

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Wikipedia: From Academic Pariah to Campus Learning Partner

By Steven Bell

When it comes to Wikipedia, the library profession's position could at one time be described as contemptuous. Consider that Michael Gorman, a former president of the American Library Association, stated in 2009 that a faculty member who encourages the use of Wikipedia to students is the "intellectual equivalent of a dietitian who recommends a steady diet of Big Macs with everything". Likewise, faculty rarely had much of anything good to say about Wikipedia.

In 2008 when Mark Wilson wrote in *Inside Higher Ed* that faculty should embrace Wikipedia, most faculty, as reflected in the comments, were hardly ready to embrace Wilson's position. None of the dire warnings from faculty or librarians about Wikipedia kept students from making it their go-to resource for research.

Thanks to the efforts of the Wiki Education Foundation, these past attitudes about Wikipedia are changing. Instead of rejecting Wikipedia as low quality content to be avoided at all costs, more faculty are indeed embracing Wikipedia. Instead of telling their students not to use Wikipedia, pedagogically adventurous faculty are adopting it as a teaching tool. Supported by how-to guides from Wikipedia, faculty can fashion a semester-long research project designed to leverage students to edit Wikipedia content for the better.

Academic librarians are visibly involved in changing the way Wikipedia is perceived on their campuses. They learned early on that just telling students to avoid using Wikipedia rarely changed student behavior. Instead librarians looked for ways to use Wikipedia to help students

understand its place in the research process. More recently academic librarians work collaboratively to engage in Wikipedia Edit-a-thons to increase the diversity and coverage of Wikipedia in underrepresented areas of research.

It is often through the campus library that programs are offered to help faculty leverage Wikipedia for student learning. This issue will explore the ways in which Wikipedia is being used to promote writing and research skills, in order to improve the quality of entries while giving students assignments that teach far more than how to finish a term paper in 48 hours or less.

If You Can't Fight 'Em

For years the standard academic response to Wikipedia was similar to government exhortations about drugs: just say no. The only problem is that college students overwhelmingly say yes. In the first Project Information Literacy report, published in 2009, Wikipedia was described as a "unique and indispensable research source for students". Students said that Wikipedia was their "first go-to place" because "Wikipedia entries offer a "preview" and provide "a simple narrative that gives you a grasp" and "can point you in the right direction," and "helps when I have no idea what to do for a research paper."

Despite knowing Wikipedia was off limits in some courses, students used it anyway. Given

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this mindset, what are educators to do?

What not to do is respond with policy based on unrealistic expectations. Efforts to convince students Wikipedia is bad and library databases are good, because the librarian says so, is a failed pedagogical approach. When dealing with wicked problems the answer is to devise strategy based on an understanding of the problem.

If we expect students to adopt a more sensible approach to research, libraries and faculty must develop classroom methods that allow students to discover on their own, as an authentic learning activity, the nature of Wikipedia and where it fits into the information landscape. Though it may sound counterproductive to the librarians' educational outcomes, the strategy is to engage students with Wikipedia as the research assignment.

Wikipedia's Campus Presence

Viewing itself as a potential partner, Wikipedia sought to make an educational ally of higher education. An early effort to build bridges to colleges and universities was the Wikipedia Campus Ambassador program. Academic libraries were early adopters. Ambassador program participants would select one or two individuals for the role of campus Wikipedia expert. Any campus community member was eligible, but a librarian often filled the position. After several weeks of training with a Wikipedian, the Campus Ambassador would work with faculty to incorporate Wikipedia into course assignments. What sort of assignments? That's where things get more interesting.

Wikipedia research assignments are like information literacy in reverse. With traditional research paper assignments students pick a topic and write a set number of pages with a required number of properly cited scholarly journals articles. We hope this leads students to connect with librarians in order to learn how to do research, but that outcome is

Wikipedia Visiting Scholars at Pitt

Ed Galloway, Head, Archives Service Center

University Library System

University of Pittsburgh

The University of Pittsburgh Library System was invited to participate in the Wikipedia Visiting Scholar (WVS) program sponsored by the Wiki Education Foundation during the 2015-16 academic year. Recognizing the importance of library resources, the WVS program is designed to improve and create new Wikipedia articles based on content held in archives and special collections. Our two editors each brought a set of distinctive skills, interests and experiences to the project.

One scholar concentrated on revising articles related to Pittsburgh history based on resources held at the Archives Service Center. He also uploaded more than 60 public domain images from our digital collections to Wikimedia Commons for subsequent use on related Wikipedia articles. One of his new articles was even featured as a "Did you know..." on Wikipedia's homepage and has been viewed 3,054 times (Robert Schmertz, the artist).

