

More Than a Domain

An Approach to Embedding Government Information Within the Instruction Landscape Using Active and Passive Collaboration

Sarah Simms and Hayley Johnson

While the state of government information librarianship continues to evolve alongside the libraries in which those librarians work, there remains a consistent lack of full integration of government information into the instruction landscape. The reasons for this have been covered within the literature as well as suggestions on how to overcome those barriers. Even with this literature, a gap in implementation remains. This article highlights the collaborative partnership between a government information librarian and student success librarian that attempts to bridge the gap between scholarship and practice in the hopes of creating a more robust government information presence in the academic instruction landscape at their university both in the classroom and beyond.

A Review of the Literature: Government Information within the Classroom

There are a few reasons as to why academic librarians choose not to include government information in their routine information literacy (IL) instruction sessions. One major reason is that IL instruction is typically focused on “topic refinement, general use of the library catalog, varieties of databases and their searches, Internet use, citation styles, access of non-local materials, and general student research concerns.”¹ As most instruction takes the form of one-shots, there are “restrictions of time and numbers of exposures” with which librarians must contend when attempting to integrate government information into their IL instruction.²

Another reason librarians avoid utilizing government information within the academic classroom deals with their own low comfort level surrounding government information. This “fear or intimidation” of government information is due to its organization by agency, multiplicity of formats, perceived specialization and difficulty, and more.³ This leads both subject specialists and general librarians with a “lack of confidence” surrounding utilizing these resources when teaching information

literacy classes.⁴ According to a questionnaire done by Rogers, this lack of confidence surrounding the teaching of government information during IL instruction extended across the board of librarians surveyed with all librarians, despite their experience levels, indicating that they “would benefit from additional training in or experience with government information.”⁵ We would add that another factor in the decision to avoid teaching government information in IL instruction stems from liaisons feeling overwhelmed with staying current within their own subject areas and the prospect of taking on an additional knowledge base feels both burdensome and outside of their role. Also, it can be difficult for librarians who are unfamiliar with government information to fully understand where it resides within the scholarly discourse as there is no common discourse. Ultimately, librarians lacking sufficient confidence to tackle government information solo in an instruction session tend to leave this material strictly to the government information librarians as their responsibility.

In a 2019 study of the duties found in government documents librarian job advertisements posted between 2010-2016, Sproles and Clemons found that “85 percent of the total of government documents job advertisements required reference or information literacy duties.”⁶ While this focus on reference and information literacy duties is not surprising, that same study found that only 26.7 percent of that pool of advertisements required the librarian serve as an internal liaison, meaning they liaised internally within the library or to faculty in other university departments.⁷ This is noteworthy as many requests for IL instruction originate from the liaison relationships built by that designated specialist. Without the attachment of liaison duties to the position, it becomes infinitely more difficult to break into instruction as the government information librarian can become a sort of default liaison to all but the go-to liaison for none.

Because of this broad role, the opportunity for government information librarians to get into the classroom can be tricky given the rarity of an instruction session that focuses solely on the use of government information. According to Downie, integrating government information into instruction does not need to be a solitary effort: “Creativity and collaboration between individuals and teams are key tools to removing barriers to information access and government documents literacy.”⁸ In past professional literature, it has often been suggested that government information librarians should simply teach subject specialists how to integrate government information into their classroom instruction. And while this seems like a simple solution, oftentimes, factors come into play that inhibit this from happening. These factors can include demands on time, decreased capacity to learn new resources outside of one’s area, or even misunderstanding of the applicability and potential scholarly impact of government information within the classroom. Collaboration between librarians is an extremely effective solution that is often overlooked. Government information librarians are eager to help, though this might be lost to the larger population of librarians as noted by Downie: “Librarians who serve as government information specialists are concerned with collaboration and information literacy as much as their colleagues as they see a useful role for government information in information literacy instruction. This concern has been addressed primarily in the government specialist literature, creating a closed conversation of government specialists ‘talking amongst themselves.’”⁹

As all government information librarians know, “government information is one area that touches all disciplines [...]”¹⁰ And as such, government information can easily find its way into any instruction session focused on information literacy. Although over 30 years old, a survey investigating the use of government documents and information by undergraduates found that “the largest single influence on student awareness of the value of [government] documents... is their faculty.”¹¹ For anyone who has been in the classroom, we know this rings true for any information source. Legitimizing the use of government documents in the classroom is an important step to teaching students not only how to access them, but how to use them effectively.

