

Interactive Information Literacy at Saint Paul's College

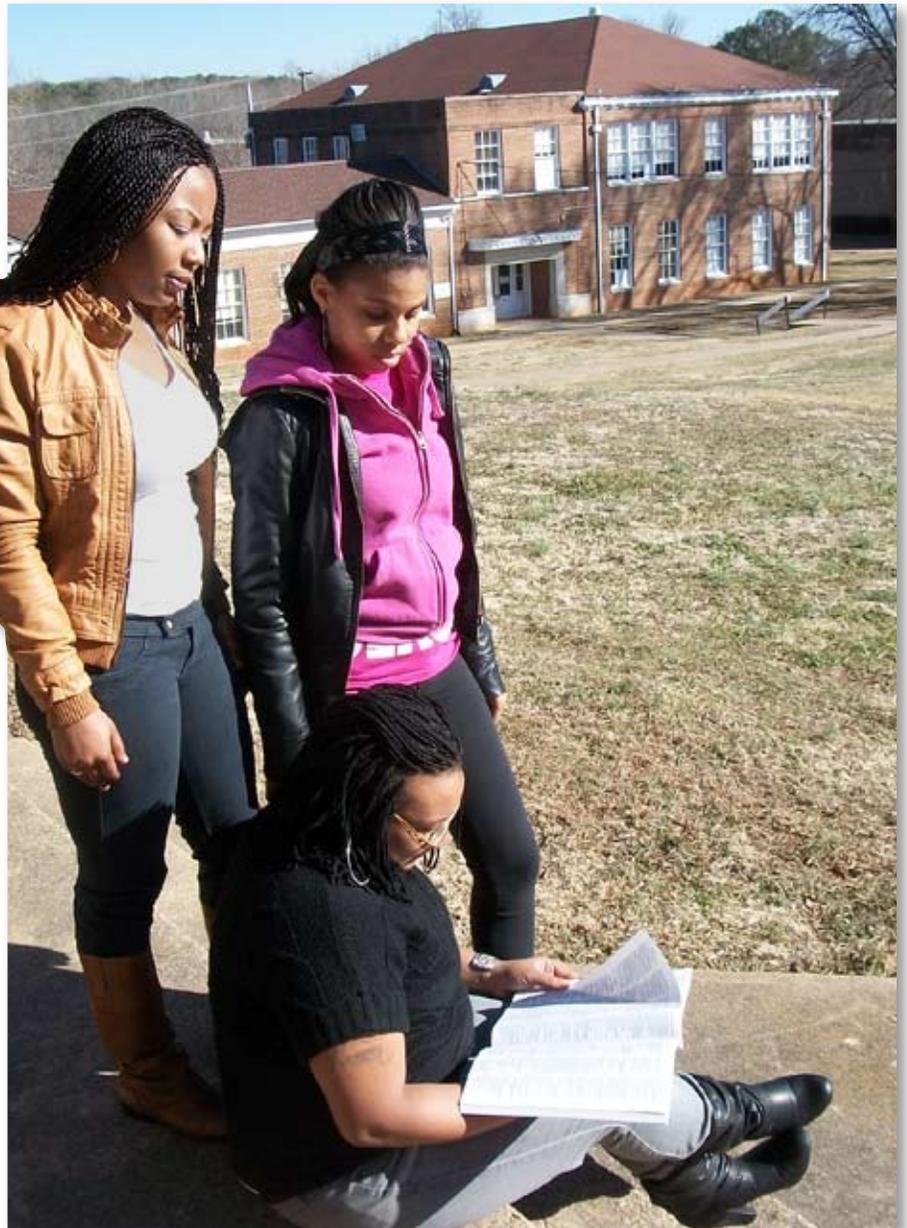
by *Otis D. Alexander*

In supporting the mission of Saint Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Virginia, the James Solomon Russell Memorial Library strives to serve the research and general information needs of the students, faculty, and community; to provide our patrons with the most accurate information in the fastest and most efficient manner; and to aid students in their ability to live, learn, and lead in a technological and global society. The library advocates that all users have the right to a supportive atmosphere conducive to their studies. As part of this mission, the library takes a special interest in the Single Parent Support System (SPSS).

