within the highly structured Standards. Perhaps the Standards approach reinforced at-risk students' difficulty with navigating the "hidden curriculum" by presenting them with yet another system within higher education that increased their sense of inadequacy. Recent research by the [Jed Foundation \(JED\) and the Steve Fund](#) provides insights into how some demographic categories of students feel less prepared and are less likely to seek assistance. Their reported findings include:

- "Caucasian students are more likely than African American and Hispanic students to say they feel more academically prepared than their peers during their first term of college (50% vs. 36% and 39%)."
- "African American and Hispanic students are more likely than Caucasian students to say that it seems like everyone has college figured out but them (52% and 49% vs. 41%)."
- "African American students are more likely than Caucasian students to say they tend to keep their feelings about the difficulty of college to themselves (75% vs. 61%)."

The gap in information literacy skills based on the Standards for specific demographic categories compelled Jessame Ferguson to explore this project with other partners. In August 2012 McDaniel College tested all incoming freshman during orientation prior to any exposure to the library using Project SAILS, a nationally recognized Information Literacy skills assessment based on the Standards. Test results for 330 students were analyzed using demographic data pulled from the student record system. Below are the statistically significant findings related to demographics:

- Males (164) didn't do as well as females (166) in 3 skills areas:
  - Developing a research strategy
  - Evaluating sources
  - Retrieving sources
- Minorities (101) didn't do as well as non-minorities (229) in 4 skills areas:
  - Searching
  - Selecting finding tools
  - Documenting sources
  - Retrieving sources
- Black students (47) didn't do as well as non-black students (283) in 5 skills areas:
  - Searching
  - Selecting finding tools
  - Understanding economic, legal and social issues of information
  - Documenting sources
  - Retrieving sources

It was immediately clear that these findings related to the conversation institutionally about how difficult it was to retain both male and minority students and deserved further exploration

beyond just one institution's findings. One big question that needs scrutiny is how much the instrument itself, as a standardized test using Standards based academic constructs, is at fault for some of these lower scores. The hope is that a new model of assessment based on the Framework might reveal new pathways to increase at-risk student success. As a profession we are in the nascent stage for developing a new approach that might solve some previously insurmountable issues. Some research is attempting to make connections between the Framework and developmental courses aimed at helping students bridge the college readiness gap, such as Larissa Garcia's article "[Applying the Framework for Information Literacy to the Developmental Education Classroom.](#)" If more research focuses on this need, it may yield promising results.

This project is an attempt to address the hidden information inequalities that at-risk students bring with them upon entering college. Preliminary investigations have indeed suggested that there are students who are far less sophisticated than others in their understanding of the world of information. We believe this may be especially true when we look deeper at their dispositions and knowledge practices as laid out in the new Framework. The research in Smith's book shows that at-risk students benefit from the extra help of mentoring. This project will help determine if there are indeed differences in the information literacy knowledge levels of students identified as at-risk and if the support offered through the library is useful to particular groups of at-risk students more so than others.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no shortage of evidence for this trend, here is one recent source: "The percentage of American college students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native has been increasing. From 1976 to 2012, the percentage of Hispanic students rose from 4 percent to 15 percent, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from 2 percent to 6 percent, the percentage of Black students rose from 10 percent to 15 percent, and the percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native students rose from 0.7 to 0.9 percent. During the same period, the percentage of White students fell from 84 percent to 60 percent." U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Fast Facts*, (Washington, DC, 2015), <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98> (accessed January 30, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Project Information Literacy conducted a comprehensive research study on this topic which finds similar conclusions as those noted in countless other studies: that students primarily use Google-like searches in high school and find it difficult to bridge their gaps in understanding when presented with faculty expectations written in college course assignments. Alison J. Head, "Learning the Ropes: How Freshmen Conduct Course Research Once They Enter College," *Project Information Literacy* (2013): 1-48, [http://projectinfoit.org/images/pdfs/pil\\_2013\\_freshmenstudy\\_fullreport.pdf](http://projectinfoit.org/images/pdfs/pil_2013_freshmenstudy_fullreport.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> As outlined in Varlejs, Jana and Kwon's recent study it seems there is very little that school librarians can do to affect a change in these trends. "The key insight gained from this study is that school librarians are relatively powerless to effect change from within or on their own." (p.20) The study goes on to conclude a great deal of support needs to be secured in order to see a different outcome. Jana Varlejs, Eileen Stec, and Hannah Kwon, "Factors Affecting Students' Information Literacy as They Transition from High School to College," *School Library Research* 17 (2014): 1-23, [http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol17/SLR\\_FactorsAffecting\\_V17.pdf](http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol17/SLR_FactorsAffecting_V17.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Buffy Smith, *Mentoring At-Risk Students through the Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).