A team can take two approaches to teaching government information in the classroom. The first is subject based wherein the various agencies creating the information take a backseat to the actual information. The other is agency based where explanation and exploration of the various governmental agencies and the information they produce take center stage. In our own experience, each has its own merits when working

with undergraduate students. When teaching introductory IL classes, especially freshmen seminars and general education courses, subject based searching through a focused Google search has been our method of choice. This allows us to introduce the idea of government information and meet students where they are in their current search strategies, such as Google. The Google approach is one that makes searching government information easier for students just learning about research. As a participant in Trujillo and Tallman’s study noted, directing the patron to the library catalog would be best for the library, but they recognize it as an unnecessary step to get the patron the information they need.¹² Agency based instruction comes into play when teaching a more discipline-specific class. This type of instruction is born from close reading of the syllabus and assignment materials to be able to curate specific sources from various governmental agencies that will support students’ research.

In our own experience and in either instruction scenario, the authors have historically utilized collaborative teaching to bring “testimony” as described by Braunstein and Fontenot into the classroom from two perspectives: one from a government information specialist and another from someone who has learned the value of government information.¹³ This testimony of a non-government information specialist at the helm of the class can entice those unfamiliar with government information to utilize them for research. “A positive user experience in working with government information will increase the likelihood of repeated use once search techniques are mastered.”¹⁴ Thus, setting the stage for both faculty and students to become not only knowledgeable about government information resources, but competent and comfortable in their use both in and outside of the classroom, is our primary objective.

However, the road map laid out for us in the professional literature only takes collaboration so far—the pinnacle being the invitation into a one-shot for those librarians without liaison areas. But through our experience, we believe we can push past this seemingly intermittent and sporadic collaboration to more fully embed government information into the academic discourse through a combination of active and passive collaboration that moves instruction *and* government information beyond the confines of the classroom.

Our Experience

As with any good case study, in order to write about where we are and where we are going, the authors first need to address where we started. We both started our academic careers at the same time at a small regional university. As mentioned previously, we followed the collaborative model as outlined in the

literature by the book—co-teaching classes, for example dietetics, where government information as a reference source was an easy fit. Through this, we began to speak one another’s librarian language—that of instruction and that of government information to create our own common discourse. As our collaboration in the one-shot model became more standard, we found ourselves working together on more than just classroom collaboration. We began pursuing opportunities beyond the normal scope of a government information librarian and instruction librarian to include exhibits and grants. As we expanded our outreach efforts together, we began a multi-year research project, the foundation of which was built upon historic government documents. Being able to fully articulate the value of government information beyond the normal classroom dialogue came into focus through this research project. During the project, we both moved to our state’s flagship university and the opportunities for collaboration—both creative and unique—greatly increased. Having the experience of breaking through personal thresholds through our research, we recognized an opportunity to recast government information as not only a special collection in terms of its unique historical materials, but a “special” collection because of its audience and ability to serve beyond the campus community. This inspiration concerning how to package and promote government information is also greatly informed by the information needs of graduating students as well as community members whose access to the university’s library materials is limited.

The behind-the-scenes reality of the information landscape often remains hidden to our students. Upon entering the scholarly confines of the university, resources for their research appear to be limitless due in part to library subscriptions paired with the magic of interlibrary loan. But as they cross the threshold from student to graduate, this access dissipates and yet their research needs continue. This abrupt loss of access is an example of information “*underprivilege*,” a term and situation that is directly related to information privilege.¹⁵ This concept was coined by Char Booth to describe the access inequities rife within the information landscape, from academia and beyond. Scales and Von Seggern recognize the inaccessibility of the tools librarians often promote to students, mainly commercial databases, to conduct research after graduation, and they posit that government information should be both taught and promoted to students to ease their transition after graduation.¹⁶ A student’s information needs don’t end with the conferred degree at graduation, but rather continue as they enter the workforce and live their lives as informed citizens.

And while our primary focus is on students and faculty at our university, it is imperative to note that information privilege

is not just an issue facing graduating students. “Transfer that concept to the area of information access, and people who are poor, people who are minoritized, people who are incarcerated, people who don’t have institutional affiliation with a particular school, or have a public library close to them that offers anything like free interlibrary loan: these people are information underprivileged, information impoverished.”¹⁷ Integrating government information into the instruction landscape is one way to help mitigate issues of information access for these populations.