The other scholar split her time between editing and creating new articles on 19th and 20th century early American music with more contemporary medical articles. Based on sources from Pitt's Center for American Music, several of her new articles focused on notable figures in Stephen Foster's life, including his father, mother, brother and wife. As an experienced Wikipedia editor in the medical field, now having access to Pitt's licensed databases and journals, she also created over a dozen new articles on health-related topics. She too had an article featured on Wikipedia's home page which has consistently received about 70 views per day (Neonatal infection).

By participating in the WVS program, University of Pittsburgh Library System hopes to see an increase in traffic to its digital collections and finding aids as well as a greater awareness of the archival content held by the institution. By contributing to Wikipedia we are improving its accuracy and reliability by referencing historical and scholarly resources. Plus users of Wikipedia are discovering what wonderful resources we have at Pitt!

achieved all too infrequently. Instead students struggle to develop effective research questions, use Wikipedia and Internet search engines to gather content and spend the least amount of time needed with library resources to fulfill the scholarly journal citation requirement. These assignments rarely inspire students' best work, faculty dread reading and grading them, and when the class is over the paper is quickly forgotten.

When a faculty member designs a Wikipedia assignment the class works together to either improve the depth and quality of an existing entry or identifies an underrepresented topic and collaboratively writes a new entry. This allows the library's primary and secondary research

resources to become the focal point of student research rather than an afterthought. Instead of consulting those resources as a final thought, students learn to start their Wikipedia project at the library. In this way, students are learning to use library research tools to inform and improve their writing in order to pass muster with Wikipedia editors.

Through this process students come to understand exactly what Wikipedia is. They comprehend that Wikipedia is the product of people just like themselves, not necessarily experts, but those who have invested the time and conducted research to share knowledge. Students also learn how resources like encyclopedias differ from journal articles,

Here's What a Wikipedian-in-Residence Does

Kelly Doyle, Wikipedian-in-Residence for Gender Equity

University Libraries Downtown Campus

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As the Wikipedian-in-Residence for Gender Equity at West Virginia University (WVU) Libraries, I focus primarily on programming and outreach to close the considerable gender gap on Wikipedia. This includes advocating for the use of Wikipedia in various classrooms, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, and in our library system as a legitimate and useful preliminary research tool for students. I also prompt academics to consider how Wikipedia fits into the framework of academia, and how we can establish ourselves as an integral part of this historic movement in the dissemination of knowledge. In focusing on gender equity, I am working to facilitate the closing of the gender gap on Wikipedia one region at a time, beginning with women from West Virginia who are underrepresented on the site, if featured at all.

I am able to work towards this goal by continuously updating my approach and the scope of my reach at WVU and throughout the Wikipedia community. The success of this role depends on the outreach mentioned above and hosting editing events or Edit-a-thons, each of which create a sense of community in our shared goal of an equitable Wikipedia. Harnessing the power of the academic community at WVU to identify West Virginia women in need of representation is absolutely essential. Compiling initial research ahead of editing events allows volunteers to focus intensely on training and writing. Speaking with scholars in the WVU community provides these early steps to research and identify gaps in knowledge on Wikipedia.

Most importantly, I serve as a liaison between the WVU Libraries and The Wikimedia Foundation and promote understanding of this relationship and this role both at WVU and WMF. As a Wikipedian-in-Residence there isn't a "typical" workday. My role requires continuous outreach and attention to the changing needs of the campus community and Wikipedia. However, each day usually begins with a brief update to the Director of Strategic Library Initiatives at WVU Libraries. I spend my workdays in various ways: from meeting with members of the systems office at the library, to designing graphics and poster images to market my Wikipedia events, to meeting with various professors to discuss their interest in Wikipedia and how they can become involved with this project, or by guest lecturing in various courses about the importance of Wikipedia, and the importance of equity and diversity on Wikipedia.

Crucially, I want the students and academic leaders I engage with to take away an understanding of the global importance of Wikipedia as an educational tool for all, a great equalizer, and if we can begin to move the content on Wikipedia towards an equitable place as well, the impact will be astounding.

and when and how to use each more effectively. Unlike their past papers, the students can proudly share the results of their research with a Wikipedia entry that persists long after the students finish the course.

Two Program Types

In addition to the Campus Ambassador model there are new ways for academic library directors and

deans to lead the way in developing a partnership with the Wiki Education Foundation. The first requires a less significant investment and can work best for institutions that have underrepresented content to share on Wikipedia.