The SPSS is designed for single, undergraduate, young parents of promise with one or two children between the ages of two months to nine years. The program has been tailored to their intellectual, social, cultural, and psychological development in anticipation of the years to come—providing a sound opportunity for the students as well as their offspring. An on-campus, residential educational program, the SPSS requires students to attend school on a full-time basis.

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Left to right: Senior Ashley Holmes; Junior Krystal Humphrey, vice president of the Student Government Association and president of the Single Parent Support System (SPSS); and Sophomore Keishonda Wright. These three young women are in SPSS.

SPSS participants must maintain a 2.5 GPA. They finish in three years because the program is year-round.

Trina Reavis-Brown, director of SPSS for sixteen years, adds that young men are accepted into the program as well. However, they must have legal custody of the child or children. There was one male who qualified, but he did not want to be the only one in the program.

SPSS started in the fall of 1987 during the administration of Dr. Marvin Scott. He believed that a college education is critical, and that SPSS would provide an environment for single parents to achieve a constructive self-identity and become productive members of society. The program has been supported and further developed by the current administration of Robert Satcher, president of the college since his arrival in 2007.

Dawnette Drumgoole is a graduating senior majoring in accounting. She found out about the program and elected to study here in 2007 because it was close to her home in Emporia sixteen miles away. She reports, "I find the program enjoyable, and am able to connect to the library by way of the Internet and by walking from my apartment to check out books and use periodicals.... Of course, my biggest problem is living with a roommate. If the child is not school age, a roommate is assigned.... My child is now six and I am planning to attend graduate school. I'm looking at Alabama State University and Virginia Commonwealth University.... Being a mother, this program is a blessing, and my child learns a lot in the day care.... I use the resources for children in our library. We have so many good books for children, and I love reading to my son.... As an outing, I always take my child to the Brunswick County Public Library."

The director of SPSS said that there are currently twenty-one par-

ents and twenty-two children in the program. There is also a waiting list of more than a hundred. In addition, some young women who had been considered turned down the offer. One such is Latasha Williams, a senior in political science from Virginia Beach. She considered the program, but lost interest once she learned she'd be living in an apartment on campus with her two sons, even though she'd have Internet access to classes and resources. She now says, "I wish I had because it is convenient and easier to focus on one's educa-

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tion, instead of being divided in maintaining a household. In other words, I have to pay all of the bills myself and search for my own babysitters, unlike being provided these opportunities by the college.... At the same time, I make use of the library's databases accessed off-campus. I also have off-campus access to the college catalog to see what's available for my studies."

The parents in SPSS take care of their young ones after classes and during weekends and holiday breaks. However, there are other times when they are not able to attend classes face-to-face due to their own or a child's illness. These unpredictable situations make interactive distance learning and information literacy necessities. In addition, as other mothers return to school with little ones, these mothers may also become

distance learners at some point. Thus, this group of nontraditional distance learners is rapidly increasing. College and university libraries throughout the nation must be able and ready to anticipate the needs and desires of such students to better serve our new, interactive distance learners.

If these young parents are participating in the special degree program at Saint Paul's College, there will be many times that they will not be able to attend class or visit the Russell Memorial Library. Yet they are still responsible for the same assignments as the traditional students. They must take part in group discussions and produce quality research projects. Therefore, it is essential that campus librarians act as intellectual liaisons who assist with technological activities and help students realize all the possibilities of distance learning.

The librarians at Russell Memorial Library set the tone for a variety of learning and information formats. In order to fully realize the priority of campus-wide information literacy, the library relies on sound communication with faculty and administrators. With information literacy as the focal point, the library strives to connect academic disciplines and nontraditional students, especially those with infants on campus. To ensure that the needs of these nontraditional students are being met, the library conducts special reference interviews similar to those held with traditional students. Whether it is an interactive, face-to-face interview at the reference desk or elsewhere in the library, or a telephone or Internet chat, a structured conversation allows the librarian to respond to the single parent's request for information by seeking as much accurate data as possible in order to give clear and appropriate directives and provide available resources.

The Russell Memorial Library addresses the specific needs of SPSS and distance education students as it would those of any library customer seeking information. Previously, there was no specific mandate for helping these nontraditional students; however, many of them made themselves known by coming to the library to seek books to read to their children and find out what other resources were available. From these interactions, librarians were able to anticipate the needs and desires of these single parents. In many ways, the library provides for these customers in a manner similar to that employed for first-generation students, who may have a similar level of prior library experience.