Beyond the One-Shot Model: Active Collaboration

At our current institution, traditional one-shot instruction opportunities are still available to utilize as a co-teaching model. We have had the opportunity, however, to bring the discussion of government information outside the traditional classroom and into other arenas through larger campus collaborations due to the work of the Undergraduate & Student Success Librarian. This position focuses on identifying and solidifying collaborative partnerships throughout the campus community in order to increase the visibility of the library to undergraduate departments and students. As a champion of government information, they have made it a point to create opportunities that allow for government documents to not only share the spotlight, but also take center stage. Through the University Honors College, we have partnered to present research workshops which are held outside of the classroom as independent workshops for undergraduate students and are scaffolded throughout the semester to mirror the research process students experience in the classroom. These workshops introduce students to the various stages of the research and writing process with each workshop focused on one particular stage. Example stages include how to identify a topic of interest, how to get to a *researchable* question, and how to navigate the information landscape to find sources. This scaffolded approach to teaching information literacy allows for government information to be fully integrated into the discussion throughout the research process through an intentional approach to government information as a natural part of the information landscape (and not just for demographics, etc.). This approach also allows us to show a large group of students the applicability of government information to their studies no matter how varied the field. The Honors College connection has afforded opportunities to create specialized bibliographies for courses in addition to being asked to consult for resources and instruction for a new Delta Studies minor focused on both the human and built history of the Mississippi River Delta, an opportunity we have taken to promote government information

to Honors faculty as a special collection. Our teaching collaboration has expanded to co-teaching and incorporating government information into Dual-Enrollment classes to increase the scholarship available to students who are not on campus and therefore unable to utilize on-campus resources. Outside of the university, we've partnered to co-teach AP Research Seminar classes with a local high school. While government information is shared alongside other resources, our teaching and pedagogy has morphed into a model whereby we each bring a certain expertise into the classroom that is not necessarily subject- or material-based, but instead allows for *each* of our theoretical and practical expertise to shine through.

To further broaden our reach, we are in the planning stages to create an independent workshop series focused on government information as the primary teaching material through which we can recast these source materials through a more critical lens. Different audiences such as undergraduates, faculty, or the general public, will inform the content matter. Admittedly, this might be a steep hill to climb with wavering trust, and often deep mistrust some individuals have, of the government. Despite these obstacles, what better time for librarians to help students navigate this information landscape? "Academic librarians have the opportunity to counter student skepticism and lack of evaluative skills through critical information literacy instruction using government information. While trust in the government has declined in recent years, trust in libraries and librarians has increased."¹⁸ These workshops are one small effort to continue our relationship with students and participants in an environment that promotes trust, discussion, and exploration while underscoring the applicability of government information in academia and beyond.

Borrowing from Melanie Maskin, different approaches to government information will be utilized in these proposed workshops, such as close and lateral readings of documents and information to explore issues of context, authority, and bias in government information, breaking through any assumptions that this material is apolitical.¹⁹ Additionally, this workshop model allows for these government sources to be examined through the ACRL Framework's new Companion Document created by the Politics, Policy, and International Relations Section, and also as described by Gregory and Higgins who mapped social justice issues found in the Core Values of Librarianship to the Framework.²⁰ Gregory and Higgins, in their Appendix, shared material with learning outcomes, values mapped to the Framework including democracy, diversity, social responsibility, education and lifelong learning to name but a few. By viewing government information through these critical lenses, we hope to create a dialogue with students as well as open a

pathway for them to become engaged with government, information consumption, and larger social justice issues.

Advocacy through Online Promotional Tools: Passive Collaboration

Promoting and advocating on behalf of government information is an essential part of whether the collaboration and instruction efforts will be sustainable and effective long-term. A first step in promoting government information is the creation of an informational online presence to which students, faculty, and fellow librarians can refer when looking for government information resources. The use of LibGuides within academic libraries is a widespread means of compiling and sharing library resources. While guides focused on government information abound, the guides typically include a general overview of what government information is followed by resources on broad topics such as census, laws and legislation, congressional materials, data and statistics, etc. Naomi Lederer notes that the creation of topical guides that include government information is one way to combat the reluctance some librarians have to using government sources.²¹