Wikipedia Visiting Scholar (WVS). The Wikipedia Visiting Scholar (WVS) program is in some ways

comparable to the more traditional visiting scholar model in higher education. A Wikipedian is matched with an institution at no cost, but the WVS is given an institutional network access account. This allows the WVS to use the library's resources for writing and editing entries.

Once engaged, after a matching process conducted by Wikipedia, the WVS will work to create Wikipedia entries made at the request of the library. This offers a strategic path to increase the discoverability of valuable digitized content. Special collection resources gain visibility on the world's most heavily visited encyclopedia. That in turn drives traffic to these institutional assets.

For example, an institution with a collection of documents and images that provides authoritative local history, could ask their WVS to develop an entire series of Wikipedia entries about neighborhoods, important community leaders and local cultural icons. One can imagine how this could boost the institution's profile in its surrounding community. At the University of Pittsburgh, two WVS edited over 200 entries and created 30 new ones. [see sidebar for more detail]

Wikipedian-in-Residence (WIR).

Unlike the WVS program, in which the Wikipedian is only loosely affiliated with the college, the Wikipedian-in-Residence (WIR) program requires a more direct bond between the two. Essentially, the WIR becomes a regular staff member and may work within any department although most WIRs are housed within the library or its special collections unit. It is up to the institution to create the job description for their WIR and then advertise it to find the Wikipedian that best meets their needs. As expected, the responsibilities of the WIR are more wide ranging. In essence, the WIR becomes an on-site idea champion for Wikipedia projects. One of the challenges academic librarians confront in encouraging faculty to adopt a Wikipedia research project

is the provision of robust support. Librarians know how to edit Wikipedia entries but may have neither the time nor expertise to help a faculty member design the research assignment – which is structured to run for the bulk of a single semester.

Without sufficient support and direction, faculty are less likely to commit to the level of work needed to develop the project. Having a Wikipedia expert on campus affords a much deeper relationship with faculty. There is greater awareness about the Wikipedia research project, because the WIR is able to invest time in speaking to faculty about the possibilities. When faculty do decide to adopt a Wikipedia research project, the WIR is available to identify appropriate topics or entries that need attention, can assist in the development of the assignment work plan and then offer instruction and guidance to the class as they set about to become Wikipedia editors.

A More Diverse Wikipedia

The WIR program is being used to do more than just improve existing entries or add new ones. It can promote social good by advancing the diversification of Wikipedia. A lesser known fact about the Internet's seventh most heavily visited site is that 90 percent of its editors are white males. Despite the incredible breadth and depth of Wikipedia, there are large swaths of underrepresented topics resulting in poor coverage of gender and race-related subjects. The Wikipedia Edit-a-thon is one way to address the inequity. These

are special events, occurring on a regional, national or global level, to address the issue of underrepresented topics.

For example, during the first week of March 2016, libraries and cultural institutions across the country organized to conduct an Art+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon. This created an opportunity to add depth and references to existing entries about female artists, as well as add new entries for those where none existed.

Despite the incredible breadth and depth of Wikipedia, there are large swaths of underrepresented topics resulting in poor coverage of gender and race-related subjects.

WIRs can organize and promote these activities as a centralizing force around which the community can gather. In this capacity the WIR can help a college or university increase diversity awareness.

If it so desires, the academic library can be intentional about a WIR position designed for diversity awareness. This allows the academic library to leverage Wikipedia's current lack of diversity to engage faculty and students in achieving a social good by bringing greater diversity to it. One of the better-known models for shaping a WIR assignment in this way is offered by the Wikipedia-in-Residence for Gender Equity at West Virginia University. (See sidebar for more detail)

A Win for All

Some faculty will no doubt continue to harbor negative attitudes towards Wikipedia. Instead of forbidding their students to use it, which they will anyway, faculty can turn Wikipedia into a tool for research and writing education. Taking advantage of Wikipedia's education programs, and working collaboratively with librarians, they could make it their campus-learning partner. Savvy academic library deans and directors, seeing the possibilities, can leverage the Wikipedia Education Programs to build partnerships with the Teaching and Learning Center, General Education Programs and others to engage with faculty in re-thinking the connection between Wikipedia and higher education.

Educators continually search for better ways to engage students with the subject matter so that learning is authentic and intrinsically motivated. Wikipedia, through its educational programs, may offer that much desired win for faculty, their students and the academic library.
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