In light of these observations, Russell Memorial Library Director Marc Finney contacted the director of SPSS to discuss partnership. Among other efforts, the library would like to further develop the children's literature offerings housed in Russell Memorial Library. According to Finney, "It would be a great idea to have a weekly story-time program for the SPSS participants and their children. Enhancing these services would also benefit the Department of Education." SPSS Director Trina Reavis-Brown agreed, and the program should definitely begin during the summer of 2011.

Almost all of the SPSS participants have a rather high level of reading and book interest and fit in easily as they use the facilities of Russell Memorial Library.

Programs like Saint Paul's SPSS are not at all new to academia. Since 1975, Smith College has had a program for women whose studies had been interrupted (<http://www.smith.edu/admission/ada.php>). These students returned to college with the implementation of the Ada Comstock Scholars Program for nontraditional students. However, at that time, the Inter-

net had not yet evolved; programs were primarily face-to-face and executed on campus. Further, there are currently only seven single-parent programs throughout the nation addressing the literacy of young women and men and their children.

In *Teaching the New Library to Today's Users*, Jacobson and Williams indicate the need for librarians to work in harmony with a college's distance learning administrators and faculty. To produce successful students, a program should monitor basic computer skills and

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teach the use of technologies vital to distance learning. Adult learning theories should be utilized to develop programs and sessions. The Russell Memorial Library specifically serves the needs of SPSS students by tailoring activities and programs. In addition, the library director at Saint Paul's is constantly evaluating current services to make sure that they are compatible with course objectives. Librarians are in constant communication with faculty and staff; they mentor incoming students and join campus committees and community boards. Library staff at all levels are prepared to teach students in any location. The library maintains a responsive presence through an up-to-date webpage; widely disseminated information literacy instructions; a suggestion box on-site; and active outreach to obtain

feedback from students, faculty, staff, and community members.

The library has an Information Literacy course in place to assist all students. Comprised of three sessions, the course is tailored to the specific needs of each class. These sessions acquaint the students with the resources and services available through the library and train them to locate and evaluate information for research projects and assignments. Hands-on and lecture-based sessions and a variety of library skills workshops impart strategies for searching specific databases, finding books and AV materials, using different citation styles, and writing research papers. After a general tour of the library, students are asked to complete seek-and-find assignments. All students who finish the Library Skills Workshop receive certificates of completion.

General library orientation sessions are also conducted as part of Orientation 111-112. At any time, students may visit the Virtual Tour section of the library's homepage. As with the Information Literacy course, the library orientation class teaches students to utilize, evaluate, and locate all resources and services available through the library. Covering three class periods, the library orientation begins with a pre-test to gauge the level of library knowledge, proceeds to a general tour of the library at which the Scavenger Hunt is distributed, and concludes with the completed hunt and a post-test.

Prior to arriving on campus, all students, including those in SPSS, are assigned to librarians who will mentor them and nurture their intellectual needs. Librarians teach strategies for retrieving and disseminating information and materials in a legal manner, including how to avoid plagiarism and when to obtain permission for the use of digital and electronic materials. Students learn how to effectively evaluate resources, including the

Internet, refereed journals, and other literature, and when to consult librarians, faculty, and staff to obtain accurate information. Librarians also guide students in the proper presentation of papers, including how to compile and annotate bibliographies.

The Public Service Department at the library is always available to give one-on-one instructions as well as in-class lectures on reference materials throughout the academic year. Further, in addition to remote access to library resources, students can go online to "Ask the Librarian" seven days a week.

In the end, the librarians, faculty, administrators, and staff must be able to answer the following

to best serve the interactive distance learner, as well as traditional students:

- What are we teaching?
- What are they learning?
- How do we know?

To answer these questions, the teaching methodology and style, as well as interaction with the students, must be considered. However, whether working with SPSS or traditional students, the major duty of the Russell Memorial Library remains the same: to make accurate information available in a timely manner and do all that we can to help students and faculty achieve course goals and objectives.

References

Jacobson, Trudi, and Helene C. Williams. *Teaching the New Library to Today's Users: Reaching International, Minority, Senior Citizens, Gay/Lesbian, First Generation, At-Risk, Graduate and Returning Students, and Distance Learners*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2000.

Smith College. "For Nontraditional Students." Smith College Admission, <http://www.smith.edu/admission/ada.php>. 