For the LibGuide, it was decided to make the homepage a visual match to the university's page where students explore all the colleges which are a part of the university's academic offerings.²² For example, a student that is part of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences can click on that college's icon and is brought to a guide that corresponds to the major degree programs within that college such as anthropology, communication sciences, economics, English, gender studies, etc. Each major has a page dedicated to an overview of the types of government information relevant to that discipline prompting students to consider the ways government information can support their research needs. It is also important to make this type of LibGuide as multi-layered as possible to demonstrate the variety of resource types available including artwork, images, videos, gifs, and apps.²³ While creating these college-specific guides, subject liaisons were asked to review the guides in their discipline and provide feedback. Additionally, they were encouraged to link to or copy sections of information into their own guides used during instruction. Since the creation of the college-specific LibGuide hub, subject liaisons have linked to the guides and have incorporated information from the guides into their course or program-specific guides. The guides have proved to be a successful outreach and collaboration tool to employ with subject liaisons as it takes the pressure of curation off their plate. This college-specific approach is a daunting undertaking which takes time to slowly build, refine, and revise as necessary. This could be why guides of this type are not as prevalent. We

believe, however, that it is a worthwhile endeavor and can move the discussion of government information beyond the expected subject areas making it more accessible and relevant to subject liaisons with limited instructional time as well as to students by catching them at their point of need.

Integration and a Look Toward the Future

“Integration” is meant to describe the moment that government information comes to the forefront of actions and conversations. One way this can happen is through situating government information as a visible stakeholder in the open access (OA) and open educational resource (OER) movement. Government information has been relegated to the sidelines of the movement and should be explored as a more integral component as it can be argued that government information and its foundation upon the ideal of open access to information for all is the backbone and precursor to the modern open access movement.

We are currently participating as librarian leads in a statewide effort led by the Louisiana Library Network (LOUIS) as a grantee in the Department of Education Open Textbook Pilot program. This program “create[s] new open textbooks and expand[s] the use of open textbooks in courses that are part of a degree-granting program, particularly those with high enrollments. This pilot program emphasizes the development of projects that demonstrate the greatest potential to achieve the highest level of savings for students through sustainable, expanded use of open textbooks in high-enrollment courses or in programs that prepare individuals for in-demand fields.”²⁴ This project taps into the expertise of various academic librarians across the state to create and curate easily accessible collections of open materials aligned to statewide curriculum and learning objectives targeted to students interested in dual enrollment. The inclusion of a government documents librarian in this effort is noteworthy. Being selected to work with the American Government cohort allows the government information librarian to enter the OER creation process at the ground level while actively working with faculty from across the state in the curation of OER materials, including curated government documents, within these resources. This project presents an opportunity to situate government documents at the forefront of OER/OA in a way that other subject liaisons cannot in terms of the materials they steward. As OER continue to gain traction, both within and outside academia, government information can provide a much-needed resource that can assist in growing the OER catalog.

Participation in this statewide pilot has opened the door within the university as well, finally prompting the inclusion of government information within the university’s own open

access initiative. Working with the library’s Director of Open Scholarship & Affordable Learning, government information now has a seat at the “open” table. Our first project is a survey of faculty regarding their perceptions and use of OER and government information in an effort to create a multi-disciplinary promotion strategy focused on these types of materials.

Conclusion

Integrating government documents into the curriculum and positioning them within large-scale projects, such as OER initiatives, is one way to ensure their utilization in research in the academic setting and beyond. By introducing these resources early, students can become familiar with sourcing, evaluating, and effectively utilizing these sources in their research. Even more importantly, this introduction to students helps to fill the resources gap that may occur once students graduate. At the heart of this information is the creation of an informed citizenry and “opens a doorway to a lifetime of involvement with the democratic process.”²⁵ And while open access, OER, and government information are just one small piece of the open movement, giving students agency is a powerful tool, especially when confronted with issues of information privilege.

Accomplishing the above is no easy task but beginning with identifying an instruction colleague with whom you can strategically explore options beyond typical IL instruction sessions is one way to gain traction outside of the restrictive roles and duties present within the academic library. One small change can set you on a trajectory towards more robust opportunities and can even lead to the reimagining of government information as a “special collection” which can resonant more readily with faculty, librarians, and students research needs.

Sarah Simms (sarahlynnsimms@lsu.edu), Undergraduate and Student Success Librarian, Louisiana State University. **Hayley Johnson** (hjohnson1@lsu.edu), Head Government Documents & Microforms, Louisiana State University.

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